

Good morning everyone, welcome to North Shore Alliance Church; my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here. After a long Summer of people coming and going, it's good to be together and to see so many familiar faces. It's also good to see some new faces among us. If you are new to our church, then no doubt you've already discovered that we are far from perfect—it's true, all of us have a long way to go. But I trust that you will find that there is a place for you here to learn and grow in discipleship to Jesus.

This Fall we are beginning a new teaching series through the Gospel of John. If you are new to reading the Bible, you may not know that it's divided into two major parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first four books in the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are called “gospels;” this word simply means “good news.” And so, at the broadest level, the Gospel of John brings good news that is connected to the identity and mission of Jesus.

Perhaps you've wondered how a historical figure like Jesus of Nazareth, born 2000 years ago, can still have enduring significance for us today? The Gospel of John addresses this question and many others.

As I begin this morning, I've decided not to launch into chapter 1, verse 1; instead, I want to provide an introduction to this Gospel. Who wrote it? Why was it written? What are some of its emphases? I trust that in doing so, it will help us to read the Gospel of John well.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 1:1.

**1. Authorship:** So let's begin with authorship—who wrote the Gospel of John? Clearly, the title is a bit of a giveaway, but the issue of authorship is worth investigating. When it comes to most New Testament books, identifying the author is a relatively simple task.

For example, in the Book of Romans, the author begins by offering an introduction, “*Paul, a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God*”.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Apostle Peter's first New Testament letter begins, “*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ*”.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of introduction is absent from John's Gospel and so we must rely on the historical affirmations of the early church. Right from the beginning, the first generation of Christians attributed this Gospel to John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, and placed it alongside the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as a reliable witness to Jesus.

So what do we know about John? Where did he come from? What was he like? As you read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the picture begins to emerge. John had at least one brother, James, their father's name was Zebedee, and they grew up in a small village named Bethsaida—less than 40 km away from where Jesus grew up.

Bethsaida was a fishing village, near the Sea of Galilee; James, and John were fisherman by trade. Bethsaida was also home to another set of fishing brothers—Peter and Andrew. When Jesus met these four, small-town, fishermen, He invited them to join His band of

disciples, and for the next three years they followed Jesus everywhere He went. What John wrote in his gospel was an eyewitness account; he heard what Jesus taught, saw what Jesus did, and wrote it down.

What else do we know about John? We know that he wasn't exactly meek and mild, at least, not in the beginning. Mark 3:17 tells us that Jesus nicknamed James and John "*the sons of thunder*". Every nickname has a story to go along with it, and the Gospel of Luke tells us the story.

Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, but along the way, they needed to pass through a Samaritan town. Jesus sent a few people ahead to secure the necessary supplies so that He and the disciples could continue on their way. But when the Samaritans heard that Jesus was just passing through, they took offence and told Jesus that He wasn't welcome in their town. *If you don't have time for us, then we don't have time for you!*

Reading now from Luke 9:54, "*When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'*" Is it just me, or is this a slight over-reaction?

**Illus:** A number of years ago, I was playing on our church soccer team and we were in the middle of an intense match. I had stolen the ball from an opposing player, deked around another player, and was running up the sideline with the ball. Moments later I was body-checked from behind and sent flying. I hit the ground hard, slid, and

my momentum carried me into the fence; I was twisted in a heap, not entirely sure what had just happened.

But when I looked up, one of my all-time favourite teammates was standing over top of me, his fist was cocked, and he was looking menacingly at the guy who had flattened me.

We know that physiologically, in the event of perceived harm or attack, the body's sympathetic nervous system kicks in, triggering the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, causing us to enter into the "fight or flight" mode. In that moment, my teammate was all fight and no flight. It reminds me of James and John.

James and John were small town boys, they had probably been in their fair share of dust-ups. They were fiercely loyal and had a fiery temper; when Jesus was disrespected, these two were all fight. "*Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?*" Luke 9:55 tells us that Jesus turned and rebuked them. *Settle down boys.*

On another occasion, Jesus was speaking to His disciples about the future, predicting His own death on the cross. Obviously, talking about one's impending death is heavy stuff; it's the kind of thing that shuts conversation down—no one knows what to say. But while the other disciples sat in silence, James and John seized the moment. "*Jesus, can you grant us a favour? After you die, and return to God, can you give James and I positions of power and authority? We want to sit at your right and left.*"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:35, 37.

It wasn't their best moment. These two brothers lacked compassion, sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. They were opportunistic, self-serving, and hungry for power.

