

## **The Gospel of John - Overview**

### *New Testament Survey – Lesson 11 (Part 1 & 2)*

Before ever going to law school, I had the fantastic opportunity to take a degree in Biblical Languages. The program was part of the Bible department at Lipscomb University, and it required a substantial number of hours in that department. By the time I graduated, I had taken roughly 60 hours of Bible courses. Opportunities to study large portions of the Old and New Testaments in their original languages, to take theology and philosophy courses, to study Christian doctrine and history, all left their mark on me. The school is in Nashville, and that also opened many doors for Christian growth. Getting to worship at the Belmont Church with song leaders like Michael W. Smith and Brown Bannister, singing in the pews with Amy Grant, Gary Chapman, Steve and Annie Chapman (“Dogwood”), and other notable Christian artists was both exciting and moving. Hearing lectures by Gordon Kaufman (Harvard Divinity School), Udo Middlemann (German Lawyer/Theologian), and other noteworthy people both challenged and helped define my beliefs.

I left Lipscomb for law school, but my heart and passion were then, and remain today, teaching about God and Scripture in the midst of a world that hungers for him, even as it strives to exist without him. As I proceeded through law school, over 30 years ago, I immediately began teaching weekly classes at church. Other than a temporary hiatus here or there, I have continued to teach for the last 30 years.

You will find the last nine years of lessons on the Internet at [www.Biblical-literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-literacy.com), and I suspect there are some audiotapes of other lessons throughout the years floating around in places. I remember when I was teaching in my mid-20’s; I thought about writing out some of my lessons, much like I do now. My preacher and friend, Dr. Bill Love, told me with that wry chuckle he had, “I wouldn’t ever do that in my 20’s.” I asked him why, and he replied, “Because in your 40’s you will read it again and think yourself either foolish or naïve.” He was right, although maybe off by a decade in my case. I suspect I would not be too happy had I been writing in my 30’s either! As a matter of fact, there are a few lessons written well into my 40’s, and available on the class website, that I would like to take back!

Why? Because as I have continued to age, I have continued to grow in my walk with God. Part and parcel to that is growth in understanding him, his word, his work, and my role in it. While I pray that my growth will never stop, still I decided at some point to capture in writing where I am at the moment, knowing it may not be where I am tomorrow!

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Time affords opportunities to grow. Aging gives one a chance to develop ideas and flavors that are not immediately appreciated when younger. There is a measure of depth and perspective that comes only with seasons of reflection. This is true for us today, and it has been true for humanity since time began.

We see this in the Gospel of John. As we have discussed in earlier lessons in this series, the Bible is both a divine and a human book. God has provided Scripture through the work of his people, those who spoke his voice through his Holy Spirit leaving God's message in precisely the form God chose. In the process, God's messengers also left their own fingerprints on Scripture. We have seen the hand of Luke in his gospel, just as readily as we have heard the voice of Peter in Mark's. In John's gospel, something profound has happened. We have a seasoned gospel that comes from age, written not so much in the immediacy of communicating events or chronicling a carefully researched mission. We have a gospel that is the result of decades of teaching and processing. We see the fruit of John's appreciation for the life and work of Christ after it has grown for a long time.

It will take a few weeks to unpack this gospel, and even then we will only be able to survey its content. John is a gospel one could read and dwell in for a lifetime, and still hear the Word of God in fresh and new ways. Our goal in these lessons is to provide a framework for personal study and growth in the Gospel According to John.

## **THE DISTINCTION OF JOHN**

When scholars speak of the synoptic gospels, they mean Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three gospels "see things the same," the core meaning of the word "synoptic." As we have seen, each has distinctions, but overall they follow the same principal geographical outline (Jesus starts in Galilee and makes his way to Jerusalem where he is crucified and resurrected), bring out the same basic miracles and events in the life of Christ, and deliver many of the same teachings and sermons of Jesus. Each gospel provides a slightly different perspective, much as Rembrandt painted multiple self-portraits to capture different perspectives on his personality and life. Not so the Gospel of John. In John, we see a noticeably different approach. John tells us about multiple trips in and out of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus' ministry. In the synoptics, we are not told of Jesus ministering in Jerusalem until the very end of his time on earth (Matthew 20; Mark 11; Luke 19). In each of the synoptics, Jesus stays in and around Jerusalem until his crucifixion. John, however, has Jesus in Jerusalem clearing the temple and attending Passover as early as chapter two! Jesus then goes back into Galilee in chapter four, only to return to Jerusalem in chapter five. In chapter six, Jesus is back in Galilee, but in chapter seven Jesus returns to Jerusalem. John also differs

from the synoptics by presenting different miracles and giving different teachings. Even when John does reference events that are covered in the synoptics, he adds an additional layer of theology onto them.

