THE SEE SERIES

JOHN

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

CHRIS TIEGREEN

See the realm of glory with new eyes

A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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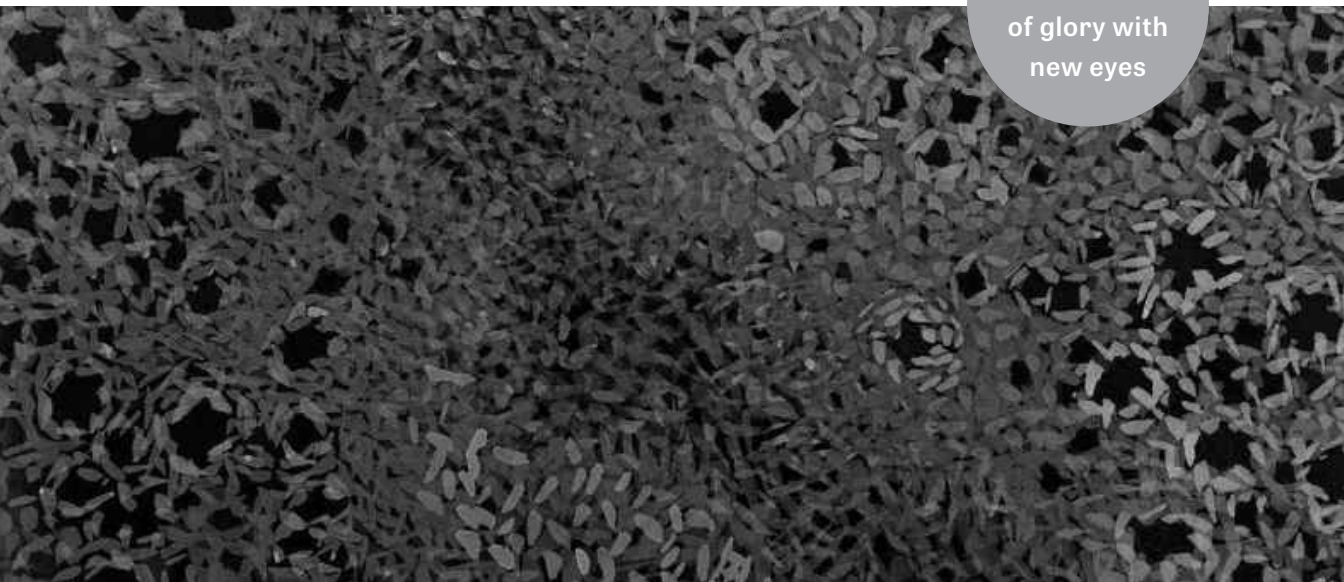

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John: A Devotional Commentary: See the Realm of Glory with New Eyes

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The readings beginning on pages 104, 130, and 195 are adapted from *The One Year Salt and Light Devotional*, published in 2019 under ISBN 978-1-4964-3005-2.

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Published in association with the literary agency of Mark Sweeney and Associates, Carol Stream, IL.

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ISBN 978-1-4964-8533-5

Printed in India

31 30 29 28 27 26 25
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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The See Series

Human beings live by vision. We're directed by the images in our minds. We pursue goals when we can *see* them; we grow according to examples we've observed more than the knowledge we've learned; and we embrace hope, despair, and numerous other perspectives based on what we see happening around us. Even people who don't think of themselves as visionary tend to have some mental picture of where they are headed and why. It's the way we're wired.

Most of us have a big vision—a sense of ultimate meaning and destiny, or even just a dream or a goal for our lives. We want to live with purpose. We orient our lives by what we can picture.

We also have smaller visions—what's on the agenda for today, this week, this year, or even the next couple of decades—that shape our short-term decisions.

If our little visions and big vision don't align with each other, we feel frustrated and compromised, as if our lives are going nowhere and our desires may never be fulfilled. But if we can align these visions and see clearly, we grow steadily, even dramatically, into our purpose and calling.

SEE, BE, LIVE

Christian teaching hasn't always recognized our visionary nature. Much instruction over the years has been based on a know-it-then-do-it approach to Scripture—as if life change were simply a matter of learning the truth and applying it. But such an approach bypasses heart transformation and can easily become legalistic and frustrating.

