

## Jesus and John

I am excited for this new year ... and one of the reasons I'm looking forward to 2019 is the opportunity to spend a lot of time reading, studying and preaching on John the disciple and Jesus, his Master. In coming weeks we will look at the relationship between John and Jesus, the portraits that John paints of his Master in the Gospel of John and in the first letter of John. We will look at the things John thought were most important about Jesus - what you'd call the major themes of both the Gospel and the letters.

Today we'll start with a look at the disciple John, seen from the writers of the other gospels as well as from his own. We see him first in a fishing boat with his brother James and his father Zebedee. We learn from Luke's gospel that the brothers were partners with another fisherman named Simon and that on the day Jesus came by they were in their boat along with their father. Jesus called James and John to follow him, to be His disciples, and they left their boats and their dad, and began to follow Jesus.

In John's gospel, we know John's personality and character mostly in endearing sorts of ways. He calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved"; he never mentions himself by name as one of the disciples. But in the other gospels, we gain different insights into the personality, the nature of this man. For example, in Mark 9:38 we read:

*John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw a man using Your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't one of our group.'*

In other words, "I'm just reporting in, Jesus, on the action we have taken to defend you and the honour of your select group of disciples."

And Jesus, who was much less concerned about the honour of the disciples replied:

*"Don't stop him! No one who performs miracles in My name will soon be able to speak evil of Me." (9:39)*

Another revealing story is told by Luke:

*As the time drew near for His return to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for His arrival. But they were turned away. The people of the village refused to have anything to do with Jesus because He had resolved to go to Jerusalem. When James and John heard about it, they said to Jesus, "Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?" (Luke 9:51-54)*

If you don't remember Jesus' response, you might want to look it up. Needless to say, He wasn't impressed with their offer, nor do I think He was convinced they had the authority to "order down fire from heaven". When Mark lists the names of Jesus' disciples, he adds a little phrase after the names "James and John". Mark says that they were the sons of Zebedee, but that Jesus nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder". You get the feeling that they were blustery fishermen, overconfident guys, used to hard work and the odd fist fight, and that they dealt with the challenges of life without much subtlety ... the "Sons of Thunder".

And then you come to one of the most revealing stories in the gospels in terms of what it says about a person's character ... the time when James and John got their mother to go to Jesus and ask Him to grant her boys the places of highest honour in His kingdom. We read it in Matthew and Mark - here is Matthew's version:

*Then the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus with her sons. She knelt respectfully to ask a favour. "What is your request?" He asked.*

*She replied, "In Your Kingdom, will you let my two sons sit in places of honour next to You, one at Your right hand and the other at Your left?"*

*But Jesus told them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of sorrow I am about to drink?"*

*"Oh yes," they replied, "we are able." (20:20-22)*

So that's John: blustery, angry, judgmental, petty, and here, he's scheming, manipulative, grasping, proud, self-seeking. Is this the one who should be described as the disciple Jesus loved? Yes, it is. John went through a lot in his life, during the years he walked with Jesus and in the decades after that, and he learned something about his own identity. He learned that the best way he could describe himself was, not as one of the inner circle of three disciples, along with Peter and James; not as the best and brightest of all who walked with Jesus, but simply as someone who experienced the love of Jesus. That's a good way to identify yourself and it's the way John chose in his writings.

There are a couple of occasions when Jesus took just three disciples with Him. One was the time He took Peter, James and John up the mountain with Him and He became brighter and brighter till He was hard to look at and then Moses and Elijah were there with Him. It was an amazing encounter and Jesus told them to keep it secret until He had been raised from the dead.

The other occasion was in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus asked the same three men, Peter, James and John, to watch with Him while He prayed in the hour leading up to His arrest. They couldn't do it, but it shows that He had a special bond with, or reliance on, Peter and James and John. Perhaps they were the ones He trusted the most or the ones He relied on the most. We're not sure, but we see that there were many followers, there were twelve disciples and there were three that made up Jesus' inner circle - and John was one of those three. Perhaps one of the reasons for this closeness was the trust that Jesus had for these men who, according to tradition, were cousins of Jesus. Their mother's name was Salome, and Mary the mother of Jesus had a sister named Salome, and the tradition of the early church was that these described the same woman - Salome the sister of Mary and the mother of James and John.

