

Chapter 1

The Unique Purpose of John's Gospel

“Wow, is she ever beautiful!” “What a personality!” “The man of my dreams!” “It doesn't get any better than this!” “I've never been so happy in my life!”

I first experienced romantic love when I was a teenager back in the big city. Though I had no illusions that the girl I fell for was the most beautiful girl in the world, she sure looked beautiful to me! Not knowing how she felt about me at first, I consulted with people who knew her to find out where she lived and how she traveled to school. Then I went out of my way to hang around certain subway platforms just to catch a glimpse of her as she went by.

I found excuses to attend her church instead of my own. I watched for her in the halls between classes. Long before I saw her I could sense when she had entered a crowded room. When I learned that she cared as much about me as I did about her, finding time with her became the highest priority of my school day.

The best block of time was the commute home. I lived an hour and a half away in another state (first subway, then bus). But I would ride the subway all the way to her station first, even though it was quite a bit out of my way. Sometimes we would buy time for conversation by letting three, four, or even six or seven trains pass before boarding one on the way to her place. Everything else took second place to finding time to spend together.

Relationship is all about being together, spending time with each other, talking and listening, doing things together. When you love someone, you want to spend time with that person.

According to the Gospel of John, the most important relationship you will ever have is the one you form with Jesus. John wrote his Gospel to help us fall in love with Jesus and to show us how to spend time with Him even though we can't see, hear, or touch Him directly.

John wrote that the key to eternal life is to know God (17:3). Jesus came down to this earth not only to show us what God is like, but also to offer us a relationship with God (15:1-8). To know Jesus is to know God (14:9). To know Jesus is to have eternal life.

For the Gospel of John, then, the key to Christian experience is to get to know Jesus personally - to become His friend, to live with Him,

talk to Him, experience Him. When we do this, we are brought into intimate relationship with God. We can be as close to God as branches are to the vine that nourishes and supports them.

But how do we do that in a secular world? How do we have a relationship with someone we can't see or hear or touch? How do we know Jesus when the fleeting images of television and the Internet seem more real than God?

As Good as His Touch

Have you ever felt that those who knew Jesus in the flesh had an advantage over us? Have you ever felt that it would be easier to be a Christian if Jesus lived next door and you could talk to Him face to face? The generation to whom the Gospel of John was written felt the same way.

It seems that the Fourth Gospel was written when its author, the "beloved disciple," was nearing death. He was the last living link with the first generation of Christians - those who had known Jesus in the flesh (see 21:20-23). John's approaching death threatened to plunge the second generation of Christians into confusion and uncertainty. What would become of them without the guidance of those who had known and talked to Jesus in person?

The Gospel's statement of purpose (20:30, 31) follows the "doubting Thomas" story (20:24-29). Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (v. 29). Comparing that verse with the statement that follows in the next verse makes it clear that Thomas represents all the disciples who had seen and touched Jesus - the first generation of Jesus' followers. The second generation of Christians followed Jesus without that privilege. Jesus' blessing in verse 29 was not for Thomas and the other first-generation disciples; it was for the second generation, those who had come to faith apart from physical contact with Jesus.

That brings us to the question that led us into this study: How do we develop a relationship with Jesus when we can't see Him, hear Him, or touch Him? The Gospel of John was carefully designed to answer that question. Its answer becomes clear when we compare its portrayal of Jesus' miracles with those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each of these other Gospels pictures Jesus repeatedly using touch in the performance of His miracles (see, for example, Matt. 8:3,4,14,15; 9:18-

JOHN

25; Mark 1:29-31,40-42; 5:21-43; Luke 4:40; 5:12, 13; 7:14, 15). But such touching is remarkably absent in the Gospel of John.

At the wedding of Cana (2:1-11) the water turns into wine without any physical contact on Jesus part. Jesus heals the royal official's son in Capernaum while remaining in Cana, some sixteen miles away (4:46-54). Jesus heals the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda without touching him (5:1-15). He does smear a little clay into a blind man's eyes, but the healing doesn't happen until the man washes his eyes in the Pool of Siloam, more than half a mile away (9:6, 7). Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb - He doesn't shake him or drag him out (11:41-43).

The common denominator of all these "signs" is the lack of physical contact between Jesus and the objects of His miraculous attention. Why is this important? It showed that distance was no barrier to the reception of Jesus' blessings. So, the second generation's lack of personal contact with Jesus placed them at no disadvantage.

Note also that it was the words of Jesus that accomplished each of these miracles. To the servants at the wedding of Cana He said, "Fill and draw" (2:7, 8). To the royal official He said, "Go, your son lives" (4:50). To the paralytic He said, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (5:8, NKJ). To the blind man He said, "Go, wash" (9:7). To Lazarus He said, "Come out" (11:43). In each case it was the words of Jesus, not His physical touch, that accomplished His intention.

These scenes taught the second generation of Christians the power of Jesus' words to overcome barriers of space. His word is as good as His touch! His word is as powerful at a distance as it is close at hand. It is through that Word that the Holy Spirit ministers to the needs of the second generation (14:26, 27).

We today share in the second generations deficiency. We, too, would love to have the privilege of Thomas, whose faith was fully confirmed by sight. We, too, would appreciate a face-to-face relationship with Jesus. But the Gospel of John tells us that the seeming absence of God in our time raises no barrier to the mighty working of Jesus through the Spirit. His Word is as good as His touch. Though ministered through a mere printed page, it still retains its power to save and to heal. All the benefits that were available through the physical presence of Jesus are now available through His Word!

