



Introduction to John

SESSION 3

| *What is the real story that the Gospel is trying to tell about Jesus?*

Introduction

We have seen how the Gospel of John differs in many ways from the other New Testament Gospels and considered some ways of accounting for those differences in relation to the Gospel's origin. But what does all this matter? What is the real story that the Gospel is trying to tell about Jesus? How do its unusual and sometimes mysterious characteristics contribute to the message about him that the Gospel writer was trying to convey? We saw in the first session that the plot of the Gospel of John essentially boils down to this: Jesus comes from God to bring eternal life to the world but is rejected, yet his very rejection and crucifixion prove to be the source of life for those who believe in him. Various aspects of this outline of John's story need fuller consideration. What does it mean, for instance, to say that Jesus "comes from God"? How does John give theological and spiritual depth to the rejection and death of Jesus? These are questions we will explore here.

"From God"

To say that Jesus "comes from God" could mean no more than that he is a man of God, a prophet (1:6; 9:16). It's clear throughout this Gospel, though, that this language has a special meaning in regard to Jesus. As "the one who is from God," only he has seen God (6:46; compare 1:18; 3:13). Jesus is able to do and say in this world what he has seen and heard in the very presence of God (5:19–24; 7:14–18; 8:38–40; 9:4; 12:48–50; 15:14–15; 17:6–8). Because Jesus does God's works and speaks



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God's words, those who have seen him have seen God (14:6–11). By the same token, however, those who reject him also reject God (15:22–24).

One aspect of Jesus' divinity in John, then, is that he is "transparent" to God. Through him—his words and his deeds—one may see God. Therefore it is significant that Jesus comes from God specifically to give life. In Jesus God is revealed as one who gives life and does so out of love (3:16–17). Whatever else the Bible may say about God, for John this is the ultimate revelation of the divine: God loves and God gives life. Not surprisingly, a later writing from the same "school" declares that the coming of the Son of God into the world to give life reveals to us that God *is* love (1 John 4:7–10).

There is another aspect to the relationship between Jesus and God, however. The Gospel's prologue (1:1–18) provides a classic formulation of this in its famous opening sentence: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Greek term translated "Word" is *logos*, which had a

wide range of meanings having to do with intelligence and expressions of intelligence. In Greek and Jewish philosophy it was used to refer to the divine intelligence that gives order to the world (called wisdom in Prov. 8:22–31; and in the Apocrypha: Sir. 24:1–12; Wis. 7:22–8:1). When John’s prologue goes on to say that “all things came into being” through the Word, it is referring to this concept. The assertion that “the Word was God” implies that the fullness of God’s being, power, wisdom, knowledge, and love were present and expressed in the Word. Thus the relationship between God and the one who is uniquely God’s Son, who is in the bosom of God (1:18) and is the divine Word/Wisdom, existed prior to the creation of the world.

You may want to pause and catch your breath after that. It is a genuinely breathtaking concept. What follows is, if anything, even more breathtaking: “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14; compare Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:1–3a). The divine Wisdom, the presence and expression of God’s own being and intelligence, became a mortal human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who ate and drank, grew weary and wept, suffered and died. Christian confessions of faith, sermons, and hymns encapsulate and expound and celebrate this, but seldom do we ponder it long enough and deeply enough to take it in fully (if that is really possible). It is as if someone told you that they could introduce you to all four laws of thermodynamics in person, a guy named Fred. Would you believe it? Would you want to meet this Fred? Or would you find the whole idea a little bit ridiculous—or a little bit terrifying?

For John, Jesus is not only transparent to God, but he literally *embodies* God. For those who accept this theology of incarnation (from the Latin for “into flesh”), the human and the divine now interpenetrate in a wonderful way; all creation is sanctified now that its Creator has entered into it as a human being. Of course, John does not contain a fully developed theology of the Trinity. It took centuries for that to be worked out, using this Gospel as a major resource. In fact, the Gospel writer seems to prefer not to present the incarnation of the Word as a precisely worked-out doctrine. It is as if this were a truth too deep, too elusive, too strange to be expressed in a simple, straightforward, noncontradictory statement. Instead, the Gospel chooses other linguistic and literary tools.

