

Introduction to the Gospel According to John

Lesson Four - “The Book of Glory”

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This is intended as the final lesson in a four-lesson course on the Gospel commonly known as the Gospel of John. The first lesson introduces its concepts and the origins and history of the text itself. The following three lessons—two, three, and four—deal with the text itself. This lesson is intended to be undertaken in conjunction with reading the text, beginning after you have completed the first lesson.

The Gospel According to John

This is the final lesson and covers the last segment of the Gospel. Like the other divisions, this concluding part of the Gospel has been given various names by its students over the years. Two of the more common names are the “Book of Passion” and the “Book of Glory.” This part of the Gospel has been summarized in various ways to help readers get an overall view. As with the preceding section, we will start with the Price outline of what he calls the “Book of Passion.” You will find that many of the incidents listed are familiar, but you may never have thought about how or where the individual incidents fit into the whole. The outline of this final section is:

The outline that follows is adapted from James L. Price’s treatment of the closing section of John in *Interpreting the New Testament*.

- 1.The Farewell Discourses, 13:1–17:26: washing the disciples’ feet; the betrayal foretold [13:1–30]; dialogue on Jesus’ departure and return [13:31–14:31]; discourse on Jesus and His church [15:1–16:33]; and the prayer of Jesus [17:1–26].
- 2.The Passion Narrative, 18:1–19:42: the arrest [18:1–11]; trial before the high priest and Peter’s denials [18:12–27]; the examination before Pilate [18:28–19:16]; the crucifixion [19:17–30]; and the burial [19:31–42].
- 3.The Resurrection Narrative, 20:1–31: finding the empty tomb [20:1–10]; the appearance of Jesus to Mary [20:11–18]; the appearance of Jesus to the disciples without Thomas [20:19–25]; the appearance to the disciples with Thomas [20:26–29]; and the purpose of the Gospel [20:30–31].
- 4.Conclusion, 21:1–25: the appearance beside the Sea of Tiberias [21:1–23] and a final testimonial [21:24–25].

This summary or outline should help you to get a comprehensive view of the sweep of the “Book of Glory.” By this point, you should have completed reading the Fourth Gospel.

This final part of the story is what we in modern times might view as act two of John’s

drama (John 13–20), which deals with the glorification of God’s Word for the world. At its heart is the story of the passion and resurrection of Jesus, foreshadowed by the farewell address to the disciples (John 14–17), a discourse that deals with the life of the believer. The purpose of the long discourse section in the Passion Narrative is to allow the Gospel writer to interpret the story beforehand. Rather than appending each discourse to the telling of the individual incidents, the reader can see the drama of the last week of Jesus’ life uninterrupted by commentary, giving it maximum impact.

Also, a new character is introduced. During these discourses, the Gospel writer refers to another entity—translated in the Oxford Bible as the “Spirit”—who will teach the disciples and help them remember. The actual Greek word used here is often rendered as Paraclete. Translation in the context of John is difficult. In one passage Jesus speaks of the Paraclete as a witness in Jesus’ defense, in another as a spokesman for Him, in another as a consoler of the disciples, and in His coming absence as a teacher and guide for the disciples. There are differing views about the relation of the Paraclete to Jesus on the one hand and the Holy Spirit on the other. The close parallelism between the work of Jesus and the work of the Paraclete may suggest that, through the Paraclete, Jesus continues His presence among us. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines “Paraclete” as “advocate,” used in the Gospel of John as an epithet for the Holy Ghost. The early church father Origen, the great second-century theologian, translated the word as “Intercessor” where it related to Jesus and as “Consoler” where it related to the Holy Ghost. But regarding the “Holy Ghost” translation, that meaning associated with the word appears nowhere outside of the New Testament. The translator of the Vulgate used “Advocate,” which is preferred by many modern scholars. Because of these translation problems, many now advocate simply using, or transliterating, the Greek word itself. Translation problems aside, we now have all three facets of God present in the Fourth Gospel.

As Trinitarians, Anglicans, like other mainstream Western Christian traditions, see God as present in three persons: Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter. The three persons may be pictured as points at the angles of an equilateral triangle. This teaching from the early Church was challenged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by, among others, the Unitarians. The contrast in positions is obvious from the name. The Eastern Orthodox view is that the three persons differ in relation of origin: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. In many Western formulations, the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. In the West, the triangle became a common symbol for the Trinity.

