

THEMES IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Cover design by Brandon Reese
Cover design resources: Lars Justinen

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ISBN 978-0-8163-7028-3

September 2024

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Signs That Point the Way

E. Edward Zinke

To best understand the message of a book, we must first understand its theme. For example, in the book of Hosea, the theme is God's intense love for His people. The book portrays that love in Hosea's relationship with his wife, Gomer. Hosea married her—a woman of ill repute—and not surprisingly, she broke their relationship by going after other men. Time and again, he wooed her back to himself.

Their relationship illustrated the Israelites' relationship with God. He had called the Israelites to a close relationship with Himself, and the Israelites responded by breaking the covenant again and again. Yet God was always there, offering forgiveness and restoration.

The theme of God's plan and care for His people is introduced in the book of Genesis through the story of Joseph, who experienced adversity at his brothers' hands. When Joseph later encountered them in his Egyptian court, he actually comforted them. By that time, Joseph had become powerful, second only to the pharaoh himself. We might expect Joseph

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to be vindictive and bitter, yet he said to his brothers, “Do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5). In this moving moment of self-reflection, Joseph reiterated a principle of God’s love for His people. God was in control in each instance of peril.

When sin entered the world, God announced a plan of salvation that He had established even before the beginning. The Bible says that God “chose us in Him [Jesus] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (Ephesians 1:4).

When sin pervaded the world, God was in control and sent a flood.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. . . .

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence (Genesis 6:5, 11).

When Abram went to Egypt, God protected his wife, Sarai. As an alien in that culture, Abram feared for his own safety because of his wife’s beauty. He told the pharaoh that she was, in fact, his sister. As he might have anticipated, the pharaoh brought Sarai into his household, intending to take her as a wife. “But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai” (Genesis 12:17). And the pharaoh angrily expelled Abram and Sarai from Egypt.

When the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah threatened Abram’s nephew Lot, God delivered Lot and his family.

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The Son of God

These Old Testament themes are picked up in the New Testament but with a twist—the Messiah has arrived. He is the loving and caring God made human, and John aims to make this clear. “Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30, 31).

John tells us exactly why he wrote his Gospel: so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, we might have life in His name! John tells us that he could have recorded many more signs or miracles, but he chose these specifically because they point to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, through whom we might receive eternal life.

It is important to note that John did not choose to report a miracle to prove the authenticity of Jesus’ miracles. He chose to report it because of the character of the miraculous work—because it pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of the coming Messiah.

Water to wine

The first sign or miracle recorded in the Gospel of John took place early in the ministry of Christ. Jesus attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1–10), and during the course of the celebration, the wedding party ran out of grape juice.¹ Ceremonial water pots used for ritual purification were nearby, and Jesus asked the servants to fill them with water.

When the servants presented the water—now turned to juice—to the master of the feast, he was surprised. He observed that it was customary to serve the good juice first and then,

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when the guests had drunk well, to serve the inferior juice. But the best had been saved until last.

John is not simply narrating a story; he is showing how the miracle identified Jesus as the Messiah. For those who asked, “Why has the Messiah taken so long to come?” John can say, “The best is saved for last!”

Moses, a forerunner of the Messiah, also performed miracles when he arrived to lead Israel out of Egypt. After meeting God at the burning bush, he later went on to change the Nile River to blood (Exodus 7:14–22). He then led Israel through the Red Sea. Toward the end of his ministry, he prophesied that God would raise up a Prophet like him (see Deuteronomy 18:15–19).

When Jesus turned water into wine, Moses’ prophecy was fulfilled. And what was the result? “This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11).

The next referenced miracle also took place in Cana. Jesus healed a nobleman’s son with just a word, without even traveling to Capernaum, where the son was (John 4:46–54).

Imagine John holding a red pen so that he could underline the common themes of the miracles of the wedding wine and the nobleman’s son.

1. Both miracles were signs (John 2:11; 4:48, 54).
2. Both took place in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1, 11; 4:46, 54).
3. Both elicited faith (John 2:11; 4:50, 53).

This response of faith fulfilled the purpose for which John was writing his book. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

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The pool of Bethesda

The next sign seems simple. Jesus walked by the pool of Bethesda. It was crowded with chronically ill people who waited at the water's edge, hoping to be the first to enter it if the waters were stirred. People thought that such a person would be healed.

Jesus walked by, saw a disabled man, and asked whether he wanted to be healed. The man answered that he had no one to assist him into the waters when they were moved. Jesus said, "Take up your bed and walk" (John 5:8). The man took up his bed and walked.

Straightforward and simple? No! Not so simple! Jesus made what appears to be a strategic mistake.

One would think the crowd should be celebrating. The man was healed—no more long years of waiting by the pool. But this healing presented a major problem to the elders. It took place on the Sabbath, and for them, this required litigation and judgment for breaking the Sabbath.

Healing was not legal on the Sabbath unless there was an emergency. The man had been disabled for thirty-eight years. There was no way to slip by the courts on this one. If the problem had been some malady of the brain, the incident might squeak by. But this man was fine except for his legs, and this did not qualify for a Sabbath exception.

So, John finds that this is an excellent opportunity to define Christ's pedigree. It takes only nine verses to describe the situation. But then John takes more than thirty verses to evangelize—to tell the story of Jesus. This provides him with the opportunity to showcase Jesus' assertion that He is the Son of God, equal to and one with the Father!

After the healing, the leaders asked the man who had healed him and told him to take up his bed and walk. After all, it

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was the Sabbath! No one had the authority to give that kind of permission.

But the healed man did not know who had made him well. What an opportunity for John: *I am writing my Gospel so that Jesus will be known!*

When the man who had been healed bumped into Jesus in the temple, Jesus revealed Himself as the person who made him well. The man went to tell the rulers that Jesus was his Healer. Therefore, the leaders “sought all the more to kill” Jesus on two accounts: (1) He broke the Sabbath; and (2) He “said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (verse 18).

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus explained that the Father and the Son work in unison, and as a result, the Father will show greater works that the rulers may marvel. Notice that John continues the theme of the signs. John says that we have just begun!

Both God the Father and God the Son have the power of resurrection (verse 21). They work in harmony with each other. From God’s perspective, there is a time coming when those who hear the words of Christ will come forth from the grave.

Witnesses

Moving from miracle accounts, John now turns to witnesses. The first one is John the Baptist. He testified to the truth and testified to the messiahship of Christ, and the leaders listened to John the Baptist for a while (verses 31–35).

In addition to the witness of John the Baptist, Christ’s works bore witness that God had sent Him (verse 36). His Father, whom the rulers had rejected, also bore witness to Him (verses 37, 38). And the Scriptures, which the leaders treasured, testified of Him (verses 39, 40).

Finally, Jesus cites the witness of Moses, the revered leader

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who had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (verses 46, 47). Jesus could not have made it any clearer. In rejecting the testimony of Moses, the rulers were rejecting the prophesied Messiah. This stinging reproof was Christ’s all-out attempt to get His listeners’ attention and win their hearts to His claims.

1. In *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen G. White states that the juice was non-alcoholic. *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 149.