

Reading John for Dear Life

*A Spiritual Walk
with the Fourth Gospel*

Jaime Clark-Soles

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*To all who have shared my passion for the Gospel of John
and have shaped my reading of it.
You give me life.*

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Chapter 1

Your One Wild and Precious (and Abundant) Life

Overview

Welcome to the Gospel of John! Whether this is your first time ever laying eyes on this text or your hundredth time, all manner of marvels await you. The Gospel has twenty-one chapters, each one rich and dense with meaning, comfort, and challenge. While we won't be able to engage all twenty-one chapters in depth here, I've chosen some of the highlights to help focus our reading, study, prayer, and discussion. The reader will notice that some chapters have prayers, meditations, or study questions, but not all do. My explanation? The Spirit moves where it wills (John 3:8), so I followed where it led, rather than trying to capture and contain it. The Holy Spirit is not a genie in a bottle.

Certainly, you'll want to read (and reread) the whole Gospel and note your own questions and insights about anything you find. I am simply here to guide you and inspire you to devote time to the Word of and from God in John that you will find for your own spiritual walk. One note before we begin: all quotations of the biblical text come from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted. You will notice that I pick fights with the NRSV from time to time—not because it's a bad translation, but because *all* translations fall short in one way or another.

To start, take a moment to answer this set of questions briefly. Tell me something about John that you

- think,
- feel,
- know, and
- wonder about.

Keep that list by you as we proceed through our study.

Tradition assigns the eagle as the symbol for the Gospel of John because only the soaring eagle can stare straight into the sun. Clement of Alexandria, a second-century church leader, said this: “Last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the [other] Gospels, and being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.5–7). Another sage describes John as shallow enough for a child to wade in, deep enough for an elephant to swim in. We aim to discover the richness of this Gospel, whose uniqueness and layers of mystery continue to grip its readers and whose unanticipated surprises delight at every turn. We expect to be transformed.

John doesn’t make us guess why he or she¹ wrote this Gospel: “But these things are written so that y’all [you all, plural] may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing y’all may have life in his name” (20:31, my trans.).

Everything from 1:1 through 21:25² was written not merely to *inform* us, but to *transform* us. John does not aim to provide an objective account of people and events in order to add another tome to the annals of human history. No, this is persuasive speech; and if this Gospel has its way with us, we will feel directly addressed by God in Christ and receive the abundant life that belongs to us as members of God’s own family.

Life is a favorite theme in this Gospel. Many people know John 3:16 by heart, usually in the King James Version: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And in

1. The debate about the authorship of this Gospel is lively, layered, and ongoing. The Gospel does not say who wrote it. Many authors have been suggested, some male and some female. For a solid discussion of the topic, see Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 233–54, and Paul Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 95–124. I will refer to the author as “he” or “John” in this book, not because I assume that the author is male but for the sake of convenience.

2. John has a rich composition history, including two endings—the first being chap. 20 and the second chap. 21. Some would call chap. 21 an appendix. For the most thorough academic treatment of the composition of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, see Urban von Wahlde’s work in three volumes: *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). For an excellent shorter treatment, see Paul Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 95–124.

John 10:10 (NRSV), Jesus declares, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

In fact, the word “life” (*zōē*) is used thirty-six times in John. The verb (*zaō*) occurs seventeen times. There’s even another verb, to “give life or make alive” (*zōopoiēō*), that occurs three times and *only* in the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel actually begins with life. In the Prologue to John (1:1–18), we hear, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was *life*, and the *life* was the light of all people.”

The fact that the Word helped to create all that exists reminds us that we should take a look around us, at everything in the world, and see how the created order might connect us to God and teach us something about what abundant life looks like. Clearly, abundant life isn’t primarily about the *length* of our lives but rather the *quality* of our lives. It’s about living a certain kind of life, for however long that may last.