Though knowing and doing are both very important, following Jesus is more than a matter of knowledge and willpower. We can never *will* ourselves to be who we need to be. We are not called simply to *do*; we are called to *be*. When we put knowing and doing before being, we end up in the same condition that many of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time found themselves in—as pious people aiming to live godly lives without the necessary inner transformation.

Let me explain what I mean by *knowing*—an unfortunately imprecise word in English. We might read the Bible and *know* the commandments, instructions, encouragement, and truth it conveys. We receive that information and even agree with it. And if we want to be obedient, we will act on what we know. In that sense, our approach is both cognitive and behavioral—our thoughts affect our actions. But knowledge alone won't change our hearts, motives, desires, impulses, and everything else in us that needs to be transformed.

We see this phenomenon in the multitudes of people who memorize Jesus' words about faith but still lie awake all night with worry; who love Psalm 23 but still believe they are pursued by misfortune, not goodness and mercy; who agree that Jesus is Lord but don't live as though he is. Knowledge and action alone aren't comprehensive and compelling enough to reshape us.

In addition to our intellectual or informational knowledge, we also live from a particular worldview that shapes everything about us. This, too, is *knowing*, but it's a radically different kind of knowledge, isn't it? It's how we see the world, which is why I prefer words such as *seeing* and *vision* to capture it. This kind of knowledge goes well beyond information and instructions. It reflects not only *what* we know but also *how* we know and how we *respond* (perhaps even unconsciously) to what we know. It forms our sense of identity and becomes the filter for every piece of information we receive. Whereas the

first kind of knowing may shape our *thoughts* to a degree, this kind shapes our *thought processes* (and therefore our thoughts) to a greater degree.

For example, if I dive into a lake or ocean and swim around for an hour or two, I experience something of marine life. I can practice different strokes, get used to holding my breath for longer periods, and work on distances and techniques. I *know* swimming. I might even start to think I swim like a fish. But if I'm a fish, moving around in the water is my nature. I don't even have to think about strokes or breath or what it takes to live in the water. I just do it. I know swimming without even knowing that I know it. It's part of who I am.

God has given us a new nature and called us to live from it. It's a radical transformation—so radical that we aren't quite sure how to do it. Many of us turn back to old paradigms, trying to live out our new life by reforming our old nature. We try to make the new ways "natural," often by disciplining ourselves to conform to what we believe is true. In other words, we *know* and *do* by receiving information and acting on it.

But what if we really saw ourselves as new creations and gave no thought to any other possibility? What if it never even occurred to us that God might not be working in all the circumstances of our lives? What if love and worship were the default settings of our lives and we were shocked by anything else that came out of our hearts? What if our new nature was . . . well, natural?

There is no flip of a switch that gets us there, but some ways are better than others. I've experienced the futility of self-discipline born of knowing and doing (which, again, though insufficient, are still important). But I've also experienced the transformation that comes from that second kind of knowing—the radical reorientation of a worldview that shapes everything about us.

I call this radical reorientation *seeing* because we often express this deeper, more comprehensive knowledge in visual terms.

"I know you told me this would work, but I didn't *see* how."

"I knew she cared, but now I *see* how much."

"You can argue with me all you want, but the way I *see* it . . ."

We instinctively know there's a seeing that goes deeper than informational knowledge, and this seeing transforms vital elements of our personality—our

hopes and dreams; our gut feelings; our deeply rooted attitudes, instincts, and motives. Knowing information and responding to it may or may not change our heart. A radically new perspective does.

Embracing a new worldview may be catapulted forward by visual or sensory knowledge, or by seeing in a new way. They say a picture is worth a thousand words—a *million* seems closer to the mark—and is far more memorable. That's why the Bible is full of stories, parables, and experiences; why God inspired prophets to see visions and illustrate truth in tangible ways; and why he eventually clothed himself in human flesh to live among us. From beginning to end, God gives us images—highly visual and symbolic representations of who he is and what he does. We don't just read his instructions; we see what living out the truth looks like. We don't just read that he is a deliverer; we see numerous examples of dramatic deliverance. He doesn't just tell us he cares for us; he inspires a king to portray him as a shepherd and his Son to dramatize sacrificial, unconditional love in eternally indelible ways. Those pictures and portrayals are life changing.

If how we live flows out of who we are, being must come before doing. And if *seeing* so profoundly shapes *being*, then having this life-changing vision is vital. It is the key to the transformation we long for—that is, we become what we behold. The Holy Spirit works powerfully on the screens of our minds. We are drawn to whatever we focus on and emulate what we admire. Discipleship that begins with vision flows much more naturally into being and doing. Vision stirs us to be who we're called to be and to live as we're called to live.

