

Introduction

The four gospels are often classified according to their character. For instance:

- Matthew is the gospel of the King, emphasizing his fulfillment of the OT prophecies regarding the kingdom.
- Mark the gospel of the Servant.
- Luke the Gospel of the Son of Man, emphasizing his humanity.
- John is the Gospel of the Son of God, emphasizing his deity.

The gospel of John also is called the **gospel of belief**, because it uses the word *believe* or a derivative of that 101 times in 86 verses. By contrast, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined, the same words only occur 39 times in 35 verses.

The gospel of John is also the **gospel of life**, because the word *life* occurs 44 times in 38 verses.

The Purpose of John

The apostle John wrote this gospel, the three letters that bear his name, and the book of Revelation. His writing is delightful in the sense that he lays out why he is writing very clearly:

- The Gospel of John: “but these [signs] are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31).
- First John: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13).
- Revelation: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified *it* by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed *is* he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time *is* at hand” (Rev. 1:1-3).

For purposes of our present study, note that **belief is John’s goal**—belief in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. This belief leads to **eternal life**. This eternal life is defined for us in John 17:3: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

Caution Needed in Studying the Gospels

There are several points of which you should be aware when studying John, or the other gospels, for that matter. Consider:

1. The church is largely not in view. In Matthew 16:18, the church is yet future. John 13-17 really gives the introduction of the new phase of God’s work in the church.
2. However, the church did receive these documents from the pens of the gospel writers, because they were written anywhere from 20 to 50 years after our Lord’s death and resurrection. They were not written just for the benefit of loosely scattered Jewish people. Therefore, the church can benefit from them.
3. Furthermore, all Scripture, including the OT and the gospels, is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for us to read and learn.
4. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ was not proclaimed in the four gospels, because it had not yet happened. In fact, the disciples were quite confused on this issue of Christ’s death (Matt. 16:21-23).
5. The mediatorial kingdom is emphasized in the gospels because the Lord Jesus came and offered it to the Jewish nation. Unfortunately, they would not have it.

Instead, the Bible records, “Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:5).

6. The law is in full force in the gospels. Jesus’ parents offered the sacrifices commanded in the law at his birth (Luke 2:21-24). Even as late as Matthew 23:2-3 Jesus told his audience to obey the law from the mouth of the scribes and Pharisees. He said that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17-18).
7. In other words, the law was not yet fulfilled at the beginning of Christ’s earthly life—that had to wait until the end of his life. The beginning of the “New Testament” then is not really Matthew. It is the book of Acts. That is, the new covenant was not ratified until the death of Christ, a subject that does not come until the end of each of the gospels. Actually, some suggest that the NT really begins in John’s gospel, as it emphasizes the deity of Christ and has a long section in the upper room discourse about the church. One reason is that the gospel of John starts with “in the beginning” just like Genesis does. 1 John also mentions “that which was from the beginning.”
8. Related to this, we can see that the Lord was like one of the OT prophets (John 4:19—the Samaritan woman thought so; 44—Jesus pictured himself this way; 6:14—the disciples; 7:40—the people; 9:17—the blind man; Mark 6:15—the people). And why would the people necessarily think otherwise, at least at first blush? There had been 400 silent years since Malachi, and the last thing they knew about were the prophets. With miracles happening left and right, they would think another Elijah or Elisha had come on the scene! He did call the people back to obedience to the Law, while teaching about the kingdom and foreshadowing what was coming in the future with the church.
9. The gospels are all transitional. That is, they tell of the situation as God’s dispensational arrangement changed from Law to Grace. The focus shifted from Israel to the Church. It is always the case that between dispensations, a significant amount of new revelation is given to set the stage for the new dispensation and make clear the new dispensational responsibilities.

These cautions will help us to not avoid the gospels due to the difficulties in proper interpretation, but also not to overemphasize them at the expense of other portions of Scripture. They do not have magical powers because they have more red letters (if you have a red-letter edition), because all of the Bible is inspired of God and living and powerful (Heb. 4:12). But a study of any of the gospels would serve to teach us more about our Lord Jesus Christ, and in turn, more about God the Father, as the Lord is the perfect image of who God is (John 1:18). After all, we are being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) so it would be helpful to know more and more about him, wouldn’t it?