William Sloane Coffin, longtime pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, put it this way: “While Abraham lived through ‘summer’s parching heat,’ Jesus died young; but didn’t both show us that it is by its content rather than by its duration that a lifetime is measured?”³ And again: “Deserted by his disciples, in agony on the cross, barely thirty years old, Christ said, ‘It is finished.’ And thus ended the most complete life ever lived.”⁴

Mary Oliver is a poet after John’s own heart. Her poem “The Summer Day” fits the Gospel of John perfectly as she asks, “Who made the world?” She reminds us how to observe the world prayerfully and, finally, confronts us with the question of all questions:

Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?⁵

John asks us the very same question. John calls us to slow down, to pay attention, and to get a life, an abundant one marked by the eternal.

3. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), Kindle edition.

4. Coffin, *Credo*.

5. Mary Oliver, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 60.

You could say that John is concerned with nothing but life: how we get it, how we lose it, how we find it again—or better yet, how we get found by it. Abundant life, embodied life, eternal life, precious life.

Some Things to Notice as You Go: Tips for Reading

John bears reading over and over again. As a fellow traveler, I offer the following as signposts.

1. Pay attention to the special repetitive vocabulary, such as light and darkness, life, truth, world, word, witness, testify, and family language (children, birth, womb, father, mother).

2. A key feature of the Fourth Gospel is the use of “I am” statements. We will address the specific occurrences as they arise, but you need to know from the start that there are two kinds of “I am” statements in John (for a great chart, see Felix Just’s “*I Am*” *Sayings in the Fourth Gospel* site: <http://catholic-resources.org/John/Themes-IAM.htm>).

First, there are the “I am” statements followed by a predicate nominative:

- I am the bread of life (6:35, 41, 48, 51).
- I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5).
- I am the gate of the sheepfold (10:7, 9).
- I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14).
- I am the resurrection and the life (11:25).
- I am the way and the truth, that is, the life (14:6).
- I am the true vine (15:1, 5).

Second, there are the absolute “I am” statements, where Jesus says only “I am” (*egō eimi*), playing off of God’s own self-designation in the Old Testament as evidenced in Exodus 3:14 (See, e.g., John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5–8).

3. Notice the extremely intimate personal encounters between Jesus and individual characters. Some of the characters we know only from John. In other places, we see characters we know from other Gospels, but they are having experiences narrated only in John. For example:

- Nathaniel (chap. 1)
- Jesus' mother (chap. 2)
- Nicodemus (chap. 3)
- the Samaritan woman (chap. 4)
- the man ill for thirty-eight years (chap. 5)
- the man born blind (chap. 9)
- Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (chap. 11)
- Mary (the sister of Martha and Lazarus) (chap. 12)
- Judas (chaps. 12 and 13)
- Pilate (chap. 19)
- Mary Magdalene at the cross (chap. 19), at the tomb, and in the garden (chap. 20)
- Peter on the beach (chap. 21)

4. John could be called the “Gospel of intimate, touchy relationships”; there is no more intimate book in the Bible than the Gospel of John. Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit and we are all intimately related to one another. It’s a very touchy Gospel: Jesus rubs mud on the blind man’s eyes; Mary anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair; Jesus washes the disciples’ dirty feet; Mary Magdalene grabs onto the resurrected Jesus as he is about to ascend. We could easily multiply the instances of intimacy in this Gospel, but I want to draw your attention to one in particular.

In 1:18 John tells us that Jesus is in the “breast” (*kolpos*) of the Father. Some translations translate *kolpos* here as “heart” (New Jerusalem Bible, NRSV). Others go with “at his side” (English Standard Version, New American Bible). Both are unhelpful and misleading. First, we have a word for heart: *kardia*. But *kardia* does not appear here. Second, the only other place *kolpos* appears in John is 13:23, where the Beloved Disciple was reclining *upon* Jesus’ breast, not *next* to him. John wants us to understand that the kind of intimacy between God and Jesus also exists between us and Jesus/God. The mistranslation obscures this fact. If you are uncomfortable with touching, with the stuff of earth, with the eradication of lines between the so-called “mundane” and the so-called “sacred,” I suggest that you take up another text. John will not countenance such a separation. Hence, the incarnation.

5. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels because they share a close literary relationship such that they can be

“viewed together,” *syn-optic*. If you are familiar with the Synoptic Gospels, you may think of Peter as the “star” of the disciples. In John, it’s the Beloved Disciple (“the one whom Jesus loved” in the NRSV). While many people assume this is John, son of Zebedee, you must note that the text never names this disciple. Interpreters have suggested many people, including Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus’ brother James. Let’s honor the fact that the author never names the Beloved Disciple. In making that choice, the author expects *you* and *me*, readers and hearers of this text, to insert ourselves into that very slot. The Beloved Disciple always “gets it right.” By the time we’re done with the Fourth Gospel, the author expects *us* to be that disciple.

6. E. B. White, author of *Charlotte’s Web*, once said: “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”⁶ I can relate to that so well. Can you? The Fourth Gospel certainly can; it expresses a conflicted relationship with the world. On the one hand, there is no doubt that God and Jesus created the world (see the Prologue) and that they aim to save it (3:16–17). On the other hand, the world “hates” Jesus, and his disciples should anticipate the same experience (15:18–19). On the one hand, the world is associated with Satan; one of John’s favorite names for Satan is “the ruler of this world” (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). On the other hand, when he talks about Satan, it’s usually to discuss how Satan’s number is up: he has no power over Jesus; he stands condemned.

7. Every intimate personal encounter with Jesus has the power to transform us, but that transformation is *always* worked out in the context of community. There is no “Lone Ranger” Christianity in John (or anywhere in Scripture, for that matter, but that’s another story).

8. John is a narrative, not a newspaper account. Respect it as such. Read it in one sitting or watch the movie *The Gospel of John* (narrated by Christopher Plummer). Allow yourself to enter fully into the narrative world that John has created. Shut out all else during that time. It will take you three hours to watch the movie, start to finish,

6. Quoted in a profile by Israel Shenker, “E. B. White: Notes and Comment by Author,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1969.

word for word. Enter the characters as if you were they. Try them all on for size. You might ask yourself the following as you do this:

- What strikes you in this passage?
- Do you like or dislike the character in this story? Why or why not?
- Do you like or dislike Jesus in this story? Why or why not?
- What previous experience or relationship do you have with this piece of Scripture? Have you heard it preached? How does that shape your understanding of it now?
- Where does it intersect with your own life? For instance, the Samaritan woman had needs, and she asked according to those particular needs: “Give me water.” What are your needs? What do you want to say to Jesus in place of “Give me this water”?
- What does it teach us about the kind of community our church should or could be?

9. John is quite different from the Synoptic Gospels. Do not try to “fix” John by imposing their narrative or theology upon John. At times I will, in fact, compare John with the Synoptics, not to fix any of them, but rather (a) to show John’s distinctiveness or (b) to clear up any confusion that may exist due to readers’ bringing the Synoptic version to the story. For instance, if I ask you to picture the scene of Jesus carrying his cross, most readers will image Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus. But in John, Jesus carries his cross alone. That’s not just an interesting difference; it’s a crucial one for understanding John’s theology, particularly John’s Christology (the understanding of Jesus’ life and work).

10. It’s quite useful to read one character in light of other characters. I call this intercharacterization. So read the Samaritan woman in contrast to and comparison with *both* Nicodemus, who precedes her, and the disciples, who show up after her encounter with Jesus (in which she becomes the first broad evangelist). Read the story of the man who is ill in chapter 5 in comparison with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 *and* the man born blind in chapter 9. Read the Samaritan woman in comparison to the man born blind (hint: both of them are heroes in this Gospel, modeling what we, the readers, should be like). And so on.

11. I usually teach my John class over a semester. Each week, we begin the class with a prayer, song, or some other centering exercise.

Then we share what I call “Johannine moments”—any experiences the participants have had where the text intersected with their lives. When you immerse yourself in very particular Scriptures for a set time, it’s surprising the ways connections arise. I invite you then to keep an eye out for your own Johannine moments during your study.

