

**THEMES
IN
JOHN**



BOOKS OF THE BIBLE SERIES

YOUTH - ADULT



THEMES IN JOHN

Richard Lawton



CHRISTIAN LIFE CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

WHO, WHEN AND WHERE?

To consider who wrote a book and in what circumstances it was written is often helpful in understanding the book itself. The consideration of the source of John's Gospel has occupied many, many words over the years. We do not have space here to add many more, for we are more concerned with the content of the book. Perhaps we can very briefly summarize the matter in the following way, and leave the reader to dig further into the commentaries if he is sufficiently interested.

The Gospel itself does not indicate who wrote it. The name *John* was added as a title, but probably not until the middle of the latter part of the second century. The church traditionally regarded the author as being the best-known John, the son of Zebedee, and the intimate friend of Jesus. Over recent years, there have been differences of opinion about the authorship. The consensus of recent commentators seems to be that the author was a close friend of the Apostle John, and that the book bears the stamp and authority of the Apostle John on it. The book was probably written in Ephesus between 90 and 100 A.D.

DIFFERENT FROM OTHER GOSPELS

Even a casual reading of John reveals that it is quite different from the first three Gospels. By comparison, the first three Gospels contain accounts of events, whereas the fourth Gospel contains more reflection on the events. In John's Gospel there is less of what Jesus did and more of what he said.

THIS STUDY

For this study we have chosen to concentrate on five passages in which Jesus makes important claims for himself. They contain five of the "I Am" sayings. In most cases, the saying stems from or is illustrated by an event. A study of these passages will give real insight into the character of the Gospel as a whole.

I AM

In John 8:58, Jesus says, "In very truth I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am". In Exodus 3:13-14 we see that "I Am" is actually a name for God. In using this phrase, then, Jesus is unmistakably laying claim to be God. In the "I Am" passages, he amplifies this claim.

What other man could lay claim to being the light of the world; the bread of life; the good shepherd; the door of the sheepfold; the resurrection and life; the real vine; the way, the truth, and the life? Yet Jesus does, and the claims dominate John's Gospel.

It is unavoidable that the study of these passages should raise for us the question of our own relationship with Jesus. We should not try to avoid it!

FURTHER READING

The following are inexpensive, but helpful, commentaries on John:

- W. Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vols. 1 and 2*. The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1955.
- F. V. Filson, *Saint John* (Laymen's Bible Commentaries). SCM Press, London, 1964.
- A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John* (Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible). Cambridge, 1965.
- J. Marsh, *Saint John* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries). Penguin Books, 1968.
- R. V. G. Tasker, *John, An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries). London: The Tyndale Press, 1960.

THE PLAN

This study booklet contains five studies, each intended to occupy a group for one hour to one hour and a half. If you need to take longer than this, you may either select between the questions or spend more than one session on the study concerned. The book should be studied in small groups (no more than 10 members). Groups will need to use a flip chart or chalkboard in most sessions (see *Adult Manual*, page 72).

1 The Bread of Life

John, chapter 6

WHAT SPARKED IT OFF

Read *John 6:1-13* and the following comments on the passage. Then discuss your understanding of the passage.

The feeding of the five thousand is the only one of Jesus' miracles which is recorded by all four Gospel writers. Like most of the biblical miracles, it stretches the credulity of modern man. Five loaves and two fish would hardly feed a "large crowd". So we bog down in controversy over whether the incident could have happened and, if so, how. (We will notice later that the people who were there could accept the event, but they were bogged down over what it meant.)

One of our problems is whether Jesus *could* have done it. This, of course, depends on our view of Jesus himself. Archbishop William Temple wrote:

"Every evangelist supposed our Lord to have wrought a creative act; and for myself, I have no doubt that this is what occurred. This, however, is credible only if St. John is right in his doctrine of our Lord's person. If the Lord was indeed God incarnate, the story presents no insuperable difficulties."

Other writers suggest as alternative interpretations that it was a sacramental meal in which each person had only a morsel of food (although this does not fit easily into the discussion which follows the event), or that it was a miracle of sharing in which the generous gesture of the boy with the loaves and fishes prompted everyone else to bring out and share the food they had brought.

Another problem is whether Jesus *would* have done it, in view of his refusal to win a following by using miraculous means to provide people with food. (See *Luke 4:3-4*.)

However, in whatever way we explain the event, we may be sure that Jesus used it as an acted parable and went on to say some very important things about life.

A VITAL DISTINCTION

Make a list on a flip chart of what you need in life. Then, individually, with pencil and paper, rate the list in order of priority. Now, on the flip chart, try to come to agreement on these priorities.

After you have done this, read *John 6:22-35, 41-48*, in which Jesus talks of our needs. If you have several copies of the same translation, it may be helpful for one person to read the words of Jesus, another the words of the people, and for another to be the narrator.

