



# Introduction to John

## SESSION 1

| *What is the story told by this Gospel, and how does it differ from the other Gospels?*

## Introduction

The Gospel of John has often been handed out to new converts to Christianity, or even to nonbelievers as an evangelizing tool, because it insists so forcefully on Jesus' identity as the divine Son of God and on the need for faith in him. Yet a case can be made that John is really more useful for those who already have some experience of Christian faith and are ready for some advanced reading about Jesus. Either way, there is no denying the central role of this Gospel in shaping both the church's faith and the beliefs of many individual Christians.

In these three sessions, we will examine first the story told by this Gospel, its basic content; then the story behind the story, the author of the Gospel and the Gospel's location within early Christian history; and finally the story within the story, the meaning that the Gospel writer is conveying. If you haven't read John through from beginning to end recently, you should do that before the first session. As you do so, be sure to take note of the characters, themes (such as eternal life or Jesus' heavenly origin), and symbols (such as light) that crop up repeatedly.

## What's the Difference?

John clearly stands apart from the rest of the Gospels in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the Synoptic Gospels, meaning that they can be viewed side by side, since many of the stories in one of them line up fairly well with stories in one or more of the others. Not so with John. Only a very few of its stories are also found in the other Gospels (the feeding of



In John's Gospel, Jesus' first disciples are not fishermen but disciples of John the Baptist.

the five thousand, for instance, and of course Jesus' crucifixion). By the same token, many stories in the Synoptics are absent from John (such as the transfiguration or Jesus' teaching on divorce or love of enemies). Even when John tells a story also found in the Synoptics, it is likely to be told very differently. For instance, at the Last Supper, instead of reading the familiar words about the bread and wine being Jesus' body and blood, we find Jesus washing his disciples' feet and commanding them to do likewise for one another.

Of course, the broad outlines of all four Gospels are pretty much the same: Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, gathers disciples, heals and does other miracles, teaches, disputes with his opponents, shares a last meal with his disciples, is betrayed by one of them and crucified after a short trial, and then on the third day is found to be raised from the dead. On that much all the New Testament Gospel writers agree. This is a very broad outline, however, and in the details John differs from the Synoptics on every one of these points.

- Jesus' **baptism** is not actually narrated; instead, John the Baptist tells of a vision he had in which the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove (1:29–34).
- Jesus does not call fishermen as his first **disciples** (Mark 1:16–20) but people who were already disciples of John the Baptist (1:35–42).
- Jesus does only seven **miracles** during his ministry in John, but they tend to be spectacular ones not found in the Synoptics (changing water into wine [2:1–11], raising Lazarus from the dead [11:1–44]) and are referred to as “signs.” He never casts out a demon, the most common kind of miracle in the Synoptics.
- Instead of **teaching** about the kingdom of God and God’s love and compassion, Jesus teaches mainly about himself, his relationship with God, and the eternal life he has come to bring. There are no real parables in John.
- Jesus’ **opponents** in John are mainly the Pharisees. The scribes and the Sadducees are not even mentioned. The Pharisees, however, often seem to be identical with “the Jews” as such (for example, 1:19, 24; 9:13–18), which raises difficult questions about the meaning of these terms.
- As already mentioned, at the **Last Supper** Jesus washes his disciples’ feet instead of inaugurating the communion ritual (13:3–20). He then makes several lengthy speeches about what they will do after his departure and concludes with a prayer that takes up all of chapter 17.
- When Jesus is **betrayed**, he practically has to force the soldiers to arrest him, since they fall to the ground when he identifies himself (18:4–8). His **trial** before Pilate is strangely stylized, with strong emphasis on his kingship (18:28–19:16). On the **cross**, he speaks with his mother and a special disciple (19:25–27), and after his death a soldier pierces his side (19:34).
- John’s story of Jesus’ **resurrection** includes elements similar to stories in all three Synoptics, but whereas they speak of a group of women coming to Jesus’ tomb, John focuses solely on Mary Magdalene (20:1, 11–18). When Jesus appears to the male disciples, he gives them the Holy Spirit, along with their mission instructions (20:19–23). A week later he appears

## JEWISH FESTIVALS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Festival	Occurrence in John
Passover	John 2:13–25; 6:4; 11:55–12:1; 13:1
Booths (Sukkoth)	John 7:1–52
Dedication (Hanukkah)	John 10:22
An unnamed festival	John 5:1

to them again, so that Thomas may see and believe (20:26–29). Some time after that, they see him yet once more by the Sea of Galilee (chapter 21).

