

## Introduction: The Purpose of the Gospel of John

### JOHN 20:30-31

Every semester on the first day of class I would sit in my seat with a feeling of dread. The professor would walk us through the syllabus as I desperately hoped not to hear the dreaded words *term paper*. When I had to write term papers, I distinctly remember my professors making a big deal about the thesis statement. The thesis statement gives the purpose of the paper. It's the point of the paper—what you're arguing for or attempting to prove. Everything in the paper is supposed to support the thesis statement. The Gospel of John is no different. The Gospel writer gives us a clear and distinct thesis in John 20:30-31:

*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written 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.*

We can summarize John's thesis in one word: *believe*. He says, "I've written this book, including these particular accounts, so that you might believe." John witnessed nearly three years of stories, sermons, and conversations, but he didn't include them all. He selected certain ones—the ones that would help us believe.

The current religious culture in America loves to talk about *belief* and *believing*. Those spiritual buzzwords are often used generically and end up devoid of meaning. Contemporary spirituality trumpets not belief in an object or a person but rather a *belief in belief*. It goes something like this: "It doesn't matter *who* you believe or *what* you believe. All that matters is *that* you believe." There's a belief in belief.

For twenty-five years the high priest of this philosophy in the United States was Oprah Winfrey. She didn't care *what* you believed; she just wanted you *to* believe. She was convinced that if you believed something, your life would improve. A few years ago she had an atheist on her show. The atheist described the sense of wonder she experienced when she stood at the edge of the ocean. Here was Oprah's response: "Well, I don't call you an atheist then. . . . I think if you *believe in the awe and the*

*wonder and mystery* then that is what god is. . . . It's not a bearded guy in the sky" (cited in Stedman, "Oprah"). Oprah was peddling a brand of spirituality that revolved around believing in belief. As long as a person has faith, he or she is fine. She ignores the object of faith.

John's Gospel doesn't call us to believe in belief or to put our faith in faith. His teaching on belief is much deeper and more robust and infinitely more life giving than any modern, pop-culture philosophy. In the course of twenty-one chapters, the Gospel writer will answer three questions:

- What do we need to believe?
- What does it mean to believe?
- Why do we need to believe?

#### *Question 1: What Do We Need to Believe?*

We need to believe that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 31). What does it mean that **Jesus is the Christ**? *Christ* is not Jesus's last name. People would have identified him as Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus the carpenter's son. *Christ* is a title, and John tells us early on in his Gospel what it means. In chapter 1 he records an encounter between two brothers, Andrew and Simon Peter. Andrew has just seen Jesus and runs to find Simon. He tells his brother, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated 'the Christ')" (1:41).

*Christ* is a title synonymous with "Messiah," and *Messiah* is a term with roots in the Old Testament. The Old Testament focuses on one called "Messiah" whom God would send. By the time Jesus came on the scene, the nation of Israel had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah to come. As we walk through the Gospel of John, we'll see this expectant climate Jesus entered. He came to a people who were waiting for the Christ.

When John identifies Jesus as the Christ, he's not saying a person just needs to acknowledge that Jesus is the one called "Messiah" but that one must believe that Jesus is the one who will fulfill all of the promises God made to his people. The promises of God tie the entire Old Testament together, and they all center on a person. The Old Testament is not a collection of stories but rather one story. It's a single story of God creating man, man rebelling against God, and God sending his Son to reconcile man back to God. John is saying, "You must believe Jesus is

that person. Jesus is the promise keeper. All of God's promises come true in him." What are some of those promises of God fulfilled in Christ?

