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A Companion to the Gospel by John

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Introductory

The Gospel by John speaks for itself, but there may be help in a few suggestions as to its deeper meaning.

1. The theme of "John" in all his writings (Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse) is "The Testimony of Jesus."

This Testimony is shown to be Christ Himself.

The Testimony is carried on, not merely by teaching, but by the vital union of Christ and His own.

2. The special word used by John for "Miracle" is "Sign". This means that everything is for instruction, not only interest and wonder.

This really is the key to "John". Everything has a hidden meaning.

What is said and done is a sign of something else. We have to look deeper for the things signified.

3. "John" is not an earthly history; it is a spiritual history; related to heaven and not merely to earth;

to eternity, and not merely to time.
"John" is in the same realm as "Ephesians".

4. John's Gospel is a comprehensive embodiment of great truths and their laws. Every great truth has its own law, and obedience to that law is the way into the experience of that truth.

Chapter 1 **The Presentation.**

1. From Eternity:

- (a) One in being with God, verses 1-2,
- (b) All creation through Him, verse 3
- (c) The fountain of life, verse 4

2. Into Time:

- (a) His Forerunner-Witness, vv. 6-8, 15-42
- (b) The Shekinah in the Tabernacle (not condemnation as with Moses; but grace and truth) vv. 14-17
- (c) An unrecognised Visitor received by a few only, vv. 10-13
- (d) God has provided Himself a Lamb for a sacrifice, vv. 29, 36

3. A Company Gathered out to Him vv. 43-47

Chapter 1 contains the whole Gospel of John in germ. (See Appendix).

Chapter 2 **"The Beginning of Signs" (verse 11).**

In the sign of the Marriage of Cana all the subsequent signs and truths are found in germ. This is the foundation of the whole "Gospel".

1. "Third Day." Verse 1.

Three in the Bible is the sign of fulness of Divine Testimony.

Taking up contents of chapter 1:

- (a) The truth of the Person of Christ, verse 11
- (b) The witness of John the Baptist, verse 11
- (c) Gathering of disciples, verse 11

2. "Marriage."

Type of Christ's union with His Church. Revelation 19: 7 (By same writer). See also Ephesians 5:25.

- (a) Waterpots - vessels. Type of humanity.
- (b) From emptiness to fulness. What Christ's company enjoy. (See 1:16).
- (c) From death unto life. ("No wine.") What Christ's company enjoy.
- (d) From despair to joy.
- (e) From shame to glory. What Christ's company enjoy, verse 11 (See 1:14).

Wine a type of Blood and Life. Blood the means of a Covenant (Marriage).

Key words: "Mine hour," 4; "Sign," 11; "Glory," 11.

The Testimony here is that of Life triumphant over Death, and it is gathered up in verses 13-25 in relation to the Passover.

The Passover:

- (1) Lamb slain
 - (2) Blood shed.
 - (3) Death destroyed.
 - (4) A people secured.
- The Kingdom of God.

Chapter 3 The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is not merely a realm, but a state; not merely an order of outward things, but a condition of life; not a system imposed from outside, but a kind of life and nature which is from God.

1. The need and concern for being in this Kingdom.
2. The law which governs this Kingdom. "Ye must be born again."
Three things:
 - (1) *Difference* verse 6
 - (2) *Essence* verse 6
 - (3) *Basis* vv. 15-18

Nicodemus corresponds to the wine having failed and the miracle of new birth.

The Serpent in the Wilderness, verse 14.

- (1) The Curse.
- (2) Man by nature is under a curse. (Even a religious leader like Nicodemus).
- (3) Christ was made a curse for us, that we might be saved.
- (4) Faith in Christ crucified delivers from the curse.

Chapter 4 The Truth of Eternal Life

Nicodemus represents death in the realm of man by nature, and the demand for new birth; thus he prepares the way for New Life.

1. The Local Setting.

Illustrating absence of God's life.

- (1) Spiritual; an abiding sense of lack. Abiding dissatisfaction.
- (2) Moral; life out of harmony with God's mind.
- (3) Religious: Powerless tradition. Religion against rather than for.

This is life which is not life, but death.

2. The Nature of Eternal Life.

It is God's own life; differing from man's; and its quality gives it its death-overcoming power, implied by "Eternal."

3. *The Law of Eternal Life.*

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God, verse 14. Chapter 7:38,39. This is related to Christ in Person, verse 14.

This makes everything spiritually alive, verse 23.