The early church recorded historical information that makes great sense with John's distinct approach. Irenaeus (c.140-c.202) wrote of his memories interacting with Polycarp (c.70-c.156). Polycarp hailed from Smyrna (modern Turkey), near the area of Ephesus where church history teaches that the apostle John lived and taught in the later part of his long life. Thinking of Polycarp, Irenaeus wrote,

I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the 'Word of life,' [a Johannine term] Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

At another place, Irenaeus placed John as the fourth gospel, writing,

Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

Timewise, this would place the Gospel of John several decades after the dates we have suggested for the synoptic gospels. The history is consistent with what one reads in John. John gives the impression of a work that came substantially after the other gospels. It reads like the writing of one supplementing the prior gospel accounts with additional matters that are not only factual additions, but are well thought out theologically. It is the developed writing one might expect later in time than the less theological synoptic gospels. This substantiates the early church writer Clement of Alexandria who was quoted saying,

But, last of all [after Matthew, Mark, and Luke], John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his

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<sup>1</sup> Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xx.5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Against the Heresies*, iii.1.2

friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual<sup>3</sup> Gospel. This is the account of Clement.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding this history makes great sense not only of the additions in John's gospel, but also the deletions. There was no need in John's gospel to recount the baptism of Jesus, it was in the already public synoptic gospels. Similarly, the calling of all twelve apostles, the temptations, and much of the material included in the synoptics were not included in John.<sup>5</sup>

John's gospel is the mature and ripened gospel of reflection that comes easily after fifty years or more of preaching and living the Christian faith. John's gospel shows a depth of perception, a fluency with Hebrew thought and Scripture, and a ready usage of Greek thought. Yet in spite of all these impressive themes and an equally impressive architecture to the book, the Greek of John is hardly elegant. The writing style works well to communicate the message, but it is not the flowing literary Greek found, for example, in Luke. This is an interesting set of factors that fits well with the idea of John or someone similar writing (or dictating) the gospel. It has incredibly well-developed theology, well-nuanced ideas, and yet is written in very common language, rather than the flowing Greek of more elegant literature.

## THE HEBREW THEMES IN JOHN

We can see in John marvelous subtleties as well as point blank bluntness in discussing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian faith. There are aspects of John that fit in well with Greek thought and philosophy, but at its core, John carries strong Hebrew themes. It begins in Chapter one and carries on through the end of the book. We shall pull out several as examples, urging the reader to pursue personal study in the gospel to find more expressions of these themes.

### 1. *The Themes from Creation*

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek *pneumatikos* references something spiritual in the sense of pertaining to God. This is not to be taken as something less than true. Carson suggests "symbol-laden." Carson, D. A., *The Gospel According to John*, (1991 Eerdmans), at 29. I might suggest the idea of "spiritual" in the sense we would today call a "theological gospel" meaning that it speaks of events in a spiritual sense, or a sense of how it pertains to spiritual matters like Paul used the word in 1 Corinthians 3.

<sup>4</sup> Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xiv.7.

<sup>5</sup> While the early church was virtually unanimous in ascribing the fourth gospel to John, the last several hundred years of scholarship have offered alternative views. We will not probe those now, for they are based upon material within the gospel itself, and we will look at the gospel material before assessing the newer ideas.

In John's gospel, we have a running echo of Genesis that is found in the words of the gospel as well as the structure. John chapter one begins with the same phrase as Genesis one found in the Greek version of the Old Testament. We read both as "In the beginning..." In Genesis, the next word is the verb "created" followed by the subject who did the creating, "God." In John, we have "In the beginning" followed by the verb "was" and then the noun "the Word." Genesis one continues to tell *how* God created. God created all things into existence by speaking them into existence. God *said*, "Let there be light." God *said*, "Let us make man." It was the word of God that brought all things into existence. It was the word of God that gave structure and meaning to the world as we know it. It was the word of God spoken and expressed in the beginning. No Hebrew could have read John's gospel and not understood that John was echoing Genesis and the word God used to bring forth life and meaning on this world.