It’s also worth noting that John gives quite a different picture of the geography and chronology of Jesus’ mission. While the Synoptics present Jesus working primarily in Galilee and visiting Jerusalem only at the end, in John most of Jesus’ work takes place in Jerusalem, which he visits multiple times. None of the Synoptics gives a clear chronology of the events it narrates. John, however, mentions various annual Jewish holidays, furnishing a chronological structure for the narrative (see the table).

In particular, there are three Passovers, from which comes the well-known idea that Jesus’ mission lasted three years. (Note, however, that since one Passover is near the beginning of Jesus’ work and one is at the end, only a space of about two years is actually implied.)

## The Plot Thickens

Gospels are not simply records of what happened; they are narratives shaped to make particular points and to express particular convictions about Jesus.

In John’s case, the plotline of Jesus’ mission and conflicts is given a more cosmic and spiritual significance than in the other Gospels (see 1:9–13; 3:17–21, 31–36; 12:37–50). Jesus comes from God to bring eternal life to the world. But only those who recognize his divine origin can receive this life, and the world (the religious, political, and governmental authorities) generally rejects him and thus brings about its own condemnation. Ironically, however, his crucifixion and resurrection prove to

be the source of eternal life for those who do believe in him (3:14–15; 6:51). They will suffer the same fate at the hands of the world as he does, the same alienation and rejection, yet they will continue to enjoy his intimate presence with them and so rejoice as they continue his mission (see 14:27–16:22; 20:19–23).

## What Difference Does It Make?

Many of the differences of detail listed above build up into patterns that are characteristic of the Gospel of John. For instance, the focus on Jesus' teaching about himself and his relationship with God creates John's emphasis on Jesus' divinity. Typical of this are the famous "I am" sayings, found only in John (see the table).

These "I am" sayings are an essential part of this Gospel's message about Jesus. We'll consider them further in the third session; in the meantime, be thinking about what you get from them, both what they tell you about Jesus and how you respond to them. John is the only one of the New Testament Gospels that is so forthright about Jesus' divinity. Indeed, John insists that recognizing this divine origin and mission of Jesus—that he comes from God unlike any other human being, and that he uniquely represents what God is, does, and desires—is essential for receiving eternal life (3:16–18, 31–36; 5:19–30, 39–40; 6:35–40; 8:23–24, 28–29; 12:44–50; 16:26–30; 17:1–3; 20:31).

Another way in which John communicates this message is by focusing on the miracles of Jesus as signs. In the Synoptics, Jesus refuses to give people a sign (Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:29–30). In John, though Jesus is sometimes skeptical about faith based on signs (2:23–25; 4:48), he does acknowledge that his miracles are signs, and the Gospel seems cautiously positive about signs (2:11; 6:2, 14; 12:18, 37; 20:30). This means that the miracles are not simply spectacular works of divine power, a kind of spiritual publicity stunt. They are intended to draw people toward faith in Jesus, toward the recognition that in him God is acting to bring life to the world. Almost all of the seven miracles Jesus performs are in some way related to the giving of life: providing food and drink (2:1–11; 6:1–14); healing (4:46–54; 5:1–9; 9:1–7). Climactically, he literally gives life back to his friend Lazarus (11:1–44). John's selection of miracle stories and the way in which they are told are meant to focus the reader on the unique way in which Jesus comes with divine power "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10).

### THE "I AM" SAYINGS IN JOHN

"I am he [the Messiah]."	John 4:26
"I am the bread of life."	John 6:35, 41, 48–51
"I am the light of the world."	John 8:12; 9:5
"I am from above."	John 8:23
"I am he."	John 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5–8
"Before Abraham was, I am."	John 8:58
"I am the gate for the sheep."	John 10:7–9
"I am the good shepherd."	John 10:11–16
"I am the resurrection and the life."	John 11:25
"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."	John 14:6
"I am the vine."	John 15:1–6