The Testimony here is again life in Christ delivering from death, and is summed up in verses 46-54.

Chapter 5 Walking in the Power of God

The impotent man at the pool.

Key verses: 19, 20, 21, 30.

In this chapter Christ takes the position of man by nature, and shows that as such he can do nothing of (out from) himself.

The man 38 years a cripple.

This was the period of Israel's journey in the wilderness up to the death of Moses: Israel's impotence and probation.

This man signifies the impotence on the bed of the Law, unable to carry it.

Christ comes in after the Law in "Grace and Truth" (chapter 1:17).

A new inward strength enables to carry the Law.

The man could do nothing out from himself. The word of life came through Christ and he walked (verse 26).

The Law - like the bed - was intended for a blessing; but human weakness makes it a bondage.

Christ delivers from the bondage of the Law.

The law of this walk in life and power is: meeting everything as out from the Lord, and not ourselves. This was the law of Christ's own life of moral and spiritual ascendancy.

The Sabbath in this chapter speaks of God's rest.

It is related to Christ as He brings God's works to perfection.

Chapter 6 Life Triumphant over Death as a Present and Continuous Testimony (verse 50).

1. *The Passover at Hand* (verse 4). Life victorious over death (Exodus 12).

2. *The Manna* (verses 30-32). Life victorious over death (Exodus 16).

(1) Speaks of the initial salvation from death through the blood of the Lamb.

(2) Speaks of our maintenance in life by constantly receiving Christ.

3. The Law of this Victory over Death.

Feeding on Christ.

Verse 53. "Except ye eat" (Greek, once for all) connects with Passover.

Verse 54. "He that eateth" (Greek, continues eating) connects with Manna.

We feed on Christ by:

- (1) Prayer.
- (2) The Word of God.
- (3) Obedience to Him.
- (4) Fellowship with believers.
- (5) Worship.

Chapter 3 - The need for new birth.

Chapter 4 - The new life.

Chapter 5 - The new walk.

Chapter 6 - The new victory.

Chapter 7 A New Day Foreshadowed

Chapter 6 brings to a close the "Life" section of the Gospel.

It is seen that life is only possible in Christ, and many are offended and go away.

Chapter 7 is a transition from Life to Light, and combines both. The Light section will close as did the Life, with unbelief and sifting.

The Feast of Tabernacles is the background here. At this Feast a great candelabra was lighted, and great vessels of water from the Pool of Bethesda were poured out in the Temple.

Christ takes hold of this custom and puts Himself in the place of both, uniting in Himself the twofold symbolism of the Light and the Life.

A New Day is here in view - the eighth day (verse 37; Lev. 23:36), which is to be the day of the Spirit on the ground of Christ glorified (verse 39).

There is a vital secret contained in this chapter. In the presence of almost universal unbelief (even in His own family), hostility, suspicion, prejudice, and danger to His life, Jesus maintains a calm, steady, strong moral ascendancy, and moves as one protected until His work is done.

Why? Because He has a secret life with God, from which He refuses to be drawn out. He moves, not at the dictates of men, nor under the government of set religious ordinances, nor yet by what is either expected of Him or what is politic, but by the inner witness of the Father; waiting for His sanction and time for movement (verses 8, 9).

Chapters 8 & 9 Christ Presented as the Light

To the end of chapter 6 the subject is Life (1:4).

Chapter 7 is a transition chapter.

Chapter 8 brings in the subject of Light (1:4).

Verses 1-11 are an introduction; the Jewish Rulers, blind even in the presence of the Law, are convicted in the presence of Christ Who is the Light, revealing the heart.

Chapter 8 is an emphasis upon the fact that Christ is the Light; that man by nature is in darkness; that liberty comes through knowledge of and obedience to the truth; and that Christ is the Truth, and the full revelation of God.

Chapter 9 is a sign (object lesson) of Chapter 8 (see especially verses 1, 4, 5, 39, 40, 41).

Man "*born* blind." This is connected with the works of God.

Salvation is not by believing certain doctrines, but by Christ giving a new spiritual faculty, which has never before operated in us.

This man's condition was an illustration of the condition of all men by nature, even of the religious Jews.

The law which governs this new living knowledge is the absolute Lordship of Christ. Not tradition, men, religious systems; but personal and complete surrender to Christ. This runs right through chapters 8-9.

The sequel to this surrender is seen to be a great cost; being cast out by men. But Christ takes up such and more than satisfies.