Genesis 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς
John 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος
A comparison of the first phrases in Genesis and John shows the similarities	

The thrust of John's opening is not simply to remind one of Genesis. It is to show the pre-incarnate Christ co-existent with the Creating God. Calling Christ the Word, John explained that he was already present at Genesis 1:1. He was present with God and as God:

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 (Jn 1:1-3).

John's identification of Jesus as the same as the Creator God in Genesis then takes an interesting turn for anyone considering the Jewish themes in John's gospel with verse 14, and the tabernacle, noted in the next section. Before going there, however, we must note another subtler echo of the creation in John's gospel. In the creation story, we have God's miracles of seven days (the seventh day as a day of rest was just as important as the days of activity, perhaps even more so as the one that was hallowed in the Ten Commandments). After the seven days, Genesis leaves us with the story of Adam and Eve tending the Garden of Eden.

John's structure runs parallel to these same things. John does not include many of the miracles of the synoptics, John limits his miracles to seven, the same as the number of creation days.<sup>6</sup> John even notes that,

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<sup>6</sup> We should add that seven also represented in the time and culture of John and the Ancient Near East a complete and full number. Seven as a symbolic number dates

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [seven] 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 (Jn 20:30-31).

We have these seven miracles, starting with the creation of wine from water in John 2:1-11. Jesus then healed an official's son in John 4:43-54. John's third miracle is Jesus healing at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1-15. The fourth is the feeding of the 5,000 in John six. In the same chapter we read of miracle five where Jesus walked on water. Miracle six is the healing of a blind man in John nine. The last miracle of Jesus is the resurrection of Lazarus, giving life to a dead man (similar to the last miracle of creation where God breathed life into Adam). John recorded no more miracles of Jesus than those seven, and we then read of the death and resurrection of Jesus (a miracle of God the Father). After the resurrection, we have the new creation in Christ and it is John's gospel that has Jesus mistaken for a gardener, the job of Adam after the first seven days of creation in Genesis.

## *2. Jesus and the Tabernacle*

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back as far as any other in written records. Going back to the Gudea inscriptions several thousand years BC, seven indicated godly perfection or totality. While the origin of this thought is not known, some scholars believe it derives from adding three, the well-rounded sacred number to four, the completeness of the world. This provides the number seven, a complete number of things sacred and earthly. (The same principle is cited for the number 12, which is three times four, and is also indicative of godly perfection or totality.) This number carried the symbolic meaning in a number of references throughout Biblical times and geography/cultures. There are many Biblical examples of seven as God's complete number. (Gen. 4:15 – God announced a seven-fold vengeance on any who kill Cain; Gen. 7:2ff – Noah was instructed to take seven pairs of all clean animals into the ark. Noah also took seven birds. God set to commence his rains in seven days; Gen. 8:4-12 – Noah's ark rested on the seventh month the seventh plus ten day. After seven days Noah sent out a dove. Seven days later he sent out another dove; Ex. 21:2 – Hebrew slaves were to be released after seven years; Ex. 22:30 first born cattle were to be given to YHWH after seven days of life; Ex. 23:11 – Fields were to be left fallow in the seventh year; Ex 24:16 – YHWH had Moses wait on Sinai until the seventh day before he spoke to him; Ex 25ff – The priests' rituals before YHWH repeatedly are built around sevens: seven lampstands, seven days of priestly garb, seven days of consecration, etc.) There are also countless examples from Roman and Greek culture as well as the Babylonian and Egyptian cultures of the Ancient Near East.

After beginning by speaking of the Word that was in the beginning and was creating the world as God, John gave new insight into the Word with verse 14:

And 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.

The word that John has used for “dwelt” is the Greek *skenoo*. It is the Old Testament word for the tabernacle built at God’s instruction. It was the place where the glory of God descended to earth, to the amazement of the people:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-35).

In the tabernacle, the people experienced the presence and guidance of God. When the glory of God was on the tabernacle, the people stayed put. When the cloud of glory moved from the tent, the people would pack up the tabernacle and follow (Ex. 40:36-38).

At this early stage, John is laying groundwork for the understanding that much of the Old Testament has found a superior level of fulfillment and meaning in Jesus and his new order.