The significance of our vision is the premise behind this devotional commentary series. The goal is to embrace a holistic, visual mode of learning. This series assumes that because we, as human beings, live from our identity and follow whatever vision we have, transformation happens by seeing in new ways. Instead of encouraging us simply to *know* and then *do*, the aim of these commentaries is to cast a vision for us to *see*, then *be*, then *live*. Like Jesus, who incorporated visual language into all his teaching, this series aims to refocus our inner eye. If we can see what the biblical writers saw and live according to that vision, we can be transformed.

THE ART OF ENVISIONING

We must train our brains to see and think in new ways. It doesn't just happen. The biblical mandate to renew our minds implies a conscious reorientation of our thought life. Old thought patterns are stubborn; those established neural pathways actively resist new pathways as intruders (which is why New Year's resolutions, exercise and diet plans, and quitting a bad habit can be so difficult). In most areas of life, this neurological dynamic—tapping into our established neural pathways—is helpful; we don't have to relearn everything each day. But when we've been called to reorient the way we think, we have to be relentless about it.

At a practical level, we can greatly amplify this process by (1) recognizing the vision behind biblical texts; (2) immersing ourselves in that vision (declaring the truths of Scripture out loud can help with this, as our brain is very responsive to the sound of our own voice, even if, at first, we don't think we sound convincing); and (3) practicing the art of envisioning.

This latter practice has been somewhat disparaged over the past couple of centuries because we've associated it with "imagination"—as in, "that's *only* your imagination," or "that's just a figment of your imagination," as if our internal vision is no reflection of reality. This would be news to biblical prophets, psalmists, storytellers, and teachers of parables, who all used highly visual language to express truth. Our imagination *can* be used to disengage us from reality—in fact, that's what many people do with it—but it is also our primary means of envisioning truth, which is exactly why God gave us so many stories and images and illustrations. He *wants* us to see his Kingdom—to picture his nature, his purposes, and his work in our lives. It's impossible to read Jesus' parables, study the stories in Acts or in the Old Testament historical books, or read the Psalms and Prophets without developing certain images in our minds. Our lives change when we immerse ourselves in those images.

In envisioning the Kingdom of God and all God's ways, we aren't trying to convince ourselves of something that *isn't* true—simply a figment of our imagination. We're training ourselves in what *is*. Sanctified imagination is not a flight from reality; it's a flight directly into it. We insist that our natural

minds, long steeped in limited vision and distorted ways of thinking, must now conform to reality as God defines it.

That's when transformation occurs. When we see God, ourselves, our world, and his Kingdom as he does, we rarely have to discipline ourselves to live differently. We just do it.

IN THIS COMMENTARY

Because this is a *devotional commentary*, you will find material here that fits both descriptors: commentary on the text, and devotional or inspirational thoughts that apply the text to your life, specifically in the ways you see, become transformed, and live out that transformation. In this commentary, you will find

- an introduction to the biblical book;
- an introduction for each subsection of the book, explaining its place and purpose in the text, the context or background of that section, and how it fits into the big-picture vision of biblical truth;
- a series of devotionals on the text that
    - further explain context, background, meaning, and purpose,
    - offer suggestions for practical application,
    - inspire and challenge you to *re-envision*—to learn to see in new ways;
- a discussion guide in the back to help you further reflect on the Scripture passages and talk about them with others to expand your spiritual vision even more.

As you read, practice the art of envisioning. Pray for Holy Spirit–inspired perspectives. Notice what and how the biblical writers see, and immerse your heart and mind in those visions. Adopt them as your own. More and more, you will enter into the heights and depths of God's Kingdom and live in his ways.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN

Even a casual reading of the fourth Gospel tells us it is quite different from the other three. It was almost certainly written later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and though it overlaps with those Gospels on some points, it is clearly meant to be more than just another version of the same story. John presents Jesus not only as the Son of God but as God incarnate—a much higher and more developed Christology than we see elsewhere in the New Testament. And it describes our relationship with Jesus in much deeper terms than the other Gospels do. John seems to have been written in and for a community of believers with a strong sense of mission and a lot of opposition. Its overarching purpose is for those who do not yet embrace Jesus to believe, and for those who do believe to believe more profoundly and persistently.