Discuss your list of priorities in the light of what Jesus says.

Jesus seemed to be disappointed with his sudden new following. He strongly contrasted his gift of ordinary bread with the gift of himself, the bread of life, which is not perishable, which is permanently satisfying, which is real, and which causes the recipient to live for ever.

Read again verses 26-27, 32-33, 35, 50-51, and underline (or list on the flip chart) the words which indicate the particular nature of this bread of life.

Bread is a symbol for basic food, without which we cannot live. It is absolutely necessary for life. So Jesus is saying that he himself is basic for life. Without him we cannot live, in the full sense of the word "live". He is also saying that this dimension of life is far more important than the ordinary one of physical nourishment. Perhaps this is why some people have been prepared to go through physical deprivation and even death for the sake of what they believe to be more real and lasting.

Discuss the following questions as you try to come to grips with what Jesus is saying:

- What does Jesus mean when he talks of the "bread from heaven" and "the bread of life"? In what way is it *real* (v.55)? How do we obtain it?
- Think of people you know well. In what ways do they try to satisfy their deeper hunger? How can you go about helping them to satisfy it?
- Christians today are concerned with the hungry people of the world. How does this passage relate to this concern?

REACTIONS

Read *John 6:14-15, 59-71*, and, as you do so, list on the following chart the reactions of people to Jesus. Summarize each reaction, and note the verse in each case.

favourable	unfavourable

The dispute was chiefly over Jesus' claims for himself.

First, "the Jews" (the religious officials and their representatives) boggled at his claim to have "come down from heaven" and to be able to give "his flesh to eat". Then even many of his followers, or "disciples", became disgusted and withdrew from Jesus.

A few reacted with faith. Peter confessed,

"Your words are words of eternal life. We have faith, and we know that you are the Holy One of God."

- If Jesus is wrong, then we need not take much notice of him. If he is right, then we need to take all the notice in the world. How can we tell if he is right or wrong?
- William Barclay wrote:
"When Jesus told us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity, and he was telling us to vitalize our lives with his life until we are drenched and permeated and saturated and filled with the life of God."
What does this mean for us in practice?

2 The Light of the World

John 8:12-20; 9:1-41

Read *John 8:12-20*, taking account of the following notes as you seek an understanding of the passage:

1. The conversation takes place at the Temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. A feature of the Feast, which could well have led to Jesus' use of this metaphor, was the lighting of four great candelabra which shed light over the city far beyond the Temple courtyard.
2. "Light" was a common Old Testament symbol for God and his work:
e.g. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear" (Psalm 27:1).
"Send forth thy light and thy truth to be my guide . . ." (Psalm 43:3).
3. "Light" was used in God's promise to Israel (Isaiah 49:6):
"I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds."

Discuss the significance of Jesus' saying under the following headings:

THE CLAIM

Jesus makes the stupendous claim for himself, "I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark; he shall have the light of life" (v.12).

Light allows us to see. It reveals both strengths and weaknesses.

- Why do men "prefer darkness to light" (John 3:19)?

THE ILLUSTRATION

Read *John 9*. You may consider having people take the parts of Jesus, the man, his parents, the Jews, and a narrator.

Again we find what is virtually an acted parable to illustrate Jesus' claim. He healed a man who had been blind from birth. This time the act, as well as the teaching, incurred the wrath of his enemies.

- List on a flip chart the man's various comments on Jesus, and notice how he proceeds from a statement of fact to an attitude towards Jesus.

- Read verses 39-41. In what way are the Pharisees judged by their reactions to Jesus? In what ways are we in danger of spiritual blindness?

Questions for discussion:

- In what way does becoming a follower of Jesus bring "the light of life"? Try to earth your discussion from your own experience.
- In what way could you say that people who are not followers of Jesus "wander in the dark"?
- Jesus says that whether a person is in light or darkness is determined by whether he is Jesus' follower or not. Yet many members of the church, who claim to be followers of Jesus, also seem to be "wandering in the dark".
— This couple has serious marital difficulties.
— This man has deep doubts about his faith.
— This woman feels desperately lonely, and says no one in the church talks with her.
— This minister has tried hard to do his work faithfully, but feels no one appreciates him.
— These two women have quarrelled and are not on speaking terms.
— This young man feels despised on account of his long hair and "mod" clothes.
Does "living in the light" mean that one should be free of troubles such as these? If not, what does it mean?

- Divide into pairs. In pairs, look in your hymn-book at a hymn which has been written around the theme of Jesus as the light of the world. Does the hymn help you as to the meaning of the phrase? Do the words give you any new insight? After 15 minutes, share your hymn and findings with the whole group.
- Read the words of Jesus to his followers in Matthew 5:14-16.
In what sense are followers of Jesus "light for all the world"?
Is this true of your congregation? If not, how can you go about making it true?

