

I. History and Background on John and his letter

- A. Today we are beginning our study of the gospel of John. To prepare us for this study, we will use today to look at the history and background of this gospel in comparison to the other three gospels. The first thing we will consider is when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written.
1. The truth is, we don't know for sure, because there is no exact dating for any of the gospels.
 2. It is reasonable to assume that at least the first three gospels were written before 70AD, because none of them mention the fall of Jerusalem or the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD.
 - a. And why is the exclusion of these two incidents seeming proof that the first three gospels were written before that? Because all three gospels speak of events that fulfill prior prophesy, and both these events were prophesied by Jesus.
 - b. For example, when the disciples were talking about how beautiful the stones of the Temple were, Jesus said, "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down" (Luke 21:6). And that prophesy was fulfilled in 70AD.
 - c. And another time Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. [38] Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (Matthew 23:37-38). Again, this prophecy was fulfilled in 70AD when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.
 - d. Now it may also interest you to know that not even Acts speaks of the destruction of the Temple, which implies that it too was written before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70AD. In addition, Acts does not mention Nero's persecution of the Christians in 64AD, or the death of James in 62AD, or Paul in 64AD, or Peter in 65AD – which implies Acts was written before 62AD.
 3. As you know, there were four writers of the Gospels. Of the four, Matthew and John were part of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Some believe that Mark was part of the 70 disciples spoken of in Luke 10:1-20. But there is no solid evidence of this. However, from the early

church writings onward, it is said that Mark was a disciple of Peter and Luke a disciple of Paul.

- a. Matthew: In the writings of the early church, it is unanimously stated that Matthew was written first. However, more recently, many Bible scholars believe Mark was written first. As to who is right, we don't know. Either way, Matthew and Mark include much of the same material – though Mark is like an abridged version and Matthew the fuller, unabridged version.
- b. Mark: Again, according to the writings of the early church, Mark was written after Matthew, but only by a couple of years. And though Mark does not say this about himself, it is possible that he, like Luke, was not an eye witness to the events of Jesus' life.
 - (1) The reason many believe he was not an eyewitness is because he was a disciple of Peter. If he were among the 70, there would be no explainable reason for him to be a disciple of Peter, since he had already been a disciple of Jesus.
 - (2) Either way, Mark presents his account in a short, to the point, without much explanation way.
- c. Luke: It is widely accepted that Luke was written third, and that it was written before Acts. In fact, in Acts 1:1-2, Luke speaks of his first written account being about Jesus' life and ministry, which church history holds to be the gospel of Luke.
 - (1) By his own admission, Luke was not an eyewitness, but rather a reporter of Jesus' life who gathered his information from those who were eyewitnesses.
 - (2) Also of interest is the fact that Luke was a Gentile, whereas the other three gospel writers were Jews.
- d. John: John was the last gospel to be written and it is believed to have been written sometime between 80 – 99AD.
 - (1) Now you may be wondering why John makes no mention of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70AD since he wrote his gospel somewhere between 10-20 years after.
 - (2) One of the main explanations for John not referencing the Temple destruction is that John's gospel does not focus on the historical events – including fulfilled prophecies, but rather on the personal and spiritual aspects of Jesus' teachings and life.
 - (3) For example, Matthew points out 124 OT prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' lifetime, Mark references 70, Luke points out 109, while John points out only 27.