Though the Gospel itself never names its author (other than to anchor its words in the testimony of the Beloved Disciple), traditionally the author and Beloved Disciple have been assumed to be John the son of Zebedee. Much ink has been devoted to scholarly debate regarding the true identity of the Beloved Disciple and whether this Gospel is his own eyewitness account or the work of an editor who based it on John's eyewitness account.

We will not venture into this debate for three reasons: (1) Though this

devotional commentary relies quite a bit on scholarly research, it is not intended as an academic exploration of the Gospel's authorship; (2) as long as the author was an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry and inspired by the Holy Spirit, as the Gospel itself claims, his specific identity has only marginal relevance to the devotional and practical insights that follow; and (3) the traditional attribution to John the son of Zebedee is at least as plausible as any alternative. Thus, throughout this book, we will refer to the author as John.

The Gospel begins with an assumption that readers know who Jesus is, which suggests John was aware of the other three Gospels (the synoptics) and was expanding on them with his own sources, memories, theological perspectives, and purposes. Unlike the synoptics, no genealogies are given (as in Matthew and Luke), Jesus tells no parables, and more of his ministry takes place in and around Jerusalem than in Galilee. And though discipleship is a strong focus in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' words and signs in John are directed more at establishing who he is—that is, until chapters 13–16, where his upper-room discourse takes his disciples into a deeper discipleship than we see elsewhere.

The Gospel of John also assumes a mixed readership of Jews and Gentiles. In some places, it assumes knowledge of Jewish beliefs and practices; in others it explains them as if the reader would not know. This approach makes sense in the context of a diverse population like that in Ephesus, traditionally considered the hub of the Johannine community and where this Gospel was written. Believers in Ephesus came from all walks of life, and John seems acutely aware that many of them were at odds with the culture.

THE WORLD OF JOHN'S READERS

Imagine living in Ephesus in the late first century as a believer in the Jewish Messiah. This large, cosmopolitan, Roman provincial capital is steeped in Greek polytheism but with a strong Jewish presence. The city is home to the temple of Artemis and a hotbed of religious tourism and experimentation. Paul spent more than two years here, Timothy pastored the believers here for a time, and John (perhaps along with Jesus' mother, whom Jesus had entrusted to him) moved here sometime after mid-century. Believers in Jesus remain a small minority but are well established.

The world has changed in recent days, however. Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple destroyed a few years ago, and Jewish practice is different from what it was. Jews have scattered—many of them to Ephesus—and with the feasts and sacrifices in Jerusalem no longer possible, they are much more focused on the rabbis' teaching in synagogues. The party of priests, the Sadducees, and many Jewish sects (such as the Essenes and Zealots) were trampled under the feet of Rome. The Pharisees have long emphasized the practice of Torah. Now it's all they have.

Tensions have grown as well. Faith in the Jewish Messiah has long been contested in the synagogues, including the one in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). Over time, most people will perceive your faith in Jesus as an entirely different religion, and even now many synagogue leaders insist that it is. Because your sect threatens the precarious status of Jews with Rome—and because you believe Jesus is not only the Messiah but God in the flesh—Jewish leaders are purging your fellow believers from their synagogues, here and in many other cities. To you, your faith is the hope of humanity and an invitation into a new creation. To them, it's heresy.

This is perhaps the context of the Johannine community at the time the fourth Gospel was written. Scholars debate and disagree about such things, but tradition and at least some documentary evidence suggest that this Gospel grew out of such an environment. Other Gospels had been written, and many people had believed in Jesus as the Messiah. But far fewer understood that Jesus was not just anointed but also divine. John's Gospel seems to reflect a need among this community to justify its belief in the deity-humanity of Jesus and call both Jews and Gentiles to believe in him too.

It also reflects a need to affirm and encourage those who already believe. The first half of John (chapters 1–12) seems directed at teaching people who Jesus is (as 20:31 explicitly says). The second half (chapters 13–21, but especially 13–17) doesn't depart from this goal but is focused more on helping a person become a Christian and remain one. It is aimed at encouraging and building up believers. Jesus is gone from the earthly realm, but what is he doing and in what ways is he still present? As he explains in John, he has left to prepare a place for those who love him (14:2-3) while also remaining thoroughly with, in, and among them (14:18-21; 16:7). He is their life.

