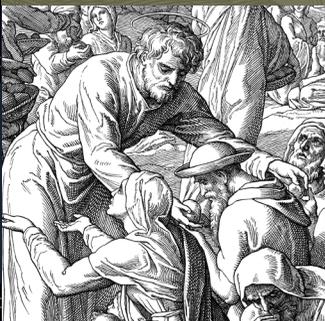




John

VOLUME I: CHAPTERS I-10



REFORMED
EXPOSITORY
COMMENTARY

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

John

VOLUME 1

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

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John

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

VOLUME 1

JOHN 1-10



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Sharon

In loving gratitude for companionship in life and partnership in ministry

and to Christ the Word

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

No human composition could ever have a more noble aim than that ascribed by the apostle John to his Gospel: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In studying the Gospel of John, believers soon realize that it is far more than a human composition: only God the Spirit could have written in such profound simplicity, such accessible depth, and such arresting beauty. Countless readers have had their objections to Christianity abashed in light of this inspired testimony to Christ himself, exclaiming with the temple guards, “No one ever spoke like this man!” (7:46).

Like the other Gospels, the Gospel of John is a passion narrative preceded by a brief summary of Jesus’ life. The weight of this Gospel, like Jesus’ own life and ministry, rests on Christ’s atoning death and victorious resurrection, fulfilling John the Baptist’s witness of Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Yet John’s presentation of Jesus in chapters 1–11 is hardly incidental. Assuming that his readers are familiar with the previously written Synoptic Gospels, John provides “new” material about Jesus without which the Christian faith would be deeply impoverished. Weaving the exodus theology of salvation through his feast-week chronology and presenting Jesus as the “I Am” who is greater than Moses, John causes his pen to shine a distinctly glorious light on Jesus as Son of God and Savior. John’s depiction of Christ’s evangelistic mission to the world and polemic against false religion provides what is perhaps the most significant biblical exposition of these themes. Furthermore, John’s record of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse and High Priestly Prayer provide essential materials by which Christians understand our calling in this present age and Christ’s provision for us until he returns. The trial and death of Jesus highlight the irony of Christ’s kingly glory at the scene of his earthly condemnation, while making clear to his

Preface

disciples the certainty of our salvation through the sufficiency of Christ's finished work. While noting the inspired value of all Scripture, the reader of John's Gospel cannot help but exclaim with Peter that in these pages we supremely encounter "the Holy One of God" and discover from him "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68–69).

The expositions in the first volume of this commentary were preached to the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Coral Springs/Margate, Florida, and the whole of John's Gospel was then preached during the morning services of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina. I am grateful to these beloved congregations, with special thanks for the encouragement I have received from both Sessions and the congregations for my commitment to study and writing. I also am appreciative to Drs. Dan Doriani and Iain Duguid, whose editorial labors have greatly improved the quality of this book, as well as to my many friends at P&R Publishing.

The amount of labor involved in these volumes, consuming a large portion of my attention for six years, prompts me to feel an extraordinary gratitude for my loving helpmeet and companion, Sharon. Perhaps only Jesus knows the sacrifices and patience required of a pastor's wife, but her unflagging support and ministry are one of the chief blessings of my life. To this I add my deep appreciation for the Christ-honoring indulgence of our five children in putting up with the demands and distractions necessary in the life of a preacher's family. Finally, and most of all, I thank and praise God's Son, Jesus Christ, who is by grace alone my Lord and Savior. May he be glorified by his Word, and may his light shine in readers' hearts through these humble expositions.

Richard D. Phillips
Greenville, South Carolina



John

SON OF GOD AND SAVIOR

PART 1



Prologue:
The Word Incarnate

1

THE WORD

John 1:1–3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1–3)



The Gospel of John is one of the world's true treasures. It contains many of the sayings most memorable and blessed to God's people. John is so simple that children memorize their first verses from its pages and so profound that dying adults ask to hear it as they pass from this world. It is said that John is a pool safe enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to drown in. Martin Luther wrote, "This is the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel. . . . Should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a single copy of the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to John escape him, Christianity would be saved."¹

ACCORDING TO JOHN

This Gospel does not specify its author's name. Nonetheless, we can be sure of its composer, from both internal and external evidence. John claims

1. Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:13.

to be written by an eyewitness and disciple of Jesus (John 21:24). We know from the other Gospels that the disciples closest to Jesus were Peter, James, and John. Of these, only John is never named in this Gospel, which is hard to explain apart from the author's modesty concerning himself. In his place we are told of a Beloved Disciple who is evidently both the author and the apostle John. The early church affirms this view. Irenaeus, the second-century bishop who knew people who had personally known John, attests that John "the disciple of the Lord" wrote this Gospel in Ephesus, and his view is backed up by every other ancient document that addresses this subject.²