John's Gospel also teaches us how to gain these benefits. In each of its miracle stories, some human party had to carry out the words of Jesus in order for the miracle to take place. The servants had to pour

water before they could draw wine. The paralytic had to rise and gather his bedding. The blind man had to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash.

So, John's Gospel tells us two things: First, we must know the words of Jesus and discern their application to our particular situation. Careful study of the Gospel of John becomes the great, living replacement for the face-to-face relationship that the disciples had with Jesus. And second, we must carry out what Jesus commands. We experience the power of Jesus through the Spirit only when we obey His words.

The Fourth Gospel was written so that those who had not seen might believe (20:29-31). As we read and apply the Gospel, we obtain the life that Jesus shared when He was physically on this earth.

Building the Relationship

Relationships between people are grounded on three things: talking, listening, and doing things together. The same basic dynamics are crucial to a relationship with Jesus. If we wish to have a relationship with Jesus, we need to spend time talking with Him, listening to Him, and doing things with Him. Let me summarize some of the key principles of a devotional relationship with Jesus.

1. Talking to Jesus

The basic means of talking to Jesus is prayer. Yet many Christians of all ages have struggled to make prayer work for them. How can you and I do better?

(1) Be flexible. Don't be locked in to any particular position for prayer. In other words, the primary thing is not your physical position: whether you're on your knees or your eyes are open or shut. A careful look at the prayers described in the Bible indicates that there is no one right position for prayer. The right position for you is the one that best helps you connect with God.

(2) Try writing out some of your prayers. It is amazing what the process of writing does to help concentrate your mind on the reality of being in the act of prayer. Computer wizards may find a notebook computer the most effective way to do this.

(3) Be relevant. When you pray, focus on the things that truly matter to you. Prayer tends to become repetitive and ritualistic when it is focused on things that are not of ultimate concern to you. Talk to God about the things in your life that matter the most to you.

JOHN

(4) Thank God in very specific ways. Thank Him for air, water, the color of the carpet, the bird you just saw out the window. This may seem a bit silly at first, but where would you be without air? What would life be like without color, without animals and birds? The best way to find the joy of the Lord (Neh. 8:10) is through a spirit of gratitude and praise. The best way to develop such an attitude is to learn to thank God for everything you receive.

2. Listening to Jesus

How do you listen to Someone whose voice you cannot hear? The primary method, of course, is to hear Jesus' voice in Scripture. As we've noted, a major theme of this book of John's is that Jesus' words in the written Gospel are as powerful and effective as His spoken words and physical touch were to those who knew Him in the flesh.

How can you study Scripture in such a way as to bring you into a living relationship with Jesus?

(1) Choose relevant readings. To be devotionally useful, Scripture reading must be relevant to present experience, to things that matter in practical terms. Genealogies and prophecies may be of intense intellectual interest, but they may not offer practical guidance for the daily issues of the household, the workplace, and the neighborhood.

(2) Focus on Jesus. Since a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ is the most relevant of all spiritual concerns, devotional study needs to focus on Jesus. The Gospel of John is far more relevant to this purpose than 1 Chronicles or Judges, for example.

(3) Take your time. When you're reading devotionally, focus on discerning God's voice to you personally, not on covering a certain number of pages or mastering a certain amount of information. Allow the reading to sink in - let it impact the very core of your being!

(4) Write out special insights. Write down or enter into your computer the "highlight-film" kind of insights that God gives you as part of your devotional experience. We tend to forget what we don't write down. You'll never find another devotional book as effective for you as the one you write for yourself. The insights you write down can help you rekindle your walk with Jesus in tough times.

(5) Keep a spiritual diary of your experiences, dialogues, and struggles with God. Don't limit yourself to devotional note taking - challenge your experience with God. Ask Him direct questions such as, "How do You feel about the way I relate to my family? Am I being

JOHN

sensitive to Your leading in my life right now? Is there someone in my life who needs to hear about You right now?"

(6) Let God answer your prayers. When you have finished praying, stay on your knees. Keep a pad of paper in front of you, and when your prayer is through, pick up your pencil and wait. You've talked to God about the things that matter most to you, and you're now in a position to receive. So, write down whatever comes to mind. Don't try to evaluate what you've written; treat this as spiritual brainstorming.

3. Working together with Jesus

Without concrete and practical faith-action, however, the study and prayer life can easily become confined to a closet separate from the rest of our experience. What happens in our devotional life will have little impact on our everyday experience if we don't consciously combine it with corresponding action.

(1) Sharing faith is not optional. Expression deepens impression. If you talk faith, you will have more faith. Sharing your faith with others strengthens and confirms your own faith.

(2) Stretch the limits. Don't be afraid to do something radical with God. Do a short-term mission project in a part of the world much different from yours. (It doesn't have to be overseas.) Plant a garden, dedicate a portion as a special gift to God, and see what happens. Shared risk enhances intimacy with others. Risking yourself for God enhances intimacy with God.

(3) Walk the talk. How you live has a powerful impact on what you believe. This is why evangelists call people to come forward to express their commitment. There is something about getting out of one's seat and walking to the front that nails down a decision in a way that very few other things can do. Action has a powerful impact on belief and experience.

(4) Act on impressions. After the spiritual brainstorming mentioned in the previous section, experiment with the ideas that came to your mind. Some may be from God and others merely from the fog of your own dreams or confusion. As you experiment with these impressions, you will gradually learn to discern which impressions come from God and which do not.

John wrote his Gospel to provide life for a new generation of Christians - those who didn't have face-to-face contact with Jesus. That life becomes real as we apply the words of Jesus to the problems of life.