In earlier discussions, we have focused on points of contrast with the other, or Synoptic,

Gospels. The Passion Narrative in John, however, contains a significant amount of material similar to the Synoptic Gospels.

a. The arrest in the garden [18:1–11], including Peter’s slicing of the ear of the high priest’s servant;

b. Peter’s denial [18:15–27];

c. The trial before Pilate [18:29–19:16], including the offer of Barabbas [18:39–40];

d. The place of Crucifixion [19:17]; The title on the Cross [19:19];

e. The execution of the two others, [19:18]; and

f. The dividing of the garments [19:23–24].

However, even the shared elements are given a special Johannine emphasis. For instance, Judas appears at the head of the mob in the garden immediately before the arrest [18:2]. When Jesus identifies Himself as “I am he,” the crowd falls back [18:4–6]. Peter’s denials, as in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are used as a contrast to the witness of Jesus; however, in John the contrast is enhanced because the stories are interwoven [18:15–27]. In a classic use of symbolism, John contrasts the warmth of light with the cold of darkness. Notice, for instance, that Peter, in his second denial, reaches out to a fire for warmth, and at the same moment Jesus is questioned by the high priest. Thus, the Light of the World is captured by the power of darkness [18:18].

An interesting bit of symbolism relates to the identification of Judas as the traitor in John 13:21–30. In this vignette, Peter asks the Beloved Disciple to ask Jesus who will betray Him. Jesus answers that it will be the one to whom He gives the bread. As soon as Jesus gives the bread to Judas, two things happen: first, Satan enters Judas; second, Jesus says that Judas should do quickly what he is going to do. The text then says that no one knew why Jesus said this to Judas. Yet the Beloved Disciple knew, because Jesus had just told him. Perhaps we are to infer that no one else knew what this meant. Notice also that Jesus hands the “bread”—that is, symbolically Himself—over to the betrayer. This may be read as a demonstration and affirmation that Jesus voluntarily submitted. The symbolism of the story is more important to John than the consistency of the storyline.

The scene reaches its climax when Pilate brings Jesus before the crowd and presents Him as king. The Jews reply, “We have no king but Caesar” [19:15]—choosing to be ruled by humans, the Romans, rather than by God. This is a point of contact with the Old Testament, especially the famous dialogue between the Lord and the people when they demand a king in replacement of God’s rule through His priests and judges. God relents and ultimately gives them Saul as a ruler.

In ages past, scenes of the Jewish authorities rejecting Jesus and turning Him over to the

Romans were sometimes used as justification for harsh treatment of Jewish peoples. In contrast, Luke Timothy Johnson, in his work on the Gospels, sees the figure of Pilate as an important indication that this section of the Fourth Gospel is not merely a polemic against Jews. Pilate's action makes clear that it is the entire world that has rejected Jesus. Indeed, Pilate did not intend to "go out of his way" to harm Jesus. But as is often the case when dealing with the helpless, it turns out simply to be easier for Pilate to be distressed yet take the path of least resistance and not interfere.

At the Crucifixion, in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the disciples do not simply abandon Jesus but are dismissed by Him [18:8]. At the cross, He is still surrounded by Mary His mother [her second appearance in the Fourth Gospel; see Cana, 2:1–11], His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the Beloved Disciple, traditionally identified with John [19:25–26]. As Jesus loved His family and friends to the end, so they loved Him. Mary His mother is important because her presence emphasizes the continuing bond between Jesus and those who follow Him.

The death of Jesus is better understood in the light of the Old Testament. The soldiers come to break the legs of the prisoners. They do not break Jesus' legs because He is already dead. But His side is pierced, and blood and water flow out [19:34]. John, of course, comments on the importance of this event: "They shall look on Him whom they pierced" [19:37]. A reading of the whole section of **Zechariah 12:10** and 13:1 says:

"And I will pour out on the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him as one weeps for an only child, and weep over him as one weeps for a firstborn. . . . On that day, there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them of sin and uncleanness."¹

Now, open your New Testament to John 7:38–39. There is dual symbolism here: blood signals atonement and the cleansing of sin, while water signals the outpouring of the Spirit. See the earlier references in the Fourth Gospel to water—the water of eternal life [4:14] and "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water," which John identifies with the Spirit that those who believed in Him were to receive [7:38–39]. As you see in the earlier text, the difference is that now Jesus has been glorified. Also notice that the only disciple present is the Beloved

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy, The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, 2nd Revision,

Disciple, traditionally identified with John [19:25–26].

