

LESSON 1

*December 27–January 2

The Unique Purpose of John's Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 1:1-4, John 15:1-8, 17:20, 20:24-31, 21:20-25.*

Memory Text: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’ ” (*John 20:29, NIV*).

Key Thought: The Gospel of John tells us that the absence of physical contact with Jesus is no disadvantage to those seeking a relationship with Him today. Jesus' word is as powerful as His touch.

Have you ever wished you could have known Jesus in the flesh, as His disciples did? Have you ever wished He lived at your house? Wouldn't it be great to take your problems directly to Him, face to face? To go to Him and share what's on your heart and then see Him go to His knees and pray earnestly to His Father for you? Wouldn't it be easier to have a relationship with Jesus if He lived, breathed, walked, and talked at your house?

But that privilege has not been ours. Yet, the good news is that the Gospel of John helps assure us that we don't need physical contact with Jesus in order to have a relationship with Him. We don't need physical contact to obtain all the blessings He is willing and able to give. John even recalls Jesus telling His disciples “ ‘It is for your good that I am going away’ ” (*John 16:7, NIV*). Through the presence of the Spirit, the work of Jesus is enhanced by His absence (*John 14:12*).

This week we take our first look at this good news.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 3.*

SUNDAY December 28

How the Gospels Were Written *(Luke 1:1-4)*.

Were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the only accounts of the life of Jesus ever expressed? Did others, perhaps even in writing, recount the life of Christ? *Luke 1:1*.

Describe the process by which Luke's Gospel (and presumably John's, as well) came into existence. *Luke 1:2, 3*.

From what Luke tells us, "many" individuals had already undertaken to tell the story of Christ. The stories about Jesus and His sayings were remembered and handed down by "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (*Luke 1:2, NIV*). The word translated "servants" seems to have been a technical term in the ancient world for professional memorizers who would make it a point to record significant sayings in their minds for future use. It should not surprise us that such individuals might be chosen to memorize the sermons, parables, and deeds of Jesus in order to repeat what the Lord said and did.

The stories and sayings of Jesus were passed along by word of mouth for many years after His ascension to heaven. Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, apparently had talked with eyewitnesses and those who had memorized the sayings and stories of Jesus. Guided by the Spirit, he then selected those sayings and stories that enabled him to put together an "orderly account." The final result is the Gospel of Luke as we know it today.

Read John 21:25. What does it tell us about the limits of all the Gospels?

John's point is that most of the Jesus story had to be left out of his Gospel. Each of the four Gospels offers selections of the sayings and deeds of Jesus that fit that particular writer's purpose. "It is seldom that two persons will view and express truth in the very same way. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 22.

Look at the Ellen White quote, particularly in the context of today's study. What does this tell us about the need to give others some flexibility in their understanding of truth?

MONDAY *December 29*

Selecting With a Purpose

Read John 20:30, 31. Why did John say he wrote what he did about the life of Jesus? In what ways does the whole Bible reflect that same purpose?

Jesus' ministry from His baptism to His ascension covered about three and a half years (1,260 days!). Out of all the things Jesus said and did during that time, John records incidents that occurred on a total of only 29 days. And in most cases, even these accounts cover only a small fraction of what Jesus may have said and done on those days. More than 97 percent of Jesus' ministry is left out of John's Gospel. Led by the Holy Spirit, John chose what was needed to achieve his stated purpose: to convince us to believe in order that we may have eternal life.

Notice for whom John wrote his Gospel. It is for "you" (plural in the original). John wrote so that "you" might believe and that "you" might have life. With the word *you*, he clearly had his readers in mind. But which readers? All of them? Or was there a special focus to this "you" group?

What story provides the lead-in for John's statement of purpose?
John 20:24-28.

Thomas clearly feels that his faith depends on a hands-on experience with a physical Jesus. Once he had seen Jesus, he had no problem believing. In John 20:24-31, Thomas represents all the disciples, the first generation, those who had seen and touched Jesus.

Jesus' statement in verse 29, on the other hand, indicates that there is a special blessing reserved for those who believe without seeing. Evidently seeing and contact are not crucial to the development of faith; in fact, they even may hinder it. Verse 29 pronounces a blessing on later generations who have been denied hands-on contact with Jesus and yet believe anyway. We are of those later generations, those who have had no physical contact with Jesus nor with anyone who knew Him in the flesh.