### *3. Jesus and Moses*

Even beyond the expression of the Word as God pitching his own tabernacle among us in Jesus, we have many more echoes of the Exodus story in John’s gospel. Repeatedly in John, we read of Jesus as superior to Moses in ministry as well as personage. So while the Law came through Moses, John explained that grace *and* truth came through Jesus Christ (Jn 1:17). Moses and the prophets wrote of God’s words to the people, but Jesus was the fulfillment of their writing (Jn 1:45; 5:45-46). Moses lifted up a serpent to cure diseases in the wilderness, but Jesus would be personally lifted up to cure humanity from all the curses of sin (Jn 3:14). Through Moses people got daily manna, but Jesus was the actual bread of life from God (Jn 6:32). Those who refused to see Jesus as Christ claimed to be following Moses, yet they refused to follow the one to whom Moses pointed (Jn 1:28-29).

### *4. The Discourse on the Bread of Life*

As we look at this discourse, we need to put it into context. Jesus had just fed 5,000 men with a few loaves and fishes. After that miracle, the people and the disciples left for Capernaum. Jesus came to the disciples in the dead of night

walking on the water. Jesus then arrived on shore in Capernaum the next morning. When the people find Jesus on the Capernaum side of the lake, they naturally quizzed Jesus on his arrival time and circumstances. In this context, we have an interchange between Jesus and the multitude that illustrates many important lessons about the search for Jesus, built them around the framework of Jesus as the bread of life, the true manna.

Jesus made the point that the people were seeking Jesus and questioning him because he had fed them with the bread and fishes. Jesus sets a challenge before the people:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal (Jn 6:26-27).

The response of the people quizzed Jesus further. They wanted to know what they would be in for, if they chose to work for the “eternal food”:

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” (Jn 6:28).

Jesus’ answer had a subtle shift in a key word from a plural to a singular:

Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn 6:29).

The people envisioned many works of their own effort to get the eternal treasure Jesus spoke of. Jesus responded that there was a singular work, it was one as simple as putting faith in Jesus. This was almost too simple for the people. They sought something profound and stunning to justify any further commitment on their part. Even Moses performed a sign by ensuring the people got manna in the wilderness:

So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (Jn 6:30-31).

Interestingly, in this sense, Jesus did not refuse to answer the demand for a sign. We might expect Jesus to tell them that he just fed 5,000 men with a few fishes and loaves just the day before. Instead, Jesus first corrected their theology and then explained the sign. The theology correction centered on the people’s misunderstanding that Moses gave them manna. As Jesus explained, God gave



them manna, not Moses. The manna came from heaven, not Moses' workshop! Jesus then explained the real sign in which the people should be interested. Jesus told the people that God offers something beyond the manna that lasted a day and fed Jews in the wilderness 1,500 years earlier. God was giving the people of the world Jesus, the true Bread of Life. Jesus would feed not just a few Jews in history, but all who would choose to partake of him worldwide.

When Jesus explained that this life giving bread was available to the world, the people asked for it. They did not realize that Jesus himself was the bread, the sustenance for the people. They were far from understanding that God was providing Jesus as the answer for mankind. The people continued to seek a physical answer for their predicament. They asked Jesus, "from now on give us this bread" (Jn 6:34). If Jesus had given them an unending loaf of bread, then they thought they would be happy for life. Jesus then explained in very blunt terms what he meant:

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (Jn 6:35).

The purpose of Jesus was not simply to satisfy the growling appetites or earthly desires of the listeners. Rather, Jesus came to earth as the bread of life to fulfill the will of God. And, the will of God is that all whom God draws to Jesus will find Jesus, not be lost by Jesus, and will be raised up at the last day by Jesus.

Jesus' teaching was not at all what the people wanted to hear. They began grumbling, not unlike the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. Jesus told them to stop grumbling! Again he explained that God calls his people to himself, that Jesus keeps them and will raise them up. Jesus further reiterated that the forefathers that ate the manna in the desert all died, but that anyone who partook of Jesus as the bread of heaven would not die but would live forever.

At this point, the grumbling of the Jews leads to arguments. They saw the statements of Jesus as cannibalistic. Jesus tried to remedy this misunderstanding with another recitation of the fact that God has sent him, but the offensiveness of the analogy did not leave the masses. John explained that many of them quit following Jesus at that point. They refused to partake of the very bread they needed.

## *5. The Festivals*

### **Passover**

We have in John a number of Jewish festivals that find meaning or celebration in the life of Christ. While the other gospels have the final Passover of Jesus, John

wrote of three Passovers. John placed the first Passover immediately after Jesus began his ministry in Cana turning water into wine. Passover was the festival that demarked the Jews from the Egyptians as God's chosen people. It was the festival where the Passover lamb was slain for the sins of the people. It was the festival where the scapegoat took the sins of the people and was driven from the presence of God into the wilderness. It was the festival that God intended to be prophetic of the sacrifice that God would later provide through Jesus for God's people, to lead the people from the bondage of slavery into the promised land of God's kingdom.

