

The Context of John's Gospel

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Welcome to the Gospel of John! Written by the beloved disciple, this gospel stands out from the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). 90% of John's gospel is unique to itself and not found in any other gospel. John's gospel dwells on the mystery of His divinity more than just the history around Jesus. This was the last gospel written and has been used to fill in the blanks with Jesus' life and relationship with the Disciples. Every interaction, miracle, and teaching from Jesus was chosen specifically for John's audience and the unique message he was conveying. To really understand the depths of John and find the application points to our life, we really need to keep the context in mind.

- Who were the people Jesus was interacting with?
- Who was the audience John was writing to?
- What was the message John was conveying?
- What tools from Jesus' life did John use and why?

Let's look at some of this context...

THE MESSAGE OF JOHN

The message of John is stated several times throughout the gospel. John's hope is that the readers would believe in Jesus and therefore find abundant life in Jesus.

"In Him is life. And that life is the light of all man." John 1:4-5

John begins by presenting Jesus as the author of life and the LIGHT of life. Jesus didn't just create us to have a pulse and breath; He created us to experience His light. This is further defined in the next verse.

"The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come that you may find life and have it abundantly." John 10:10

Jesus used the word "zoe" which refers to the quality of one's life. Jesus defined "zoe" with the adverb abundantly. This wasn't a message of prosperity, this was a message of qualitative joy, contentment, and meaning! Jesus came for us to place our belief in and therefore experience life the way we were meant to live.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"

John 14:16

The message gets clearer. The only way to experience life to the full is through Jesus Christ! No other philosophy or religion. There is no other path that man could make. The only path to abundant life is through Jesus.

"These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." John 20:31

John heard Jesus teach many things. John saw Jesus interact with hundreds of people. John witnessed Jesus perform miracles upon miracles, but he chose these specific things to convey this specific message. Jesus is the only person worthy of our full belief and this belief leads us to experience abundant life in Jesus.

THE AUDIENCE OF JOHN

The Jews were not quite as unified as many of us would like to believe at the time of Jesus. The history of the Jewish faith puts their first-century identity into perspective. Consider this Bible timeline...

Learning to Follow God:

(Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) We see God's people learn to know Him and understand how they are to follow Him.

(Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) We see the tools God's people used to worship Him, understand Him, and follow Him.

(Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles) We see God's people struggle between following their own desires and following God. They create a cycle of falling into sin, rebelling, falling in desperation, repenting, returning to God.

Forgetting God: 586 BC

(Amos, Hosea, Micah, First half of Isaiah, and Zephaniah) The prophets warned God's people of falling away from God and the impending Babylonian exile.

(Jonah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Habakkuk, Obadiah Joel) God pronounces judgment on His people for turning from Him.

(Ezekiel, Daniel, Job, and the third part of Isaiah) God gives hope and encouragement to His people in exile.

Remembering God: 532 BC

(The last part of Isaiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah) Israel returns to God and begins to rebuild.

(Haggai and Zechariah) Israel longs for what they used to have with God.

(Malachi and Esther) Israel begins to learn how to follow God again.

Silent Years: 332 BC Influence of Hellenism

God's presence is no longer in the Temple and Israel struggles to find its identity. It's at this time that Alexander the Great begins to take over the world and spread his worldview of Hellenism. As the Jews sought to solidify their identity they had to learn to accept or deny this influential culture.

Hellenism was a worldview that placed man at the center of the universe. For the first time, god or gods were pushed out of their primary role in the lives of people. In this worldview

man was the measure of all things (Protagoras) and what one desires or needs would define all of truth and life. Life was all about my comforts, my leisure, my security, my truth, my life, and my desires. Alexander would use Hellenism to both conquer and unite the world. He believed this “self-centered” worldview would be received as good news for the world!

Alexander used Education, Healthcare, Entertainment, and Athletics to imbed this worldview into the lives of all cultures and religions throughout the known world. **Hellenism was everywhere and in everything!**

Important Note! Hellenism was actually a return to original sin! Man fell from God at the beginning of time when he chose to eat the forbidden fruit. At that time he put himself at the center of the universe and wanted to know good and evil for himself. Man wanted to choose his way over God’s way and define life on “his” terms.