What do we know about John from the history of the early church? What part did he play in the early missionary movement of the first disciples? Although Paul refers to John as one of the pillars in the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9), the writings of the early church fathers place him in Ephesus for much of his ministry. He was banished

for a time on the island of Patmos, which is not far off shore from Ephesus and tradition tells us that he was buried in Selcuk, which is the modern town in Turkey that is closest to the site of Ephesus. We don't know much about what he did, but there are some records that indicate that he was much loved and respected by the believers.

What we really know about John we learn from his writings, from the Gospel he wrote and from the letters, in particular. The Revelation that comes at the end of our Bibles doesn't tell us as much about what's important to John because it was a revelation that was given to him to pass on to others. He wasn't the interpreter, the one who selected the stories - that was all laid out for him. But when we come to the Gospel of John and, particularly, the first of his letters, we can see a lot about what he thought was important about his faith in Jesus and what new believers should know and how mature believers should be dealing with the challenges that life brings. And that's what we'll be looking at in this series. What is the heart of the Gospel message? What does Jesus want to change for us and in us that will in turn change the world?

You find the word "faith" only once in the gospel of John and once in the first letter he wrote. But, in those same two documents, you find the words "believe", "believes", "believing" and "believed" - 104 times. John 20 ends with this:

*Jesus' disciples saw Him do many other miraculous signs besides the ones recorded 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 in Him you will have life.*  
(Jn. 20:30,31)

In the introduction, we read that Jesus, the Word who became flesh, was rejected by His own people, but then this:

*But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. (1:12)*

And in the first letter, he writes:

*And this is His commandment: we must believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (3:23)*

Believing is a word that describes an active response to the person and the works of Jesus. John has chosen to use this word that expresses action, this verb, instead of the noun that describes a conviction, a noun like faith. I think that's because his intention is to call people, not just to know about Jesus, but to respond to Him, to believe in Him, to follow Him and find in Him the way, the truth and the life.

In John's gospel, "belief" is the key element in people's response to Jesus. When Jesus had turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, John tells us that this was the first display of Jesus' glory and then says, "And His disciples believed in Him." In the next chapter Jesus challenged Nicodemus on his inability to believe the things Jesus was telling him. And in the next chapter the story of the woman at the well ends up with many of the citizens of Sychar believing in Jesus. The story closes with the people of the village speaking to the woman:

*“Now we believe because we have heard Him ourselves, not just because of what you told us. He is indeed the Saviour of the world.” (4:42)*

This belief, literally, “into” Jesus, is so filled with action - there’s nothing passive or ‘merely intellectual’ about John’s concept of belief. In fact, there are two ways in Greek of expressing belief in something. In one form, it means to “rest upon”; “I believe” means, in that case, “here I rest”. But when John talks about belief he uses the other Greek concept which is to “believe into”, to move towards, to identify yourself with this wonderful person named Jesus. The Greek construction that John uses further emphasizes his idea that believing is an active thing that requires movement on our part - and that’s what he presents as Jesus’ mission; to call people to believe into Him.

Another word that John used often to describe Jesus and a word that we’ll look at next week when we dig into the prologue to the Gospel of John, is the word “light”. I’m going to read some familiar words from the first chapter of John’s first letter:

*This is the message He has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in Him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth. But if we are living in the light of God’s presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from every sin. (1 John 1:5-7)*

The light, for John, represents truth and goodness. There is a close association between believing in Jesus and walking in the light. In fact, in John 12:46 Jesus says, “I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.”

Darkness is the place of ignorance, especially ignorance of God, whereas the light shines into the darkness and illuminates what’s there. John, and Jesus, see the coming of the light as an opportunity for true transformation, for people to enter into the kind of life that God had intended for His people to know and to live. Again, Jesus speaking, this time from John 8:12: “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.” Light and life proceed from the decision to follow Jesus. Allowing Him to set the direction for our lives is opening the windows to the eternal world and allowing the light of God’s glory into our lives.

