

## MOVING AWAY FROM THE FIRST THREE

No person who has read the four Gospels would reject the idea that *three are similar* and *one is different*. Very different, in fact. So different that one wonders if it should even be included with the other three as standard practice. But the fact that *the fourth is different* itself argues the Gospel must be rightly divided. If there is only one Gospel, why isn't that Gospel found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? And if it is found in those three...show me! Why is there scarcely a hint of the "believe and be saved" message that can be found in John? Isn't this of some mild interest?

## FINDING THE GOSPEL IN JOHN

There are several passages in John that teach the priority (and even exclusivity) of *belief* as the foundation for salvation. These passages even seem to teach that faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ results in salvation as a free gift. Let's consider a few of these passages.

In John 1:11, we are given a key to understanding the fourth Gospel. From the beginning of the book we are told how the story ends: **his own received him not**. This is not a work that leaves the reader in suspense. Rather, the author *always* tells the ultimate outcome. The gospel of John was written to convince **his own** to *receive Him* after they previously rejected Him. John 1:12 *sounds like our Gospel*, but as tempting as it is, I think it best to say that *things that are similar are not the same*. In John 1:11-12 the emphasis is on **his own** and the acceptance of those who did receive Him.

But what of John 3:14-16? The **Son of man** (v. 14) was **lifted up** (including the crucifixion, followed by His resurrection and ascension) in order that **eternal life** (v. 15) could be given to **whosoever believeth in him** (v. 15, 16). However you interpret these verses, they are clearly a grace gospel. The only requirement is belief, a truth that is not mentioned in the synoptic Gospels. There is no limit to the Jews (as in the Synoptics), nor do the words include (or even allow) any required obedience to the law or the commandments.

There are a few passages, like John 5:24 which speak of salvation in terms of **everlasting life**. Unlike John 3, this is clearly Jesus speaking, not commentary by the author of the Gospel. How then can it be that Jesus appears to be teaching a Pauline message here, prior to the mystery of this dispensation and prior to the death, burial, and resurrection?

First, note the problems with taking this as "the same gospel we teach."

1. When Jesus spoke of **he that heareth my word**, He had not spoken a single word about trusting in the complete work of Christ on the cross, let alone about the resurrection.
2. In addition to hearing, Jesus taught the people that belief **on him that sent me** (i.e.: the Father) was sufficient for **everlasting life**. However, this is not part of the Gospel we preach today.
3. Theologically, in our age of grace, a person is not saved by *hearing Jesus* and *believing in the Father* but by *trusting in the completed work of Jesus*.

What then can this passage mean?

- In John 8:49-51 there is a similar context of honoring the Father. In that passage, Jesus says that a person must **keep my saying** and then **he shall never see death**. Whatever we do, these verses will have to be in harmony.
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of both *hearing* and *doing* His word (Matt. 7:24-27).
- The word for **heareth** is one that *can* be interpreted as *obey*. For example, it is **Hearken** in Mark 7:14. In Acts 4:19 Peter said it would not be right to **hearken unto you more than unto God**. In this sense, it is like a parent who says to his child, “now listen.”
- In the end, Jesus *never* said anything for His hearers to hear other than to believe in His identity as the Son and thus obey the commandments of the Father. Doing so would bring a person *through judgement* and into the **everlasting life** of the Kingdom.

In John 10:9-10 Jesus speaks of Himself as **the door** (v. 9) through whom one can **be saved** (v. 9) and find **life more abundantly** (v. 10). However, here too it could be argued that such salvation seems to be more in a Jewish kingdom concept than in the individual salvation of which Paul speaks.

John 20:31 is often used to speak of our Gospel, but I would caution against doing so. The book of John begins with the declaration of Jesus as God (Jn. 1:1) and continues the same conviction to the end. The goal of the book is to convince the Jews that the one they rejected is their Messiah. John 20:31 certainly emphasizes belief as fundamental, but the belief requested is **that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God**. Such belief, in its strictest sense, is not belief unto salvation (which requires a faith in His completed work, a belief which can only be surmised from the stated belief).

In the end, it may be that John 3:14-16 (and a few verses following) are the only passage in John that *undoubtedly* speaks of the salvation we share today, and that all other passages are directed toward the salvation to the nation that comes along with the Kingdom.

## WHY DO WE FIND THE GOSPEL IN JOHN?

Paul makes a clear declaration in Ephesians 3:9 that the Gospel he teaches (and we share) was given by revelation and previously **hid in God**. But if the Pauline Gospel is a hidden mystery at the time of Jesus, *why do we read it in John 3:16?* In very short order, I believe that the reason we read of the Gospel of Grace in John has to do with the timing of which it was written, coming long after the first three, and certainly at a time with the *mystery* had been revealed. But furthermore, I believe that we have been led astray with *red ink* in John 3:16 and the surrounding passages. I am convinced that Jesus did not speak these words, but that they are *commentary by the author* that explains the current situation in contrast to the *kingdom era* situation of Nicodemus.