It was vital for Christians in this context to grasp the connections between the us-and-them world, as they perceived it, and the realm of eternity. Jesus was (and is) glorified and in the place of glory, but his people were enduring very inglorious circumstances. Yet according to his ministry and words, his eternal glory was breaking into his fallen creation. Understanding his work for, in, among, and through his people on this point was paramount.

JOHN'S MAJOR THEMES

The organization of John is not hard to discern. It begins with a prologue and ends with a conclusion. In between are what some have called the Book of Signs (2–12) and the Book of Glory (13–21). These are not completely distinct; glory is a prominent theme in the first half of the Gospel, and the greatest sign (the Resurrection) is at the end. Much of Jesus' ministry in John is woven into Israel's feasts, which provide a secondary framework for the Gospel's organization. Throughout these signs, feasts, and discourses, several themes emerge.

The story of two realms

The Christian faith is not dualistic (good and evil as equal forces against one another), escapist (all about getting to heaven), or Gnostic (only the spirit matters; the material world is evil). That said, two realms are evident in John: (1) an eternal realm of glory, the source of life and the new creation; and (2) the material realm we see around us and experience physically, which became subject to corruption and decay through sin. This latter realm is a victim of the Fall—the human rebellion in the first genesis—and needs renewal, restoration, and resurrection in the new genesis.

Nowhere does this Gospel or Scripture as a whole tell us we are escaping one realm to live in the other (though New Testament writers tell us to escape the corruption of the world and its sinful systems). Rather, we live in one realm while embracing the other, as Jesus demonstrated by functioning in both simultaneously while always pointing to the eternal realm as the source of life. His connection with the world beyond shows up in virtually every story in John.

Living in both realms, Jesus not only demonstrated his divinity but also

set an example for us to perceive what is happening in the invisible realm and bring it into the visible realm to live it out. This is how the Father, Son, and Spirit are manifested in this world, first through Jesus' ministry and then through those of his followers.

This story of two realms is also a story of the clash between them, the conflict of two kingdoms, one in which there is no corruption or decay, and the other that is dominated by the evil one. As God's Kingdom breaks in, there will be conflict. Fallen flesh will war against the things of the Spirit, both within ourselves and in society. But Jesus assures us he has overcome the fallen world (16:33).

As we live simultaneously in these two realms, we need to be clear about which one is our greater reality. We draw our life from the eternal realm of glory. Many Christians are living *for* eternity. In John, Jesus teaches believers to live *from* eternity. Even in our here-and-now experience, we are already born from above and have access to that realm.

Life

Jesus is life (1:4; 14:6), and he invites his listeners to receive new life in him. This life is rich and satisfying (10:10) and eternal (3:15-16; 4:14; 5:24; 6:47; 10:28; 12:25; 17:2-3). As his words in this Gospel make clear, "eternal" is not just a matter of duration but also of quality. His signs—water turned to wine, healing, multiplying food, resurrection—show us something of what this life looks like. It's restorative, abundant, overflowing, and joyful. Throughout his ministry, Jesus not only invites people into this eternal life; he brings it from the eternal realm into present experience and commissions his followers to do the same.

The coming and going of Jesus

The first few words of John's Gospel tell us that Jesus is from the eternal realm, the light that comes into this world (1:1-2, 9). From there, the coming and going of Jesus becomes an increasingly emphasized theme. He has ascended into and descended from heaven (3:13); he is the true bread that came down from heaven (6:41-42); the Pharisees don't know where he came from or where he is going (8:14); he goes to prepare a place for his followers and will come again

to take them, and they know where he is going (14:1-4); they will be able to do his works because he goes to the Father (14:12); Mary Magdalene encounters him before he ascends into heaven (20:17); and he will come again (21:22). Not only does his ability to come and go between realms reinforce the truth of his divinity; it impresses upon those who are "in him" that the gifts and blessings of heaven are more accessible than we might have thought.

The humanity and divinity of Jesus

The prologue of the Gospel makes sweeping claims about Jesus' deity, pre-existence, and creative power. But it also says he became flesh. John points out that Jesus thirsted (4:7; 19:28), got tired (4:5-6), wept (11:35), bled (19:34), and died (19:30). This divinity-humanity was challenging to many. (The idea of a coming messiah was commonplace in Jewish thought; the idea that this messiah would be God in the flesh was revolutionary and offensive.) It was also a difficult balance for many to grasp. Early false teachings about Jesus emphasized his deity/spirituality to the exclusion of his humanity/physicality or vice versa. For example, many scholars detect in John a response to early, proto-Gnostic thought (specifically Docetism, the idea that Jesus was only a spirit and never experienced material life or suffered). John presents Jesus as flesh and Spirit, fully human and fully divine.

