



*that you may*

**BELIEVE**

RECEIVE LIFE EVERLASTING IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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# an overview of john

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## introduction

There is a scandalous simplicity to the Christian faith. Only one thing is required of us to have life from God; *to simply believe in Jesus Christ*.

But what does it mean to believe?

 Is it mere acknowledgement?

 Must it translate to action?

 Will it also demand our affections?

These are often our questions as we come to the challenge of growing in genuine belief. In our modern tendency to engage in philosophical or psychological terms, our efforts to firm up our faith are frustrated. But personal faith begins not with us, but with the person of Jesus Christ.

The gospel of John calls us to look beyond and behold Jesus in his multifaceted glory. John lays out who Jesus is and why he has come *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the one from God. To believe in Christ is to believe his claim that life; life anew, life to the full, life from God is only found in him. *To believe is to live!* And so, this gospel will ask us at every turn to believe in Christ and help us live in his fullness.

## author + audience

 **This gospel was written by John, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' 12 disciples.**

This gospel (like the other three) is technically anonymous as the author doesn't identify themselves. But this is similar to "other ancient books that were also formally anonymous but not intentionally anonymous"<sup>1</sup> The author calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (21:7) and "this is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things" (21:24). From the internal evidence of who remains unnamed as well as external attributions throughout church history, we can affirm that the apostle John is the "disciple whom Jesus loved". Whilst this anonymity may seem strange, we can rightly understand that "the author has done his best, apparently with intention, to cover up his tracks. For his theme is not his own workshop but the workshop of God."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore John, an eyewitness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, has personally produced this account. It could even be argued that "no one was closer to Jesus during his earthly ministry than John. For this reason, no gospel presents Jesus' person and work in a more perceptive and spiritually penetrating manner than does the Fourth Gospel."<sup>3</sup>

 **This gospel was written to strengthen believers to share with unbelievers.**

Gospels are written to a broad readership to further the general witness of the church. The intended purpose and audience of John's gospel may initially appear to be purely evangelistic (20:31), but its theological depth and rich use of the OT probably meant that "John's purpose encompassed both aspects, evangelism of unbelievers and edification of believers, and that John pursued an indirect evangelistic purpose, aiming to reach an unbelieving audience

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Klink III, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah: An Introduction to John's Gospel* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021), 18.

through the Christian readers of his gospel."<sup>4</sup> The OT emphasis may have come from "years of preaching to Jews, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, had given him some ideas about how it should be done. Here he puts his ideas on paper; the result is the Gospel of John."<sup>5</sup>

## purpose

In one sense, every gospel is written as proclamation about Jesus the Christ; who he was and what he did in his life, death and resurrection, calling for repentance and faith before his return. John makes that abundantly clear with his purpose statement.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (20:30-31)

John prays that his readers would finally know God in Christ and receive the full life that can only be found in trusting him. As Carson notes, "the best evangelistic literature not only explains why one should become a Christian, and how to become a Christian, but what it means to be a Christian."<sup>6</sup>

## context

### historical context

John's gospel was likely written towards the end of the first century between **85-95 A.D.**, making it the last gospel to be written. A key piece of historical context would be the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. "In the wake of the temple's destruction, John likely saw a window of opportunity for Jewish evangelism, seeking to encourage fellow believers to reach out to their Jewish and Gentile neighbours in the Diaspora."<sup>7</sup> The mission of the early church to the 'ends of the earth' would have been established; witnessing success and facing increasing opposition, for example 21:29 seems to indicate that the apostle Peter has been martyred already. Therefore the distinctive choices in John's gospel, are not only a reflection of the historical context but also a reflection of the Church's maturation in presenting Jesus to the world.

### literary context

What is the 'gospel' genre? The genre is probably best described as a **theological narrative** which carries these "three aspects: biographical (on Jesus), historical (on real events), and theological-didactic (on a subject matter pertinent for the reader)."<sup>8</sup>

Many have noted similarities with Graeco-Roman historical biographies (e.g. ancestry, heroic words and deeds, death and vindication). And by any measure, the gospels should

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<sup>4</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 85.