John also uses other methods to draw the reader toward a deeper level of understanding. One of these is irony: the characters in the story often don't seem to understand what Jesus is saying or doing, but the reader does (3:1–15; 4:31–34; 8:12–29; 10:6–10). If there's any doubt, the Gospel writer may give a hint (2:18–22; 11:11–15). Other statements are simply paradoxical: "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1); Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd who leads the sheep through the gate (10:1–15). This use of irony and paradox, along with the use of sayings with multiple possible meanings (4:10–15; 6:51–58) and the use of symbolism (as in many of the "I am" sayings; note also 7:37–39; 19:34), encourage the reader to look for meaning that is not obvious on the surface. The message that this Gospel wants to convey seems to be one that could not be given merely by a straightforward narrative or summarized in a single sentence. We will come back to this paradoxical and ironic quality of John's message in the third session.

One final thing that sets John apart from the other New Testament Gospels is its hostility toward the people it

calls “the Jews.” This designation is used more than fifty times in John, although it almost never occurs in the Synoptics (apart from references to Jesus as “king of the Jews” during his trial and crucifixion). Sometimes John uses it in a neutral manner, for example, when discussing Jewish holidays or customs (2:6, 13; 5:1; 11:31–37, 55; 18:20; 19:40, and elsewhere). But in other cases “the Jews” clearly means Jewish authorities who are opposed to Jesus (5:15–18; 7:1; 8:48–59); as noted above, they are sometimes identified with the Pharisees. “The Jews” are often mystified by Jesus’ teaching (6:52; 7:35; 8:22) and never seem to understand him. In 8:31–47, even “Jews” who have believed in Jesus remain uncomprehending, and Jesus derides them as children not of God but of the devil. Sometimes Jesus speaks of “the Jews” as if he and his disciples were not Jewish themselves (13:33) or speaks of the law as if it belonged to them but not to him (8:17; 10:34; 15:25). At other times people, including Jesus’ disciples, are said to be afraid of “the Jews” (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19).

In historical reality, of course, *all* these people—Jesus, his disciples, his opponents, and the rest—were Jews. Scholars have long puzzled over this strange use of terminology, and we will consider some possible reasons for it in the next session. For now, simply be aware of its strangeness and of how much it has done over the centuries to make Christian readers of the Gospel of John suspicious of their Jewish neighbors, even to the point of committing acts of anti-Semitic violence.

## Cast of Characters

Even apart from “the Jews,” the people mentioned in John—the “characters” in its story—often differ from those in the Synoptic Gospels. There are a number of characters, some of them playing significant roles, who are mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament (see the table).

Most notable among these is the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” The Gospel hints that this disciple is its author—or at least stands behind its writing (21:20–25; compare 19:35). Yet he is never named, and his identity remains mysterious. We will learn more about whom he may represent in the next session.

Some characters who do appear in other Gospels get special treatment in John, such as the disciples Philip and Andrew (1:43–46; 6:5–9; 12:20–22). Especially note-

### CHARACTERS WHO APPEAR ONLY IN JOHN

Nathanael	John 1:45–51; 21:1–14
Nicodemus	John 3:1–21; 7:45–52; 19:38–42
Samaritan woman	John 4:1–42
Disabled man at the pool	John 5:1–15
Boy with five barley loaves and two fish	John 6:8–11
Man born blind	John 9
Lazarus, Mary, and Martha	John 11:1–44; 12:1–11
The “disciple whom Jesus loved”	John 13:23–26; 19:26–27; 20:2–10; 21:7, 20–25

worthy is the treatment of Thomas. John gives the meaning of his Aramaic name (“the Twin”), and he is mentioned by name several times (11:16; 14:5) apart from his most famous appearance as the “doubter” who will not believe Jesus has risen from the dead until he sees and touches his wounds (20:24–29).

Do these specifics about particular people represent the experience of an eyewitness who saw or remembered more than those responsible for the other Gospels? Or is this just good storytelling, making the narration more vivid by adding the “human interest” of names and personalities? These questions go hand in hand with John’s distinctive portrayal of Jesus himself and of his mission. How could someone writing about the same person as Matthew, Mark, and Luke have such a different picture of him, of what he taught, and of how he related to those around him? Did this author really know something that the others didn’t? Or has he shaped the same story in a radically different way? And in either case, why and how did this come about? These are the kinds of questions that we will take up in sessions 2 and 3.

## About the Writer

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