Against this backdrop of the Passover, in John 2:12-25, John wrote of Jesus going into the temple in Jerusalem. This was the temple where the sacrificial system was at its commercial best. At the Temple was a great number of sacrificial animals for sale to the people for their sacrifices. There are also money-changers (think of airport currency exchange desks in foreign airports) for the people who came into Jerusalem from foreign lands to change currency and buy the animals for sacrifice. Seeing these things, Jesus made a whip from cords and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke also wrote of Jesus driving moneychangers from the temple. John, however, added a detail the others left out. Jesus not only drove the moneychangers out, but he also drove out the sacrificial animals themselves, "both sheep and cattle" (2:15).

Why did John tell us this? The temple itself was the center of Jewish worship and national hope. It was the core symbol of the Jewish religion. Against this backdrop, John repeatedly showed events in the life of Jesus that were forecasting the work Jesus would perfect in his passion and sacrifice. We see that here too. In this sense, Jesus drove out the animals for sacrifice in the temple because they were not necessary when Jesus himself was there. Jesus was showing that the old order was going and his new order was coming. In the new order, there was no reason for sacrificial animals. Jesus himself would drive them out replacing them with himself, the true Passover lamb. Jesus was also clearly incensed at the way the sacrifices had turned from a foreshadowing of God's redemptive work into a market-driven profit center for so many.

The Jews questioned Jesus' authority to do such a deed and demanded from him a miraculous sign to validate such drastic judgment. Jesus responded that the miraculous sign they sought would come from their own unbelief. Jesus told them to "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). The people did not understand that Jesus was referring to raising the real "temple" where God really dwells and communes with man, namely in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The people believed Jesus was talking about the physical temple where the symbolic sacrifices of actual animals were taking place. They did not see how anyone could rebuild that awesome structure in just three days!

Of course, had the people understood Jesus saw himself as the real temple, they would have realized that there was no need for sacrificial cattle and sheep. These people, however, had no such understanding. It is ironic that their desire for a sign stemming from their own disbelief would ultimately bring about the very sign they sought. In other words, their disbelief would result in the death of Jesus; the following resurrection would be their miracle.

This story John wrote from the life of Jesus contrasted the old Jewish sacrificial system with that of the new messianic sacrifice that was once and for all. It especially highlights this change when we consider that John wrote this gospel well after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D. At the time of John's writings, Jewish sacrifices had ceased because of the absence of the temple. Yet, the finished work of Christ was a sacrifice once and for all. The temple of his body underwent a resurrection after three days and lives for eternity. Not only that, but the church became the body of Christ and is the dwelling place of God with man until Jesus returns.

### *Sukkot*

In addition to the three Passovers, which we will discuss in more detail in a subsequent lesson, John also wrote of Jesus celebrating the Feast of Booths. Also called the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* (from the Hebrew for "tent" or "tabernacle"), this was a festival Moses introduced in Leviticus 23:33-44.

The feast was to be observed for seven days beginning on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishri. That made the festival an autumn festival, usually falling between September and October in our Western calendar. Leviticus records the instruction:

You shall live in booths seven days in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt (Lev. 23:42-43).

Because the festival occurred in the autumn each year, it quickly took on an emphasis as a festival of thanksgiving for the completed harvest and the provision of God in that harvest. The Bible sometimes refers to the festival as the Feast of Ingathering (Ex. 23:16b; 39:22) showing the usage of the holiday as a time for celebrating harvest. It lasted one week<sup>7</sup> and formed a special holiday season in the Jewish year.

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<sup>7</sup> Today, the festival is celebrated for 8 to 9 days with additional add-on days depending upon whether the celebration is in Israel or outside Israel.

As Jewish history unfolded, the festival took on special significance as a foreshadowing of the Messianic Age to come. This understanding of the festival stemmed from the idea that while one year's harvest was being celebrated, there would come a year when the harvest would not only be the year's crops, but also a harvest of the nations. This thought was that the nations would gather in a final onslaught against the Jews, that Yahweh would intervene on the Jews behalf, and that while the wicked were punished, the holy remnant would see the perfect age of the Messiah ushered in with celebration at Jerusalem.

The practice of the Feast of the Tabernacles included reading from Zechariah 14, which prophesied the coming day of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> This passage set forth two characteristics of the Messianic Age:

1. Continuous daylight with an absence of winter (Zech. 14:6), and
2. An unfailing source of water ("on that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem..." Zech. 14:8).

