

# 1

---

## *Why John Wrote His Gospel*

Have you ever played the party game in which everyone tries to identify objects that are passed from person to person? You feel a bit foolish as you struggle to figure out what the objects are. The worst part is that they look so familiar, and yet you can't imagine the *purpose* of the various things. Then the host enlightens you. "This is a honey-dipper, used for dipping honey out of a jar without spilling it." Or, "This is an orange peeler."

As we look at Scripture, we can become perplexed for the same reason—we're often unaware of the purposes of the books of the Bible. The first step in studying the Gospel of John is to know *why* it was written.

John, the fourth Gospel, has at least three purposes:

- to bring people to salvation
- to strengthen Christians
- to defend the faith

Let's look at these purposes in order to apply the message of John more faithfully to our lives.

### *Bringing People to Salvation*

We don't have to guess at the major purpose of John's Gospel. The apostle himself tells us his reason for writing.

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).

Let's study these important verses. Jesus performed many more miracles than are recorded in the fourth Gospel. His nine miraculous "signs" in the Gospel of John are the following:

- turning water into wine (chap. 2)
- healing a royal official's son (chap. 4)
- healing a lame man (chap. 5)
- feeding the five thousand (chap. 6)
- rescuing his disciples on the Sea of Galilee (chap. 6)
- healing a blind man (chap. 9)
- raising Lazarus from the dead (chap. 11)
- raising himself from the dead (chap. 20)
- giving his disciples a miraculous catch of fish (chap. 21)

Although we will not examine the significance of each miracle until our fourth and fifth chapters, here we want to notice their purpose. John 20:31 tells us, "But these are written that you may *believe*. . . ." Christ's miracles are reported in order to generate faith in the reader. In fact, John puts such emphasis on believing, that he uses the word *believe* ninety-nine times in his Gospel.

Where are we to put our faith? This is an important question because faith in an unreliable person is worthless, even dangerous. Think of the unfortunate people who followed Jim Jones to Jonestown, Guyana, and committed mass suicide with him in 1978. Though they put great confidence in Jones as a religious leader, their misplaced confidence proved destructive. We must put our confidence in the only one we can trust for salvation—Jesus Christ.

John tells us what he wants us to believe about Jesus, "That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31). We must believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah (the Christ). For this reason in each of the first twelve chapters of John's Gospel Jesus is presented as the Christ, the promised deliverer who fulfills the Old Testament. Furthermore, we must also believe that Jesus is the Son of God, equal with God the Father. I will say more about Jesus' being the Christ and the Son of God in our eighth and ninth chapters. Here we note that the fourth Gospel reports Jesus' miracles so that its readers would believe in his messiahship and divine sonship.

People are to trust Jesus as Messiah and Son of God so "that by

believing [they] may have life in his name." John's ultimate concern is that believing readers may gain eternal life! Such life is later defined as knowing the Father and the Son (17:3). Thus John wrote that all who believe in Jesus enter into a personal relationship with the Father and the Son.

A look at the preceding verses (20:24-29) helps us understand John 20:30-31. Thomas is absent when Jesus first appears to his gathered disciples (see 20:19-24). Even when they later tell Thomas that they have seen the risen Christ, he answers, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (v. 25). A week later Jesus makes a special appearance to the doubting Thomas and invites him to touch him and believe that he has risen from the grave. "Stop doubting and believe," Jesus tells him (v. 27). Thomas exclaims in response, "My Lord and my God!" And Jesus goes on to pronounce future believers truly happy (v. 29). We thus see the primary purpose of the Gospel of John fulfilled when Thomas believes in Jesus as his Lord and God.

We may summarize the first and major purpose of John's Gospel as follows:

SIGNS → FAITH → JESUS THE CHRIST → ETERNAL LIFE  
THE SON OF GOD

Has that major purpose of the Gospel of John been fulfilled in your life? Have you put all of your confidence for salvation in Jesus Christ alone? If you have not trusted Christ as Savior, I pray that you will come to do so as we study John together.

### ***Strengthening Christians***

John also wrote his Gospel to build up God's people in their faith. Although chapters 2-12 are designed primarily to lead people to salvation, they also enable believers to grow spiritually. Moreover, the chief purpose of chapters 13-17 is to help Christians make spiritual progress. I will select three passages from these chapters to demonstrate that the fourth Gospel's purpose is to strengthen Christians.

*Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet (13:1-17)*

Knowing he must shortly leave the world and return to his Father, Jesus is about to show his great love for his own by dying on the cross for them (13:1-2). Having decided to spend the last hours before his death with his disciples, he does something unheard of—he washes their feet! No teacher was to do that for his students. In fact, students were not even supposed to wash their teacher's feet. This humble task was reserved for a servant. Yet, Jesus gets up from the evening meal, takes off his outer garment, and wraps a towel around his waist. He then pours water into a basin and begins to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel (13:4-5).

In their amazement the disciples are all but speechless. Simon Peter, however, speaks up. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" When Jesus tells Peter that he would later understand the significance of the footwashing, Peter protests, "No, you shall never wash my feet" (13:8). Then Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." With characteristic exuberance Peter blurts out, "Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Again Jesus surprises his disciples. "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you" (13:8-10).

Our Lord is teaching his followers an important truth. Unsaved people need to trust Jesus as Savior to have their sins forgiven once and for all. Once they are saved from sin's penalty, however, they still need daily cleansing from its pollution. Since he already is a believer in Jesus, Peter does not need a bath. He and the others (except Judas, the betrayer) need only to have their feet washed—they need frequently to confess their sins and accept the Lord's forgiveness.

These words of Jesus apply to twentieth-century Christians as well. Many believers are frustrated because they do not deal with their sins in God's way. Perhaps you have heard the joke about the foolish man who bought a gasoline-powered chain saw but failed to heed the salesman's advice to read the instructions. The next day the man angrily returned the saw, complaining that he had labored all day and managed to cut down only one tree. "What's

the problem?" asked the salesman as he proceeded to start the saw. At the sudden roar the startled man jumped back and exclaimed, "What's that noise!"

Christians who fail to follow God's instructions on dealing with daily sin are as foolish as the man with the power saw. We must often confess our sins to the Lord to be cleansed from their defilement and to enjoy ongoing fellowship with him.

By washing his disciples' feet Jesus also teaches them another lesson. When he finishes the footwashing, puts on his outer garment, and returns to his place, he says:

Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me "Teacher" and "Lord" and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (13:12-17).

Jesus gives the eleven disciples an unforgettable example of humble service when he stoops down to wash their feet. By deed and word he teaches them that they too must humbly serve others and thereby find true joy. How we need to follow Jesus' example today!

I have two friends who know the joy of which Jesus spoke. Ed and Bill drive the elderly to church, clean the church building, and generally help in any way possible. They are not paid to do these things; they do them because they love the Lord and his people. God's work would be furthered if the world saw more Eds and Bills humbly serving in love. Do you stoop to "wash the feet" of other Christians? May God give us grace not to exalt ourselves above our Lord Jesus, who took the place of a servant.

*"Greater Things Than These" (14:12-14)*

Jesus also seeks to strengthen his disciples in John 14:12-14. They are confused and discouraged because he has told them he will be

going back to his father (13:33, 36; 14:2). Therefore, Jesus encourages them by saying: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (14:12).

How is it possible for Jesus' followers to do greater things than he has done? How could anyone ever do something greater than the unique Son of God? Jesus explains in verses 13-14: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." After his death, burial, and resurrection Jesus will return to heaven, and he and the Father will answer believers' prayers. As a result of Jesus' earthly ministry of salvation prayers will be answered as never before! Praying in Jesus' name does not mean merely tacking the words "in Jesus' name" onto the end of a prayer. In fact, we do not find even one example of the apostles' doing this in the New Testament. Instead, to pray in Jesus' name means to pray with an awareness of the new access to God that we enjoy as a result of the work of the mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

An illustration helps clarify this idea. Since the Zimmerman family lived across from a playground, Mr. and Mrs. Zimmerman often supplied the equipment for the games their sons Charles and Craig played with their friends. When a neighborhood boy would simply ask to borrow equipment, the Zimmermans would turn him down. But if he would say, "Charles sent me to ask for the bats and balls," they would gladly grant the request. This is what it means for us to pray to God the Father in Jesus' name. We do not approach God on our own, but we come to the Father through Jesus our Savior.

I'll always remember a remarkable account of answered prayer told me by a friend.

As a city church in New Jersey grew in size, the congregation faced a shortage of parking facilities, which brought complaints from neighbors whose spaces were being taken by the cars of churchgoers. Friends advised the church leaders to move to the suburbs where they could expand, but the leaders were committed to remaining in the city. Nonetheless, a hill on the church property prevented expansion where they were. So the pastor and other

leaders brought their problem to God in prayer through his Son, Jesus.

