

# LESSON 1

\*December 27–January 2

## The Unique Purpose of John's Gospel



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### 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.*

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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?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

**Key Text:** *John 20:29*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To emphasize that Jesus is available to us in any place or era of history.
2. To understand the Gospel of John both as an individual work and in its relation to the other Gospels.
3. To apply the Gospel of John to our life today.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. John—A Gospel for Today** (*John 20:29*).

- A. Jesus is actively concerned about our lives, even though He is not physically present in them.
- B. Jesus' physical presence was not necessarily an advantage to His contemporaries in their attainment of salvation.
- C. John's Gospel was written with future generations of believers in mind.

#### **II. A Gospel With Focus** (*John 20:30*).

- A. John did not intend to write a comprehensive account of Christ's life and deeds.
- B. John self-consciously writes to an audience unfamiliar with Jesus but who needs and wants to know the important points.
- C. John's Gospel lays special emphasis on faith in the absence of concrete proof.

#### **III. A Letter to the Future** (*John 20:31*).

- A. John's Jesus often was not addressing His contemporaries but those in the future.
- B. Much of the teaching in John is more easily understood today.
- C. Although we do not have Jesus, we have His complete teaching in the Bible.

**Summary:** The Gospel of John is unique among the Gospels in that it speaks directly to the generations of Christians who would follow the apostles. John makes us aware that Jesus is with us in as real a way as He was with His contemporaries.

### COMMENTARY.

The Gospel of John is the crown jewel of the Gospel narratives. This is because it begins in the very throne room of God the Father (*John 1:1-3*) as opposed to beginning with Jesus' human chronology as did Matthew and Luke, or with His human ministry as did Mark. In John, we are not dealing with just the Babe of Bethlehem or the Carpenter of Nazareth but with the very God who became

## 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 ninety-seven 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.*

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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?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

human flesh. John leaves no doubt about his subject: Christ is God. He was with the Father in Creation, and He is with Him in redemption and restoration. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega (*compare Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:13*) of all that is. John wants Christians of every age to grasp the fundamental truth that Christ is God who became human so “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (*John 3:16*).

In this introductory lesson, we note the authorship, the purpose, and the uniqueness of John’s Gospel.

### I. The Gospel of John: Its Author.

The author does not mention his name but identifies himself as a disciple of Jesus and an eyewitness to all that his Master taught and did (*John 21:24, 25*). Moreover, this disciple is one “whom Jesus loved” (*vs. 20; compare John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7*) and who leaned on His breast at the Last Supper (*John 21:20*). That should leave us no doubt that John, the beloved disciple, is the Gospel’s author. It was perhaps his modesty, humility, and a desire for self-abnegation (as opposed to the events of Matthew 20:20-22) that led John to forego mentioning himself in this book.

The early church consistently identified the author as John. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130–200) wrote that John authored the Gospel while he was advanced in age and living in Ephesus.—*Against Heresies*, 2.22.5; 3.1.1. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp (A.D. 70–155), who was a disciple of John and bishop of Smyrna.

Why did John describe himself as the disciple Jesus loved (*John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20*)? Did Jesus love the other disciples less? The Greek usage of “loved” refers to a process. This is John’s humble way of saying that Jesus continued to love him in spite of his many character defects (*Mark 9:38, 10:35-37, Luke 9:54*). “Evil temper, revenge, the spirit of criticism, were all in [him].”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 295. Yet, John gratefully recognized he was the object of Jesus’ unfailing love—a love that could come only from One who is God. This recognition caused the apostle to coin Christianity’s defining expression, “God is love,” and to teach us in a special way that this love in all its fullness was manifested in Jesus (*1 John 4:7, 9*).

And so it was that the youngest of the disciples and the last one to pass from those wonderful days when God walked in space and time to redeem humanity left his legacy by writing the Gospel that underscores the divine-human mystery of Jesus, in whom is eternal life.

### II. The Gospel of John: Its Purpose.

John gives the purpose of the Gospel in John 20:31:

“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his

**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 (*vs. 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?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

name” (NIV). Theologically, John wanted to show beyond a doubt that Jesus is fully God and fully man (*John 1:1-3, 14; compare 1 John 2:22, 23; 4:2, 3*). This truth needed to be spelled out, because by the time he wrote the Gospel (A.D. 80–90), there were Gnostic heresies creeping into the church that denied the reality of the Incarnation. (Gnostic teachings were based on the Greek idea that because God is spirit [good], He could not become flesh [evil].)

Redemptively, John wanted to emphasize the thought that belief in Jesus and acceptance of Him lead to eternal life. John uses the word *believe* about one hundred times in his Gospel to show that saving faith in Jesus is essential to salvation.