We do not know exactly when John wrote his Gospel, traditionally thought to be the last of the four Gospels. Some scholars place John's Gospel before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, since it often mentions the temple. But the consensus holds that John wrote perhaps as late as the A.D. 90s, and no earlier than A.D. 80. In addition to the evidence from early Christian writers, numerous details in the text suggest a late-first-century date, including John's ignoring of the Sadducees, a previously important Jewish sect that virtually disappeared after the fall of Jerusalem, and his emphasis on the exclusion of believers in Christ from the synagogues. Moreover, John's highly developed Christology seems to fit best in conflict with an incipient Gnosticism, which appeared only in the later years of the first century. Finally, while John often mentions the temple, his Gospel nonetheless gives little attention to matters related to its fall and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, so that it is hard to imagine John's writing this book in the years shortly before or after that epochal event.³

According to church tradition, John's purpose in writing his Gospel was to provide material missing from the other three Gospels and to complement them with a "spiritual gospel."⁴ According to Irenaeus, John also wanted to combat heresies that were rising, especially those that denied either the full deity or the full humanity of Christ.⁵ Moreover, as Christianity spread beyond its original Jewish bounds, it seems that John wrote to make the gospel more accessible to the Greek mind. But John himself tells us his main

2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Arthur Cleveland Coxe et al., 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:414.

3. See D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 166–68.

4. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 6.14 (p. 192).

5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.1.

purpose in John 20:31: “These [words] 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.” This is why, when people ask for a place in the Bible to learn about Jesus, the most common Christian answer is: “You should read the Gospel of John.” It is a treasure provided by God himself, as the Spirit moved the Beloved Disciple to show us Jesus as Savior and divine Son so that we might believe and be saved.

JESUS THE DIVINE WORD

John differs from the other Gospels in many ways, among them the manner by which he begins his account of Jesus. Like the other Gospel writers, he wants us to understand that Jesus is God made flesh—the very God who became truly man. Matthew and Luke approached this by explaining the virgin birth. But John’s prologue gives a theological explanation for Jesus’ coming into the world, beginning with his eternal origin before the creation of all things.

John starts: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). This mirrors the way in which the Old Testament began: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). John places Jesus where we expect God: “In the beginning, God”; “In the beginning was the Word.” The subject of this Gospel, the man Jesus who lived and died and rose again, is thus identified as God. Mark Johnston writes, “Without apology or qualification, John goes back in time beyond Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and Nazareth where he was conceived, indeed back beyond the beginning of time itself, and allows us a glimpse of a glorious person who has an eternal existence.”⁶

John 1:1 teaches Jesus’ deity in three respects, beginning with his eternal being: “In the beginning was the Word.” When the creation “was made,” Jesus—here designated as “the Word”—already “was.” This was an important statement in the church’s fight with the earliest heretics. Consider Arius, for instance, whose heresy articulated ideas that began percolating during John’s life and prompted the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. Arius maintained that Jesus, though certainly godlike in many ways, was nonetheless less than God. Arius argued that Jesus was a created being, however glorious and close

6. Mark G. Johnston, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 1.

The Word

to God. But John tells us, instead, that when time and creation began, Jesus already “was.” Leon Morris explains: “The Word existed before creation, which makes it clear that the Word was not created. . . . The Word is not to be included among created things.”⁷

If the Word already was in the beginning, then either he must have been with God or he must have been God. John teaches both. His second statement is that “the Word was with God.” This tells us that the Word is a person who has a relationship with God.

In the creation account of Genesis 1, we read “And God said” nine times. It was by God’s Word that he brought creation into being. John now tells us that this Word is a person who was “with God.” This statement sheds light on Genesis 1:26, which reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image.’” God was speaking to the Word. John clarifies in verses 2–3: “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” So the Word is God’s executor in creation, the agent who accomplishes God’s will. God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and the Word made light. All through the Bible, it is God’s Word that does God’s will. Psalm 33:6 teaches, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.” Psalm 107:20 says, “He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.” So the Word who made creation also brings God’s salvation.

With this in mind, we see that John wants us to understand not only the eternity of the Word but also the personhood of the Word. The Word is a person, the companion of God himself. This warns us against another perennial heresy, namely, that which denies the distinct personhood of the various members of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity states, “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons . . . : God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”⁸ It is hard for us to understand how there can be only one God but three distinct persons in that God, but verses such as this cause us to believe it. When John speaks of *the Word*, he means God the Son, Jesus Christ, who eternally lives in relationship with and does the will of God the Father. Some people would deny that these are distinct persons, instead seeing Father and Son as different modes of the one, undifferentiated

7. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 65–66.

8. Westminster Confession of Faith 2.3.

God. But while one person can be *by* himself, he is never *with* himself; John insists that *the Word* is a distinct divine person: “the Word was *with* God.”