- The first promise is found in Genesis 3. Mankind has just sinned against God, and Adam and Eve are learning about the consequences of their sin. In the midst of their punishment, God promises to send a son, born from the seed of a woman, who would fix everything that sin had broken.
- In Psalm 2 we find a promise that the Christ will end all injustice and rebellion. Kings and leaders oppress people and make a mockery of justice, but the Christ will come to put an end to their reign. He will judge them for their wickedness, and only those who run to him will find mercy.
- In Isaiah 53 we find the promise of a Suffering Servant. God's servant, the Christ, will be perfectly righteous. He will be the only person who never sins. But he will be punished and killed. He will willingly offer his perfect life as the payment for our sins. He takes the guilty's punishment so the guilty can be declared innocent.
- The prophet Daniel records a vision of God ruling in heaven (ch. 7). In his vision one who looks like a man comes before God, and God gives him a kingdom that never ends. His eternal kingdom is also universal—it includes people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

So when John says we need to believe that Jesus is the Christ, he's making a sweeping statement. We need to believe Jesus is the one who will fix all that's been broken, the one who will end tyranny and oppression, the one who will reign forever as King and Lord, and the one who gave his life so we who are guilty can be forgiven and reconciled back to God.

We also need to believe that Jesus is the **Son of God**. John not only makes the claim that Jesus is the promised Messiah but also that Jesus is God. Only someone divine could do all that God promised in the Old Testament. Only someone divine could be trusted with the absolute power and authority promised to the Messiah. Only someone divine could be the perfect sacrifice and payment for the sin of the world. If Jesus were not divine, then he could not be the fulfillment of all the promises God made.

### Question 2: What Does It Mean to Believe?

We use the word *believe* in numerous ways. Someone asks, “Is the weather supposed to be nice out today?” We answer, “I believe it’s supposed to warm up.” We really mean, “I think” or “I may have heard” or “I have no idea, but it would certainly be nice.” In school we’re taught certain facts about history and physics, so we believe those facts. In that sense *believe* means we hold it to be true but have no real attachment to it. If someone shows us different evidence, we are willing to change our minds. The kind of belief to which John calls us looks much different from these two types of belief.

The word *believe* translates the Greek word *pisteuō*, which means “to trust” or “to put one’s faith *into* something or someone.” To believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God requires more than mere intellectual adherence to a set of facts about the life of Christ. It requires *trusting* one’s whole self *into* who Christ said he was and what he was sent to accomplish.

Imagine you are on a hike through a beautiful mountain pass, approaching the edge of a cliff that drops a thousand feet to the canyon floor. The only way to continue is to walk across a bridge from one side of the cliff to the other. It’s one thing to say, “I believe the bridge can hold my weight as I walk across this great chasm.” It’s something altogether different to actually start walking across the bridge. The former is a kind of belief based on intellectual adherence to a possible outcome. The latter is placing one’s *trust in* the bridge. John did not write his Gospel just so we could know facts about Jesus’s life. He wrote his Gospel so we would know facts about who Jesus is and what he was sent to do and in response trust in him completely.

### Question 3: Why Do We Need to Believe?

One of the dominant themes of John’s Gospel is our need for life, and it’s always connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* (1:4; emphasis added)

*For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* (3:16; emphasis added)

*Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life. (5:24; emphasis added)*

*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. (11:25-26; emphasis added)*

*I am the way, the truth, and the life. (14:6; emphasis added)*

The life we need—spiritual, eternal life, delivered from the judgment of hell—comes through belief in Jesus Christ (20:31). But life does not come to us like a UPS package. It's not a transaction in which we believe in Jesus, then he hands us our life at the front door and walks away. The life he gives us is life "in him."

Life in Christ can be illustrated by adoption. When a child is adopted, the significance is not a piece of paper he can place in a file folder. The real meaning of adoption is that he is brought into relationship with a family that is now his own. His existence is tied up with these new family members. They sleep in the same house. They sit and eat meals together. They exchange gifts at Christmas. They cry together when Grandma dies. They pass the flu to one another. Adoption is not an exchange; it's a new relationship. It's the beginning of a new life. Life in Christ is not an exchange; it's being drawn into an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. He illustrated it for his disciples by comparing their relationship to a vine with branches. The branch doesn't get a one-time injection of life from the vine. It gets daily nourishment from its connection to the vine, and if something were to sever the branch from the vine, the branch would die. When we truly believe, we truly begin to live.