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *John 3:16, 17; 14:29-31; 20:30, 31; 1 John 4:13-16*

- 1 The accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry in the four Gospels differ from one another in a number of ways. Do you find this confusing or helpful? Could these different accounts be construed as mutually contradictory? Explain your answers.
- 2 It is not uncommon for Christians today to feel that the first disciples had a great advantage in the fact that they knew Christ “in the flesh.” Was this advantage really as great as it seems? Explain your answer. In what sense might those of us who know Christ through His Word and the Holy Spirit have an advantage over His immediate contemporaries? How can we use our imagination when reading the Bible to help us feel closer to Jesus and to feel that we know Him better?
- 3 What criteria do you believe John used in selecting the events and teachings from the life of Jesus to include in his Gospel? Does his Gospel have a unifying theme? If so, what do you think it is, and why? Provide texts to support your answer.
- 4 How does the Gospel of John show Jesus’ concern for the generations of believers who would follow the original disciples? What does this concern teach us about Jesus’ regard for us?
- 5 While the Jesus portrayed in John’s Gospel may seem more remote at first glance, it can also be suggested that John portrays Him as being more intimately involved with His creation than do the other three Gospels. Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not? Provide texts to support your answer.

## 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*

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*John 13:20*

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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?**

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## TEACHERS COMMENTS

### III. The Gospel of John: Its Uniqueness.

Instead of dwelling on history, John concentrates on the mystery of Jesus: His divinity; His equality with God; His role as Creator; His power over nature, life, and death; and His incarnate purpose as the Savior of the world. The eight miracles recorded in the Gospel (*John 2:1-11, 4:46-54, 5:1-18, 6:1-15, 16-21, chapter 9, 11:38-57, 21:6-11*) not only reveal the uniqueness of Jesus as a Person but also challenge the reader to experience faith in His redemptive mission and purpose.

The eight great "I AM" statements (*John 6:35, 8:12, 58, 10:7, 9, 11, 14, 11:25, 14:6; 15:1, 5*) further reinforce the unique desire of John to show that his Lord and Master is God and Messiah. Without Jesus, there is no full revelation of God, no salvation, and no eternal life (*John 3:16, 20:31*).

The uniqueness of the Gospel also is seen in John's emphasis on the Godhead. In addition to the prologue, which establishes the God-

## Witnessing

On December 19, 1923, 12-year-old Myrtle Berry watched as thick black smoke ascended from a burning building one block from her home. She walked down Washington Street to get a closer look at the Dime Tabernacle as the flames consumed it.

At the other end of Washington Street stood 12-year-old Ronald Simpson. Several hours later, Ronald wandered into what was once the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Battle Creek. He went down into the basement and shuffled through the ashes. A loose board flipped over as he stepped on it, revealing the bell that once called worshipers to Sabbath School. The fire had destroyed the bell's wooden handle. But he took the priceless possession home, cleaned it, and later replaced the handle.

After several years, Ronald Simpson met Myrtle Berry, and they were married. The Simpsons kept the old bell for many years, until Myrtle donated it to the Adventist Museum in Battle Creek. Long after the passing of her husband, 92-year-old Myrtle still lives, by the grace of God, to tell the story of the burning Dime Tabernacle. Many who were not there listen with excitement as she recalls the details of that historic day.

Jesus said, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (*John 20:29*). The author of the Gospel of John was actually there when Christ lived on earth. By faith, we believe that the things he wrote are true, even though we were not there to see for ourselves. And in these last days, the Lord has chosen us to be His witnesses, to lead others to the Word of God, where they, too, can read the firsthand accounts of those who walked and talked with Jesus.

**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?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

Son relationship, we have in John 14–16 the most exhaustive presentation of the Holy Spirit and His relationship to the saving ministry of Jesus.

Looking from any perspective, from Creation to Redemption, John’s Gospel is unique, and we are blessed for it.

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** The apocryphal book, The Acts of Thomas, tells this story: After the death of Jesus, the disciples divided the world into regions to which they would take the gospel message. India fell to Thomas, who expressed doubts about going and made many excuses. Then Jesus appeared to him one night and said “Fear not, Thomas, go thou unto India and preach the word there, for my grace is with thee.”

Shrines and monuments in southern India credit Thomas for introducing Jesus to India. If this story were true (and we have no reason to believe that it is), what might it have taken to overcome Thomas’s doubts? What kind of relationship must you have with Jesus to make His word as powerful as His touch?

### Thought Questions:

❶ For Thomas, faith and obedience did not come easily. He was the kind who needed to be absolutely certain of the pros and cons of a situation before making a commitment. Compare Thomas’s need for a hands-on experience with that of Paul’s need for grace alone. What are the similarities and differences? What human elements cause us to yearn for tangible proof of God’s control?

❷ Read Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20, 21. Even at a time when His followers are few and the Cross towers before Him, His confidence remains firm. He focuses on a brighter future, on those who would come to believe in Him. From this prayer, what elements of unity do you think Jesus envisions for His church? How do you think unity affects the faith and the works of the church?

### Application Question:

● Monday’s section emphasizes the special blessing reserved for those who believe without seeing. Such blind faith can result only from an intimate relationship with the Savior. What everyday things can you do to cultivate an intimate relationship with your Lord?

## 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.