Chapter 10 Separation Unto Christ

Chapter 9 ends with what happens to those who surrender to Christ; they are cast out.

Chapter 10 begins with what Christ does with such; He leads them out of one order and into the true fold.

He becomes their Shepherd.

Chapter 10 marks a Big Transition.

Up to this point all has been individual; now it is collective. All the great truths illustrated in individual cases are now embodied in a called-out company.

The movement begins with coming out to Christ, and ends with having eternal life.

Christ is here seen as :

- (1) Shepherd - leading out, vv. 2, 3
- (2) Door - leading in, verse 7
- (3) Good Shepherd - inspiring confidence, verse 11
- (4) One Shepherd - bringing unity, verse 16

The Issue: Division. Verses 31, 42

Chapter 11 & 12 **The Church which is His Body**

Note that a distinct movement is taking place now. Christ is closing in with His own; public ministry is ceasing, while He concentrates upon His Church for future testimony (11:54).

"Bethany" (verse 1).

Three Pictures:

- (1) Luke 10:38. Strain and discord.
- (2) John 11. Death.
- (3) John 12. A feast in resurrection.

This is the Spiritual History and Nature of the Church.

- (1) Connected with the Passover. Because of sin there is judgment and death, in order to newness of life (11:49-51; 12:1).
 - (2) Related to the glorifying of Christ (4).
 - (3) Spiritually related to the incurable state of man by nature, needing a new life (39).
- Note the many delays of Christ.
- (4) The object in view is a vessel of testimony to Christ (12:10,11; 11:52).
 - (5) The issue, antagonism toward Christ and the vessel of testimony.

The Corn of Wheat (12:24):

- (1) Much out of little.
- (2) Gain out of loss.
- (3) Life out of death.

This is "Bethany". Christ, and His Church.

Chapter 13 **The Servant and Service of God**

As embodying all the spiritual truths of chapters 1-11.

The chosen company now come to service.

Chapter 3 Heavenly Birth.

Chapter 4 Eternal Life.

Chapter 5 Walking in victory.

Chapter 6 Life triumphant over death.

Chapter 7 The fulness of the Spirit.

Chaps. 8-9 Spiritual revelation.

Chapter 10 A separated company.

Chaps. 11-12 The nature of the Church.

Chapter 13 Service.

The Church is to Carry on Christ's Ministry.

- (1) Sin and ruin entered because Satan in pride refused place of a servant and sought equality with

God.

(2) Sin and ruin are dealt with through Christ laying aside (temporarily) equality with God and becoming a servant.

(3) The Church has to have the mind of Christ in this way. (See Philippians 2).

Chapter 13 teaches that the way to glory is through humility, suffering, and shame, to save from sin.

At verse 34 of chapter 13, the "Gospel" enters specifically upon the theme of Love.

Chapter 14 **Heavenly Fellowship with Christ**

What Christ has been saying about going away and the manner thereof was beginning to touch them as with a chill hand.

A state of uncertainty about everything was created. This was an inevitable thing, and necessary as a part of spiritual history. They were spiritually on resurrection ground since chapter 12, and that means the world left behind, and heavenly things taking the place of the earthly. Thus Christ introduces another spiritual factor - the mystery of spiritual fellowship with Himself after His departure; union with Christ in heaven.

With everything earthly, uncertain and passing, He introduces a word which touches the whole situation.

Menō (Greek) means - to stay, remain, abide, continue, enduring, permanence.

Verse 2. (1) Heavenly abiding places ("mansions"), Greek, *Monai*.

Verse 10 (2) The Father abides in Him.

Verse 17 (3) The Holy Spirit will abide in them.

Verse 23 (4) The Godhead will make His abode in believers.

Their questions are:

(1) How shall we get to God? "I am the Way," verse 6

(2) How shall we know the truth about God? "I am the Truth," verse 6

(3) How shall we know the life of God? "I am the Life," verse 6

To go, to know, to live, Christ is the answer.

Chapter 15 **Fruitfulness by Heavenly Fellowship with Christ**

Israel was of old called the Lord's Vine.

Christ now takes the place of Israel: "I am the Vine" (verse 1).

The object of the Vine is the glory and satisfaction of God.

(See link with chapter 2: Wine, vine, glory, marriage, union, life, joy, fulness.)

The law of fruitfulness is "Abiding in Christ."

Christ's fruitfulness was because He abode in the Father.