Look up 2 Corinthians 4:18. How does this fit in with today's study? What message is there for us today, who have not seen Jesus in the flesh?

TUESDAY *December 30*

The Occasion of the Gospel *(John 21)*.

According to John 21, Jesus employs a threefold sequence of question and response to confront Peter about his three denials in the high priest's courtyard a short while before (*vss. 15-19*). Not only does Peter need to work through his sense of guilt and failure for denying Jesus, but this confrontation probably also gives him the opportunity to regain the confidence of his fellow disciples. Later, as Jesus and Peter walk along the beach, an incident occurs that may have had a large impact on John.

Who does Peter notice is following him and Jesus along the beach?
John 21:20, 24. See also John 13:23-25.

What does Peter ask Jesus about that disciple? *John 21:21.*

Jesus has just explained to Peter the circumstances that would one day surround his death. Peter is curious about whether his experience would be similar to that of the beloved disciple, the one who wrote the Gospel of John (*vs. 24*). Jesus evades the question with a cryptic "If I should prefer that he remain alive until I come, what business is that of yours?" (principal contributor's translation).

Jesus' cryptic comment was misunderstood in the years that followed. People came to believe that the beloved disciple, John, would live to see the second coming of Jesus. As disciple after disciple died, many became excited over the "obvious" nearness of Jesus' return. As John entered old age and began to approach death, a crisis of confidence loomed: Would John's death make Jesus appear to be a false prophet? After all, didn't Jesus say that John would be alive at His return?

Some believe that at this decisive moment, in which the church faced a crisis, the Lord moved upon John to leave the legacy of a written gospel, one that would correct the unfounded rumor regarding the timing of John's death in relationship to the Second Coming. His Gospel would provide what the next generation of Christians needed to survive his passing. His Gospel would teach us all how to have a living relationship with Someone you cannot see, hear, or touch.

Read again what Jesus told Peter in John 21:22. He never says that John would not die, though that meaning is what some have read into the text itself. In what ways are we in danger of doing the same thing; that is, reading into texts what is not there?

Second Generation

In a number of different ways, the Gospel of John expresses an interest in the second generation of Christians.

In the Fourth Gospel, the disciples usually are not gathered directly by Jesus but through the invitation of someone else who knows Jesus. Perhaps this is meant to symbolize how most of the world will come to first know Jesus, not through personal contact with Him but through the witness of another.

Look up the following texts. How do they express the idea that we don't have to see Jesus in the flesh to first learn about Him?

John 1:40-42

John 13:20

Today, of course, people learn about Jesus through the witness of others who first tell them about Jesus and, as in the first example above, "lead" them to Him. How crucial, then, that we as professed followers of Christ, as those whom God has chosen to spread the truth to others, be prepared to do just that.

In John 17 Jesus prays for Himself first of all and then for His disciples (*vss. 1-19*). After this He turns to the second generation, and beyond. His prayer is not for His disciples alone but for "those who will believe in me through their message" (*vs. 20, NIV*). Most people throughout history have gained a relationship with Jesus not through personal contact but through the writings of those who had such contact. Jesus prayed that the Written Word would be the means of uniting all believers, those who had seen Him and those who had not (*vss. 21-23*).

Prayerfully read through Christ's prayer in John 17 (specifically verses 11-19), which He offered in behalf of His disciples. What are the key points He is praying for? On the lines below, write a summary of what Jesus wanted for His followers. What message is in there for us, today, as well?

THURSDAY *January 1*

His Word Is as Good as His Touch

According to Luke 4:40, what does Jesus do whenever He heals people? (See Matt. 9:29, 30; 20:34; Mark 1:29-31; 9:25-27; Luke 7:14, 15; 13:13 for further examples.)

By way of contrast, how does Jesus accomplish His miracles in the Gospel of John? *John 4:46-54. (See also 2:1-11, 5:1-15, and 11:1-44 for further examples.)*

Jesus uses touch in about half the miracles recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. By way of contrast, in John's Gospel, Jesus is rarely described as using touch in order to accomplish His miracles.

Why the difference?

