

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

John

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: Look and See the Living God

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

(John 20:31)

John may have been the only one of Jesus' twelve disciples not to die a violent death, but don't let that fool you that his lot in life was easy. As the last surviving disciple by far, he was burdened by a barrage of unwanted attention.

The enemies of Christianity, particularly the Romans, had marked him out as a dangerous eyewitness to the life of Jesus. He had been there when Jesus healed the blind and fed the hungry, there when he was nailed to a Roman cross and there when he left behind an empty tomb. John hadn't stopped preaching about what he had seen for sixty years, and he knew that if old age didn't claim his life soon then his increasingly agitated enemies surely would.¹ In around 90 AD, just before the Emperor Domitian exiled him to the Greek island of Patmos, John decided it was time to preserve his memories in a gospel.² Irenaeus, who was taught by John's young helper Polycarp, informs us that "*John the Lord's disciple, the one who leaned*

¹ John had recounted these events so often over sixty years that, in conjunction with what he describes in 14:26, they were still as fresh in his memory as the events of the day before.

² See Revelation 1:9. Despite John's use of a present tense to describe Jerusalem in 5:2, his language and perspective backs up the united view of the Early Church leaders Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen and Clement that John wrote this gospel at the end of the first century.

back on his chest, published a gospel whilst living at Ephesus in Asia... John made his permanent home in Ephesus until the time of Trajan."³ When John saw that his time witnessing on earth was nearly over, he wrote his gospel as a witness to generations yet to come.

John was also being watched by the many false teachers who had latched themselves onto the growing Christian faith like limpets to the hull of a mighty warship. Some of them played down Jesus' divinity while others played down his humanity, but both groups found common ground in their resentment towards the aged apostle who refuted their theories with facts about the Jesus that he knew. Note the way John fills his gospel with vivid eyewitness descriptions,⁴ and with words like *seeing* and *knowing* and *bearing testimony* and *the truth*.⁵ John wants his readers to appreciate that he knew the real Jesus – fully God and fully man – and that his gospel exposes the speculations of people who try to reshape the Messiah in a mould of their own making.

Most concerning of all, John was troubled by the star-struck gaze of the many well-meaning Christians who hailed him as their hero. Note the way he writes his gospel in a manner that prevents us from placing him on a pedestal as a saint. Matthew, Mark and Luke mention John and his brother James a total of thirty-nine times in their gospels, but John never mentions himself or his brother by name at all!⁶ He might mention less famous disciples such as Philip, Thomas and Nathanael, but he

³ Trajan became emperor in 98 AD, and Irenaeus wrote in c.180 AD in *Against Heresies* (3.1.1 and 3.3.4). Linked to John 21:20 and 24, this quote tells us that the anonymous disciple in the gospel is John.

⁴ John describes scenes in particular detail in 6:10, 12:3, 13:23–25 and 18:10.

⁵ John uses five different Greek words for *seeing*, and also stresses he is an eyewitness in 1 John 1:1–3.

⁶ The closest he comes is when he refers to "*the sons of Zebedee*" in 21:2. No one but John himself could make such a glaring omission, which supports the unanimous Early Church view that John wrote this gospel.

purposely redirects his readers' attention away from himself by making anonymous references to "the disciple Jesus loved".⁷ As for the rumour among his fans that he might not die until Jesus returned in glory, he quashes their misguided hero worship in 21:23. In a world where too many people looked at John instead of Jesus, he wrote this gospel to plead with each of his readers to *Look and see the Living God!*

All of this makes John's gospel essential reading for anyone who wants to know the real Jesus today. Like us, John had copies of the gospels that Matthew, Mark and Luke had written earlier, but he believed that we needed something more. They are known as the "synoptic" gospels because they all "share a common perspective" on the life and ministry of Jesus, whereas the second-century church leader Clement of Alexandria explains that John's gospel takes a different view: "John, perceiving that the outward facts had been set forth in those gospels, urged on by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel."⁸ John doesn't tell us that Jesus told parables, drove out demons, healed lepers, was transfigured or prayed agonized prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Instead, he duplicates as little material as possible in order to tell unrecorded stories which open our eyes to see the real Jesus in his untold glory.