Theirs (and ours) is to be a continued expression of the principle of His own life.

He abode in the Father - not in Himself.

He did this by obeying the Father, and neither consulting Himself nor obeying the Evil One.

We abide in Christ and bear much fruit by seeking to do everything as out from Him and not from ourselves.

Love is the secret of fruitfulness.

Chapter 16 **The Gain of His Going**

Christ said that the Holy Spirit's coming was more important than His own remaining (verse 7).

How is this?

(1) His presence was outward.

The Holy Spirit would be within.

(2) He would only be able to be with some in one place at a time.

The Holy Spirit would be with all everywhere.

(3) He could at most only stay for a few years.

The Holy Spirit would abide for the age.

(4) He came to do a work for our salvation by dying an atoning death.

The Holy Spirit would convict men worldwide of the need of that work.

Chapter 16 shows that persecution will come from the religious world, but that the Holy Spirit would be with them to be their strength.

It also teaches that their equipment for service would be the same as His.

Chapter 17 **The Prayer Beside the Altar**

Christ here takes the place of the High Priest. He has already taken the place of the Jewish Feasts, the Sacrifice, the Temple, the Vine, etc.

He is now about to offer the Whole Burnt Offering (Himself) (verse 19).

His prayer will be sealed with His own blood.

The prayer includes the three sections of this Gospel, viz. :

Life, Light, and Love.

(These are mentioned and dealt with).

The prayer is:

1. That the Father may be glorified in the Son, Verse 1
2. That the Son may be glorified in the Father, Verse 5
3. That He may be glorified in His disciples, Verse 10
4. That the disciples may be glorified in Him, Verse 24
5. That they all may be one, Verse 21
6. That they may be kept from the Evil One, Verse 15

Was this prayer answered?

Yes! The book of the "Acts" shows the answer.

God is glorified in Him in His resurrection.

All believers are one because they share one life.

The answer to the prayer will yet be revealed universally.

Chapter 17 takes up most of the great words of "John": Life, Light, Love, Truth, Believe, Know, Glory, Father, Son, etc.

Chapter 18 & 19 CHRIST THE KING

When this trial (?) is closed, there is not a vestige of true ground for anyone but Himself to stand upon.

See how He rules in the midst of His foes:

1. He Rules by His Person.

As to the soldiers and officers: They fell back when He said, "I am" (verse 6).
He commanded them what to do (verse 8).

2. He Rules by the Word already spoken by Him.

As to His flock (17:12).
As to His denial (13:38).
As to His betrayal (13:2,18,21).
As to His death (12:32,33; Mark 10:33).

3. He Demoralises the Jews.

They have repeatedly to change their methods to make up a case. They charge Him with:

- (a) Evil doing (verse 30).
- (b) Sedition (verse 33) (implied).
- (c) Religious misdoing (19:7).
- (d) Rivalry to Pilate (19:12).

They stood for ceremonial cleanness, but stooped to moral infamy (18:28).
He compelled them to say the most humiliating thing about themselves (19:15).

4. He Disconcerted Pilate.

- (a) Proved him guilty of accepting reports without getting evidence, 18:34,35
- (b) Made him hide behind a veil of cynicism, verse 38
- (c) Compelled a verdict of innocence, verse 38
- (d) Drove him to subterfuge, verse 39
- (e) Drew out his inconsistency, 19:1
- (f) Made him repeat his verdict twice, vv. 4,6
- (g) Discovered a secret fear (note "more"), verse 8
- (h) Put him in the place of a puppet, verse 11
- (i) Disclosed more moral weakness, vv. 12-13
- (j) Proved him to be a mere worldly time-server, vv. 12,16
- (k) Drew forth an acknowledgment (even if in irony) of universal sovereignty, vv. 19-22

Christ's Death was:

- (1) A deliberate laying down of His life; not having it taken away.
- (2) A universal uncovering of man's sin and wickedness.
- (3) A prophecy that He will universally reign in righteousness.

It seemed that evil was in the place of supreme control, but the references to the fulfilment of Scripture (e.g., 19:24,36) show that God was over all in government.

Chapter 20 **The Great Shepherd Returns**

This chapter gives a beautiful and concrete presentation of what the Church is in principle.