We lose touch with the significance of these two issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Our electric lights and safety keeps the night and darkness from being too threatening and beyond control. Similarly, we face neither the anxiety nor the possible health results from a lack of good pure water. To 1<sup>st</sup> century people, however, these were major life issues and concerns. That these concerns would disappear in the Messianic Age was an incredible hope and dream.

We have Rabbinic evidence indicating how the Jews celebrated these two promises at the festival. Before dawn each day, a golden pitcher was filled with water from the pool of Siloam. While Isaiah 12:3 was sung ("With joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation..."), a procession brought the pitcher of water to the temple. At the temple, the water was poured out into two pipes which channeled the water underground and into the Kidron Valley. The significance of this ceremony was its prophesy that a time would come where the water scarcity would be no more and a never ending stream would issue forth from under the temple, making glad Jerusalem, the city of God.

The second promise was celebrated by a brilliant lighting of a temple court all night long. The lights were not extinguished until just before the sun dawned. At this point, a blare of trumpets was followed by a vow of fidelity to Yahweh, and Yahweh alone.

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<sup>8</sup> Zechariah 14 speaks of the coming Day of the Lord with the coming Messiah. In verse 16, it references that the survivors from the nations will "go up year after year to worship the king, Yahweh Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles."

With that background, we can better consider the story of the Festival of Tabernacles as our Messiah, Jesus, celebrated and explained it (recorded in John 7 and 8). Jesus did not go up to the feast in a showy fashion. Instead, he sent others first and came himself in secret. The Jews at the festival were searching for Jesus, the miracle worker. We know that a good many Jews were discussing whether or not Jesus could be the Messiah. That being the case, no doubt many were especially abuzz about that year's festival and what might happen with Jesus. In the middle of the week-long feast, Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. There was considerable interest in how this carpenter with no substantial formal education was able to teach in such a way. Jesus explained to those who wondered that Jesus' teaching was from God, not from school!

Jesus' interchange included some seeking to kill him, some questioning whether he was possessed, and some wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah because no one arrested him. John then takes us to the last day of the feast. On this day, Jesus stood up and declared in a loud voice:

*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He that believes in me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

John clarified that Jesus was referencing the Holy Spirit that would come to the people after Jesus was glorified. In light of the practice of the day, we can see in this statement of Jesus a deeply profound message to us, but an equally disturbing message to those present. If the pitcher of water from Siloam was to indicate the promise of unending water in the day of Messiah, then Jesus was boldly making a proclamation that the day was upon the people.

Although the people did not understand that Jesus was speaking of the Spirit, they were very aware of the implications of what Jesus was saying. John tells us that upon hearing this statement, a number of the people proclaimed that Jesus was indeed the coming prophet, the Messiah. Others argued that Jesus could not be Messiah because these folks mistakenly thought Jesus came from Galilee while the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. The priests and Pharisees put forward an effort to have Jesus brought before them, but those sent to retrieve Jesus were too amazed at his teaching to bring him in. Nicodemus tried to stand up for Jesus in their midst, but those in power mockingly shut him up.

Jesus was never a partial Messiah, which is no less true on the occasion of this festival. John begins chapter 8 telling us that Jesus did more than make the promise of unending water. Jesus also spoke to the people and addressed the second aspect of the festival – unending day:

*Again Jesus spoke to them saying, "I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."  
(8:12)*

While Jesus' statement takes on a special significance because it was made at the festival where light was a significant promise of the Messiah to come, we should not limit its significance to that meaning. Throughout the Old Testament, light is used as a metaphor for God's direction and effect upon man.<sup>9</sup> John himself has used the metaphor as early as the first chapter explaining that Jesus was the light of the world that bestows the "light of life." John then develops this theme more fully in chapter 9.

Before chapter 9's treatment of Jesus as the light, however, John gives us the finale to the Feast of Tabernacles. After Jesus makes the claim of being the light, those in power question Jesus' authority for making such a bold and near blasphemous proclamation. In Jewish courts, it took two witnesses for evidence to be considered credible. Jesus tells the folks that there is a witness of two, Jesus and God the Father. Many of the masses believed Jesus was in fact Messiah. Jesus said to those who were persuaded that he was the Promised One, that if they would abide in the words and teaching of Jesus, then they would not be temporary followers but true disciples. Then, Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." This was troublesome to the people. They explained that they were Abraham's seed (how could anything be more true?) and that they were not enslaved to anyone (what need to be set free?)

