

# The Gospel of John: WHO IS THIS MAN?

by Ray C. Stedman

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The fourth Gospel holds peculiar significance to me for many reasons, but especially because it is written by the disciple closest to our Lord. When you read the Gospel of Matthew, you are reading the record of our Lord as seen through the eyes of a devoted disciple. Mark and Luke, of course, were dedicated Christians who knew and loved Jesus Christ, though they learned about him largely through the testimony of others, but John is one who leaned upon his breast. He was of that inner circle which included Peter and James, who went with our Lord through the most intimate circumstances of his ministry and heard more than any of the others. Therefore, we open this book with a sense of anticipation. Here is the testimony of our Lord's closest friend.

In light of this, it is very startling to see how John's Gospel begins (chapter 1, verse 1):

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
{John 1:1 RSV}**

Sometimes I think it is difficult to believe that Jesus is God. I know there is not a Christian who has not at one time or another felt the full force of all the arguments that would make him out to be nothing more than a man. There are times when we find it difficult to lay hold of the full intent of those words and think of the man Jesus as God.

But if we find it difficult, how much more did his own disciples find it so? They, of all men, would be least likely to believe that he was God, for they lived with him and saw his humanity as none of us ever has or ever will. They must have been confronted again and again with a question that puzzled and troubled them, "Who is this man?" As they themselves said, "What manner of man is this who heals the sick, raises the dead, quiets the wind and changes the water to wine?" {cf, Matt 8:27}

I have often pictured them lying out under the stars with our Lord on a summer night by the Sea of Galilee. I can imagine Peter or John or one of the others waking in the night, rising up on an elbow, and as he looked at the Lord Jesus sleeping beside him, saying to himself, "Is it true? Can this man be the eternal God? What is the secret of his being, the mystery of his coming?" No wonder they puzzled about him and constantly conversed among themselves about the mystery of his being.

Yet, so overwhelming and convincing was the evidence they saw and heard that when they reached the end of the story, when John began to write down the recollections of those amazing days, he began with declaring the deity of Jesus, "This is the One who was in the beginning. He was the Word who was with God, who was in the beginning with God, and was God," {cf, John 1:1}.

That is the theme of this Gospel of John. In Matthew we see the Lord as the King; in Mark we see him as the servant, always busy in ceaseless activity, serving men; in Luke we see his perfection of humanity, man as God intended man to be. Now, in the Gospel of John, we see his entrance into the Holy of Holies. We learn the secret of his life.

The key to the Gospel of John is found in the next to the last chapter. There are two endings to this little Gospel. John adds a postscript, which we call Chapter 21, that has to do with certain things that occurred after the resurrection. But John had ended his Gospel with these words (chapter 20, verses 30, 31):

**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [that is, these signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God] you might have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}**

That is the twofold purpose of this book. First, John is setting out to give evidence why any man in any age or in any place can fully and wholeheartedly believe that Jesus is the Christ -- or to use the Hebrew form, Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised one. The second purpose is to show that he is the Son of God.

A great deal is made of this term, "Son of God" today, as though there were a distinction to be made between God and the Son of God, but no Hebrew would ever understand it that way. To the Hebrews, to call someone a "son" of something was to say he is identified with, identical with, that thing or person. Barnabas was named the "Son of Consolation." That is the meaning of the name Barnabas. Why? Because he was that kind of man -- an encouraging, consoling kind of fellow. His nickname meant that he was the very epitome of consolation. He was the expression of it.

To the Hebrews, the use of this term, *the Son of God*, meant, "This one is God." That is why invariably, when our Lord used that term of himself, he was challenged by the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, saying, "who are you? What do you make yourself out to be? Why, you make yourself to be equal with God." Of course he did. That is what the title means.

In setting out to prove this, John employs the principle of selection. He lets his mind run back over those amazing three and a half years he was with the Lord. Already Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written their Gospels. But John did not write his until the close of the last decade of the first century. He wrote it as an old man looking back on these events.

This fact, of course, has been used by critics to say that we cannot depend upon the Gospel of John, because it is the account of an old man who is trying to recall the events of his youth. Remember, however, that these events were on the lips, heart, tongue and memory of the Apostle John every day after those events took place. He was always talking about them. He is writing now to tie together the record that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written.

Notice how he divides this. Jesus is the Christ -- that is the first issue. It was the question on the lips of men in John's day, the question that divided the Jews. Prominent figures were asking themselves, "Is this the One? Is this the Christ?" They knew there was a deepening sense of expectation running all through the Old Testament. It is forever saying in one way or another, "Someone is coming! Someone is coming!" At the close of the book of Malachi, you find that question hanging in the air, "Who is this One who is to come?"

In John's day, people were stirred by the fact that John the Baptist had appeared. They asked him, "Are you the Christ?" He said, "No, but he is coming after me," and when Jesus began to preach up and down the hills of Judea and Galilee, men were saying everywhere, "Is this the One? Is this the Messiah?"