Third, verse 1 makes a straightforward statement that the Word not only is a companion to God but is himself divine. Secular voices as diverse as conspiracy-theory novelist Dan Brown, in his best seller *The Da Vinci Code*, and liberal New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman assert that Christians never considered Jesus to be God until the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century.⁹ But here, in clear language, the apostle John writes, “And the Word was God.” He repeats this claim in John 1:18, saying that the One “who is at the Father’s side” is himself “the only God.” Likewise, at the Gospel’s end, when the resurrected Jesus appears to doubting Thomas, the disciple falls before him and cries, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). That is the Christian confession. John wants us to know from the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus Christ, the *Word*, is God.

Because it states Christ’s deity so plainly, John 1:1 has long come under attack, beginning with Arius. His argument, used by Jehovah’s Witnesses today, was that John does not teach that Jesus is God but rather that Jesus is a godlike creature. He is divine, but not a deity. This is based on the fact that in this final phrase of verse 1, John places a definite article (“the”) before “Word” but not before “God.” Literally, they argue, John says, “The Word was *a* God,” but not *the* God.

What is our reply? First, it is clear throughout the Gospel that John intends for us to identify Jesus as God. Our teaching of Christ’s deity does not depend on this verse, and what John says elsewhere clarifies his meaning here. Consider, for instance, the indisputable assertion of deity in John 1:18, which describes Jesus as “the only God, who is at the Father’s side.” Second, if John meant that Jesus was divine but not a deity, there was a perfectly good Greek word (*theios*) that he did not in fact use. The word he did use (*theos*) means “God” and not “godlike.” Third, while the Arian and Jehovah’s Witness argument might convince novices in New Testament Greek, in fact Greek grammar does not demand a definite article for both nouns when they are joined in this way. It is common for one definite article to serve for both nouns, and so the grammatical argument is simply wrong (see John 1:49; 8:39; and 17:17 for noteworthy examples). Fourth, there is

9. Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 260.

an obvious reason for John's construction. His point is to identify the Word both as God (meaning God the Father) and also as distinct from God. If he had written, "The Word was the God," that would be identifying Jesus with God in a way that would render them indistinguishable. His point is clearly to specify Christ's deity while also distinguishing him from God the Father.

Martin Luther stated, "This text is a strong and valid attestation of the divinity of Christ. . . . Everything depends on this doctrine. It serves to maintain and support all other doctrines of our Christian faith. Therefore the devil assailed it very early in the history of Christendom, and he continues to do so in our day."¹⁰ As we begin his Gospel, John wants us first to realize Christ's deity and his relationship to God the Father, insisting on Jesus' divine sonship for our salvation. Jesus is God the Executor doing the will of his Father, God the Ordainer, within the perfect harmony of the Trinity. As A. W. Pink put it, "The One who was heralded by the angels to the Bethlehem shepherds, who walked this earth for thirty-three years, who was crucified at Calvary and who rose in triumph from the grave, and who forty days later departed from these scenes, was none other than the Lord of Glory."¹¹

JESUS THE SAVING WORD

Jesus is the Divine Word. But John wants us to understand not merely Jesus' person but also his work. He wrote this Gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). *Christ* means "Messiah," or "Savior." Jesus the Divine Word came into the world to be the Saving Word.

We are going to find that John employs words powerfully, often selecting a term that has at least a double meaning. There is no better example than his use of "the Word" to describe Jesus. The Greek is *Logos*, one of the most significant terms in Greek philosophy. By using this word, John built a bridge from the Greek philosophical world to the Jewish thought-world of the Bible.

One of the earliest Greek philosophers was Heraclitus (6th c. B.C.). He thought about the fact that things constantly change. His famous illustration was that you can never step twice into the same river; it is never the same

10. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 22, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 19, 25.

11. Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 17.

because the water has flowed on. Everything is like that, he said. But if that is true, how can there be order in the world? His answer was the *Logos*, the *Word* or *reason* of God. This was the principle that held everything together in a world of change. There is a purpose and design to the world and events, and this is the *Logos*.

The *Logos* fascinated Greeks from Heraclitus onward. What keeps the stars in their courses? What controls the seasons? Order and purpose are revealed everywhere in the world. Why? The answer is the *Logos*, the divine logic: the Word. Plato said, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, a *Logos*, who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain.” In a stroke of divine genius, John seizes on this word and says, “Listen, you Greeks, the very thing that has most occupied your philosophical thought and about which you have been writing for centuries—the *Logos* of God . . . has come to earth as a man and we have seen him.”¹²

This means that Jesus is the One who gives meaning to life in this world. People today are living without purpose or meaning, which is why our affluence fails to content us. We are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and only as we know God and do his will do we find meaning and joy. Speaking in Greek terms, John says that Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word, who bears to us the mind and heart of God. Later in this prologue, John says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Life does not make sense until we meet Jesus. Peter realized this, and when Jesus asked if he was going to go elsewhere, Peter replied for us all: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:68).