## Conclusion

I was walking through the mall one day when I entered a store and something strange caught my eye. I couldn't figure out what it was. I stopped and looked around and realized it was something about the mannequin by the window. I walked a little closer, trying to figure out what didn't fit, when the mannequin looked at me. Then the mannequin blinked. It wasn't a mannequin; it was a model. The store paid some models to stand in the window and display their clothes.

Models and mannequins are similar in many ways. You find them in the same place. You see them wearing the same clothes. You notice

them working the same job. Despite all the similarities, there's one major, all-important difference. Models are alive; mannequins aren't. The most expensive mannequin still falls infinitely short of the worst model in one category—life.

The Gospel of John reveals that the most moral, religious, pious person is no more alive than a mannequin in the store window. Though imperfect and struggling with sin, the one who believes on Jesus and commits to following him has been given life. The wrath of God has been removed, the relationship with God reconciled, and eternal life with God guaranteed.

### Reflect and Discuss

1. Why did John write his Gospel?
2. What two things does John want you to believe about Jesus?
3. What is the result of believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?
4. When John says we need to believe that Jesus is the Christ, what is he saying we need to believe?
5. What are some common “spiritual” beliefs the world holds? How are these different from belief in Jesus?
6. What does it mean to believe in Jesus?
7. What is John asking his readers to believe *about* Jesus and what he has done and will do?
8. Name some of the promises God has fulfilled in Christ.
9. How can belief bring life through Jesus?
10. How has belief in Jesus changed your life?

# Introducing Jesus

JOHN 1:1-5

**Main Idea:** Jesus is God, born to deliver mankind from death and darkness.

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**I. Who Is Jesus (1:1-3)?**

**II. Why Did Jesus Come to Earth (1:4-5)?**

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*T*ime magazine once asked “Who Was Jesus?” on their cover. They went on to ask more questions in the article:

How is Jesus to be understood? Did he stride out of the wilderness 2,000 years ago to preach a gentle message of peace and brotherhood? Or did he perhaps advocate some form of revolution? When did he realize his mission would end with death upon a cross? Did he view himself as the promised Messiah? Did he understand himself to be both God and man? (Ostling, “Who Was Jesus?”)

These are important questions to ask and to answer. We live in a culture increasingly spiritual yet hesitant to commit to saying there is one absolute truth. To many in modern society, Jesus was a philosopher. Others view him as a good man with important things to say. Still others view Jesus as just another prophet who came to point us to God. This is why the first words of the Gospel of John are so vitally important. They answer the questions, Who is Jesus, and why did he come to earth?

## Who Is Jesus?

JOHN 1:1-3

The clear testimony of the Holy Scriptures is that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a good man or wise rabbi; Jesus Christ is God. In verse 1 Jesus is given the unique title, “the Word.” Words are powerful. Anyone who thinks words are painless never went through middle school. Our own experiences and the testimony of history teach us the power of words. During World War II, Winston Churchill said these words:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their Finest Hour.”<sup>1</sup>

His words rallied England and emboldened the citizens to stay the course and stand strong against their enemy.

As powerful as Churchill’s words were, they are no match for the power of the word of God. “The heavens were made by the *word* of the LORD, and all the stars, by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6; emphasis added). “Then God *said*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3; emphasis added). “He sent his *word* and healed them; he rescued them from the Pit” (Ps 107:20; emphasis added). Creation and salvation both came through the word of God.

God reveals his power and will through his word. There is no greater revelation of the character and nature of the Father than through the person of Jesus.

- Jesus reveals God’s mind.
- Jesus expresses God’s will.
- Jesus displays God’s perfections.
- Jesus exposes God’s heart. (Pink, *John*, 21)

The Gospel of John begins with a phrase that sounds familiar. The first three words of this book echo the first three words of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 opens, “*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth” (emphasis added). John is connecting Jesus Christ with creation, claiming Jesus existed *before* creation. Jesus existed before the world began, before there was time. If we were to hit the rewind button on history, we could take it back to the very beginning, when God created the world out of nothing, and Jesus was there. In fact, we could go back *before* God began creation, and Jesus would have existed with him. This was the testimony of Jesus himself: “Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with that glory I had with you *before the world existed*” (John 17:5; emphasis added). Genesis 1:1 contains no hint of the creation of God, and here in John 1:1 there is no hint of the creation of Jesus. This is what sets Jesus apart from so-called gods—gods made by human hands and invented by human minds—Jesus has always existed.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, June 18, 1940 following the collapse of France.