In chapters 1–4, John uses fresh incidents from Jesus' early ministry to encourage us to *look at Jesus alone*. In chapters 5–12, he uses more new stories to teach us to *look at who Jesus really is*. In chapters 13–17, he records Jesus' handover teaching to his disciples and encourages us to *look at what Jesus has given you*. This leads into his conclusion in chapters 18–21, where he gives final reasons to *look at Jesus and win*. All along the way, he punctuates his gospel with frequent exhortations to "Look!" and "Come and see!" and "Open your eyes!" to see the Living God.

⁷ John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24.

⁸ Quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea just after 300 AD in his *Church History* (6.14.7). Since Luke 1:1–4 suggests that Luke had copies of the first two gospels, it is also fair to assume that John had copies of all three.

If you are unsure what you believe about Jesus of Nazareth, this should all strike you as very good news. John wrote this gospel to give you a ringside seat from which to watch the Galilean carpenter whose message changed the world. Mark writes to tell us *what* Jesus did, and Matthew and Luke write to explain *why* Jesus did it, but John's main concern is to help us discover *who* Jesus is and what it means for us to follow him today. He tells us in 20:31 that he wrote this gospel for you and me, so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name".

If you already believe in Jesus but want to know him more, this should also strike you as very good news. The most accurate Greek manuscripts of 20:31 use a present tense which can be literally translated "so that you may **go on believing** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by **going on believing** you may **go on having** life in his name". Read that way, John is telling us that he wrote his gospel to turn our head knowledge about Jesus into genuine experience of new life through him.

So sit back and enjoy the life-changing message of John's gospel. It was the message which the early Christians needed to hear in the face of Roman persecution, false teaching and hero worship, and it's still the message we need to hear amidst the pressures of today.

John therefore hands us his gospel, still as fresh as when he wrote it, and tells us to do the same as his first-century readers. He invites us to fix our eyes on the Jesus that he knew. He tells us to look and see the Living God.

First Word (1:1–18)

In the beginning was the Word...

(John 1:1)

If you aren't shocked by John's opening verses, it probably means you haven't understood them. John writes them very carefully to capture your attention, regardless of how well or little you know the Bible.

Mark had connected with his Roman readers by starting his gospel in the thick of the action with the coming of John the Baptist. Matthew had connected with his Jewish readers by beginning with Jesus' family tree back to Abraham and with King Herod's shock discovery from a group of foreigners that the true King of Israel had just been born in his backyard. Luke had connected with his Gentile readers by beginning with a Roman census, with Simeon's prophecy that Jesus would save many non-Jews and with a family tree that traced his ancestry back to Adam. John didn't think there was anything wrong with those beginnings. He just didn't think that any of them went back far enough in Jesus' story.

That's why he starts his gospel with the words "*in the beginning*". He knew that anyone familiar with the Greek Old Testament would instantly recognize them as the opening words of the Jewish Scriptures. They would know the Genesis account of God creating the universe from nothing – solely by the power of his spoken Word and of his Spirit.¹ John tries to shock us by telling us that Jesus' story started long before an angel appeared

¹ Psalms 33:6 and 107:20 also talk about God's Word being both our Creator and our Saviour.

to Mary or she laid her baby in a manger. It started before the dawn of time because the baby born in Bethlehem's filthy stable was the eternal Word of God.² Jesus is the one who revealed himself to the Israelites as Yahweh, and there never was a time when he was not.

Not everybody knew the Greek Old Testament, of course. John lived in Ephesus, the vibrant capital city of Asia, where his mainly Gentile readers were more familiar with the thoughts of the pagan Greek philosophers.³ Accordingly, he chooses a word which he knows will shock them too. Heraclitus, the great Ephesian philosopher, had used the Greek word *Logos*, or *Word*, in around 500 BC to describe the divine force of Reason which governs the universe.⁴ His teaching was so influential that we still refer today to *biology*, *geology*, *cosmology* and *astrology*, so John chooses this word to grab the full attention of the Greeks as he did the Jews. He tells them that the divine Reason which Heraclitus groped for in the darkness was not just a principle but a person. Long before Jesus became a baby in a stable, the best Greek minds had sensed his presence as the ruler of the universe.⁵

We can see how shocking the Jews found this message by flicking forward a few pages to John 10:33. When the Jews grasped that Jesus was claiming to be Yahweh, they picked up stones and tried to lynch him for blasphemy. That's why John

² Don't be confused by the word *monogenēs*, or *only begotten*, in verses 14 and 18, or by the fact that John uses the word more than the rest of the New Testament writers put together. Hebrews 11:17 uses it to describe Isaac, who was not Abraham's only son, so it speaks about Jesus' unique *status*, not about his *birth*.