Paradox, Irony, Symbolism

The first sentence of John already contains its first paradox: “the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” How could the Word both be with God and *be* God? The Gospel writer makes no attempt to reconcile these contradictory assertions. Somehow, the Word’s relation to God is one of both association and identity. At the very beginning of this Gospel, we are invited to stretch our imaginations toward a truth that can perhaps be better visualized than rationalized, sung or put into poetry more readily than given logical explanation. This mode of communication continues throughout the Gospel, which uses paradox, irony, and symbolism in communicating its message about Jesus.

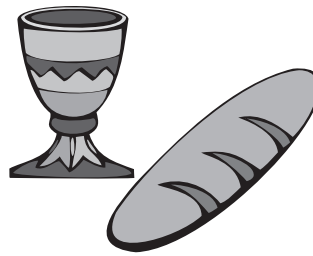
John does this because the message itself is paradoxical, ironic, and symbolic. We are not used to thinking of such a central claim of Christian theology in this way, but if we read John carefully we will find ourselves pointed in that direction. In 10:1–15, for instance, we read that Jesus is, paradoxically, both the gate through which the sheep go in and out and the shepherd who leads them through the gate. In 11:5–6, the NRSV reads, “Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” However, a more literal translation would run, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed in the place where he was for two days”—implying that Jesus let Lazarus die *because* he loved him, a paradox indeed.

Irony enters into a story when the readers have information that the characters in the story do not. When Jesus says, “I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come,” his opponents wonder if he is going to go teach the Greeks (7:33–36). They clearly do not think this is likely, but, as the readers know, they are ironically more correct than they realize, for the teaching about Jesus will indeed go beyond Judaism to the Gentiles.

A symbol (John calls them signs) is something that, while having its own reality, represents another, unspoken reality so as to make it in some way present. Because the symbol cannot perfectly reproduce the absent reality, it

leaves room for multiple possibilities of perception and interpretation. A stop sign can mean only one thing. But using a flower as a symbol for love, without speaking directly of love, can imply multiple characteristics of love: beauty, delightfulness, sweetness, but also fragility and transience. In John, some of the “I am” sayings use materials from everyday life to symbolize Jesus’ identity and what he offers: he is the bread of life, the light of the world. In other passages, Jesus offers living water that puts an end to thirst (4:10–14; see also 7:37–39) and washes his disciples’ feet (13:1–11).

How does all this paradox, irony, and symbolism relate to John’s message about Jesus? For one thing, the claim that the Word became flesh is deeply paradoxical. In the dualistic worldview that was prevalent in the ancient world, the Word—*logos*, intellect, spirit—was not only distinct from flesh, body, and matter but also opposed to them. Many sought to overcome their flesh in order to live for the spirit; certainly no one expected or desired divine Mind to descend and take on mere material flesh. The idea was absurd, if not repulsive. The claim of incarnation was paradoxical; indeed, it was revolutionary—more on that later. John’s message that the Son of God came into the world to save it but that the world failed to recognize its own Creator is ironic; it is ironic again that this very failure, leading to the Savior’s rejection and crucifixion, consummates his mission of salvation. The Gospel’s use of symbolism enables it to present truth about Jesus in a way that transcends mere factual narrative. The symbols are suggestive rather than definitive, opening up possibilities more than closing them off. This use of symbolism implies that the Gospel’s author believed the truth about Jesus to be something that was beyond simple definition and explanation. Language, which largely depends on habit and custom and familiarity, is stretched to the breaking point when trying to represent this unparalleled and unprecedented truth. Symbolism is a way of enabling language to do indirectly what it can barely manage directly. Symbolism is also essential to John’s message because of the content of the message: Jesus, the Word made flesh, is “transparent” to God. This means that *Jesus himself is a kind of symbol of God*: his presence in the world makes God present, as a symbol makes another reality present. To tell a story about a man who is uniquely a symbol of God requires the use of symbolism within the story.