The Father and the Son

Though neither John nor the New Testament is explicit about the Trinity, the relationship between the Father and Son (and the Spirit in chapters 14–16) points us in that direction. According to 1:1, the Word is with God but is also God himself. In 3:35, the Father loves the Son and puts everything into his hands; but in 10:30 and 17:21-22, the Father and Son are one. Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing and says only what he hears the Father saying (5:19-20; 8:38; 12:49), and he contrasts his relationship with the Father with the claims of Jewish listeners that their father is Abraham (8:33-59). In the end, Thomas ostensibly praises Jesus as deity, and Jesus does not object (20:28-29). The overall picture is that the Father and Son (and the Spirit, who is called both the Father's Spirit and the Son's) are personally distinct but essentially one.

The "I am" statements

When Moses asked God what to say when people asked who had sent him, God identified himself as "I AM WHO I AM" and told Moses to say, "I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:13-14). Jesus associated himself with that moment of revelation in his "I am" statements in John. How closely these correspond linguistically with that passage isn't clear—the divine name is Hebraic, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospel is written in Greek—but the references are too frequent and fraught with meaning to miss. And some were clear enough that Jesus' opponents reacted violently to his claims.

Those statements include:

"I AM the Messiah!" (4:26)

"I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48)

"I am the bread that came down from heaven" (6:41; "living bread" in 6:51)

"I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5)

"Before Abraham was even born, I AM!" (8:58)

"I am the gate for the sheep" (10:7, 9)

"I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14)

"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6)

"I am the true grapevine" (15:1)

"I AM he" (18:5, 8)

The Spirit and the flesh

Jesus sharply contrasted spirit and flesh on one occasion (6:63), but both are integral to God's good creation. The Holy Spirit does not come to condemn the flesh or do away with it, but to inhabit it (14:17). Jesus came from the realm of spirit into the realm of flesh and returned to heaven with a resurrected body, reconciling God's creation and his people as human beings born of his Spirit.

Light and darkness

Light from eternity shone into this world of darkness (1:5, 9), yet many prefer the darkness to the light (3:19). This theme of light and darkness is explicit in several passages (8:12; 9:4-5; 12:35-36, 46) and implied in others. In John, confusion and misunderstanding often happen at night (for example, Nicodemus struggling to comprehend heavenly truths; Judas leaving the upper room to betray Jesus; Peter denying Jesus in the courtyard), but some signs and responses of faith (healing and other miracles, as in 9:3-5; the Samaritan woman believing) are specified as taking place at "noontime" or during the day.* The theme of light shining into the darkness not only fits the Gospel's theology but also shapes its narrative.

The relationship between seeing and believing

John uses seven signs in chapters 2–11 to provoke a variety of responses among those who witnessed or heard about them, ranging from deep faith to rejection and hostility. John's narration and Jesus' words explore the shades of belief surrounding these signs. In fact, belief is emphasized throughout the book (for example, to gain life in 3:16 and 20:31; to do or fulfill the work[s] of God in 6:29-30). Some people see but do not believe, some see and believe superficially, some see and believe deeply, some see because they believe, and some believe without needing to see. Jesus' words to Thomas after the Resurrection present the answer to the questions raised along the way: "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me" (20:29).

Spirit, wind, and breath

In both Hebrew and Greek, *spirit*, *wind*, and *breath* are the same word. This makes for fascinating dialogue, especially in Jesus' words to Nicodemus (3:8), but also as a visual wordplay when Jesus breathes his Spirit into his disciples (20:22). This multiple meaning makes the references to the Spirit that appear throughout John suggestive of God's breath and the power and mystery of the wind.

* Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 201.

Life in the wilderness

Between the Exodus and the Promised Land, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years. During that time, they received manna from heaven and drank water that miraculously flowed from a rock (Exodus 16:1–17:7); built the Tabernacle according to God's instructions (Exodus 25–31) and saw his glory fill it (Exodus 40:34); survived a punishment of serpents by looking to the bronze serpent God told Moses to hold up for them (Numbers 21:4-9); received instructions for their major feasts (Leviticus 23); and were told they must listen to a prophet like Moses who would one day come (Deuteronomy 18:15-19).