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Nottingham: Apollos, 1991), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Klink, *John*, 49.

be considered reliable historical recounts. "The gospels are deeply concerned about retelling the history of events but that is not its only goal. More importantly it aims to interpret the significance of the events in showing that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, in who we should believe and have eternal life." Therefore we should read it more like the biblical narratives of the OT (which John draws heavily from), given not only to depict events but to disciple us.

There are few literary features that are worth noting in the gospel of John.

### **Narrative asides**

John will regularly interject his commentary into the narrative. Some shorter asides simply fill in details about geography, timing or meaning of words. The more substantial asides will strive to highlight themes and steer the reader to its theological significance.

### **Signs and symbolism**

Not just the miracles, but a vast array of words and actions that show Jesus to be the Messiah foretold in the OT. "To the evangelist a sign is not, in essence, and miraculous act, but a significant act, one which, for the seeing eye, and the understanding mind, symbolises eternal realities."<sup>9</sup>

### **Extended speeches**

They are bigger chunks of dialogue/monologue that are more than just the context for Jesus' statements. It presents the pastoral/theological state of the people as they have significant truths about Jesus revealed to them.

## **biblical-theological context**

### **in the OT**

The gospels are **a turning point in the biblical canon and in salvation history**. And so, the "Gospels are simply not understood if one fails to appreciate their fundamental 'salvation-historical' direction, which presupposes the promise history of the Old Testament."<sup>10</sup> Whilst there are not as many direct quotations, John depends and draws heavily on the key themes of the OT. Themes such as the vine (Ps 80), shepherd (Eze 34), word (Gen 1), glory (Isa 55) are all deployed to show that Jesus' life death and resurrection fulfilled scriptural patterns and prophecies. "Thus, it is John's message that in Jesus, all the various scripture, messianic predictions, and typology converged, not only in his life but most signally in his death... in Jesus all of salvation history finds its climatic fulfilment."<sup>11</sup>

### **in the NT**

John's gospel was likely written last and also to complement and further the 3 other Synoptic gospels. It assumes that the reader has interacted with the earlier accounts (just think about how much it leaves out!). As early church father, Clement of Alexandria notes,

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 90.

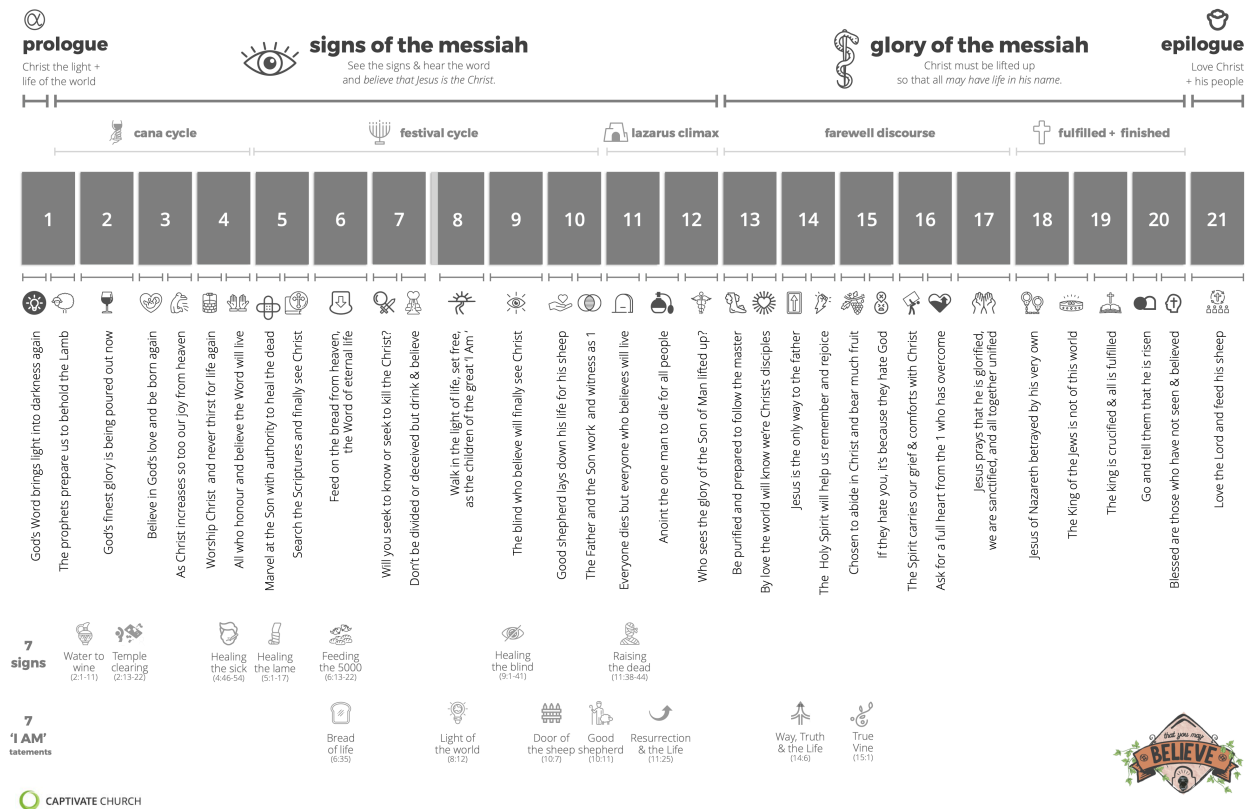
<sup>10</sup> Hengel, 'Eye-witness memory and the writing of the Gospels', *The Written Gospel*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl & Donald A. Hagnerpp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp70 - 96), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 317.