Some time later a representative of the phone company called the pastor and explained that his company had done soil tests on various sites in the area. The tests showed that the type of dirt in the hill on the church's ground was precisely what the company needed for a project it had planned. To the pastor's amazement, the phone company agreed not only to remove the hill, but also to pay for the dirt. The thankful church now had the space for its new parking lot and enough money to pave it. The church's people had also received a lesson in how God answers believing prayers offered in Jesus' name.

When Jesus promises his disciples that they would do greater works than he, he does not mean works greater in *importance*. No one will ever do a more important work than Jesus' great work of dying and rising again to save us from our sins. Jesus means that in answer to prayer his followers will do works that are greater in *number* and more *widespread* than his. Jesus ministered in first-century Palestine to thousands of people; Argentine evangelist Luis Palau has ministered around the world to millions! Nevertheless, he recognizes that he is successful only because of Jesus' redemptive work and his promise in John 14:12-14.

God expects every believer in Christ to contribute to the "greater things" of which Jesus spoke. Each of us is to pray with the confidence that our Savior has opened to us a new access to God. And we are all to tell others of the love of God in sending his Son to be our deliverer. Perhaps God is calling you to be a missionary who will explain the message of salvation to people living in another culture.

*The Vine and the Branches (15:1-17)*

That John writes to strengthen his readers is also evident from Jesus' teaching concerning the vine and the branches in John 15. There Jesus applies to himself the Old Testament picture of Israel as the vineyard of the Lord (see, for example, Isa. 5:1-7). He, the true vine, takes the place of the disobedient nation that failed to accomplish its mission. Jesus' Father, the all-wise gardener, cuts off

fruitless branches and prunes the fruit-bearing ones (15:2).

Does Jesus speak of two kinds of believers here, fruitful and fruitless Christians? No. People are either children of God or children of the devil (John 8:42-44). They either believe in the Son of God or do not (John 3:36). They either obey or disobey Christ's commandments (John 14:23-24). They either have eternal life or are spiritually dead (John 5:24). They either love the light or hate it (John 3:19-21). For John there are only two possibilities: either a person is a Christian or he is not. There is, therefore, no middle position between fruitfulness and fruitlessness.

The fruitless branch in John 15 is an unsaved person who has been "in the vine"—he has firsthand experience of the teachings and power of Jesus. In fact, the unfruitful branch that Jesus immediately has in mind is Judas. He has acted outwardly as a disciple should, appearing to be a fruitful branch, even fooling the other disciples (13:28-29). But in reality he is a fruitless one whose evil deeds will soon give him away. He has been a thief all along (12:4-6) and now has gone out to betray the Son of God (13:27, 30). Thus, one reason Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches is to prepare his disciples for Judas's treachery. The gardener will cut off the fruitless branches so that they can be gathered and thrown into the fire (John 15:2, 6). This is a picture of the eternal torment that Judas and those like him will suffer.

Jesus' threat of hell-fire is not directed at his disciples; he lets them know that he considers them fruitful branches. He uses a figure of speech in verses 2-3 (evident in the original Greek) called "paronomasia," which involves words with similar sounds but different meanings. Although the Father cuts off (Greek: *airei*) unfruitful branches, he cleans (*kathairei*) fruitful ones. Therefore, when Jesus tells his disciples that they are already clean (*katharoi*) because of the word he spoke to them, it is his way of assuring them that they are fruitful branches.

Moreover, Jesus is careful to speak of condemnation in 15:1-8 in the third person: "every branch in me that bears no fruit . . ." (v. 2) and "if anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch . . ." (v. 6). In the surrounding verses, however, Jesus uses the second person to speak to the disciples: "You are already clean . . ." (v. 3); "apart



from me you can do nothing" (v. 5); "if you remain in me . . ." (v. 7). Thus Jesus carefully distinguishes his disciples from the unfruitful branches that are headed for God's judgment.

John 15:8 sums up the main reason Jesus tells his disciples about the vine and the branches. "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Since eternal life manifests itself in fruitfulness, the disciples are to prove that they are true believers by bearing fruit.

What does Jesus mean when he speaks repeatedly of "remaining" or "abiding" in the vine? He means remaining in his love (v. 9). Abiding is continuing in a personal relationship with Christ. Although Judas seems to have such a relationship with the Son of God, he really does not. The other disciples, however, are genuine fruit-bearing branches. They are to remain in the vine by continuing to love him who first loved them—Jesus. In so doing they will bear much fruit.

What kind of fruit is Jesus speaking about here? Some say he is talking about winning souls; others say the fruit of the Spirit. Although these would be included, the passage does not mention either one. Jesus is more general. The fruit of which he speaks is obedience to his commands (v. 10) and love for other believers (vv. 12-14). Moreover, Jesus himself is the disciples' model of both of these: he obeys his Father's commands (v. 10), and he gives the greatest example of love in laying down his life for them (vv. 12-13). Still another fruit is the great joy that comes from continuing in a warm personal relationship with Jesus (v. 11).