Jesus upset the people by explaining that they were in fact enslaved to sin. The freedom from sin that would come from Jesus would set the people "free indeed." Jesus then further upset the people by telling them that if they were truly Abraham's children, then they would do the works of Abraham. Rather than accept the words of Jesus (and with them truth and freedom!), the people persisted in arguing with Jesus in disbelief.

Jesus then told the people that they were refusing to hear and believe what he is saying. Jesus told them that rather than Abraham as a father, the devil was in fact the father of those arguing. The Jews responded that Jesus was the one with a devil. They challenged Jesus on whether Jesus thought of himself as greater than Abraham. Jesus answered that Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus and the people mocked that Abraham could never have anticipated the day of Jesus.

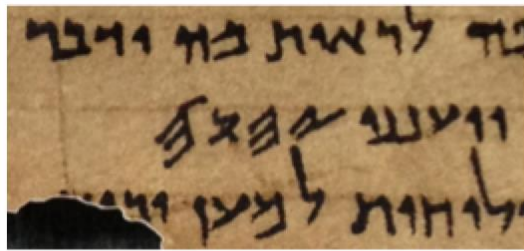
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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 27:1: "Yahweh is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?"; 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path"; Isaiah 42:6 "I will make you...a light for the Gentiles."

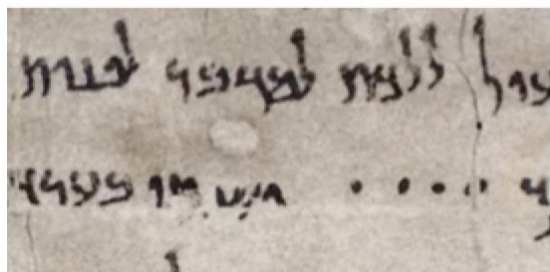
Jesus responded to the people that “Before Abraham was, I am.” At this response, the people picked up stones to kill Jesus. In addressing why this happened, we need to consider the next theme, the “I am” statements.

## 6. The “I Am” statements

“I am” is the best interpretation that scholars can give to the Hebrew name for God, *YHWH*. To pronounce *YHWH* was itself considered blasphemy by Jews. The name of God was too holy to be uttered. In fact, it was rarely even written. The Dead Sea scrolls give us good evidence of how Jews at the time would treat the name of God. In the scrolls we see two main treatments. Most often, the scribes who were writing the scrolls would simply eliminate the name, replacing it with four dots (one for each letter). Occasionally we see the name *YHWH* spelled out, but done so in ancient Hebrew letters rather than the Aramaic letters in use at the time.



The middle line of this passage from the Habakkuk Peshar (“commentary”) shows the name *YHWH* are the last four letters to the left. They are written in ancient Hebrew script instead of the Aramaic script in the rest of the document.



In this passage from the scroll of discipline, we can see the four dots used for the four letters in the name *YHWH*.

When Moses encountered God in the burning bush on Sinai, Moses asked God what his name was. Our English Bibles give God’s answer as follows:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14).

In the Greek translation of this at John’s time, the name of God written “I AM who I AM” is *ego eimi ho on*. *Ego eimi* is one way in Greek to say “I am,” and *ho on* is a second. Over and over in the Greek text of Moses’ encounter with God, we see God using “*ego eimi*” in describing himself:

- **Ex. 3:6** And he said, “I am [*ego eimi*] the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.
- **Ex. 7:5** The Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”
- **Ex. 8:22** But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD in the midst of the earth.
- **Ex. 14:4** And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD.” And they did so.
- **Ex. 14:18** And the Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”
- **Ex. 20:2** I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

John brings this same holy expression into the words of Jesus, and does so in ways that indicate that Jesus was proclaiming himself as God and Messiah. Jesus took the mantle of God to Moses. There are four places in John’s Greek text where Jesus explicitly says, *ego eimi* (“I am”) without any predicate. In other words, these are just simple proclamations of Jesus as “I AM.” These passages make sense if we see Jesus assuming the title or mantle of God and his holy name. Otherwise they seem to be incomplete sentences. We are waiting for a predicate to go behind “I am...” like “I am this,” or “I am that.” It reads so awkward that the translators occasionally smooth the English. We will use the English Standard Version below, but take out the smoothness to be more literal:

- **John 8:24** I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am [*ego eimi*] you will die in your sins.
- **John 8:28** So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [*ego eimi*], and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.
- **John 8:58** Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [*ego eimi*].”