Jesus shares his nature and being with God—“the Word was God.” He is of the same character and quality as God (v. 1). Everything that can be said about God can be said about Jesus Christ. We call this the Trinity—the understanding that there is one God but that the one God exists as three persons: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In verse 1 we find a precisely worded statement about Jesus that leads us to only one conclusion: Jesus Christ is God.

This phrase proves critical in distinguishing the Christian faith from other expressions of religion. When Jehovah’s Witnesses meet to discuss their religion, they pick up a translation of Scripture called *The New World Translation*. If you opened that book, turned it to the Gospel of John, found verse 1, and looked at the last phrase, you would read, “and the Word was a god.” Does that small change matter? Does a simple little monosyllable make any difference? By adding that little word *a*, they are making a statement that Jesus is something *less than fully God*. He may be a god in some sense. He may be one of many “gods,” but he is not the true God. From the beginning of his Gospel, John argues that Christ is not one of many gods but is God himself. John MacArthur writes,

Confusion about the deity of Christ is inexcusable, because the biblical teaching regarding it is clear and unmistakable. Jesus Christ is the preexistent Word, who enjoys full face-to-face communion and divine life with the Father, and is Himself God. (*John 1–11*, 20)

As God, Jesus was not only present at creation, but he also was active in creation. He created “all things” (v. 3). John chose the specific term *all things* and used it to focus on each individual thing Jesus created. John could have phrased it in such a way that our eyes were drawn to the whole universe collectively—sort of like throwing open the warehouse and simply saying, “He made all of this.” However, John chose a word that looks at each created thing individually. Like opening the warehouse and taking us around on a tour and saying, “Look at this here. Check out that detail there.” Jesus Christ made everything from the largest whale to the smallest amoeba. From the sunflower seed to the redwood tree, from the beautiful sunset to the tiny lightning bug, Jesus Christ designed and created all of it (cf. Col 1:16). One day Jesus will be worshiped in heaven with the words, “Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because you have created all things, and by your will they exist and were created” (Rev 4:11).

## Why Did Jesus Come to Earth?

### JOHN 1:4-5

Can you imagine someone asking the apostle John, “If this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth is really God, then why is he here? Why is he walking around as a man? What’s the point of all this?” John provides two grand and glorious answers: life and light (vv. 4-5).

Without Jesus we are dead in our sin (Eph 2:1-3). What’s it mean to be dead in sin? *Death is fundamentally separation.* At death the spiritual part of man—his soul—is separated from the physical part of man—his body. We feel this separation when we attend a funeral or a wake. We walk into the room, greet the family who are mourning over the separation that has taken place between them and the one they love, and then we walk to the front of the room and look into the coffin. In that coffin we see a shell. Though the body is still with us, the person—the part of that person that really makes her who she is, the part you can’t see—is no longer there. It’s gone. Her soul has been separated from her body, and all that remains is a decaying, worn-out husk with a bad makeup job.

If physical death is the separation of the soul from the body, then *spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God.* Physical death pictures the far more terrifying and sobering reality of spiritual death. Sin separates us from God! Right here and right now, our sin separates us from the sinless God of the universe. That separation is made permanent after physical death, when God, the just Judge, will punish sin with eternal separation from him in the horrors of hell.

Jesus came to give us life—to reconcile us with God, changing both our present condition and our future destination. How do you receive spiritual life? By placing your faith and trust in Jesus Christ (John 11:25). He will reconcile you with his Father. You will no longer be separated from God and cut off as an enemy but welcomed as a son or daughter. Your future is life forever in the glorious kingdom of God. Jesus Christ takes God’s judgment on your sin, and his victory over death and the grave become yours. Do you know what a Christian is?