The Word, Embodied

For John, abundant, eternal life is, above all, *embodied* life. Bodies are good. Creation is good. How could they not be, since God made all of it? The Gospel opens with creation, drawing upon language from the first creation story, found in the opening of Genesis:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. (Gen. 1:1–4)

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome/comprehend it. (John 1:1–5)

If we are going to take John seriously, then we are going to have to take creation, and our embodiedness, seriously:

If the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us—that is, if the Word of God came out of the birth canal of a woman’s body, grew, ate, went to the bathroom, bathed, struggled against demons, sweated, wept, exulted, was transfigured, was physically violated, and rotted away in a tomb just before being gloriously resurrected—then the Bible must have flesh on it. If a valley of dry bones can live again, then bones and blood and bread and flesh and bodies should never be left behind when we are trying to understand the grime and glory of Scripture. Any interpretation that denounces the material, created order, including our own bodies, should be suspect. From birth to death our bodies swell and shrink;

they are wet with milk and sweat and urine and vomit and sex and blood and water, and wounds that fester and stink and are healed and saved and redeemed and die and are resurrected. If you can't glory in or at least talk about these basic realities in church while reading Scripture, then how can Scripture truly intersect with or impact life?⁷

If you know Genesis well, you will see many other instances where John draws from it. In fact, this Gospel is famous for its use of the Old Testament.⁸ The author was steeped in Scripture. Not a bad idea for all people in any century, really.

Structure of the Gospel

John is sometimes called “the maverick Gospel” because it differs from its Gospel counterparts. You can see this from the way each Gospel begins. Mark starts with Jesus' baptism. Matthew moves it back to a genealogy and a visit from an angel to righteous Joseph, followed by the birth of Jesus. Luke kicks it back to John the Baptist and his parents; the annunciation to Mary; the special meeting between two exceptional women, Elizabeth and Mary; and the census and birth of Jesus, made famous to modern Americans by Linus's performance in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” or by children's Christmas pageants every December.

The Fourth Gospel begins with a Prologue (1:1–18). Chapters 1–12 are known as the Book of Signs. In these chapters, Jesus conducts his public ministry and enacts seven “signs” (*semeia*). Never does John use the word so familiar from the Synoptics when they refer to “miracles” (*dynameis*). Signs point to something. The signs in John are used to point to Jesus' identity as Messiah, the child of God, sent by God and acting with all the agency of God. Chapters 13–20 are known as the Book of Glory. Here Jesus turns away from his public ministry to focus upon the disciples. He models for them servant leadership in the footwashing. In the Farewell Discourse

7. Jaime Clark-Soles, *Engaging the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 32.

8. For a detailed treatment, see Clark-Soles, *Scripture Cannot Be Broken* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003).

(chaps. 14–17), Jesus consoles them in their anxiety and fear related to his physical departure and prays for their/our unity. The passion and resurrection occupy chapters 18–20. Chapter 21 addresses, among other things, the rehabilitation/reconciliation of Peter, who, under heat by a warm fire, coldly denied Jesus.

That the Gospel has two endings is obvious if one reads the conclusions of chapters 20 and 21. Scholars debate whether the same author penned the second ending at a later date or whether another hand is responsible for that. In fact, the Gospel of John has a layered composition history, so that question arises in various places within the narrative. As interesting and important as that conversation may be, it's a side issue with respect to the goals of this particular book.

No matter which ending resonates with you, one thing is clear: the author is calling us as individuals and as communities to be addressed by this Gospel. The rabbis have a saying that fits this Gospel perfectly: “Turn it and turn it [the Torah] again, for everything is in it; and contemplate it and grow grey and old over it and stir not from it” (Mishnah *Avot* 5:22).⁹ Now is the time.

9. This quotation comes from part of the Mishnah called the *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), which is composed of a variety of ethical maxims attributed to a long line of rabbis and other leaders. One translation of this chapter can be found online at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Talmud/avot5.html>. As with other Hebrew documents, it uses letters rather than numbers to designate sections, so 5:22 is 5:FF in this translation.

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