“John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.”<sup>12</sup> By ‘spiritual gospel’ he means that John theologises in a more explicit manner. And in doing so, it brings to the New Testament profound truths about our triune God, an overpowering depiction of the nature of Christ, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human belief and much more.

## structure

The Gospel of John is made up of 2 key sections; the ‘Book of Signs’ and the ‘Book of Glory’, bookended with a prologue (1:1-18) and an epilogue (21). The first half is commonly referred to as the ‘Book of Signs’ (1:19-12:50) which follows Jesus public ministry and focuses on Jesus identity. The second half is commonly referred to as the ‘Book of Glory’ (13:1-20:31) which prepares us to see the substance of the signs; that Jesus is the crucified Christ as well as the implications for new life in the Spirit.



## key themes

One of the most exciting things about studying the gospel of John is that it really pushes us to consider Jesus deeply. Calvin, in contrasting it with the other gospels, notes, “And as all of them had the same object in view, to point out Christ, the three former exhibit his body, if we may be

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.7.

permitted to use the expression, but John exhibits his soul."<sup>13</sup> Here a brief overview that touches on the rich theological themes woven throughout John's gospel.

## ▲ our triune God

Front and centre in John's purpose for his readers to believe, is meeting the triune God in his full glory. **Jesus reveals to us who our trinitarian God is, how he relates within himself and with us.** We are to believe in a triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are to see that "the life of Jesus is one that fulfills the purpose of the Father and finds its ultimate expression in the coming of the Spirit. In this sense, the plot of this Gospel involves the life of the trinitarian God."<sup>14</sup> More than any other book, John's gospel shows the inter-trinitarian life and how it overflows into our world and our lives.

### God the Father (πατήρ)

*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (14:10)*

To know the Father is to have life (17:2). But how do we know the Father?

First, he sends his Son. **The Father can only and truly be known through the Son** (6:40). The Father is "characterised not directly by what he says or does but by what Jesus his authorised emissary says about him."<sup>15</sup> Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (10:30), he only does what the Father tells him (8:28), and Jesus is the only way to the Father (14:6). It is because the Father and the Son are perfectly united in their love that Christ can bring that love to us (14:21).

Secondly he sends his Spirit (14:26). **The Father alone draws people to him by his Spirit** (6:44). The Father is seeking people to worship him (4:23) but we are unable to do so unless he has chosen us and takes us to Christ. He continues to hold us by declaring Christ into our hearts by his Spirit (16:15).