Another of John’s favourite words to quote from the lips of Jesus is the word “abide” - at least that’s the way the King James translation team rendered the word. In the NIV and the New Living Translation, the word is “remain”. When Jesus talks to His disciples about being the vine that they need to keep attached to, he says it this way:

*Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from Me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me, you can do nothing. (John 15:4,5)*

There are many more key words and concepts that John weaves through his account of Jesus’ life and teaching, and we’ll pick up on many of them as we work through the

gospel. But, let's back off from the particulars for a few minutes and look at the big picture and then see how it might apply to us.

In the perspective of the other gospel writers, Mark, Matthew and Luke, John was a pretty aggressive and maybe not that likeable personality. He and his brother got the nickname "sons of thunder" from Jesus - I can't see how that would be a complement. He saw their bluster and their anger and their greed and ambition and He rebuked them, and He loved them, and He took them with Him and He patiently taught them and encouraged them and strengthened them to be two of the pillars of the early church.

Big picture: God changes people, and you can grow, you can change, you can - and will - become more like Jesus as you continue to follow Him. Don't ever believe that you are stuck and will never change. Look at John's life and know that he moved miles from being a "son of thunder" and a harsh rebuker, a willing destroyer, to become a much-beloved leader in the early church. He was changed by being with Jesus and by having the Spirit of Jesus live within him.

When I was a young college-age man, I was sort of religious in that I went to church occasionally, believed the Bible was God's word, hung around with Christians, liked Jesus, but I wasn't committed to Him; I didn't pursue a relationship with Him and my life showed it. I was proud of myself - even though I hadn't done anything with my life. I was confident in my ideas and very reluctant to say the three magic words, "I don't know". I was foul-mouthed, easily angered, resentful, argumentative and self-absorbed. But one day, during my third year at UBC, God got ahold of me and He began the huge project of changing my life. He filled me with His Holy Spirit and transformed my tongue, first, from being an instrument of cursing to an instrument of blessing and praise. Over the next few years, He gave me both ministry opportunities and humbling opportunities, so that my pride was gradually brought down and my ability to love and serve others grew. That process really began over the Christmas holidays of 1971 - 47 years ago - and He's still not finished. I have so much to learn and there are so many areas where I need to grow. But I've changed - a lot. Some areas changed quickly and some are still in process, but God can and will change our lives. If you're disappointed with His progress so far in changing you, if you're impatient with yourself, then you need to be encouraged by the example that John's life offers us. He lived longer than any other of the original 12 disciples - maybe he needed the most time.

The second "big picture" item is John's central focus on the call of Jesus to believe into Him. As we'll see in the coming weeks, John emphasizes Jesus' call to various people to believe, to trust Him, to put their full confidence in Him. He says that salvation comes to those who believe, that they will receive life, the life that God created us for. It's a wonderful promise and a simple but testing condition for us to work through in order to enter that life. John calls us to believe that Jesus is the Word, who was with God in the very beginning, and who was God, and that He came to this earth and that people saw His glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.

Those are big claims and there are many things that can cause us to doubt. Some of these are the voices of skeptics and rebels against the Lord, our own interpretations of the events that take place on earth, and our emotions, especially self-doubt and frustrations with our lack of growth in some area or other. John would not expect us to live 'doubt-free', and so he has put together a gospel that quite literally shouts out with evidence for a reasonable faith: experience, witnesses, words and deeds that declare Jesus to be the Son of God. And through it all, he urges us to believe. As we wrestle with questions, even if it's mostly just questions about our own lives and our inability to live up to what we believe, John brings us assurance, a conviction that what he has experienced has been so good for him that it cannot help but be good for us, as well.

Be prepared for the challenge to believe this Jesus in a deeper way than you ever have before. My hope is that this series will help us walk closer to Jesus than we knew was possible and to believe in Him in the depths of our being, trusting Him in all the ways He has shown Himself trustworthy and loving Him more.