4. After going through all this information related to when each gospel was written, what we know for sure is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written a number of years before John. And though knowing when each gospel was written may seem important, it is nowhere near as important as reading them, understanding their message, and living accordingly.
- B. The Bible tells us that John's father was Zebedee (Matthew 4:21, 10:2), and by comparing several different passages, it is assumed his mother was Salome (compare Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; John 19:25). It is also assumed from this comparison of scriptures that the reference to Mary's sister at the crucifixion is speaking of Salome – which made her Jesus' aunt and means James and John were Jesus' cousins.
1. John's brother was James – which is the James who wrote the book of James. There was a second prominent James in the early church, and he was Jesus' brother. According to Acts 15:13-21, this James was the leader of the church. But back to John and his brother James. It is believed John was the younger brother and James the older one because in the gospels, James name appears before John's.
 2. If Salome was John and James mother, and also the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, then it makes more sense why Salome would ask her nephew, Jesus – on the night before He was crucified – to give priority to her two sons in His kingdom.
 3. It was while John and James were mending their fishing nets at the Sea of Tiberias that Jesus called them to leave that kind of fishing, follow Him, and become fishers of men (Matthew 4:21; Luke 5:10-11).
 4. John was part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples, a circle that included James and Peter. All three were the only disciples present with Jesus when He raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51) and on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9). And they were the three Jesus took a little ways off from the rest of the disciples to watch and pray during His time of agony in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45; Mark 14:32-42).
 5. While hanging on the cross, Jesus committed the care of His mother to John (John 19:26-27). Church history tells us that Mary lived with John, most probably in Jerusalem, for about fifteen years before she passed away. However, Catholic and Orthodox tradition say that John took Mary to Ephesus where they lived out their lives. And to this day, there is a home in the vicinity of Ephesus that the Catholic church identifies as the home John provided for Mary.

6. After the Resurrection, it was John and Peter who were the first disciples to run to the tomb and believe that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:2-10).
 7. Following the giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, John and Peter are the ones involved in the healing of the lame man at the Temple (Acts 3:1-10), and it was John and Peter who the church sent to work with the new converts in Samaria (Acts 8:14).
 8. After Jesus's mother died, early church tradition holds that John moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus where he lived for a number of years.
 - a. It is believed that he was banished to the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea during the persecution that took place under the Roman Emperor, Domitian. And it was during John's time on Patmos that he wrote the book of Revelation.
 - b. After Domitian died, Trajan became the emperor of Rome and brought an end to most of the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. It is believed that once Trajan took power, John was freed from Patmos.
 - c. Again, church tradition says that John returned to Ephesus where he lived a peaceful life until his death. It is thought that John is the only disciple who was not martyred for the faith.
- C. The four gospels share a single purpose for being written. John states this purpose in his own words in John 20:31, where he says that he wrote so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ (that is, the Messiah – the human savior), and the Son of God (which means the human Messiah is also divine, that is, God himself); and that believing we may have life in His name.
1. In other words, the primary purpose of the four gospels is to convince us that Jesus is both human and divine, that He is both Messiah and Immanuel, and that He is both the NT Savior and the OT God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
 2. Now the reason this is the purpose of these four gospels is because when we believe this to be true and live accordingly, that is, when we trust in Jesus to be our Savior and our God, and in trusting Him we submit to His rule over our lives and do His will, we get freed from and transported out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. In other words, we go from death to life in this world, and from eternal damnation to eternal life in the next world.

3. There are those who claim that should there be any unexplainable discrepancy between the four gospels or any seeming errors, it means they are unreliable and not to be taken seriously. And if we cannot take them seriously, than whatever faith we might want to put in Jesus and His words as recorded in the gospels, is foolish.
 - a. The problem with this view is that it implies God cannot be worthy of our trust if He allowed any unexplainable variance or discrepancy to exist within the four gospels, and that the history about Christ and words of Christ cannot be taken seriously.
 - b. However, I submit to you that God was not seeking to prove the validity of Christ and the truth of Christ's words by producing four accounts that pass the Enlightenment's rationalistic and scientific methods of measurement.
 - c. God's purpose was to work with and in four different gospel writers to produce four accounts that use selected quotes from Jesus teaching, selected stories about Jesus life and ministry, selected examples of the opposition's response, and fulfilled OT prophecies to show that Jesus is both the Messiah and Immanuel.
 - d. So, even though these four gospels have some similarities and some differences, with John being very different from the other three, they all share the same purpose – that is, to show Jesus to be both human and divine, both Messiah and Immanuel, both the NT Savior and the OT God of Israel.
 - e. And there is one more point to make here, none of the gospel writer's contradict or show to be false what another writer wrote even though they say some things differently.