The Lord Jesus declared again and again that he came with the authorized credentials of the Messiah. That is what he meant when he said,

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep." {John 10:1-2 RSV}**

The sheepfold was the nation Israel. He says there is One who was to come by an authorized way, by the door. If anyone comes in any other way, he is a thief and a liar, but he who enters by the door, the authorized opening, will be recognized as the Great Shepherd. He goes on (verse 3):

**"To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, ... " {John 10:3a RSV}**

He is referring there to the ministry of John the Baptist, who came as the opener of the door, the forerunner of the Messiah. Thus he came as the One who was authorized, with the proper credentials.

Now, what were those credentials? He gives them to us himself in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke tells us in Chapter 4 that he stood in the synagogue that day and read the book of the prophet Isaiah. He found the place and deliberately read to these people the words,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me, ..." {Luke 4:18a RSV}**

What is the meaning of Messiah? the Anointed One? "The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me," he says,

**"... because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. {Luke 4:18b RSV}  
... to proclaim release to the captives,  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." {Luke 4:18c-19 RSV}**

He stopped in the middle of a sentence, closed the book and sat down. Then he said to everyone there, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" {Luke 4:21b RSV}, that is, "I am this One."

Take those marks of the Messiah and lay them beside the seven signs that John chooses from the ministry of our Lord and you will see that he selects those particular ones because they are the signs that prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Let me show them to you in the order in which they appear in John's Gospel.

The first miracle of our Lord is the changing of water into wine, {John 2:1-11}. That miracle was a parable. Our Lord was performing a symbolic act at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. He took that which belonged to the realm of inanimate being, water, and changed it into a living substance, wine. He took that which belonged to the realm of death and changed it into that which is forever an expression of joy and life. By this he is declaring in symbol what he came to do: "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" {Luke 4:19}. He did not come to declare the day of vengeance; he stopped before that passage in Isaiah. But he came to declare the day of grace, when God's purpose would be to take man in his brokenness, his emptiness and his lifelessness, and give to him life -- to proclaim the acceptable time of the Lord.

The next sign is the healing of the nobleman's son, {John 4:46-54}. The central figure in that story is not the son, who lies sick at the door of death, but the nobleman, who comes to the Lord with a heart crushed with grief. In the agony of his heart he cries out to Christ, and says, "Will you come down and heal my son?" The Lord not only heals the son at a distance, with a word, but he heals the broken heart of a father. As he said, he was anointed to heal the brokenhearted.

The third sign is the healing of the impotent man who lay at the pool of Bethesda, {John 5:1-9}. Remember, that man had lain there for thirty-eight years. He had been a captive of this paralyzing disease, so that he was unable to get into the pool. He had been brought to that pool, hoping to be healed, hoping to be set free and our Lord singled him out of the great crowd of impotent folk and healed him, saying to him, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk," {John 5:8b RSV}. Now, why? Here he was demonstrating his ability to set at liberty those who are oppressed. For thirty-eight years a man had been bound, and he set him free instantly.

The next miracle is the feeding of the five thousand, {John 6:1-14}. This miracle appears in all four of the Gospels. Linked with it is the miracle of the walking on the water. What is the meaning of these signs? Well, you cannot read the story of the feeding of the five thousand without seeing that it is a marvelous demonstration of the desire of the Lord to meet the deepest need of the human heart, the hunger of man of God. He uses the symbol of bread. He himself had said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," (Matt 4:4). Then he demonstrated what kind of bread he meant. "I," he said, "am the bread of life," {John 6:35 RSV}. Taking the bread, he broke it, and with it fed the five thousand, symbolizing how fully he can meet the need of human life.

Then, sending his disciples out into the storm, he came walking across the waves to them in the midst of the tempest. The waves are high, and the ship is about to be overwhelmed, and their hearts are anguished with fear. He quiets them and says, "It is I; do not be afraid," {John 6:20 RSV}. In the double miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water, there is a symbolic representation of our Lord's ability to satisfy the need of human hearts and deliver them from their greatest enemy, fear. This is good news, is it not? This is one of the signs of the Messiah: he came to proclaim good news to the poor. Can you think of any greater news to tell anyone than that there is a way in which he can find all the clamant cry of his soul satisfied and all the fear of his life removed? That is to proclaim good news to the poor.

The next miracle is the healing of the blind man, {John 9:1-12}. This hardly needs comment. Our Lord said he came "to give recovery of sight to the blind," {cf, Luke 4:19}. He chose a man who was blind from birth, just as man is spiritually blind from birth, and he healed him.

The last miracle is the raising of Lazarus from the dead {see John 11:1-44}, symbolizing the delivering of those who all their lives had been held under the bondage of Satan through fear of death. Thus these seven signs prove beyond question that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the expected One.

But John goes deeper than that. He says that he is not only the Christ, but he is the Son of God. When you see him in his delivering power, you are indeed seeing the promised Deliverer, the Messiah. Ah, yes, John says, but that is not the greatest secret about him. When you see that he is the one able to do all these mighty things, meeting the deepest need of men's lives, look further and you will see there is glory yet.