- **John 13:19** I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am [*ego eimi*].

Of course Jesus was not speaking Greek, he was likely speaking Aramaic (or possibly Hebrew). John's translation makes it clear, as does the context, that Jesus was making the claim of being YHWH, and likely actually saying the name in the process. It is what brought the Jews to the point of stoning him. That Jesus would pronounce the name of God was alone sufficient grounds for stoning Jesus. That Jesus would do so in a context where Jesus claimed the title for himself was utterly blasphemous – unless, of course, it was true. That thought did not enter the people's mind. Although if that thought had entered their minds, if they had known the truth, then the truth would have indeed set them free. In this sense, Jesus also spoke in such a way that John translated *ego eimi* with predicates as well, just as we saw in the Exodus passages earlier. Jesus spoke as YHWH indicating himself the presence in the burning bush as he explained what it meant. No longer was it “*ego eimi* who brought you out of slavery.” Now it is *ego eimi* in a magnificent new way:

- **John 6:35** Jesus said to them, “I am [*ego eimi*] the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John added that in response to this “the Jews grumbled about him because he said ‘I am [*ego eimi*] the bread that came down from heaven’” – Jn 6:41).
- **John 8:12** Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am [*ego eimi*] the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- **John 10:9** I am [*ego eimi*] the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.
- **John 10:11** I am [*ego eimi*] the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
- **John 11:25** Jesus said to her, “I am [*ego eimi*] the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.
- **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am [*ego eimi*] the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- **John 15:5** I am [*ego eimi*] the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

One of the most stunning comes in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus asks the mob who they have come for and they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus’ response was significant. He said simply, *ego eimi*. At this, John recorded that the crowd “drew back and fell to the ground!” Jesus could make no more awesome divine claim, nor could John more clearly carry out the Hebrew themes in his gospel!

A final note on the *ego eimi* passages involves Jesus repeatedly pointing out even as he was the *ego eimi*, he was revealing the true name of the Father. As Moses wanted to know God’s name so that he could more clearly communicate to the people exactly *who* was calling them forth from Egypt, so Jesus used this name to personally demonstrate *who* not only called the Israelites out of Egypt, but who called the world out of darkness and sin into light and forgiveness:

- **John 17:6, 26** “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world...I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”
- **John 5:43** “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me.”
- **John 10:25** “Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”
- **John 17:11** “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”
- **John 12:23, 28** “And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’”

## CONCLUSION

As we close this introductory look at some of the Hebrew themes in John’s gospel, we return to the idea expressed at the beginning of this lesson. There are ways that time and maturity ripen a message. John’s gospel came at a time where he had seen and understood the implications for much of what Jesus lived and taught, as John had decades to teach it. We get the fruit of this in his “spiritual gospel,” as it lays out the amazing incarnation, ministry, and redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. In the coming lessons, we will see even more of this as we continue to study the uniqueness of John. Meanwhile, we pause and thank God

for our growth *in his message*. We thank him that we are not the same today as we were yesterday, or a decade ago. We pray and always seek to grow continually before him.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1:1).*

We hear this so many times that I fear it might lose its profundity in our lives. Yes, Jesus was with God and was God. Is there more to it than that? Absolutely! Jesus was not an accident. He was not a Plan B for God. He was something that God had recognized from before creation would be necessary. Yet he was involved in creation from the beginning. We often say that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus. We should never lose track of the fact that Jesus so loved the world that he came! This should draw us to love him back, even as it humbles us at this greatness. This is not the same old thing. It is beyond words in how it should amaze us.

2. *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:14-15).*

This is part of what Jesus was teaching to Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who snuck out in the night to visit with Jesus. It puts into contrast the efforts of this world against the supreme act of God. Where do we put our confidence? Is it in what we do? Is it in what we see from others? Is it in what we think? Or is our confidence in Jesus Christ, lifted up and crucified, the righteous for the unrighteous? Can we sing with conviction the hymn, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”? Let us live lives on Christ the solid rock! May he be the solid framework for all we are and all we do.

3. *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (Jn 2:19).*

The older I get, the more convicted I am that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. It has always been a tenet of my faith, but as I get older, I see more and more not only the theological necessity, but the incredible evidence that points to the historical fact. I was not there to touch his nail-scarred hands or feet, but I have no doubt they were real. Jesus was resurrected. In that I have hope; in that I have confidence. There is one who is mightier than death who holds my hand. Thank you, Lord.