Jesus the Word also comes as the Answer to the great problems of life. Psychologist Erich Fromm has written that we are faced with three unsolvable dilemmas, existential problems that plague all of us. First is the dilemma of life versus death. We want to live, but we all die. Jesus answers that problem, giving eternal life to all who believe on him. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. . . . Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25–26).

The second of Fromm’s dilemmas is the dilemma of the individual and the group. Jesus is the answer to that problem too, for He has come to break

12. Boice, *John*, 1:35.

The Word

down all walls and to make of His followers one new man which is His mystical body (Eph. 2:14–16). The last of Fromm’s dilemmas is that arising from the conflict between our aspirations and our actual achievements. We all fall short of what we would like to be and believe ourselves intended to be. Is there an answer? Yes, Jesus is the answer to that problem also, for He promises to make us all that God created us to be in the first place. We are to be conformed to Christ’s image.¹³

But our greatest problem is that we are alienated from God by our sins. Our guilt has placed us under his wrath, with no way of saving ourselves. For this, above all, Jesus is the Word who reveals and also achieves our only answer. He came to die for our sins that we might be reconciled to God. Jesus said, “The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15).

The great industrialist Henry Ford once experienced a breakdown on his assembly line that no one could fix. In desperation he called Charlie Steinmetz, the mechanical genius who had designed and built Ford’s plant. Steinmetz showed up, tinkered for just a few minutes, and threw the switch, and everything started running again. Days later Ford received a bill for \$10,000, an exorbitant sum in those days. He wrote back, “Charlie, don’t you think your bill is a little high for just a little tinkering!” So Steinmetz sent back a revised bill: “Tinkering—\$10. Knowing where to tinker—\$9,990.”¹⁴

Likewise, Jesus knew how to fix this broken world, because he made it. But he came not just to do a little tinkering. Jesus fixed the world by shedding his own blood for our sins. Instead of presenting us with a bill, he offers us the free gift of eternal life through faith in him.

JESUS, GOD’S WORD FOR US

Jesus is the Divine Word and the Saving Word. But most important for us, Jesus is God’s Word for us.

Because Jesus is the eternal Word of God—and because, as John 1:14 tells us, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—*we can know God*. This flows from John’s description of Jesus as “the Word.” We all reveal

13. *Ibid.*, 1:239.

14. Quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 18.

ourselves though our words, and in Christ, God’s speech is most eloquent. Hebrews 1:1–3 reminds us that in the past, “God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, . . . the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” This is Jesus’ own testimony in the Gospel of John. He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30); “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). If you want to know what God is like—and this is the greatest of all questions—you need only learn about Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus is the living Word of God, and because God never changes, then God always was and is like Jesus—always Christlike! God is holy, the way that Jesus is shown to be holy in this Gospel. God is compassionate and caring, sovereign and mighty, just as Jesus reveals in this book. But most of all, Jesus reveals God’s love for us. “What Jesus did was to open a window in time that we might see the eternal and unchanging love of God.”¹⁵ This is what the greatest verse in John—and perhaps in the whole Bible—says: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). “We have seen his glory,” John says, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). If you want to see the glory of God, in his holiness and compassion and might and especially in his love, you will find it only in the face of Jesus Christ.

If that is true, if Jesus is the living Word who reveals God to us, then *his coming is the most important thing ever to happen in this world*. In worldly terms, Jesus accomplished nothing. But God’s Son did not come to build a financial or military empire, or to leave a record in the fading pages of worldly glory. Instead, he came to show the way to God that he himself would open for us by his death on the cross for our sins. Since he is God, and since he came to save lost sinners, what he did demands our fervent attention and heartfelt faith.

Finally, if Jesus is the Divine and Saving Word, then *nothing is more important for us than our relationship to him*. When the new millennium began a few years ago, surveys were taken as to who had been most influential in the previous thousand years. But no one can doubt who has most dominated all of history. Mark Johnston writes, “Even a complete atheist is forced at least to wonder what it was that made practically every nation in the world

15. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 1:38.

The Word

act in unison as the clocks struck midnight in the passage from 1999 to the year 2000. What was the great anniversary that inspired such celebration? The answer: the celebration of the anniversary of the coming of Christ.”¹⁶

Do you see who Jesus is and perhaps admire him, yet remain indifferent? Jesus, the Word, who “in the beginning [was] with God,” and “was God,” and who came into the world to be God’s Savior for us, calls for our faith. He calls us to believe not merely *in* him but *on* him. As one writer puts it, “We are called to worship him without cessation, obey him without hesitation, love him without reservation, and serve him without interruption.”¹⁷ John said, “These [things] 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” (John 20:31). Jesus warned, “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (8:24). But he added, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:31–32).