³ We can tell that John wrote mainly for Gentiles from the way he translates Hebrew and Aramaic words for his readers in 1:38, 41, 42, 6:1, 9:7, 19:13, 17 and 20:16.

⁴ John deliberately echoes Heraclitus' teaching that "*all things come to be in accordance with the Logos*" (fragment DK 22B1).

⁵ Paul argues this when he preaches the Gospel in Athens in Acts 17:23, saying that Jesus is their "*unknown God*".

tells them in verse 17 that Jesus is greater than their great leader and lawgiver Moses because he fulfils the Law with grace and truth. It's why he tells them in verse 18 that what Moses saw on Mount Sinai was nothing compared to the way that Jesus has made God fully known.⁶ It's why he takes the word for Moses' Tabernacle in the Greek Old Testament (*skēnē*) and uses it as a verb in verse 14 to tell them that God truly tabernacled (*skēnoō*) on the earth in the flesh and blood of Jesus' body. Remember, the Jews didn't kill Jesus for healing people and telling pithy parables. They killed him because they knew he was telling them to look at him and see the Living God.

We can also see how shocking the Gentiles found this message by flicking forward a little further to Acts 14. The Lystrans liked Paul and Barnabas when they thought they were preaching that the gods were just like them. Things turned nasty when the Lystrans grasped that they were challenging their Greek idols and urging them to "*turn from these worthless things to the Living God*". Epictetus, another great philosopher from the vicinity of Ephesus, summed up the Greek view that the spirit is good and the body is bad when he wrote that "*You are a little soul, burdened with a corpse*",⁷ so the idea that the Living God had taken a human body was so offensive to the Greeks that they stoned them. They were happy with the inoffensive message peddled by the Gnostic false teachers that Jesus had merely *seemed* to be a human,⁸ but they angrily refused to surrender to a message about God's incarnate Son.

⁶ The Greek word *exēgeomai* at the end of verse 18 means *to declare or unfold fully*, and is the root of the English word *exegesis*. Jesus repeats this claim later in 14:9.

⁷ Epictetus was a Stoic and a contemporary of John. This quotation comes from "Fragment 26" of his work.

⁸ Since the Greek word for *to seem* is *dokeō*, the late first-century Gnostics who denied the full humanity of Jesus are commonly called Docetists. John insists repeatedly that the Word always *was* (*ēn*), but that at a certain moment in verse 14 he suddenly *became* (*egeneto*) a real human being.

We can be like the first-century Jews and Greeks if we let our own cultural baggage divert our gaze away from who Jesus really was. The villains in John's nativity story aren't Matthew's jealous King Herod or Luke's overworked innkeepers. They are the entire human race which wants to force-fit Jesus into the domesticated role of a mere prophet or good teacher.⁹ That's why the Greek word *katalambanō* in verse 5 has a deliberate double-meaning – either *to grasp* in the sense of *understanding* a mystery, or *to grasp* in the sense of *overcoming* an enemy. John tells us that few people understand who Jesus is, but that none of those who oppose him can succeed in domesticating the Living God. He calls us to surrender to the fact that God has come to earth to save all those who will receive him as he really is.¹⁰

If you are prepared to look where John is pointing; if you are prepared to humble yourself and step out of the darkness into God's light; if you are prepared to respond with faith to the crucified carpenter who called John to follow him on the shore of Lake Galilee – then John promises to guide your footsteps through his gospel. He promises to help you to look and see the Living God.

⁹ Ironically, Jehovah's Witnesses twist this very passage to repeat the ancient heresy of Arius that "*There was a time when the Son was not*" (Socrates of Constantinople in *Church History*, 1.5.2). John uses something called an "incomplete predication" in the Greek of verse 1 by dropping the definite article to clarify that he means "*the Word was God*" (one person of the Trinity) and not that "*God was the Word*" (in his entirety). Jehovah's Witnesses fail to understand this and mistranslate his words to mean merely that "*the Word was a god*".

¹⁰ John tells us that the Gospel is for *everyone* in verses 7 and 9, but he qualifies this by saying that many will reject the salvation which could have been theirs.