### Jesus the Son/Christ (υιός/Χριστός)

*The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (3:35-36)*

John's gospel is the only one that explicitly calls Jesus the 'Son of God'. **Jesus is the eternal Son of God; the perfect witness of his Father.** Jesus claiming to be God, humanly speaking, is what got him killed. As the Son, he is the only one qualified to bear witness to God (6:46), and carry his fullness to us (1:16). "Jesus' role as the sent Son thus highlights both his equality with the Father and his obedience to him in carrying out his mission."<sup>16</sup> The 'I am' statements all throughout John's gospel affirm the identity and the mission of the Son.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Klink, *John*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 361.

<sup>16</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 391.



Jesus comes to us as “the climatic eschatological revelation of God’s covenant love and faithfulness.”<sup>17</sup> **Jesus is the Christ/Messiah who perfectly fulfils the will of the Father.** The entire scriptural witness points us to Jesus as the Christ (5:39), the fulfilment of God’s loving promise to save us from sin and give us life (3:16). Jesus is therefore the singular point of God’s judgement; he is the difference between life and death for all.

### **The Holy Spirit our helper (παράκλητος)**

*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”. (14:26)*

The Spirit first appears in descending on Christ with the promise that many would be baptised in the Holy Spirit. **The Spirit brings the power of God to complete his purposes in Christ.** He is the Spirit of God’s truth (14:17), he is the presence of Christ (14:18). The Spirit is sent from the Father and the Son as the person who will perfect/complete their will.

John’s uses a unusual word: *parakletos* to describe the Holy Spirit which is probably best translated as ‘helper’ or ‘helping presence’. **The Spirit helps us have life in Christ and hold on to Christ.** We must be baptised/born again by the Spirit (6:63). We are taught to know and love God by the Spirit (14:15-17). “Jesus prepares his disciples for the time after his departure. Once he has been exalted, the Spirit will continue Jesus’ work in and through his followers.”<sup>18</sup> Life in the Spirit is the new paradigm for living under the ascended Christ.

### **signs (σημείον)**

*When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (6:14)*

In the first half of John’s gospel, we see Jesus perform 7 explicitly identified public signs that authenticate Jesus’ messianic claims (3:2). Signs are revelatory pictures of Jesus’ identity. John doesn’t refer to ‘miracles’ but has opted to call them ‘signs’; a different word that gives us the “penetrating theological insight that the primary purpose of Jesus’ miracles was not the powerful act itself but the event’s function as a signpost to Jesus’ messianic identity.”<sup>19</sup> Even though the crowds chased after signs (6:30), in and of themselves they are inadequate if they do not lead to belief in what they signified (12:37).

### **fulfilment**

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (5:39)*

The signs are best understood as a part of the wider effort to show how Jesus fulfils OT anticipations. **The substance behind every provisional OT sign and symbol is**

<sup>17</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 409.

<sup>18</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 88.

**found in Christ and his work.** We see again and again OT institutions, motifs, prophecies, celebrations, such as temple, Jewish rebellion, baptism, passover, fulfilled in Christ. For example, in the festival cycle “John presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the symbolism, inherent in these various festivals, as embodying in his very own person, the essence to which each of these festivals pointed... in him all these various festivals, found their multifaceted messianic fulfilment.”<sup>20</sup>

## **believe (πιστεύω)**

*“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (6:29)*

John writes his account for the express purpose that his readers would believe Jesus is the Christ (20:31). In fact, this is the very prayer of Jesus himself (11:42). Unsurprisingly, “there is no theologically significant word that occurs more frequently in John’s gospel than the word “believe”<sup>21</sup> In John’s gospel, **to believe is to give yourself to Jesus; a dynamic conviction that sets the crucified Christ over every facet of life.** “Only such christological, cross-centered faith is true faith in the Johannine—and biblical—sense.”<sup>22</sup>

Believing is both a gift from God (10:25) and our genuine response-ibility (4:42). “The only work God requires is “trusting” Jesus. And even this trusting response toward Jesus is ultimately God given. It is this total dependence on the one who came to give his life for us, that liberates us from our affections which tie us to our earthly surroundings, positions, and relationships.”<sup>23</sup> When we truly believe Jesus is the Christ, he becomes our centre, our comfort, our celebration, and our courage.