All these events figure prominently in John. Jesus revealed his glory in the "tabernacle" of his body (John 1:14); people speculated that John and then Jesus were "the Prophet" (1:21; 6:14-15; 7:40); Jesus likened himself to Moses' bronze serpent, the emblem of the curse that would be lifted up for people to see and be saved (3:14-15); he described himself as true manna, the bread from heaven (6:32-58); he promised rivers of living water from something much greater than a rock in the wilderness (7:37-39); as the prophet to whom Israel "must listen," he assured his followers that his sheep hear his voice (10:1-18); and most of these statements and symbols are presented during (or immediately before or after) feasts celebrating these events. John's editing and narratives seem designed to draw attention to life in the "wilderness" of this world as we journey toward the land of promise, and to emphasize that, in Jesus, fulfillment of the promise has come.

Glory

Because the realm of glory and the revelation of glory are such prominent themes in John, it would help to define what glory is. The problem is that this concept is much easier to describe than to define. It includes the ideas of splendor, majesty, reputation, and worthiness; it is demonstrated through power; it comes with blessing, delight, and life itself; and the appropriate response is honor and worship. It is a revelation of who God is and an assertion of his preeminence, often in miraculous signs or overwhelming manifestations. It represents the eternal reality behind the scenes that will exceedingly surpass all that natural eyes might value.

In the Old Testament, glory often represents the divine presence. Moses both saw it (Exodus 24:16-18) and asked to see it (Exodus 33:18-23). God's glory filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35) and Temple (2 Chronicles 7:2-3). The whole earth is full of it (Isaiah 6:3) and will become aware of it (Habakkuk 2:14). God does not give his glory to another (i.e., a rival, Isaiah 42:8; 48:11), but he created people for his glory, to carry or reflect it (43:7; 49:3; 60:1-2; 62:2). Glory is God's, but it is impossible for human beings to carry his image without carrying his glory. By its nature, his image comes with some measure of, or capacity for, glory.

References to glory and glorification in John are numerous (1:14; 2:11; 5:44; 7:39; 8:50, 54; 11:4, 40; 12:16, 23, 28; 13:31-32; 14:13; 15:8; 16:14; 17:1-5, 10, 22, 24). Jesus is a manifestation of glory, and those who witnessed his ministry saw it (1:14); the first miracle revealed his glory (2:11); the Father glorifies his name in Jesus (12:28); Jesus and the Father glorify each other (17:1, 4-6); Jesus is glorified in his followers (17:10); and, in fulfillment of the original image we were given, Jesus shares his glory with us and wants us to see it (17:22, 24). Heaven is a place of glory, but as Jesus makes clear in John's Gospel, we can experience it on earth as the realm of glory breaks into the visible world.

JOHN 1

PROLOGUE AND PRELIMINARIES

In the beginning, God spoke, and the world came into being. The Spirit, the breath of God, hovered over the deep to bring order out of chaos and life out of lifelessness. At God's first spoken words in Scripture, "Let there be light," light pierced the darkness and the material world began to take shape.

John evokes this scene from Genesis not only to reveal Jesus, the incarnate Word, as the agent of creation, but also to signal the dawn of a new creation. God clothed himself in human flesh not just to save or rescue the fallen, the broken, and the lost, but to birth something new out of the old. This is the story of redemption, but it's also the story of another genesis. Just as God breathed his Spirit into the dust to form the first human, by the end of this Gospel Jesus will breathe his Spirit into his followers.

John's prologue (1:1-18) is the key to understanding his Gospel. We can't

know who Jesus is, why he said what he said and did what he did, or what he accomplished, unless we know where he came from and—as he says many times as the Gospel unfolds—where he is going. Here in the first chapter, John summarizes the book and the gospel message as well: The Word became flesh, lived among us, and revealed the nature of God.

BACKGROUND

The hymnic, poetic style of John's prologue is more appropriate to wisdom literature than biography—both admittedly imprecise genres in ancient literature. The first eighteen verses describe the Word as Creator, the testimony of John the baptizer, the Word's entrance into human history, and the implications of the Incarnation. They also introduce words and concepts that will be prominent in the rest of the book: *light*, *testimony*, *believe*, *rebirth*, *glory*, *love*, and *revelation*. Contrasts immediately emerge—spirit and flesh, light and darkness, law and grace, acceptance and rejection—as the author foreshadows tension between the realms of heaven and earth and between the diverse responses to the one who bridged them.