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Sectarian Spirituality and Incarnation

The message of the divine Word made human flesh, of the rejected Savior whose rejection brings about salvation, is central to the Christian gospel, but it is not as straightforward and obvious as we may be used to thinking. It does not link Christianity directly to the world’s hubs of power; instead it requires a twist in the usual human way of thinking about power and security. There is something hidden, something enigmatic in God’s way of salvation, something that may elude us if we charge straight ahead. This paradox, this ironic twist at the heart of the Gospel, which comes to expression in the paradoxes, ironies, and symbols of the Gospel of John, is connected to the paradoxical lives of those who first believed it.

The theology of incarnation, especially in a philosophical culture that resisted the intermingling of *logos* and flesh, makes a radical claim about God, that God “came down,” intentionally engaged in an act of downward mobility, to bring life to human beings. Ancient philosophy considered intelligence to be characteristic of free men of the ruling class. Women, workers, and slaves were given value in relation to their bodies. To say that the Word (*logos*, intelligence) became flesh was to suggest symbolically that a revolution had happened, the superior lowering itself scandalously to the inferior. This self-lowering of the divine would correspond to the experience of social lowering that the community behind the Fourth Gospel apparently underwent. If we understand this community as a sect in the sense discussed in session 2, its social experience has implications for its theology, and vice versa.

Sectarian groups tend to be at the margins of society. This early Christian community, undergoing a painful separation from the synagogue, would have experienced

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loss of connection with family and other support systems, loss of status (in a world in which status, defined in terms of honor, was enormously significant), and loss of the religious traditions and systems that had given meaning and value to life. To reconstruct these things in their new situation, they focused upon their community itself and especially on Jesus. For instance, if they were no longer able to celebrate the Passover, with its traditions of unleavened bread and exodus themes, they could see in Jesus the provider of bread, the bread of life that far surpasses the manna given through Moses (6:1–14, 25–35, 48–58).

Indeed, they saw in Jesus one who had already experienced what they were experiencing, rejection and downward mobility, so that their difficulties found meaning when understood as following in his way and their sacrificial service to one another could be seen as imitation of him (12:23–36; 13:12–17, 33–38; 15:18–16:3). Just as he had “come down,” encountered opposition, yet persisted in speaking the words and doing the deeds that God had given him, leading him further downward to rejection and crucifixion, so they, alienated from their former lives and connections, persisted in their confession of him and thus experienced further alienation. Yet by “abiding in him,” persisting in relationship with him through confession and devotion, they could find joy and bear fruit (15:4–11).

Not everyone in the environment of the Johannine community was willing to undergo this risk of downward mobility, especially those with something to lose (12:42–43; Nicodemus, a Pharisee and authority, seems to represent the struggles of such people: 3:1–15; 7:45–52; 19:38–42). Thus the “spiritual Gospel” is not simply about individuals and their response to the challenge of faith in Jesus but about the creation of new community, centered on a new and radical act of God, in the face of opposition and difficulty. Spirituality as

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John’s Story and Ours

Is our world today any more ready than the first-century world to believe that the creative divine Wisdom has entered it as a mortal human being? In some ways, our situation resembles the situation of the New Testament Christians more closely than any time in many, many centuries. When Christianity was a dominant cultural and political force, its beliefs could be widely assumed or even imposed. Incarnation could be taken for granted—and thereby misunderstood. Now that the church no longer holds cultural sway, incarnation is once again strange and hard to explain (although for very different philosophical reasons). Can the Gospel of John once again be a help to a Christianity that may once again become a minority religion in a pluralistic world?

John gives absolutely no encouragement to the idea of Christians *taking back* cultural and political power. Instead, this Gospel calls us to stand with—to abide in—the rejected Jesus and to live in the solidarity of love with those whom society and its authorities reject. It calls us also to accept paradox and irony as natural to the Christian faith and outlook. A Christianity lived on Johannine terms might be less likely to look for God in overt centers of power and more likely to seek God on the margins, in the paradox of cross and resurrection, in clear-eyed delight in the irony and absurdity of the Word made flesh. It might be a faith that allows God genuinely to be God, to act in ways that even believers find perplexing and radically new. It might be a faith known more through imagination than through iron-clad rules, a truth expressed more in symbols than in certainties.

If you encountered the light of the world today, what pathway might it illuminate for you?

About the Writer

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