Much later, after Jesus did die, was raised, and ascended to heaven, John and the other disciples became leaders of the church. But as the Gospel accounts were being written, these leaders made no attempt to edit the stories being told. Think about it, if you were writing a biography about Jesus, would you include all the stories that exposed you as a selfish, angry, or cowardly disciple? These accounts remain for us to see. The question is *why*?

Is it not because the disciples then, as we are now, were people in process? It's hard to relate to a person who seems to have it all together, who is never confused, fearful, or proud. "*I could never be like them,*" we tell ourselves.

But maybe it's time that we think about John, and ourselves, as people in process—people that Jesus is shaping along the way. Spiritual transformation doesn't take place in a moment, it happens over the course of a lifetime. Transformation happens step by step. In the midst of everyday life we make small choices to trust Jesus, to be corrected by Him, to allow His thoughts to shape our thinking, and His pursuits to direct our own.

In time we are changed. In time, we become mature, wise, humble, and loving. In the beginning, John's need for transformation was

evident to all, but for all of John's flaws, Jesus loved him. In fact, as John's Gospel proceeds, on four different occasions, John describes himself as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved.*"<sup>4</sup>

It's a strange way to describe one's relationship to Jesus, isn't it? On first blush it seems to suggest that Jesus loved John, but didn't love the others—or, that Jesus loved John *more* than the others. It makes us wonder, *did Jesus have favourites? Does God?*

I don't think we're meant to understand this phrase in this way. In one sense, John did have a unique relationship with Jesus. Using contemporary language, we might say that Jesus had a Senior Leadership Team; Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus into situations where the other disciples were not present. For example, when Jesus raised a little girl from the dead, only Peter, James, and John were with Him. At the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John were the only disciples who saw Jesus in all of His glory. In the Garden of Gethsemane, moments before Jesus was arrested, it was Peter, James, and John who were right beside Him.

At Jesus' trial, only Peter and John were present. At the cross, John was the only male disciple brave enough to risk being seen, and right before Jesus died, Jesus asked John to take care of His mother Mary.

John described himself as "*the disciple Jesus loved*" and I believe Jean Vanier has it right—this phrase reveals John's own sense of identity. Vanier writes, "Our deepest need is to be loved, and our

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<sup>4</sup> John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20.

deepest identity is to be the beloved of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> John’s intent with this phrase is not comparison, as though Jesus loves some more and others less. Instead, John desire is that every one of us, might be able to say along with him, “*I am loved by Jesus.*”

2. Let’s shift our attention to the matter of purpose: ***Why did John write his Gospel?*** *What was he trying to achieve?* Every author, from Dr. Seuss to Dr. Phil, write for a particular purpose, be it to educate, entertain, or encourage—John is no different. The book that bears his name is both history and biography, centred around Jesus of Nazareth.

First and foremost, John is an eyewitness—he saw what Jesus did and heard what Jesus said. But John makes it clear that he isn’t what we might call a “neutral” observer—as if there is a such a thing. John is utterly convinced about who Jesus is, and he writes his Gospel in order to persuade us to his own conclusions.

As he nears the end of his book, in chapter 20:30-31, John states his reason for writing: “*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”

Here, at the end of his Gospel, John draws the connection between Jesus’ identity and humanity’s greatest need. “*I am writing that you may believe as I do: Jesus is the Messiah—sent by God to rescue and save; He is God the Son—God in the flesh, God in our midst. I am writing so that you may believe as I do and find **life** in His name.*”

None of us are self-created; we need to be given life. And what is true in the physical is also true of the spiritual. Spiritual life does not spring from self-effort; it must be given, and only God can give it. John’s Gospel makes this plain over and over again; life that is purposeful on earth, life that continues after the grave, comes to us through Jesus.

Listen to some of the things that John writes about concerning life:

- John 1:4, “*In him [Jesus] was **life**, and that **life** was the light of all mankind.*”
- John 3:36, Jesus said, “*Whoever believes in the Son has **eternal life**, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life*”.
- In John 6:35, Jesus declared, “*I am the bread of **life**. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*”
- In John 8:12, Jesus said, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of **life**.*”
- And in John 10:10-11, Jesus declared, “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have **life**, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his **life** for the sheep.*”

There is more that John records concerning **life**, but on every occasion, Jesus is front and centre—**He is the life giver**. I’m not sure where all of you stand concerning Jesus, but perhaps it’s time that you take a look at the life you’re living and consider the life Jesus extends to you.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Gospel of John, The Gospel of Relationship*, Introduction, ix.

