

“So that you may believe”

Introduction

We remember from last week that there’s only one Gospel. And yet that single Gospel of Jesus Christ has been given, in our Bibles, fourfold expression. So we have *the Gospel “according to Matthew”* and *the Gospel “according to Mark,”* and *the Gospel “according to Luke,”* and *the Gospel “according to John.”* While there’s only one Gospel, these four different expressions of that Gospel are all unique, and if you’ve ever read through the Gospels you’ll know that none is *more* unique than this Gospel according to John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic (“seeing together”) Gospels because in terms of their content they share so much in common. The Gospel of John is different in so many ways (in the material and content, in the way it’s organized, and even in its “tone”) that there’s a sense in which we can think of it in a different category from the synoptic Gospels. This morning, we’re going to ask very simply: What is the goal of this Gospel of John and how has John uniquely crafted his Gospel with this goal in mind? John himself answers these two questions in John chapter twenty:

I. John 20:30–31 — Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The purpose or the goal of this Gospel is that we may *believe* that *Jesus* is the Christ, the Son of God (the promised Messiah), and that *by believing* we may have *life* in his name. How’s that for the goal of any book? But notice, now, how John says that he has sought to accomplish *this goal* by writing down just a select number of the “signs” that Jesus did in the presence of His disciples. John basically sums up the content of his entire Gospel as a collection of “signs” (which in this Gospel are also miracles). And yet there are far less miracles recorded in John than in any of the other (synoptic) Gospels. There are at least 17-20 recorded miracles of Jesus in each of the other Gospels. But here in John, there are only seven recorded miracles of Jesus (all in the first half of the book; 1-12). So how can John say—or at least seem to say—that this Gospel is in some special way the book of “signs”? The answer is in the word itself: “signs” (Greek: *semeia*).

The synoptic Gospels may record more miracles, but it’s John who uses that word “signs” more than any of the other Gospel writers. Not only does John use this special word more often, but he treats it in a special way. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we can read about the “sign” of “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Lk. 2:12) “the signs of the times” (Mat. 16:3), “the sign of [Jesus’] coming” (Mat. 24:3; Mk. 13:4), the “sign” that Judas gave to the mob that came to arrest Jesus (Mat. 26:48), as well as the “signs and wonders” of “*false* christ and *false* prophets” (Mk. 13:22). But in John, the word “signs” is very carefully reserved only for the miraculous works of Jesus. It’s almost as though this word comes to have its own “technical” meaning in John. John has specially chosen this word in order to help us see Jesus – so that we might believe, and that by believing we might have life in His name.

II. Changing water into wine

In chapter two, after Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, John writes:

- John 2:11 — This, **the first of his signs**, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Now think about this: When Moses or any one of the Old Testament prophets performed miracles, they were never manifesting their own glory. Far from it! They were only manifesting the glory of God. But when Jesus performed a miracle, John says, He was manifesting *His own* glory. So what's the difference between the miracles of Moses and the miracles of Jesus? The answer to this question is found, as we'll see all throughout the Gospel of John, not in the miracles themselves, but in what each man taught, and in what each man claimed—or didn't claim—for himself. In other words, it's the words and the teaching of Jesus that invest His miracles with their true meaning and their true *significance* as *signs* – signs manifesting and revealing *His* glory, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Think about it like this: The “signs” of Jesus (such as the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana) are ultimately only “explained” and unpacked by the things He said. At the same time, the things that Jesus said were being authenticated (for those with faith) by the signs that he performed. In the case of Jesus especially, word and deed—or word and sign—are intimately bound up together. What is the *meaning* of changing water into wine at a wedding in Galilee? What is this a *sign* of? We can only make sense of this sign by listening to the words that Jesus speaks. But how do we know that the words that Jesus speaks are true – that He is the promised Messiah? For those with eyes to see, the words that Jesus speaks—the very words that explain the signs—are themselves authenticated by the signs that Jesus performs.