16. Johnston, *Let’s Study John*, 2.

17. Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 36.

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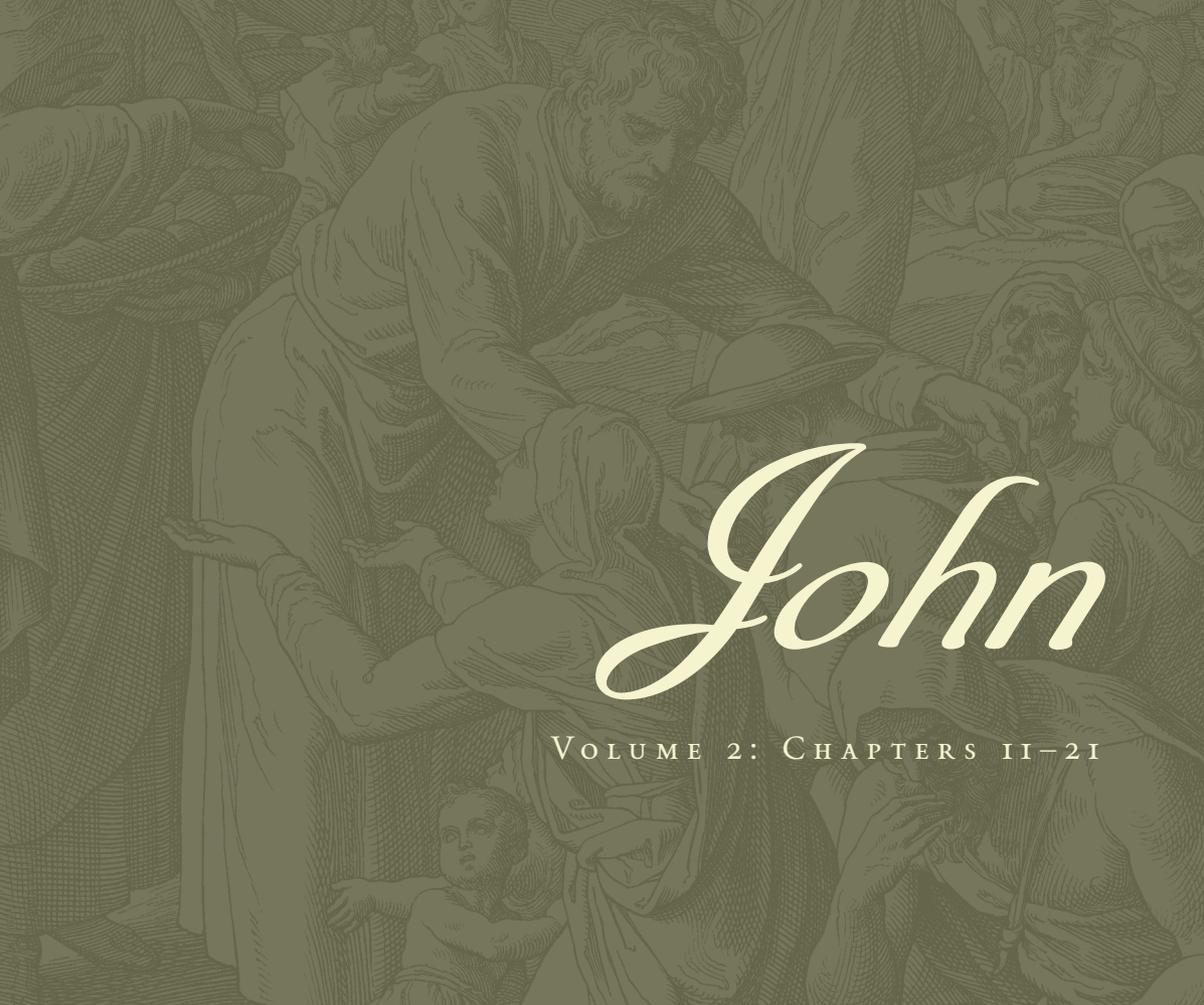
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To Sharon

In loving gratitude for companionship in life and partnership in ministry

and to Christ the Word

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

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≈ *John*

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

PART 4



*Witness and Ministry
among Believers*

LOVE DELAYED

John 11:1–6

When Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4)



One of the chief blessings of life is close friends. The ancient Roman statesman Cicero wrote, “With the exception of wisdom, I am inclined to think nothing better than [friendship] has been given to man by the immortal gods.”¹ A true friendship is not spoiled by the changing of seasons or the turning of fortunes. The Bible says, “A friend loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17). Especially in times of trouble, friends are close by, comforting with their presence, strengthening with their words, and sympathizing with their hearts.