The disciples cannot take credit for bearing fruit. Ultimately they did not choose Jesus, but he chose them and appointed them to go and bear lasting fruit (v. 16). Since he chose them out of the world, they belong no longer to the world, but to him (v. 19).

Some time ago I had the privilege of sharing the gospel with a man I will call Antonio. After I told him that only Christ's death in our place can make us right with God, he seemed to understand. And yet I was unsure whether he trusted Christ as his Savior. My uncertainty grew as I lost contact with him for several months. Suddenly our paths crossed again, and I was surprised by what I saw. Antonio had obviously come to know the Lord—he was bear-

ing much fruit by obeying the teachings of the Bible, praying for others, and sharing the gospel with his fellow workers. I was rebuked by the Lord for thinking that without my help Antonio would not become a Christian. God alone is the source of spiritual life. When he gave life to Antonio, that life expressed itself in fruit.

These three passages from John 13-15 demonstrate that these chapters are not primarily evangelistic; they do not present the way of salvation to an unsaved audience. Instead, the Savior is teaching his disciples what they would need to know after his death. The instructions of John 13-17 are intended to strengthen the disciples in their faith.

### *Defending the Christian Faith*

The fourth Gospel presents a much different tone toward the Jews than does the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew reads as a tract for Jewish evangelism, while John seems almost hostile toward the Jews. Understanding John's frequent use of the phrase "the Jews" to mean the Jewish leaders opposed to Jesus does not really solve the problem; it just puts it in better focus. Why does the fourth Gospel speak so negatively about the Jewish leaders?

John writes his Gospel sometime during the last fifteen years of the first century, after the church's highly successful evangelizing of the Jewish people. By now the lines between the synagogue and church are tightly drawn. Gone forever are the days when the apostle Paul and others could witness for Jesus in a synagogue service.

At first glance the fourth Gospel's purpose of defending the faith may seem to run counter to its evangelistic purpose. John seeks to win Gentile converts to faith in Jesus, but what about Jews? Does he seek to convert "the enemy"? Understanding the historical situation at the time of the writing of the Gospel of John enables us to see that John does indeed seek to win Jews for Christ.

During the 80s of the first century the Jewish leaders tried to force Christian Jews out of the synagogues. That is dramatically illustrated for us in the chief prayer of the synagogues at the time, the Eighteen Benedictions. About the year 85 a curse on Jewish Christian

“heretics” was added to the twelfth benediction. Since the Jews had to recite this prayer in the synagogue services, a Jewish Christian would thus be faced with a difficult choice: either curse himself or refuse to say the curse and thereby admit his belief in Jesus. Such an admission would result in his expulsion from the synagogue.

This background illumines for us the emphasis on confessing Christ in the fourth Gospel. John calls for Jews in his own day to believe in Christ and leave the synagogue. He does so by presenting to his readers three courageous Jewish believers: the blind man, Nicodemus, and Nathanael.

#### *The Blind Man*

The account of the blind man in John 9 is especially important. Jesus claims to be the light for the world and then gives sight to a blind beggar to prove it (9:5-7). The leaders of Israel, however, oppose Jesus and reject his light. In contrast, the blind man stands up for Jesus against “the Jews.” Yet, when his parents are called in before the Pharisees, they refuse to discuss their son’s healing “because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22).

When the blind man attempts to lecture the Jewish authorities concerning the ways of God with man, and especially concerning Jesus, they excommunicate him in a rage (v. 34). Jesus, however, seeks the man out, who then believes in the Lord and worships him (vv. 35-38).

Christ gives a powerful concluding message (v. 39). He came into the world as its spiritual light, and his light both repels and attracts. It repels the Jewish leaders who refuse to see their spiritual blindness and thereby become hardened in their sins. It attracts the blind man who sees his spiritual need in Jesus’ light and believes in him. The application to Jewish people still in the synagogue in John’s day is plain: they must publicly confess their faith in Jesus even though it means excommunication.

*Nicodemus*

The three episodes where Nicodemus appears are also used to defend the Christian faith. In John 3 he comes to inquire of Jesus, who then instructs him concerning the new birth. Moreover, Jesus exposes Nicodemus's unbelief. "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (3:12).

We next find Nicodemus in chapter 7. The temple guards sent to arrest Jesus return to the Jewish leaders empty-handed. When the guards report amazement at Jesus' messages, the leaders are filled with anger.