Are you beginning to see that we can never separate out the miracles of Jesus from the teachings of Jesus – the words of Jesus from the deeds of Jesus? Some of us might have the wrong idea that miracles don't need to be explained – that they are obvious enough. But nothing could be further from the truth! The point of miracles is not just to “wow” people into believing something—anything. That's the mark of counterfeit miracles. Miracles that delude and deceive. The point of a true and genuine miracle is to function as a sign that points us away from itself to something else – specifically, to the “something else” that explains and legitimizes the miracle as a genuine “sign.” The sign is capable of authenticating the word only in so far as it is the word that truly and faithfully explains the sign. This is what helps us to resolve a tension in John. John says that these *signs* are written “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” That sounds so positive! But then we read in other places:

- John 2:23–25 (cf. 7:31) — Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, **many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing**. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now isn't this supposed to be a good thing? They believed when they saw the signs. Isn't that the point? And yet Jesus wasn't impressed. Apparently, the people saw the signs clearly enough, but they hadn't yet seen or understood the true explanation or meaning of those signs. They had been “wowed” into believing, but this believing was not the true, saving kind of belief that pleases God. What does this tell us? John does not record the signs of Jesus merely to “wow” us, but rather to teach us (since the signs are explained by the word) and to produce in us a genuine

saving faith (since the word is authenticated by the sign). There are many other places in John where we see the helplessness of signs in and of themselves to produce any genuine believing.

➤ John 4:48 — Jesus said... “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

Notice how Jesus adds the word “wonders.” In other words, the people saw the signs only for their “wow” factor, and failed to look beyond the signs for their true meaning in the *words* of Jesus.

➤ John 6:30 (cf. 2:18) — [The Jews] said to [Jesus], “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?”

It’s pretty clear that the religious leaders aren’t interested in believing. There’s a sense in which they *have* understood to some extent the *word* that Jesus has spoken, and having rejected that *word* they cannot and will not accept the legitimacy of any *sign* that Jesus performs. We read in John 11 and 12:

➤ John 11:47–48 — So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

➤ John 12:37 — Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.

In light of all these things, how can John conclude his Gospel so “optimistically” with these words: “These [signs] are written *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, *and that by believing you may have life* in his name.” Notice that these signs are *written*. They’re not somehow performed anew every time someone reads John’s Gospel. And yet these “signs” that none of us can ever see have been written down so that we might believe and so that we might have life! Why should these signs that none of us have seen with our own eyes cause us to believe? Because the point is not sensationally wowing us into a superficial, counterfeit believing, but rather *revealing* and *manifesting* to those with eyes to see *the word* that these signs point to and by which they are *explained* – the word that is in turn authenticated by these very signs. This is the solid, indestructible foundation for all genuine, saving faith.

III. The healing of an official’s son

In chapter four, after Jesus’ healing of an official’s son who was at the point of death, John writes:

➤ John 4:54 — This was now **the second sign** that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

It seems clear that John is in some sense organizing his Gospel around a specific series of signs. And yet after this second sign, the numbering stops and we’re left to “count” the signs on our own. That can be frustrating to those who were off to a great start with the first two! But is John really so concerned that we be counting the signs? I don’t think so. That’s why John himself

stopped counting. What John is far more concerned with are the words and the teachings of Jesus that surround these signs and explain these signs as together (both the *word* explaining the deed and the *deed* authenticating the word) they reveal and manifest to us the glory of Christ – so that we might believe, and so that by believing we might have life in His name. Are you beginning to understand now how John can summarize his entire book as a book of signs?

IV. The Feeding of the Five Thousand

The next miracle that John explicitly identifies as a “sign” is Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand (plus women and children) with only five barley loaves and two fish (Jn. 6:1-15). Listen to what John writes:

- John 6:14–15 — When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Once again, they saw the sign clearly enough with their own eyes, but they didn’t understand the sign. They were wowed by the sign, but they failed to see in this sign the manifestation of the *true glory* of Jesus. And so they failed to *truly* believe. This explains how on the one hand we can read in verse two:

- John 6:2 — A large crowd was *following him, because* they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.

True enough. And on the other hand, we can read what Jesus says in verse 26:

- John 6:26 — Truly, truly, I say to you, you are *seeking me, not because* you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

If they had understood the sign of the feeding of the five thousand, they would have believed the word of Jesus, who explained the sign with these wonderful words:

- John 6:33, 35 — The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life.

If they had truly seen and understood the sign, they would have believed in Jesus, who says to all of us:

- John 6:35 — Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

V. The raising of Lazarus

The next miracle that John explicitly identifies as a “sign” is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And yet once again, the majority of the people failed to see what this sign truly meant.

Even as they were crying out “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (Jn. 12:13), they were still failing to truly believe. John writes:

- John 12:18 — The reason why the crowd went to meet him [on Palm Sunday] was that they heard he had done **this sign** [raising Lazarus from the dead].