We might wonder whether the Son of God would need friends or whether his being the Messiah would keep Jesus from human intimacy. But Jesus seems to have enjoyed friendship very much. Perhaps his closest friends, whose company he most enjoyed and whose home was most comfortable to him, were the three siblings who lived together in the town of Bethany: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

1. Quoted in George Selde, *The Great Thoughts* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 79–80.

John 11 begins the last section of John's Gospel before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. It was an interlude from his public affairs and from his increasing conflict with the religious leaders. It was also a time of ministry to those closest to him, as Jesus sought to strengthen the faith of his friends and disciples before taking up the cross.

MARY, MARTHA, AND LAZARUS

Since we will be spending time with this family from Bethany, it is a good idea for us to get to know them. This family is mentioned in all four Gospels, and they seem to have been personally close to Jesus. We don't know how they met him or how long they had known him. What we do learn is the difference that Jesus made in their lives.

First, we might consider Lazarus, whose name is made famous by the miracle recorded in this chapter. Lazarus might have been a quiet man; not one of the Gospels quotes him as saying anything. Quiet people sometimes think they make little difference, but Lazarus shows us how wrong they are. Each of us should know how to tell others about Jesus. But Lazarus shows us what a difference we can make simply by showing the power of Christ in our lives.

During the time span of this chapter, Lazarus dies and is raised from the dead. Afterward, his family held a banquet in Jesus' honor. Lazarus was seated with Jesus, and John tells us that a large crowd came to see them both—perhaps hundreds or even thousands of people. So powerful was Lazarus's witness that the hostile authorities decided to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus, too, "because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus" (John 12:11). Like him, you may not be a great speaker for Jesus, but, as James Montgomery Boice reminds us, "You should be especially careful that your life demonstrates the reality of that [spiritual] resurrection that Jesus has performed in you so that others might turn to him and believe in him because of what they see."²

Another family member was Martha, who was made famous by Luke's record of an earlier meeting at their house. Jesus was there, and Martha was working hard to take care of things. But her sister, Mary, was sitting

2. James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:810.

at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching. Martha complained, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me" (Luke 10:40). Martha was a classic example of someone who serves but is caught up in herself. "My . . . me . . . me," she complained, just as many people do today. Jesus reproved Martha, pointing out that Mary was doing the more important thing by spending time with him.

If Lazarus's witness was transformed by his resurrection, it seems that Martha's attitude was also changed. I say this because in the next chapter we see her serving again while Jesus and others recline at the table. But this time there is no complaining! The resurrection of her brother seems to have turned her mind away from her petty problems and directed her service as a joyful gift to the Lord.

Lazarus gave his witness to Jesus, and Martha gave her service. But the third family member, Mary, gave herself to Jesus. Practically every time we see Mary, she is sitting at Jesus' feet, which in that day was the proper posture of a disciple. This probably indicates an awareness of his deity, as well as the wholehearted submission of her life. In Luke 10, Mary is seated at Jesus' feet. In John 11, when Jesus arrives at their home, Mary falls at his feet (John 11:32). And in the banquet that occurs afterward, she washes his feet with her hair. Mary loved Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and she gave him the gift of her complete devotion.

Mary teaches us another important point. The first time we find her sitting at Jesus' feet, Luke says that she was listening to his teaching (Luke 10:39). It is because she opened her mind to his Word that Mary more than anyone else seems to have understood Jesus. She was the quickest to learn the lesson of his miracles and the most fervent to worship him. Learning the truth from Jesus' teaching, she surrendered her life to him and poured out her most costly gifts at his feet.

OUR PRIVILEGE IN PRAYER

John 11 starts Jesus off where chapter 10 left him—across the Jordan where John the Baptist had begun his ministry. While he was there, Lazarus became ill. So Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3).

The sisters might have been surprised that this could happen, since they use the word *behold*. Some English translations leave this out, but the Greek text reads, “Lord, behold, he whom you love is ill.” If this indicates surprise on their part, it should not have, since even those who are very close to Jesus will suffer the trials of this life. People sometimes conclude that an illness or other affliction indicates a separation from God’s affection. But the sisters specifically identify Lazarus as one who was loved by Jesus and yet was ill. Charles Spurgeon comments, “The love of Jesus does not separate us from the common necessities and infirmities of human life. Men of God are still men. The covenant of grace is not a charter of exemption from consumption, or rheumatism, or asthma.”³

But this does not mean that Christians are just like everyone else, because we have the privilege of prayer. Praying involves more than making petitions of the Lord; it rightly includes adoration, confession, and thanksgiving as well. But when it comes to asking of the Lord, Mary’s and Martha’s example shows three important points about prayer.