3 The Good Shepherd

John 10: 1-30

In this study, it is suggested that you use the Swedish method of Bible study.

Divide a piece of paper into three. In the top section, draw a candle (even if it is a rough one!); in the second section, draw an arrow; in the third section, a question mark. Alongside the question mark, make a note of the questions which arise in your mind from the passage. Alongside the arrow, note any points which are challenging or which prick the conscience. Alongside the candle, note any insights, or verses which throw new light or clarity on your understanding of the faith or of your life.

Read and study John 10:1-30 in silence, using the method outlined above. As you study refer to the following explanatory notes. After about 15 minutes, share your questions and insights, and discuss any issues which arise out of them.

Verses 1-5 The imagery is of the Eastern sheepfold and shepherd. Only legitimate people came in by the door. Others sneaked in by another way because they were up to no good. The shepherd knew his sheep intimately, by name, and the sheep knew him and could recognize his voice.

Verses 7-9 In some sheepfolds there was no door. The shepherd himself actually slept across the entrance and became the door. Entrance could be obtained only through him.

So Jesus provides safety and security.

Verse 8 refers to patriots and insurgents who had used violence to try to lead Israel to freedom, and some of whom had claimed to be the Messiah. Referring back to the controversy over the blind man in chapter 9, Jesus contrasted himself with the Jewish rulers who had so readily expelled the man from the synagogue. Jesus himself was the entrance to the new Israel, the people of God.

Verses 10-18 The figure of the shepherd has been frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to God. See, for instance, Psalm 23; Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:11-31 (which follows a denunciation of false shepherds). Here again Jesus was liable to a charge of blasphemy. "The good shepherd"

was there for the sake of his sheep, not for the wages he could get from the job, and not with his own safety pre-eminent in his mind. In fact, he would risk and, if necessary, sacrifice his life in order to care for his sheep adequately.

Verse 16 refers to the Gentiles, who did not belong to Israel and whom Jesus wanted to include in his kingdom. It was some time, however, before the church learned the lesson of this verse. Hence Peter's struggle (see Acts 11:1-18), and the controversy over the conditions under which Gentiles could be admitted to the church, culminating in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Verses 17-18 anticipate Jesus' death and resurrection.

Verses 19-21 Again, there were varied reactions. Some judged Jesus as demon-possessed, or insane. Others were impressed by the sense and the authority of his words, and by his healing of the blind man.

Verses 22-30 Jesus' deeds were self evident, yet he was not recognized because these people did not belong to the true Israel. Those who did belong to the true Israel recognized Jesus as the one who cared for them.

For further discussion:

- What significance does it have for us today that Jesus is the "good shepherd" — as individuals? as a church?
- In *John 21:15-17* Jesus asked Peter to "feed my sheep". What is the significance of this for today's church?
- Explore together the meaning of life "in all its fullness" (v.10).
- Note the reactions to Jesus in *verses 19-21*. Why do people assume markedly different stances towards Jesus? How can you help other people to take a positive stance towards him?

4 The Resurrection and Life

John 11: 1-54

In this study session use the Iona method of Bible study.

After allowing time for reading the passage in silence several times, invite each person in turn to share what has seemed to him to be of most significance in it (what impressed him, or what raised an important question in his mind). Then go back and discuss each point raised. Finally, someone should sum up the main points of the discussion.

Study John 11:1-54, using the following notes to help in your understanding.

Verses 5-10 John saw the raising of Lazarus as the incident which brought to a head the opposition to Jesus. Jesus knew that to return to Jerusalem (which was less than two miles from Bethany) and to do what he intended to do would be to bring about his death. His delay in leaving emphasized that his death did not happen simply because by chance he happened to go to Jerusalem. He went on his own initiative, despite the protests of his disciples, knowing what would be the result, and ready to lay down his life for his people. In verses 9, 10, Jesus declared that it was now the time for him to take this step.

Verses 11-16 Jesus intuitively knew of the death of Lazarus. His disciples typically misunderstood him, and he had to explain more carefully. Jesus was ready to make the most of the opportunity to show his mastery even over death.

Verse 17 The Jews regarded the third day after death as the one on which the soul left the body. "Four days" underlines the fact that Lazarus was dead.

Verses 21-37 Martha and Mary both believed that Jesus could have healed their brother. The crowd (v.37) were more cynical about it.

Verse 25 contains one of Jesus' most famous statements. It has given hope to millions. Jesus claimed for himself power over life and death. In him believers would find life, even beyond physical death.

Verses 34, 35, 38 show Jesus in deep emotion. If you have several translations, you might compare their renderings of these verses. There seems to be a suggestion of anger or indignation on the part of Jesus, possibly at the lack of faith in the mourners.