You discover that when you stand in the presence of his humanity, see his lovely eyes. feel the beating of his human heart, sense the compassion of his life poured out in service. you are also standing in the presence of God, you are seeing what God is like. "This One," he says, "is the Son of God."

He declares that for us in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

**No one has ever seen God** [That is a statement of fact. Man hungers after God, and he is always searching for God; but John goes on]; **the only Son**, [the margin says that many manuscripts read "God" in this, "the only God"] **who is in the bosom of the Father, made him known.** {John 1:18 RSV}

Literally, he has exegeted God. He has unfolded what God is like. Then, in his Gospel, John picks up seven great words of our Lord that prove that statement.

He bases it all on the great name of God which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses saw the bush burning and turned aside to learn its secret, God spoke to him from the bush and said, "I AM WHO I AM" {Exod 3:14 RSV}. That is God's nature. That is, "I am exactly what I am. I am nothing more. I am nothing less. I am the eternal I AM." Seven times in his Gospel John picks this word up and uses it about our Lord. In fact, seven times these words came from our Lord's own lips. These constitute the proof that he is Deity.

Does that amaze you? Have you thought that it was his miracles that proved he was God? No, no. They proved he was the Messiah, the Promised One. It is his words that prove he is God. Listen to them: "I am the bread of life," {John 6:35b RSV}. That is, I am the sustainer of life, the One who satisfies life.

"I am the light of the world," {John 8:12b RSV}, the illuminator of life. I am one [to borrow a phrase from Paul] "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" {Col 2:3 RSV}, the explainer of things, the one who casts light upon all mysteries and enigmas and solves them.

"I am the door" {John 10:7b RSV}, Jesus said; that is, the opportunity into life, the open way. Whenever you are confronted with a sense of lack, some hungering after something more, these are the words you need to hear.

"I am the good shepherd" {John 10:11a RSV}; that is, the guide of life, the only one properly equipped to take an individual and safely steer him through all the problems and chasms that yawn on every side, to lead him safely through life. ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}.)

Then, "I am the resurrection and the life," {John 11:25b RSV}; that is, the power of life. Do you realize that resurrection power is the only kind that works when nothing else will? It works in the midst of death. Resurrection power is the only kind that needs no outside props, no process of learning. It does not need anything to initiate it, shore it up, or bolster it in any way. When nothing else can be done, then it comes in and begins to act. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," {John 14:6 RSV}; that is, I am ultimate reality. I am the real substance behind all things.

"I am the vine" {John 15:5a RSV}, "apart from me, you can do nothing," {John 15:5c RSV}. I am the producer of fruitfulness, the source of fellowship and of identity and communion.

Thus our Lord takes the great, revealing name of God and, linking it with these simple symbols, enables us to understand God. "The Word," John says, "became flesh and dwelt among us," {John 1:14a RSV}. He pitched his tent among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of God become man. That is the tremendous theme of this book. There is not a greater theme in all the universe than the fact that when we stand in the presence of the humanity of Jesus we suddenly discover that, for the first time, we also stand in the presence of God. This is what God is like. This one who heals, loves, serves, waits, blesses, dies and rises again -- this is God. That is what John reveals.

The one word that he leaves with us, then, is that believing that he is the Messiah and that he is God, we may have life in his name. He is the key to life. Who does not want to live? Isn't that what we all want, young and old alike? What we are really seeking is the key to life. We want to be fulfilled. We want to see fulfilled all the possibilities and potential of our being which we sense lie deep inside. We want those deep yearnings satisfied. We want to be able to express ourselves. We want to be what we were designed and intended to be. Then listen! John says:

**These [things] 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 RSV}**

This brings us inevitably to two things: first, to worship. How can you stand in the presence of this divine mystery and not feel your heart drawn out in worship of this one? As we often sing,

Can it be that I should gain  
an interest in my Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love, how can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is worship.

Isaiah, who saw the Lord lifted up and the temple filled with the smoke of his glory, bowed down and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am ... a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips," {Isa 6:5 RSV}. Then an angel flew down from the altar, took a coal, and put it upon his lips, cleansing him.

That brought him to the next thing, to which we, too, must come, if we see what John is after here: Not only worship, but service. "Love, so amazing, so divine," says Isaac Watts, "demands" -- what? -- "my soul, my life, my all." How can we worship, unless as we hear the words of the Lord Jesus, "As my Father has sent me, even so, send I you," {cf, John 20:21}. We say with Isaiah, "Lord, here am I, send me," {cf, Isa 6:8}. What could be greater than to stand in union with this life, around whom the whole universe gathers, the image of the invisible God?

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we pray as we bow before this blessed One of whom this book has been speaking, that the eyes of our understanding may be opened, that we may realize that here is One who stands supreme in the midst of those thousands and tens of thousands in Revelation who cry, "Worthy is the Lamb to be praised, to receive honor and glory and blessing. Worthy is this One who is slain and is dead, and is alive, and lives forevermore." We thank you for this revelation, and pray that our hearts may echo these words, "Lord, here am I; I am nothing

but a human being, nothing but a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, but Lord, here I am. Take me. Send me. Use me." In Christ's name, Amen.

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