- A Christian is someone who was dead in sin but now has received life.
- A Christian is someone who was cut off from God but has now been reconciled.
- A Christian is someone who was a spiritual corpse but now has the life of God flowing through him or her.

- A Christian is someone who was dead to God but has now been made alive by and for him.

Why did Jesus come to earth? Jesus came to call people from death to life—to a living, vibrant relationship with God—through faith in him. Those who believe he makes alive and gathers into a living community that bears the fruit of his life flowing through them. Together we demonstrate and declare his life.

Jesus brought life to the spiritually dead and light to the spiritually darkened (v. 5). Though a different metaphor it pictures the same truth. We have a great need we cannot meet. We need to be rescued from the domain of darkness, and we're powerless to do anything about it. Jesus came to earth because only he could meet that need. We could never come to know what God desires and expects from us unless Jesus revealed it. We would be staggering about in the darkness of our own opinions if Jesus had not brought the light of God's revelation. Hundreds of years before Jesus came, his coming was predicted with these words: "The people walking in darkness have seen a *great light*; a *light* has dawned on those living in the land of darkness" (Isa 9:2; emphasis added). When Jesus came, he said, "I am the *light* of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the *light* of life" (John 8:12; emphasis added).

The gospel is the good news that you no longer have to wander about in the darkness and despair of sin, but you can enjoy the light of righteousness through Jesus Christ. John is not suggesting we need more religion. Jesus came into a very religious world—a world where the religious leaders had memorized lengthy portions of the Bible. Yet these men were in the darkness of sin. They stumbled about, attempting to please God through their own self-righteousness. Jesus offers light and life.

Throughout John's Gospel we find an ongoing struggle between light and darkness. Jesus, the light of the world, is opposing and being opposed by those who are in darkness. Near the end of the Gospel, we discover how Jesus was betrayed by one of his own friends. He was arrested by the Roman soldiers and brought to trial. Before, during, and after his trial, he received cruel beatings, his back whipped so many times the blood flowed freely. To make the mockery worse, he was dressed in a purple robe, and a crown of thorns was brutally smashed into his scalp. A cross was thrown on his back, and he was forced to carry it up to a hill called Golgotha where he would be hung to die like a common criminal. After having his hands and feet nailed to the cross, his cross was lifted

into place and there he died, despised by those he came to save. His corpse was taken down from the cross and placed in a cold, dark tomb.

If we were to stop reading after chapter 19, we could say to John, “John, you’re wrong. Jesus was not God. He did not bring life. We’re all doomed to death and darkness.” But there’s a chapter 20, and there we read about the most wonderful event to ever take place on this earth—the resurrection. After his death on the cross, Jesus did not stay buried because he is the life, and the life could not remain dead. He arose, conquering forever the sting of death and hell.

John describes this wonderful scene—this amazing resurrection—with this simple phrase: “That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). Look at these two verbs. John says “that light *shines*.” *Shines* is in the present tense. He’s saying, “The light is *still shining* in the darkness.” Now look at the next phrase: “The darkness *did not overcome* it.” Here John uses a verb that signifies a completed action: The darkness has done everything it could: it schemed and plotted, but it ran out of ideas. No matter what the darkness does, the light will still shine; it will not be overcome. What an awesome truth! Jesus Christ is still shining in this dark world. The light can still be seen.

### Reflect and Discuss

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why are God’s words powerful? What Scriptures show the power of God’s Word?
3. Why does John call Jesus “the Word”? What does this title tell us about Jesus?
4. What does John want us to believe about Jesus from this passage?
5. Describe the connection between Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. How does this connection show a distinction between Jesus and creation?
6. Why did Jesus come to earth?
7. What would the world look like if Jesus had not brought the light of the gospel?
8. What does it mean to be a Christian? What changes have taken place in your life as a result?
9. What is the good news of the gospel? If someone took an inventory of your life, what would they think is your good news?
10. Are there moments in your life when you feel overwhelmed by anxiety, fear, or isolation? How does the picture of Jesus as a light shining in the darkness speak to you in those circumstances?