## **unbelief/blind (τυφλός)**

*I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. (10:25-26)*

Equally stark in John’s account is the unbelief from a dark world that does not recognise the light (14:17), from spiritually blind religious leaders (8:44). Jesus condemns this unbelief as sin (16:9), a judgement of blindness from God (12:39). **To not believe Jesus is to not know or have life.** But with God as our hope, we bring Christ’s words to our doubts “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (20:27).

## **love (ἀγάπη)**

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (13:34-35)*

<sup>20</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 470.

<sup>22</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 474.

<sup>23</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 93.

John wants us to have no doubt that love is the divine motivation. We are presented with a radical vision where **the eternal love within God overflows into the salvation of a sinful world.** God relates to us in the same love that has existed eternally and perfectly between Father, Son and Spirit (15:9) "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (15:13) We believe Jesus loves us to the end (13:1). "The phrase "the disciple whom Jesus loved" expresses the important truth that John knew himself to be deeply loved by Jesus... The most important truth John believed was that he was an undeserving recipient of Jesus' redeeming love."<sup>24</sup>

**We are fundamentally reformed in and by Christ's love.** We love Christ in obeying his commands (14:15). We show Christ by loving one another (15:12). Therefore "the mutual love and spiritual unity of the new messianic community, which is to be grounded in the mutual love and spiritual unity among the members of the Trinity themselves."<sup>25</sup>



### salvation

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (3:16)*

**The mission of Christ and his believers is therefore an expression of love.** For Christ so loved the world that he sent his Spirit-filled disciples so that whoever they love with the gospel may be saved and have eternal life. "John's moral vision is simply this: believers must recognise that they are deeply loved by God and must believe in the one God has sent; by believing, they enter into the circle of love existing between the persons of the Godhead, and they also enter in the triune God's purpose and mission: to spread the message of God's love for the world in his Son in the face of opposition and hostility."<sup>26</sup>



### eternal life (ζωή)

*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.(6:68-69)*

'Eternal life' is another key term for John, occurring more than any other piece of NT writing. "John normally eschews "kingdom of God" language and instead speak of "eternal life"<sup>27</sup> **Life in Christ is the end goal God has for us.** Life in John is a living event not simply a 'thing' to be had. To know God, be loved by Christ, and live by his Spirit is life to the full (10:10). Eternal life is not just a comment of quantity but also quality; God alone gives life, free of sin and finally worth living forever. Both halves of the gospel climax with the invitation to dead humanity to listen to Jesus and come back to life. "The raising of Lazarus serves as a living demonstration that the eternal Life-giver, Jesus, is already present with humanity... Do you believe that you can enjoy eternal life—full, abundant life—already in the here and now?"<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 152.

<sup>26</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 523.

<sup>27</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Kostenberger, *Signs of the Messiah*, 129.

## goals

In studying John's gospel, we are not merely investigating the life of Jesus but invested with the life Jesus came to bring. We want people to see how Jesus really is life changing good news! I love this pastoral prayer in Calvin's introduction to his commentary.

The conduct which we perceive in irreligious men, who take an extravagant delight in the empty enjoyments of the world, while they are little if at all, affected by a relish for spiritual blessings, is natural to us all. For the purpose of correcting this fault, God expressly bestows the name Gospel on the message which he orders to be proclaimed concerning Christ; for thus he reminds us that nowhere else can true and solid happiness be obtained, and that in him we have all that is necessary for the perfection of a happy life.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore our goal is:

**To really believe life is only and fully found in Christ.**

Here are some questions to unpack that:

### head

- **Do you believe Jesus fully reveals God?**

When we know the Son of God deeply, we truly know God's truth, love and life for us.

- **Do you trust Jesus as your life?**

We live with certainty and conviction that life is defined and delivered by Christ.

### heart

- **Do you believe you are dearly loved by God?**

We are secured in the greatest love ever known in our God who laid down his life to save us and bring us back to him.

- **Is your vision of life to the full founded on Christ?**

We look for the joy of life in work and play, world and self, when life has only and ever come from Christ.

### hands

- **Do you believe that you will do even greater works in Christ?**

God's Spirit comes to help us live out Christ in advancing his purposes.

- **What fruit do you see in your Christian life?**

Our life is to be characterised by love driven obedience to Christ and to one another.

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 20. (emphasis added)