First, they made their need known to the Lord. They simply brought the matter to Jesus, as we should do in our prayers. John Calvin states: “We are not forbidden a longer form of prayer; but the chief thing is to cast our cares and whatever troubles us into the bosom of God, that He may supply the remedy. This is how those women act towards Christ. They explain their trouble to Him intimately and look for relief from Him.”⁴ This is the great comfort that any believer can and should seek in times of anxiety, since, as the psalm says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

We are not told by John, but sending this message to Jesus must have brought a great peace to Martha’s and Mary’s souls. No doubt they were doing everything they could for their brother. A physician would be there, with the sisters close at hand. But we are not doing all we can until we pray to the Lord. Christians should make use of every good and natural means available: in sickness, we should secure the best medical care; when needing a job, we should look through the advertisements or see a job counselor; in legal trouble, we should hire the best attorney. But as J. C. Ryle writes:

3. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971), 26:73.

4. John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 5:2.

In all our doing, we must never forget that the best and ablest and wisest Helper is in heaven, at God's right hand. Like afflicted Job, our first action must be to fall on our knees and worship. Like Hezekiah, we must spread our matters before the Lord. Like the holy sisters at Bethany, we must send up a prayer to Christ. Let us not forget, in the hurry and excitement of our feelings, that none can help like Him, and that He is merciful, loving, and gracious.⁵

Second, we should note the basis on which the sisters sent their prayer: "He whom you love." They did not appeal to Jesus on the basis of their love or Lazarus's love for him, but on the basis of his love for them. Not that they did not love Jesus. "They did love him," Boice writes, "but they knew that their love for Jesus would never in a million years be an adequate basis for their appeal. . . . [This] is the only grounds that any of us can ever have in approaching the Almighty."⁶

This principle holds in every area of salvation. God did not send his Son because the world loved him. For the world does not love God. But the Bible proclaims, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). "In this is love," John says, "not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Even our love for God stems from his love for us. John adds, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Therefore, Matthew Henry says, "Our love to him is not worth speaking of, but his to us can never be enough spoken of."⁷

Knowing this will provide a great encouragement to our prayers. We feel distant from God because of our cool hearts and mixed performance. But our prayers are offered not in our own name but in Jesus' name, that is, on the basis of his perfect life and saving work. Our prayers are accepted because God loves us, a love that he has proved once for all by offering his Son for our sins on the cross.

Third, having made their need known to the Lord, Lazarus's sisters seem to have left the manner of his reply up to Jesus. I do not deny that what they wanted was implied: they wanted Jesus to come immediately. But what they said was simply, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3). The women knew

5. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:258.

6. Boice, *John*, 3:816.

7. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 5:842.

enough about Jesus that they did not weary him with advice or complaints, but simply placed the matter into his loving hands and left it to him.

The better we know God—in his holiness, power, wisdom, and love—the more we will do the same. The God who has already sent us his very best in his Son is certain to work all things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

THE LOVE THAT WAITS

Jesus' response to this message is one of the best examples of God's approach to answering our prayers. The first thing it shows is *his perspective* on our trials. "When Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death'" (John 11:4).

At first glance, this statement might seem odd and might seem to call Jesus' competence into question, for the simple reason that Lazarus's illness did lead to death. After all, just two days later, Jesus informed his disciples that Lazarus had died. How, then, could Jesus say that Lazarus's illness "does not lead to death"?

The answer is that Jesus knew both his ability and his intention to travel to Bethany and raise Lazarus from the grave, just as he has pledged the resurrection of every believer. Whatever affliction the Lord may be pleased to allow us to endure, Jesus knows that it leads not to death but to eternal life. There is a resurrection awaiting every believer. Even our bodies will be raised in glory. Whenever a Christian dies, fellow believers can and should respond, "This will not lead to death!" "He will be raised!" This is what Paul said: "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:42–44). The great doctrine taught in this chapter—the Christian doctrine of the resurrection—is a wonderful source of comfort in affliction and especially in the face of death.

The same might be said of other trials. We might be subject to injustice now, but in the end believers will be justified by God. We might suffer humiliation, but it leads to glorification. We might struggle in poverty, but out of this come heavenly riches. We might be lonely and sorrowful, but by trusting in Jesus—who secured every spiritual blessing for us through his

death and resurrection—we will have fellowship with God and with other believers and be filled with joy. Jesus’ words might be engraved on every Christian tombstone and emblazoned on every Christian trial: “This does not lead to death.”

Jesus’ response to Lazarus’s illness shows not only his perspective on our trials, but also *his plan* for delivering us from trouble. It is a plan that troubles many believers and causes some to doubt his love. But John 11:5–6 tells us Jesus’ plan for responding to this plea: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

What a remarkable combination this is: Jesus loved them, so he waited for Lazarus to die! Jesus did not wait because he was indifferent to these friends or because he was still trying to figure out how he felt about them. He loved them, so he waited.