Perhaps the Spirit moved upon John to select stories in which there is an absence of touching or in which the distance between Jesus and the healed person is emphasized (in John 4:46-54 Jesus is 16 miles away from the individual He heals at the time of the healing), all in order to help express the point that one doesn't need immediate physical contact with the Lord in order to be blessed, or even healed, by Him. These accounts, where there is no touching, are consistent with John's theme that Jesus' word is as good as His touch. This is especially good news for those, such as we, who can have the assurance that although Jesus isn't here in the flesh, He still can be close to us in all our trials and sorrows, whatever they happen to be. Through these accounts John shows us that heaven is, indeed, closer to earth than we might, on sight alone, believe.

Most miracles in the Gospel of John (but not all) came as a result of Jesus' words, as opposed to His touch. List the command phrases used in each of the following accounts: John 2:7, 4:50, 5:8, 9:7, 11:43.

What comes through in these scenes is the power of Jesus' words to overcome barriers of space. Distance is no problem for the Lord, who created the universe. Jesus' word is as powerful close at hand as at a distance. Though now manifested to us through the printed page, Christ's Word still retains the power to save and heal. It is through His Word that He ministers to the needs of later generations.

Instead of Jesus in the flesh, we have His Word, the Bible. Why, then, is study of the Word crucial in forming a close relationship with Him? Without the Bible, what could we know about Jesus?

FRIDAY January 2

Further Study: Note Ellen White's comments on the process of how the Bible was written (*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 15–23).

Regarding faith in Jesus' word versus faith in what we can see and touch, Ellen White comments (*in the context of John 4:46-54*): "The nobleman wanted to see the fulfillment of his prayer before he should believe; but he had to accept the word of Jesus that his request was heard and the blessing granted. This lesson we also have to learn. Not because we see or feel that God hears us are we to believe. We are to trust in His promises."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 200.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 **Read again 2 Corinthians 4:18 along with Hebrews 11:1. Why must our ultimate hope be in things we do not see, at least directly? Is there anything we, now, can see that will last forever, or will everything we now see ultimately, as it now exists, be destroyed?**
- 2 **How could different writers portray Jesus from different perspectives? Do these different perspectives make you more or less likely to accept their accounts as truthful? If all accounts said the same thing, would that not tend to make us think they merely were copying one another as opposed to telling the story of Jesus as they, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, understood or even remembered it? Explain your position.**
- 3 **What does the gist of this week's lesson tell us about the importance of witnessing in the mission of the church?**

Summary: We often struggle with the issue of how to have a living relationship with Someone we cannot see, hear, or touch. We imagine that faith came more easily to those who walked and talked with Jesus back in New Testament times. But the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus' word, as ministered in the Gospel, is as powerful as His touch. Through the Spirit and the Word, we may know Jesus even more intimately than the disciples did.

A Question of Honor

by PAULINE TANOH

Pauline went to work in a factory in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, in western Africa. The factory operated on Saturdays, so Pauline asked for permission to have Sabbaths off. After awhile, her supervisor grew weary of her requests. Pauline decided to speak to the personnel director about her dilemma. Before she went, she fasted and prayed for three days.

She went to his office and explained her problem. He told her, "Life is a choice. You must choose which you wish to keep and which you will toss away, your work or your religion. I attend church, but sometimes I have to work on Sunday. I work first, then I go to confess to my priest."

Pauline explained that no priest or pastor could give permission to break the Sabbath, because God established it. "It is written in the Bible that we are to work six days and rest the seventh day. If we wish to honor God, we must do it His way."

The personnel director slammed his hand down on the desk and shouted, "Are you trying to teach me the Bible? Get out!"

Pauline walked out and closed the door. She stood there and prayed, "Lord, the person who shouts at me is shouting at You. Your will be done."

Later a colleague asked, "Did he give you your Sabbath off?"

Pauline answered simply, "God created the Sabbath; he cannot take it from me."

The next day was the Sabbath. When the personnel director saw that Pauline's position was empty, he asked, "Where is she?"

Her colleagues told him, "Since she was hired, she has not worked on Saturday, for it is her Sabbath."

"OK," the boss said. "On Monday she will lose her job."

But when Pauline came to work on Monday, she learned that the personnel director had been fired. When a colleague asked her what she thought, she responded, "God is sending this man away because he refused to honor God's Sabbath. The Lord had the final say in the matter."

Shortly after the personnel director left, the factory was closed on Sabbaths.



PAULINE TANOH (left) operates her own small business in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.