- D. As I have already said, John's gospel is noticeably different from the other three gospels. This difference has created some serious debate among Bible scholars as to why there is this difference. And as far as I know, there is no common agreement within the church or among Bible scholars as to why John is so different. It is my observation that all the explanations focus their reasons on four primary factors.
 1. First, some say John is different because it was written well after the first three gospels, and therefore John filled in the blanks left by the first three gospels.
 2. Second, some say John takes a more theological approach to the life, works, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

- a. For example, the other three gospels focus on Christ's parables, his miracles, his debates with the Scribes and Pharisees – that is, the outward manifestations that affirm who Jesus was.
 - b. John presents things like what Jesus was thinking, why He said and did what He did, and what He prayed for.
 3. Third, some say that John gives us a more personally applicable picture of Christ's expectations of being holy and what we must do to be holy. Those who hold this view support it by pointing out that John continues this theme in his three letters.
 4. Fourth, some say that John wrote to refute the Gnostics, who taught that spiritual or mystical knowledge, and especially that hard to discover and hard to understand knowledge about God and the mysteries of God, is what makes us worthy of salvation.
 - a. Those who hold this view support it by the fact that the word "know" appears in only 38 verses in Matthew, 23 verses in Mark, and 41 verses in Luke, while appearing in 109 verses in John.
 - b. Plus, those who hold this view claim that John's three letters were written to refute Gnosticism.
- E. It is my belief that we do not need to know why John's letter is so different to receive the message that God has for each of us who read it, and to discern what God is saying through the John's gospel to the whole church. However, I am going to present a fifth reason why John is so different.
 1. But before doing so, I want to affirm that I am not smarter or better educated than those who have provided the first four explanations. And for certain, I haven't come close to earning the respect given them.
 2. However, church history confirms that greater intelligence bolstered by higher education is not a pre-requisite to knowing God and His son, Jesus Christ as John came to know Him.
 - a. For example, John was a fisherman and the son of a fisherman. Yet he saw what many Christians do not see, and understood what many Christians never understand in this life.
 - b. David, who was Jesse's youngest son and the shepherd of their sheep, explains this depth of knowing and seeing this way, "I have more insight than all my teachers, [because God's] testimonies are my meditation. [100] I understand more than the aged, because I have observe [God's] precepts" (Psalm 119:99-100).
 3. In other words, this depth of knowing and seeing does not depend on exceptional intelligence, or having advanced theology degrees, or

- knowing biblical history and Bible culture, or mastering the Greek language, or memorizing whole books of the Bible, or teaching others.
4. This depth of knowing comes from an ongoing confident faith in God, continued and progressive learning about God and His ways and His word, repetitious pondering, honest self-judgment, and careful application of the truths of God's word to ourselves – so as to grow in holiness until we are holy in all our behavior as God is holy.
 - a. The fact is, a growing and faithful life of holiness is the only way to get to know God personally and intimately – that is, face-to-face – just as Moses knew Him. This is the only way to move beyond Bible knowledge and the understanding of theology TO personally and intimately knowing God himself, and TO knowing more nearly as God knows and seeing truth and life as God sees.
 - b. This depth of knowing takes perseverance over a significant amount of time. For example, for Moses it appears to have taken up to 40 years, and for Paul, 13 years. But if you persevere, one day you will realize that you have entered into the joy and peace of the abundant life that God has prepared for all who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).
 5. Therefore, it is my belief that John lived long enough to grow to the place of knowing God this way, and that God then used John to write a gospel that conveys this depth of spirituality in order to encourage us to press on – for as long as it takes – to come into this depth of knowing and living. And that is my explanation why John is so different from the other three gospels.

II. Conclusion

- A. We were saved to begin at the beginning level of faith, to gain knowledge and understanding of God and His word, and to grow from there to the depth of spirituality whereby we know God personally and intimately and in knowing God this way, enter into the abundant life God prepared for us – now and throughout eternity.
- B. Therefore, throughout the time of our study of John, I urge each of you to make it your prayer that God will use John's gospel to lead you further down the road to the depth of the spiritual life John writes about.