They were wowed by the sign into a counterfeit believing, but what they failed to see in this sign was the manifestation of the true glory of Jesus. They failed to see in the raising of Lazarus the reality that Jesus is, Himself, the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25). If they had truly seen and understood the sign they would have rejoiced in these words of Jesus to all of us:

- John 11:25–26 — Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

On the one hand, there were many who were wowed by the signs (as just bare displays of power) into a believing that was counterfeit. On the other hand, there were others who dismissed the signs because they were already convinced that Jesus was a liar. In and of themselves, and apart from faith, signs are ultimately of no value or benefit to anyone. But wonderfully, even miraculously, John *can* still write these words to all those who have eyes to see (cf. Jn. 12:37-40):

- John 20:30–31 — Now Jesus did many other *signs* in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but *these* are written *so that you may believe* that *Jesus* is the Christ, the Son of God, *and that by believing you may have life in his name*.

John wrote his Gospel for those who already knew about the promised Messiah and son of God. He wrote so that they might believe that the one they were waiting for had come and that His name was Jesus. But his ultimate goal was not just that they would have a head knowledge of who the Messiah was, but that believing in Him, they might have life in His name. He wrote not only so that they might understand that *Jesus* was the promised Messiah, but also so that they might see His *true glory*—so that we might see His true glory, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” It’s this “seeing” that we can truly say *is* “believing.” It’s in *this* seeing and *this* believing that we come to have life in His name. Have you seen? And have you believed?

VI. The resurrection of Jesus

For anyone who wants to count, there are seven miraculous signs recorded in John prior to Jesus’ death and resurrection (the other ones are Jesus’ healing of an invalid at the pool of Bethesda [5:1-17], Jesus walking on the sea [6:16-21], and Jesus giving sight to a man who had been blind from birth [9:1-41]). These “signs” are all recounted within the first twelve chapters (the first “half”) of John. In chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 there are no recorded “signs” and that word itself is never used. So why, at the end of chapter twenty, does John suddenly come back again to that theme of signs (“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written...”)?

It's in chapter twenty that John records for us the eyewitness testimony of Mary Magdalene, and Peter, and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, to the empty tomb (20:1-10). There's nothing in and of itself miraculous about an empty tomb, is there? But if an empty tomb isn't in and of itself miraculous, the historical fact of the risen Jesus *is*. So after giving eyewitness testimony to the empty tomb, John records the eyewitness testimony first of Mary Magdalene, then of the disciples, and then of Thomas—to the risen Jesus (20:11-29). Back at the beginning of John's Gospel, after Jesus had driven the merchants and money-changers out of the temple, the Jews asked Jesus:

- John 2:18-19 — “**What sign** do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple [referring to His body; 2:21], and in three days I will raise it up.”

What is that ultimate sign by which Jesus has manifested to us His glory? What is that ultimate sign by which we have been brought to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? It doesn't matter that we've not yet seen with these eyes the resurrected Jesus. It doesn't matter one bit. Jesus said to Thomas:

- John 20:29 — Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

The nature of a true sign—the power of these signs recorded in John—is that apart from the original eyewitnesses, they don't *need* to be seen in order to be fully, 100% effective. They only need to be understood. The true power of all the signs in John is that in pointing to something beyond themselves they are constantly requiring, and compelling, a believing response in all who have eyes to see.

The *meaning* of the resurrection is only explained by the words that Jesus spoke (especially in his Farewell Discourse; 13-16); and the words that Jesus spoke have, in turn, been finally authenticated and validated—beyond all shadow of a doubt—in the glorious fact of His resurrection. So after those first seven signs in John, the last three signs are the three resurrection appearances of Jesus (followed by a fourth appearance in chapter 21 on the shores of the Sea of Galilee).^{*} It's only after these three signs—which are really just the single sign of the resurrection—that John can conclude with these wonderful, beautiful words:

- John 20:30-31 — Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are *written* so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

As we work our way through this Gospel of John, may it be our deepest desire that Jesus would manifest to us His glory and that in seeing His glory we might rejoice daily in believing – and in all that this believing truly means.

^{*} The miraculous catch of fish in chapter twenty-one is, more than anything else an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. The sign of the catch of fish is subsumed under the ultimate sign of the resurrected Jesus. It is of note that none of the synoptic Gospels record any post-resurrection miracles of Jesus (unless we include the unique manifestations of his new existence in a glorified resurrection body).