Verses 38-44 Jesus did not want to appear to be a mere wonder-worker (v.42). He wanted the glory and praise for the event to go to God. Some people, including some commentators, find this miracle difficult to accept. Some find difficulty in accepting that it could possibly have happened, while others think it strange that such an amazing event was not recorded in the other Gospels. On the other hand, some are able to accept this as credible. John again saw the event as an *acted* parable of the truth that Jesus had the authority to give life to man as he determined.

Verses 45-54 record the effect on the people of the raising of Lazarus: some came to faith, but others became more hostile and commenced to plot his death.

For further discussion:

- A friend or workmate says to you, "I can't believe that stuff in the Bible. It even reckons that Jesus brought a dead man back to life. Rot!" How would you answer?
- Another friend is talking with you just two weeks after the sudden death of her husband at the age of 45. She says, "I would be much happier if only I could believe that he is still alive, and not just dead and buried and finished." How does this passage help you to reply to her?
- The reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus' raising of Lazarus was one of resentment. Why was this? How do people today react to Jesus' claim to be "the resurrection and life"? (You may like to plan a way of getting a sample of people's reactions.)
- What does it mean in your everyday life that Jesus is "the resurrection and life"?
- Parts of this passage are usually used in funeral services. Ask your minister to show you a copy of the funeral service he uses. Discuss the way in which it reflects the hope that lies in Jesus' claim.

5 The Real Vine

John 15: 1-17

Read *John 15:1-17*, using the following notes in your search for deeper understanding of this passage.

The vine was a very much treasured plant in Israel. In the Old Testament, Israel itself was called "the vine" (see, for instance, Ezekiel 15; 19:10-14; Isaiah 5:1-7; Hosea 10:1). But Israel was often a degenerate vine. Its failing to bear fruit for God meant that it was fit only for burning. Jesus claimed that he was the real vine; he would be fruitful, and would not fail the Father.

The branches were the members of the church. Christians were part of Christ. They existed for the purpose of bearing fruit. If they did not, they were useless and they, too, would be discarded as so much rubbish. Verse 2 indicates that in order to bear fruit they were subject to discipline.

Commentators vary as to what the "fruit" is. Some refer to verse 12 and suggest that it is a life filled with love. Others suggest that it is the bringing of more people to be Christians. Perhaps we can accept both suggestions as being complementary.

Verses 4-6 underline the necessity for the Christian to continue "in Christ".

Verse 7 appears to give wide scope for petitionary prayers. However, it is similar to the statement of Augustine, "Love God and do what you like". If we are united intimately with Christ, then our prayers will be in tune with him also.

Verse 11 stresses the happiness of the Christian life.

Verses 12-13 The love that flows from Christ to the Christian must in turn flow through the Christian's life to those about him.

Verse 15 The Christian is given a place of intimacy with Christ. He is "friend" rather than "servant" in that he has been admitted to the secrets of the Kingdom.

Verse 16 indicates that the initiative always comes from Christ.

Questions to help in finding deeper meaning in the passage:

- Verses 2 and 3 speak of cleansing the branches. How does God do this to us?
- "Dwell in me, as I in you." How would you explain this to an enquiring friend?
- What do you understand to be the "fruit" borne by the Christian?
- Read verse 6. How does this fit into your conception of the love of God? Does it mean that God's will for us all to be his followers can be frustrated?
- What does verse 7 teach you about prayer?
- Read verses 12 and 13. Can love be commanded in this way? Are we being disobedient to God if we find it hard to love others?
- What does the intimacy between God and us (verse 15) mean in practice?

Questions for today:

- John S. is an earnest Christian. He grew up in a Christian family, made his own commitment to Christ at 16, lived a cheerful and attractive life, and at 28 was active in the life of his church. To other people he seemed a model Christian. Yet in himself he was not satisfied. He had never, to his knowledge, been instrumental in bringing another person to Christ. He would read John 15 and wonder whether his failure to "bear fruit" meant that he was not "dwelling in Christ". On the other hand, he felt that he had a close relationship with Christ. What would you say to him?
- Lois T. came from a poor home, in which there was only a negative attitude to the church. She, however, felt strongly attracted to Jesus Christ, and at 18 she committed her life to him. She attended church regularly, and later taught in the Sunday School, despite the sneers of her family. At 22 she married and went to live on the other side of town. She now found herself despising her family and their way of life. She visited her mother each fortnight, but

dreaded the visits, and was quite impatient with her mother whilst she was there. This worried her when she read John 15. She felt that she was not obeying Jesus' commandment to love, and that therefore she was inadequate as a Christian. How would you counsel her?

- St. Thomas's Church planned a week of special evangelistic meetings. In addition to all the publicity and visiting that took place in the months before, a prayer group met weekly to pray for the success of the meetings. The meetings went by, and there were no apparent results. The prayer group had read John 15:7, and were sure that their prayers for people to come to Christ had been in accordance with God's will. What would be your response to the group?

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