- 1. An exclusive witness to the Resurrection of Christ. He confined (and always does confine) the revelation of Himself as the Risen Lord to His own, and never to the world.
- 2. He constitutes the Church a Resurrection company, and then a heavenly people by first ascending to His Father as its Head (verse 17).
- 3. He constitutes the Church upon the basis of the peace which He has made by the blood of His Cross (verses 19, 20, 26; see Hebrews 13:20).
- 4. He establishes the fact that the Holy Spirit will be the governing reality of the Church in this age (verse 22).
- 5. He makes it clear that the full blessing of fellowship with Him as risen is through faith (verses 24-29).
- 6. He gives to the Church the beautiful character of a family (verse 17). "Father," "Brethren" (see Hebrews 2:11-13,17; 3:1).

Chapter 21

(This chapter is an after-inspiration. John evidently closed his narrative with 20:31.)

The chapter tells of the events of Christ's third appearance to His own after His resurrection (verse 14).

As three is the number of Divine completeness, we look for completing factors here.

What is the main feature of this chapter?

It is a new attaching of His own to Himself on the different basis which resurrection represents.

(1) The Church is out on the sea ("Sea" is a Biblical type of humanity).

(2) It has known failure because of self-energy (verse 3).

(3) Christ is on the distant shore, and knows all about them.

(4) When they come absolutely under His government (above natural reasoning) the place of failure becomes the place of fulness (verses 5, 6).

(5) The precision as to "one hundred, and fifty, and three," speaks of the elect gathered out of humanity in this age under the direction of Christ in service. This represents a special relationship to Him (verses 15-18).

THE GOSPEL BY JOHN
APPENDIX FOR STUDENTS.
A Suggested Outline.

1. The Prologue (1:1-19).

2. The Narrative.

The whole Gospel is an exposition of two great opposites:

1. Unbelief and Faith.

2. The World and Christ and His own.

The Narrative is in two main sections:

1. The presentation of Christ to the world (1:19-12:5).

2. The revelation of Christ to His disciples (13-21).

Each of these two main sections has its phases:

1. (a) Presentation to the world (1:19-4:54).

(b) Recognised in the world (3-4).

(c) Antagonised by the world (6-12:50).

In the Upper Room.

2. (a) Reveals the mind which is basic to the service of God and purges the chosen company of internal antagonism (13; Cp. Phil. 2).

(b) Reveals the spiritual position of the Church by reason of His departure (14).

1. (a) The presentation to the world is in two parts:

(1) Testimony to Him (1:19-2:11).

(2) His work (2:13-4:54).

The Testimony is threefold:

(1) John the Baptist - the old dispensation (1:19-34).

(2) Disciples who recognised Him (1:35-51).

(3) The "signs" (2:1-11).

1. (b) The recognition is threefold:

(1) Nicodemus - Jewish Pharisee (2:13-3:36).

(2) Samaritans (4:1-32).

(3) The King's officer (4:43-54).

1. (c) The antagonism runs right through alongside of works and testimony; both become more and more emphatic, is mainly in Judea - especially Jerusalem. The greatest testimony and signs in and near Jerusalem; the final burst of antagonism also there.

On the Way.

(c) Reveals the secret and nature of fruitfulness (15).

(d) Reveals the manner of His presence with them for the new dispensation. (The Holy Spirit) (16).

(e) The prayer before the Altar (17).

(1) For Himself (1-5).

(2) For those in fellowship (6-19).

(3) Those to be in fellowship (20-26).

(f) The final scenes.

The antagonism prevails.

He remains dead to unbelief.

He triumphs and lives to faith.

His death is the source of life.

His sufferings were voluntary, pre-determined and did not obscure His moral glory.

The great significance that John was the last apostolic writer, and that the contents of this book is the last revelation and emphasis. Before John's death a fatal tendency set in to sever the person of Christ; i.e., of the two natures to make two persons. That the Divine nature only joined Him at His baptism and forsook Him at His Cross. John wrote to refute this, and to affirm the indivisableness of Jesus Christ - the Son of God.

Chapter 1 sums up the whole book in its words:

Life, verse 4

Light, verse 4

Father, verse 14

Glory (and Glorify), verse 14

Truth, verse 17

Witness, verse 7

World, verse 10

Believe, verse 7

Name, verse 12

See also:

"To know."

"Works."

"Signs."

"To judge" and "judgment."

"To abide in."

"To manifest."

"Eternal Life."

"Flesh."

"Love" and "to love."

"Behold."

"Darkness."

Give the number of occurrences of each of the above words and phrases in the whole Gospel; then note in which part of the Gospel there are special preponderances.