Outline

A simple outline of John’s gospel is as follows:

- I. Prologue Introducing the Word 1:1-18
- II. Public Ministry of Jesus 1:19-12:50
- III. Upper Room Discourse 13:1-17:26
- IV. The Crucifixion and Resurrection..... 18:1-20:31
- V. Epilogue 21:1-25

This seems to fit quite well the structure of the book, because the first 18 verses contain general statements about the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The large second section is narrative about Jesus ministry as he went about the land of Israel. The scene shifts again in chapter 13 when he privately instructs his disciples in the upper room where the final Passover meal was held, and on the way to Gethsemane. At Gethsemane, the scene changes again when the crowd came to arrest Jesus and have him crucified.

“I Am” Statements

There are some other crucial things to notice about John’s gospel. One is the great “I am” statements made by the Lord.

- 1. I am the Messiah4:26
- 2. I am the bread of life*6:35, 41, 48, 51
- 3. I am the light of the world* 8:12, 9:5, 12:46
- 4. I am 8:58, 18:5, 6, 8
- 5. I am the door*10:7, 9
- 6. I am the good shepherd*10:11, 14
- 7. I am the Son of God10:36
- 8. I am the resurrection and the life*11:25
- 9. I am Master and Lord.....13:13
- 10. I am the way, the truth, and the life*14:6
- 11. I am in the Father14:10, 11, 20
- 12. I am the true vine15:1, 5
- 13. I am not of the world.....17:14, 16
- 14. I am a king 18:37, 19:21

* Represents those seven texts normally considered as official “I am” statements.

Miracles

It is also important to notice in John’s gospel the miracles. In this list are included the “physical” type of miracles, not including the manifestations of the Lord’s omniscience (1:47 -49; 4:17-19) which might be called miraculous by some. These miraculous signs play a significant role in the book because John uses them to convince the readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that they should believe in Him.

- 1. Turning water to wine 2:1-12
- 2. Healing of nobleman’s son 4:46-54
- 3. Healing of man at pool of Bethesda 5:1-16
- 4. Feeding of 5,000 men (plus women and children) 6:1-14
- 5. Walking on water 6:19-21

- 6. Healing of man born blind 9:1-41
- 7. Raising of Lazarus from the dead 11:1-44
- 8. The Resurrection 2:19, 20:1-29
- 9. Second huge catch of fish 21:6, 8, 10-11

In fact, an example of the miracles leading to belief occurred in the life of the nobleman (#2 above) and his family. In John 4:53, the Bible tells us that he believed when he realized who Jesus was because of the miracle he had performed. But no matter how many miracles were performed, some refused to believe in him (John 12:37).

Did you know that of the miracles listed above, the following are only recorded in John – #1, #2, #3, #6, #7, #9?

We learn from John then that miracles have an authentication function to them—they verify that the miracle-worker is from God and is who he says he is. Of course, someone could do miracles under the power of Satan but then his message would make this plain as it is compared with the Scriptures (Deut. 13:1-5—notice his miracle happens, but his message is to depart from God). And naturally, if someone says they are from God and tries to do miracles but they do not come to pass, then they are plainly NOT from God (18:20-22, where the message is supposedly from God but the miracle does not happen). That is to say,

	His Message	His Miracles
Good prophet	Matches Scripture	Come to pass
Bad prophet	Seems to match Scripture	Do not come to pass
Bad prophet	Does not match Scripture	Do not come to pass
Bad prophet	Does not match Scripture	Come to pass

The interesting thing for us today is that God in Scripture has told us that the miraculous has really ceased because there is no need for authentication of revelation, since there is no new revelation. Do you hear of someone claiming to perform miracles all the time? You ought to be immediately and seriously skeptical.

Jesus reflected the understanding that miracles do authenticate the messenger when he said that the works which the Father gave him to do bear witness of Him that the Father sent him (John 5:36).