This reminds us that the Lord works in our lives according to his timetable and his purposes. He is loving enough not to do what we want him to do but what we need him to do (whether we are aware of it or not!). We see this principle at work throughout the Bible. Faithful Joseph was tossed into a dark prison for refusing to commit a sin. There, he prayed for God’s deliverance and waited. And waited. He waited for over two years. Then, according to God’s own timetable—based on his wonderful plans for Joseph and the way he intended to use Joseph for his larger plans—God delivered him in a marvelous way. It was only afterward that Joseph could explain to his brothers who had betrayed him: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). What Joseph saw by sight looking backward, we are called to see in the present by faith in God and his Word.

But this is often not easy. Kent Hughes eloquently writes:

When a child dies in his mother’s arms as she cried to God for help and the ambulance lies stalled two blocks away, we wonder if God cares. When a Christian is falsely accused and pleads with God to bring the evidence to clear him, and it is only after his reputation is ruined that the evidence comes, we wonder if God cares. When we plan some great event for God and the whole thing falls through, we wonder if God cares.⁸

8. R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 282.

Such thoughts might have gone through Martha's and Mary's minds as they frequently looked out their window or went to stand in the doorway, expecting to see Jesus racing to their aid. "He will come," they would have assured each other. But all the while, Jesus was waiting for the thing they most feared to happen. Why the delay for those he loved?

The answer is seen in the changes that we have already noted about each of these three. Jesus intended for Lazarus to be a witness of his divine glory, and this required Lazarus to be raised from the dead. Jesus intended to transform Martha's attitude. Is there much doubt that she would have been complaining about him and how he had let her down? So Jesus wanted to change her heart. And Jesus wanted to continue teaching Mary, for there were great things about his kingdom that she barely guessed until Lazarus came walking out of the tomb. Jesus also has plans to change, transform, and enlighten us, and those plans inform his timetable in answering our prayers.

In other words, Jesus knows that there are more important things than that we should be delivered from sickness, provided with a good job, or helped out of any number of other trials. Our faith, for instance, is more important, and Jesus puts it ahead of our other needs. Our witness is more important. Our attitude is more important. Ultimately, Jesus thinks it is most important that we do what Mary did after his power was fully revealed: he wants us to lay our most costly gifts at his feet, and especially to offer the gift of our very selves.

We see, therefore, Jesus' perspective on this situation, and his plan for responding. But finally, he told his disciples *his highest purpose* in the affairs of our lives: "It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (John 11:4).

It is the chief end of man to glorify God. This is what truly is highest and best in all things, that the perfections of the excellencies of the glories of God should be displayed in the affairs of earth. It would have been good for Jesus to have come to Bethany in time to heal Lazarus. But the time was short for Israel; the cross lay just days ahead. Others had been healed, and the people did not believe. So Jesus did something even better: he waited for Lazarus to die, and after he had been buried in the tomb, Jesus raised him to life. John tells us the result: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him" (John 11:45).

Are you willing for God to use your life for his glory and the salvation of others? Or do you hold lesser agendas more dear? If we resent God's glorifying himself through our trials and affliction, we will miss out on the joy and wonder that ought to be ours. God *will* glorify himself in our lives, for his glory is his chief end as well as ours. How much better for us to rejoice in all situations, knowing that God's glory is going forth through his sovereign grace for and through us.

THE DEATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE

If you find it difficult to set aside your own will for the will of God, remember that Jesus is not asking anything of you that he did not accept for himself. Jesus himself experienced this in a way that none of us ever will. Jesus was maliciously accused, unjustly convicted, and cruelly put to death. Where was his Father in all this? Did not the heavenly Father love his Son? How could God delay as the crown of thorns was placed on Jesus' head, as the nails were beaten through his hands and feet, and as Jesus suffered such torment on the cross?

The Bible answers that God had a perspective on the death of Jesus, seeing the open tomb beyond the cross. God had a plan that was higher than merely preserving Jesus from harm—a plan to save sinners such as you and me through the blood of Christ. And God had a purpose: that his own glory would be displayed in his Son, crucified as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world.

Yet even Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). But he persevered in faith, knowing that his was a death that leads to life, not only for him but for all who trust in him. So he prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46).

Because of that life-giving death, the same will be true for us. To be a Christian means to die to sin, to worldly pleasures, and to our own agenda for our lives, and ultimately means the death of our bodies. But with Jesus, who conquered death, as our Savior, all of these will lead to life. And then the love of Jesus, our dearest Friend, which was once delayed, will be near at hand forever.

“Rick Phillips’s two volumes will become constant friends and ‘go-to’ companions for those charged with the daunting task of preaching the depths of the fourth Gospel. The whole of Phillips’s work maintains an unwavering focus on the apostle John’s grand purpose of leading his readers to believe that ‘Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God’—so that each exposition is gospel-rich. . . . The fact that these expositions have been delivered in the living context of the church gives them a depth and piquancy that many of the standard commentaries lack. Those who preach the Word will also find these volumes full of fresh insights and homiletical inspiration—good friends indeed.”

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