

Interpretive Keys for John

John 1:1-18...Part Two

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John has a very special purpose for the beginning of his gospel. In the first eighteen verses of chapter one (the prologue) he gives us the interpretive keys to understand the rest of the Gospel. This is why John begins with some very deep theological ideas. He is setting the stage so we will know what to look for as the Gospel unfolds. This is crucial, because the Gospel of John is so deep, and at times so complex, we need some guidance right from the start on how to read it. What are the key themes we should be looking for as we read? Here are three:

1. God Incarnate in Jesus Christ

The most astounding statement in the Gospel of John is in 1:14, *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.”* In many ways, the entire Gospel is an exposition of this verse. Everything John writes is intended to answer the ultimate question: who is Jesus Christ, truly, and why does it matter? From the opening paragraph we are invited to read every page of John with heart and mind focused on Jesus, seeing Him as God in human flesh, filled with wonder and all that this actually means for our world and for our lives.

2. Spiritual Conflict and New Creation

John’s Gospel is filled with conflict. We see the first sign of this in 1:5 - *“The light is shining in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.”* All is not well with our world—darkness abounds. Light shining in darkness pictures an invasion, an intervention, a struggle, a battle. This image gives us a preview of what we will see throughout the Gospel. We see it develop right in the prologue itself. *“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him”* (John 1:10-11). This explains what we find throughout the Gospel—so much controversy and intense conflict. What we find in John is nothing less than an intense spiritual battle from beginning to end. We are to read every page of John with this idea in mind.

The light cannot be defeated. In fact, the theme of light shining in darkness is taken from the account of creation in the Book of Genesis. So John is telling us that his Gospel is not just about spiritual conflict, it’s about the power of a new creation through Jesus Christ. This is why the prologue begins the way it does, with so much language taken from Genesis 1. Jesus Christ has come to invade this fallen world, to defeat the power of Satan, death, hell and darkness. This is also why we are given hints of the resurrection victory of Jesus throughout the Gospel of John. The resurrection is the ultimate victory of God and the beginning of a new creation. When we look at Jesus in the Gospel of John we are looking at the victory of God in our fallen world. We are looking at the one who is *“the resurrection and the life”* in the midst of the darkness and death of this broken world, and we are challenged to put our trust in Him (John 11:25).

3. The Personal Response of Faith

The final interpretive key for John is the personal response of faith. *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:12). Faith, belief, trust: all three of these English words reflect just one single word in the Gospel of John. These three English words give us different shades of meaning of this all important theme in John: we must each personally respond to Jesus Christ in faith (belief! trust!). But this is crucial...we must respond to Jesus as He is actually presented in the Gospel. It’s not enough to say we believe in Jesus and then make up our own version of who Jesus really is. It’s not enough to say we believe in Jesus, but then pick and choose the things from the Gospel we want to agree with while rejecting the parts we don’t like. The Gospel of John presents a radical vision of

the reality of Jesus Christ—God incarnate invading the darkness of our sin filled world, winning the ultimate victory through His death and resurrection, calling us to follow Him in fullness of faith, sending us out in His name to continue shining the light of Christ in the darkness of this world. This means that each of us should expect conflict too, as we follow Jesus, the light of the world. This is our personal response of faith in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life.

So now you're ready. Take these three themes and read, believe and live the Gospel of John.

For Further Reflection:

This week as you spend time in John 1:1-18, reflect as well on these additional passages which deal with many of the themes we have been discussing...

Colossians 1:9-14, 1 John 1:5-7, Hebrews 10:35-11:1, Hebrews 12:1&2.