3. In the time remaining, I want to mention a few of the **theological emphases in John’s Gospel**, beginning with:

a. **Revelation:** Some critics object to the Christian claim that Jesus is God in the flesh. “*How can you say that,*” they protest, “*when Jesus Himself never claimed to be God.*” Now in one respect they have a point, Jesus didn’t walk around 1st century Palestine wearing a “*I am God*” t-shirt, but if you understand Jewish theology, there can be no doubt about who Jesus claimed to be.

One of the unique aspects of John’s Gospel is that it features *Seven Signs* and *Seven I Am* statements. John uses the word “sign” to describe the 7 miracles reported in his Gospel. From John’s perspective, Jesus’ miracles were never flashy displays of power; they were *signs*, pointing to the deeper reality of His identity, and, to God’s saving activity in the world. Each of Jesus’ seven signs—the healing of the blind man, or raising Lazarus from the dead—reveals God’s intent for the world to come.

As for the seven “I Am” statements, Jesus does something bold; instead of pointing away from Himself to God, Jesus points **to** Himself **as** God. In Exodus 3, when God revealed Himself to Moses, He referred to Himself by His Divine Name—Yahweh. Yahweh means “*I AM who I AM,*”

Jesus knew the Divine Name, every Jew knew the Divine Name, and scandalously, Jesus used this name in reference to Himself saying things like:

- I Am the Bread of Life (John 6:35);
- I Am the Light of the World (John 8:12);
- I Am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25);
- I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)

On one occasion, a listening crowd took offence at Jesus, picking up stones to kill Him. “*Jesus said to them, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’ ‘We are not stoning you for any good work,’ they replied, ‘but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.’*”

At the centre of Christian orthodoxy is the confession that in Jesus Christ we see God **as a man**.

The agnostic is quick to acknowledge that while God may exist, nothing can be known of His nature. After all, how does one investigate a God that is above us, beyond us, and unlike us? The Christian response is that since only God can know himself, only God can make himself known.

Scottish theologian, Thomas Torrance, writes, “In Jesus Christ the Son of God took our human nature upon himself and made it his own so completely that he came among us *as man*; and by what he was *as man*, he revealed to us what he was and is *as God*.”<sup>6</sup>

In Jesus, God became human so that He could bear our weakness, disappointment, sin, shame, and death. In Jesus we discover that God loves you, me, the world. John’s Gospel has a lot to say about revelation.

<sup>6</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 55.

**b.** John also has a lot to say about **Salvation**. John talks about forgiveness of sin and eternal life, but in John’s Gospel “salvation” is much larger. Salvation isn’t just spiritual, it’s physical, relational, mental, and emotional. It includes healing what has been broken—in you, me, and the world; it includes reconciliation; it includes freedom from what enslaves us, and the restoration of love, joy, and peace. Salvation is the summary word for God restoring the world to His original design and purpose.

**c.** But John makes no bones about the fact that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and the salvation He offers, is connected to **Human Responsibility**—this is another emphasis in John.

John 3:16-18 says, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.*”

The revelation of God, in Christ, is before you; the offer of salvation is before you; *how will you respond? Will you believe in Him and find life in His name, or will you walk away?*

There are many other theological emphases in John, including Jesus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit, and we will explore all of it in good time.

**Conclusion:** I began this morning with a question—*how can a historical figure like Jesus of Nazareth, born 2000 years ago, have enduring significance for us today?* The answer lies in who Jesus is and what He has done.

God the Son became human to rescue, to heal, to express God’s love for the world. Through Jesus, everyone and everything has been given life. In Jesus we see the life of God: we see God’s life *for* us, God’s life *with* us, and for those who receive Him, we experience God’s life *in* us. Jesus is the life-bringer. For those in need of a second chance at life, look no further than Jesus; He is, He has, what we need.

**The Lord’s Supper:** This morning we have the opportunity to participate in a meal of special significance, a meal that Jesus originally celebrated with His disciples. This meal has come to be known simply as “The Lord’s Supper.”

This meal took place on the same night that Jesus was arrested and sentenced to die. Knowing what awaited, His body broken and His blood spilled out, “*Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’*”<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ body was broken, that our lives could be made whole.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 26:26.

*“Then [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”<sup>8</sup>*

In eating this meal, we don’t recreate Jesus’ death on the cross, instead, we celebrate the salvation He won for us, the healing He’s promised us, and the life that is yet to come.

**Invite servers forward**

**Worship**

**Prayer for Healing**

**Benediction**

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:27-28.