Why is this important to know as we study the gospel of John? As Hellenism seeped into Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee the Jews had to either reject or accept this new worldview. How they did this would splinter Judaism and create the groups of people that Jesus would interact with in the gospels. John’s unique message was shaped for these unique groups of people that were looking to define life.

Herodians:

Referred to as Hellenistic Jews and later Hellenistic Christians. These Jews loved the message of Hellenism. They loved everything the Roman world had to offer. They wanted all the world had to offer and just enough of their Jewish faith to be able to claim it for themselves.

Sadducees:

They were the “Sons of Zadok” that were connected to the family line of Aaron. This group of people made up the Priestly Order that was in charge of the Temple in Jerusalem. As Herod was made King this group of people gained wealth and power. This quickly corrupted them as they also accepted the Hellenistic lifestyle. They became an aristocratic family that had power and access to wealth by abusing the temple system. The sacrifices, tithe, and offerings that were brought into the Temple would fuel their lavish lifestyle and jeopardize the “worship” in the Temple.

Pharisees:

The Pharisees learned from the Babylonian Exile. They understood that the people forgot the Word of God and got lost in the ways of the world. The Pharisees rejected Hellenism and wanted to protect the Word of God by holding onto the Oral Law that was created around the written law. They believed adherence to the law was the only way to stay connected with God and fight against the culture of the world. They were always at odds with the Sadducees and hated them for defiling the Temple.

Zealots:

The Zealots agreed with the Pharisees in their rejection of Hellenism. However, they took it one step further. They were so passionate about their rejection that they were willing to step into violence to fight against its infringement into Judaism. They were behind many revolts and wars and were always ready to kill any Roman they found alone. One of the disciples was identified as being a member of this rowdy sect! They were at war with the world in defense of their religion.

Essenes:

The Essenes rejected Hellenism and believed the only way to keep their faith pure was to withdraw and isolate themselves from their broken world. They established a colony in the desert near the Dead Sea. They valued the Word of God and adhered to every word. They believed the end of the world was near and someone needed to keep the purity of faith so they could lead the world back to God. Isaiah 40:3 was defining for them. "A voice calling in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God"

Many believe Zechariah the New Testament Priest was influenced by their faith. They also believe his son John the Baptist could have been raised under this influence by the Essenes in the desert.

Hellenism splintered Judaism into two groups of people. Those who accepted it became a group of people that were defining truth and life on their terms. They were the center of their universe and God served them. On the other side was a group of people that rejected Hellenism and were trying to find life and truth in an empty religion. Both groups of people were lost and in need of finding life. A life that John knew could only be found in believing in Jesus.

We find ourselves fragmented in the same way as the audience of John. In each of these interactions, we feel Jesus personally challenging our culture. Today Christians are struggling with modern-day "Hellenism" that has resurfaced. Think about how these groups are seen in today's Christian culture that is struggling to accept or reject Humanism or modern-day Hellenism.

Herodians and Progressive Christianity

Progressive Christianity is a recent movement that says our human experience should determine what is true and how we should find life. It is a movement that demands Christianity to catch up with the times and accept the truth of this world. They want as much of the world as possible and desire to loosely hold onto Christianity at the same time. Our modern-day experience should determine what parts of the Bible we hold onto and what parts we consider outdated and irrelevant to our modern life.

Sadducees and The Prosperity Gospel

The Prosperity Gospel puts our health, wealth, and wellbeing as the center of God's presence in our life. The extremes of this "gospel" have become some of the most wealthy people in America through the abuse of a religious system. Those who loosely adopt this "gospel" believe the favor of God is proven through our success in life according to a worldly measure.

Pharisees and the Adherence to rules

So many of today's "religious" Church attenders can identify with the emptiness found in the Pharisaical life. Christianity has become a life of rules that set us apart from the world. So many Christians feel like they still have to earn their way back to God and live according to an impossible standard. For many Christianity is an empty religion disconnected from LIFE in Jesus.