The first resurrection appearances in the Fourth Gospel are like those in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—but with a particular Johannine emphasis. There is a footrace between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Peter does not win, but he still goes into the tomb first; the Beloved Disciple, however, is the first to “believe” [20:3–9]. The failure of people to recognize Jesus in the appearances shows that He now lives in a new way and that He will be recognized by those who know His voice when He calls them by name. Remember that in the shepherd stories it is said that His flock will know His voice and that He knows His flock.

The drama ends with an epilogue, John 21, which may have been written later but is now firmly related to the body of the Gospel. This final section narrates the appearance by the Sea of Tiberias, including the catch of 153 fish and the recommissioning of Peter. Together, these incidents point to the unlimited scope of the Christian good news, an idea retained throughout John’s Gospel, and provide an agenda for the church of the future. The mission of the disciples to the world can now begin, based on the revelation and glorification of the messianic Word of God.

Conclusion

The following summary of John’s theology draws especially on Stephen S. Smalley’s article on John in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*.

According to *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, John’s theology is a theology of life. He bears testimony not only to Jesus but also to the possibility of life through Him (John 1:4). The repeated symbol of light makes the same point. The life that He mediates to every believer, on the basis of His revelation to the world and His glorification for the world, is the divine life that ultimately belongs to the Father Himself (John 5:26). Moreover, John’s Gospel speaks of life through Jesus in all its fullness. The seven signs make clear that Jesus, in His humanity, is concerned about the physical dimension of human existence as well as its spiritual possibilities. And since the Word became flesh (John 1:14), as the signs again illustrate, all matter—not only water, bread, and wine—can point to and convey the abundant life of the life-giver (John 10:10). Such is John’s particular “sacramentalism.” This eternal life is available to the faithful now, in the present, rather than only after death. John’s theology of salvation includes a future tense; for example, Jesus promises His disciples that He will eventually “come again” for them (John 14:3).

But His emphasis is on the blessings of eternity that can be shared by the Christian in the present, when the judgment as well as the life of God is disclosed (John 3:16–18).

This understanding of salvation is determined by John's concept of sin. For writers of the other Gospels, sin is essentially personal and communal wrongdoing: it is disobedience to God's law. Its consequence, as throughout the Hebrew Bible, is a breakdown of the covenant between Creator and creature. Such a covenant relationship can only be restored by the sacrifice on the cross, echoed in the subsequent self-offering of obedience in the lives of the disciples (Mark 10:45; Matthew 7:21; Luke 9:23). For the Fourth Gospel evangelist, sin is presented less as an isolated ethical failure and more as a cosmic state of alienation from God, a spiritual blindness, darkness, or deadness (John 3:19; John 12:35). In other words, the whole world and everyone in it was separated from God. This situation can be remedied only by restored sight (John 9:39) and a conscious return to the light through identification with, and incorporation into, the life of the Son who unites the dimensions of heaven and earth (John 12:46; John 15:4). Thus, in John's Gospel the passion and crucifixion of Jesus are not presented primarily as a sacrificial explanation for the forgiveness of sin, but as a historical expression of the introduction of Light and Life into the world by Jesus, in whom heaven and earth are united. This gives us new life and new sight. In John's view, the cross is a timeless expression of Jesus/God in the world, mediated through a historical event. Those who are thus "drawn" to the now-glorified Christ are indwelt by the Spirit-Paraclete (John 14:16–17) and receive new life now from the vine; and this not only sustains believers individually but also unites them with every other "branch" in the Christian community (John 15:1–5). At this point, ethical sinfulness—misbehavior—can be eradicated by effecting the "new commandment" of love (John 13:34–35). The fullness of eternal life in Christ is still to come; but through Him, decisively, it has already arrived.

The great differences between the Fourth Gospel and the others have been a problem for Christians from the earliest times. Conservative scholars have often explained the differences by assuming that the author expected readers to be aware of the Synoptic Gospels and that, while the author intended to correct or supplement some details, he was not concerned with reproducing the already familiar teaching of Christ as given by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The purpose of the Gospel was to relate the higher teachings reserved for His disciples and brought to the fore in John, though they were relegated to the background in the catechetical instructions contained in the other three. In short, John represents an advanced text and the others a more basic text. Clement of Alexandria called the Fourth Gospel the "spiritual Gospel," saying that John, "last of all, aware that the bodily facts were disclosed in the gospels, urged by friends, and inspired by the

Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel.” It may therefore be regarded as a necessary complement to the picture of Christ drawn by the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

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