The concept of *logos*—the Word—also functions as a bridge among John's readers, who include Jews and Gentiles with various backgrounds and worldviews. In the Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture (the Septuagint), *logos* is often used to translate the Hebrew word *dabar* ("speech, revelation, wisdom, prophecy"), a word frequently used of prophets uttering the word of the Lord and of the Torah itself. In Greek philosophy, it refers to wisdom, order, and the logic or underlying principle of the universe, much like Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8:22-31. This one word draws on multiple theological and philosophical understandings to position Jesus as the designer of our world and the incarnation of all that is true.

We discover a concise summary of John's Gospel in 1:10-14. This, in a nutshell, is the story he is about to tell. Jesus, the concrete revelation of God, is the vehicle through which the Spirit and divine wisdom enter the world to re-create, reestablish order, and rebirth humanity. Some received him; others did not. Those who did were born into the new creation from above.

After the prologue but before Jesus begins his public ministry, the author covers the ministry of John the baptizer and the calling of Jesus' first few

disciples. These words also point ahead to what Jesus will reveal about himself. He is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36), the Holy Spirit rests upon him (1:32), and he connects this visible world with an open heaven (1:51). The first chapter points the reader to what is to come: God-in-the-flesh revealing his glory, doing the works of heaven, and breathing new life into his own creation.

THE BIG PICTURE

There's a difference between believing a message and receiving a person. Both are appropriate responses to Jesus, but John's Gospel emphasizes the latter. We receive Jesus by faith, but we need to understand what receiving him entails. If he is just a teacher, we simply learn from him. But if he is God incarnate, and if receiving him results in being united with him—born of his Spirit and bound to him deeply, internally, and inseparably—we are fundamentally transformed into something entirely new. We begin to look at our limitations suspiciously. We are no longer "only human." The Word, the Wisdom and Logos, the voice that spoke this world into being, has stepped into our lives with a promise to make them eternally fruitful and glorious. The rest of this Gospel will show us how.

BEGINNING AGAIN

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

1:1

Genesis starts at the most logical point: the beginning. It doesn't tell us the beginning of God, who has no beginning or end, but it does tell the story of this world and how it was created at God's resounding commands. He spoke, things happened, and in the world's original state it was all good.

The Gospel of John starts at the beginning as well. Many ancient readers of a biographical work on the Jewish Messiah would surely be startled by John's opening line. Where other biographies may have started with the subject's birth (as Matthew and Luke do), John goes back to the creation of the world. This Jewish Messiah was already there. In fact, he was the agent of creation (1:3), the preexistent giver of life (1:4), the light from a spiritual realm who formed a material universe and pierced through its darkness. It's quite a majestic beginning for a Jewish teacher, yet that is John's point. Jesus was no mere man. He was the Word, the Voice that created simply by speaking. He was God in the flesh.

By invoking the first words of Genesis, John unveils the purpose of this work. It is the story of beginning again, a *regenesis*, a new creation. God once spoke order into chaos and light into darkness, yet this beautiful new world

soon descended back into chaos and darkness through its acts of rebellion. In telling the story of God's chosen people in this fallen world, many of Israel's prophets and scribes pointed toward a coming redemption and a new creation. *This is it*, John says. Jesus was not just a prophet, teacher, or messiah who would redeem Israel. He was—and is—the Author of Creation, who came into this world to infuse it with new life.

RE-ENVISION THE NEW CREATION

We're familiar with the concept of fresh starts and a new life. It's central to Christian theology and, at least in figurative terms, to worldly wisdom. We can apply the idea to reform, improvement, or any other positive change. But we don't always grasp how *thoroughly new* God has made us, and we struggle with living a new life when the old one remains so visible. We slip back into "normal" too easily.

Change your "normal." Envision yourself as an entirely new being. Your name and personality continue on, but your source of life is altogether different. So are your character, your calling, and your capabilities. You will struggle if you see yourself as someone stuck in the old but aspiring to the new, but you will soar if you know you are already new. Immerse yourself in that belief, clothe yourself in the new creation, and live with new vision. By the power of the Word who has spoken life over you, you will flourish.