Zealots and Political Christianity

The Zealots were at war with the world. They wanted to be right and were willing to kill for it. Thankfully we haven't seen too much of this in our modern times. However, it isn't a stretch to look around and see the movement of Christianity that is at war with the world and feels more political than relational.

Essenes and the Withdrawn Christian

So many Christians today would rather withdraw from the world and create a comfortable Christian bubble that is untouched by the wickedness of the world. There are many that choose to ignore the world and just pray for His return! As nice as that sounds Jesus doesn't leave much room for that in His gospel!

THE TOOLS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

John was able to capture Jesus' amazing ability to speak in challenging ways to a broad audience. Every interaction, relationship, miracle, and message that John chose to record lifted Jesus up above Hellenistic thought and the empty religious practices of the first century. Here are five themes to look for.

1. The Word:

The Greeks and Hellenists understood the word or "logos" to be the unknowable force that created the world. This logos was also considered within the field of logic to be what led people to reason and truth.

The Jews believed the word was God's written law that should be the center of life itself. It also detailed Temple Worship and guided people in navigating their relationship to the presence of God. **Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus is set up as *being* the knowable Word made flesh.**

2. The Light:

The Greeks believed light was a symbol of truth and enlightenment. All matter was evil and all divinity was removed from this world. Enlightenment leads one to transcend this world and be led into the divine after death.

The Jews saw light as the presence or glorification of God. The light that led them in the wilderness, the light that filled the Temple, and the light that had left them and that they longed to return to them.

In the Gospel of John Jesus is the light. He is fully divine and fully man. The presence of God with us.

3. The Life:

The Greeks were man-centered looking for life on their terms. This life leads to death.

The Jews were looking for life in an empty religion finding only death and emptiness.

Jesus came to give abundant life.

4. Belief:

The word “believe” is used over a hundred times in the gospel. “To see” is also used over a hundred times. **At the end of every interaction, the people are challenged to believe in Jesus or to remain in unbelief.** John continues to come back to this challenge and theme throughout his letter.

5. The 7 Miracles and “I AM” statements:

John states at the end of his gospel that the words and miracles of Jesus would take up a library of books to fully record. In his gospel, he chose to focus on 7 miracles and 7 sayings of Jesus. These were chosen specifically to speak to this audience. These miracles reveal the uniqueness of Jesus being fully divine and fully man. This challenged the Hellenist perspective that the divine could not walk among us. It also proved to the Jews that Jesus was the Divine and only Son of God. The 7 “I Am” statements of Jesus lifted Jesus up above all of humanity. When Jesus claimed to be the “I Am” He was also pointing out that man “was not”. Each statement spoke against specific Greek gods and their inability to serve man. Man could not be the source of life and truth. These statements also correspond to the Temple and the Word of God. **In these statements, Jesus was showing the Jews that He was the awaited fulfillment of the Temple, The Word, and all of the Festivals that they had built their life around.**

The Gospel of John challenged all people to believe in Jesus as the only hope of finding abundant life! As we understand the context and audience that Jesus interacted with we will hear a message that speaks directly to where we are living now! Where are we looking for life and truth? Do we really believe in Jesus? Have we found His abundant life?

THE BREAKDOWN

We will be going through the Gospel of John in four parts. Each part will take us several months to study; so get ready to be deep in this Gospel for at least 10 months! Even at that pace, I feel like we will be running through it and barely scratching the surface of this amazing Book!

Part 1: Foundations (Chapters 1-5)

We will see Jesus presented and His message clearly defined here!

Part 2: Who “I AM” (Chapters 6-12)

Here Jesus will use the miracles, statements, and festivals to display who He is!

Part 3: Respond in the Spirit (Chapters 13-17)

These five chapters are dedicated to the last conversations and days leading up to His crucifixion. Here Jesus asks His disciples if they are ready to respond to a new way of living life. To continue the mission of Jesus the disciples must learn to live in the presence of the Spirit.

Part 4: Basis of Belief (Chapters 18-21)

Here we see the death, resurrection, and final words of Jesus as being the basis of our belief and faith in Him.