"You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them" (7:47-49).

Then Nicodemus questions the leaders whether they are following the guidelines of the law in their treatment of Jesus (7:50-51). John uses irony to make his point. The rulers have just accused the multitude of following Jesus because they are ignorant of the law. Now one of their own members points out that they are acting contrary to the law themselves. Nicodemus's response also indicates that at least one of the rulers and Pharisees (namely, Nicodemus) is willing to give Jesus a fair hearing—even if he himself has not yet believed in him.

In John 19 Nicodemus appears with Joseph of Arimathea, previously a secret disciple of Jesus (for fear of the Jews), who now has asked Pilate for Jesus' crucified body. To help Joseph prepare Jesus' body for burial, Nicodemus brings a mixture of costly spices, thus showing his love for the crucified Lord. The two men wrap Jesus' body and lay it to rest in a new garden tomb (19:39-42). Nicodemus thereby identifies himself with the accursed body of Jesus and publicly confesses him as Christ.

*Nathanael*

John's message is plain. The former blind man and Nicodemus

are examples of those who give up the synagogue to follow Jesus. John's Jewish readers should do the same. They should follow the example of Nathanael in 1:49 who confesses Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel. Since Jesus proclaims him "a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false" (1:47), Nathanael stands in contrast to the Jewish leaders who are false Israelites, as John 8 shows. Although physically they are the descendants of Abraham, spiritually such leaders are children of their father, the devil (8:37-47).

Nathanael believes in Jesus the first time he meets him. In contrast to this true Israelite, "the Jews" are unmoved by Jesus' numerous signs and sermons. Even when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, their response is to issue a death warrant for Lazarus as they previously did for Jesus (12:10-11)!

We too can use the Gospel of John to defend the Christian faith. Many people are involved with cults that deny that Jesus is God. This is a serious error; if Jesus were not God he would not be able to rescue us from our sins. Since the fourth Gospel offers abundant testimony to Christ's deity, we need to study it so that we can help those ensnared by the cults.

Today many believers are afraid to confess Christ publicly for fear of persecution. The Gospel of John offers encouragement to us all to be like the blind man, Nicodemus, and Nathanael and to take a stand for the Lord Jesus, who loved us to the point of death.

As we have seen, the fourth Gospel has three primary purposes: to bring people to salvation, to strengthen Christians, and to defend the faith. Let us use this Gospel today by keeping in mind the purposes for which God gave it.

First, let us use John's Gospel to win the lost to Christ. I know of no better tool to use in an evangelistic Bible study than the fourth Gospel. I once led an outreach Bible study for more than a year on the Gospel of John. It was exciting to see people come to know Christ and his salvation. Perhaps you can consider opening your home for an evangelistic Bible study. Ask your pastor to supply the Bible teacher; you provide a friendly home and invite unsaved friends.

Second, let us use the Gospel of John to strengthen the people of

God. John's Gospel has been described as a river in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim. It presents the message of salvation as simply as anywhere in the Word of God, while also containing challenging teachings that make us think deeply to grasp their meaning. We will examine some of these more difficult ideas—John's doctrines of Christ, his saving work, the Holy Spirit, and the last things—in chapters 8-13 of this book. I invite you to strengthen your faith by opening the Gospel of John and thinking with me about these important topics.

Finally, let us use John's Gospel to defend the faith in our day. We need not be ashamed of believing in the Lord Jesus. Let us, therefore, commit ourselves to learning the teachings of John's Gospel well enough to be able to defend Christianity from attacks and to help those deceived by false teaching.

#### ***Review Questions***

1. What are the three purposes of the Gospel of John?
2. Explain John 20:30-31 in your own words.
3. What two lessons did Jesus teach by washing his disciples' feet?
4. How could anyone ever do "greater things" than Jesus (John 14:12-14)?
5. Tell how Jesus' light both repels and attracts according to John 9.

#### ***Discussion Questions***

1. What fruit (from John 15) do you need to cultivate in your life? Why don't we see more of this fruit in our lives?
2. Is daily confession of sin part of the normal Christian life? Is it an important part of your life? If not, what steps can you take to make it a more important part?
3. Name people in your fellowship who "wash the feet" of other believers. How can you be more like them?
4. Trace Nicodemus's pilgrimage to faith in the Gospel of John.

Compare it with Nathanael's response to Jesus. Do you know people whose conversion experience was like Nicodemus's? Like Nathanael's? What do we learn from studying their conversions?

5. In what specific ways can we today use John's Gospel in accordance with its divinely intended purposes?