

Beyond New Beginnings: Finding Life in the Gospel of John

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[0 : 00] So good morning, Table Church, and welcome to the joy and the weight and the invitation of another year.

In circles like ours, I find that the new year can sometimes be a little bit hard to talk about. We know that it's an artificial boundary, and yet we also know that we need moments like this to mark the passing of time.

And we need moments in which we can count our wins and our losses. Many of us may have given up making resolutions, and even as difficult as it is, we struggle to make resolutions anymore.

But we also recognize that we need time to be intentional about our lives. We don't maybe want to be disappointed, so we don't cling to anything too tightly for the new year.

We don't want to fail yet again. We know that we are not in control, and yet we often crave a new beginning. We walk this fine line between a healthy desire for better habits and a compulsion toward change and the lie of perfectibility.

[1 : 27] We walk this fine line between hope and cynicism, between at the new year zealously trying everything and fearfully not trying anything.

One of the poets that I often look to at the start of the year, John O'Donohue, says this about new beginnings. Perhaps beginnings make us anxious because we did not begin ourselves.

Others begin us. Our very life here depends directly on continuous acts of beginning. But these beginnings are out of our hands.

This is true of our breathing and of our heartbeat. Beginning precedes us and creates us. I believe that as people of faith that that is possibly one of the most important things that we can remember at the start of the new year.

That genuine new beginning is out of our hands. It is gift and it is grace and it has already come.

[2 : 45] And that can be as scary as it is liberating. To explore that truth, we're going to take the next several weeks to move through a gospel whose very structure assumes a new beginning.

And that the new beginning has already occurred in Jesus. For the next several weeks, we're going to explore the gospel of John. And if you've read any of the gospels, particularly if you read John, you might know that John is really unique from Matthew, Mark and Luke and the way he tells his story.

John is really unique in his timeline and its plot and in the way it emphasizes these really long speeches of Jesus instead of like short, pithy parables in the way that it uses private conversations.

During my formation in the evangelical church, John's gospel was always the one that new believers were encouraged to read. And back then, I didn't think a lot about why that might have been.

But now I suspect that it might have been because in John's gospel, Jesus is portrayed unmistakably as the sent one from God.

[4 : 04] Over and over, you hear these things that are where there's no ambiguity. I am the light. I am the bread of life.

I am the way and the truth and the life. Jesus says all these things so clearly about himself. And John, there's no escaping what is called a high Christology, a way of viewing Jesus that emphasizes his divinity.

In contrast, in at least in the progressive circles that I'm most accustomed to, that I'm most familiar with, we tend to be more comfortable with placing the accent on the humanity of Jesus.

Why? Well, this is just my speculation, but maybe it's because we know that if we place the accent on the humanity of Jesus, we can avoid having to answer questions about what Jesus means in a really complicated, multicultural, multi-religious world.

If you stay away from the claim that Jesus is both God and reveals the one true God, that you can save yourself some trouble, at least on the surface of things.

[5 : 21] But in a year that I suspect is going to have all kinds of challenges for us as people who live in Washington, D.C., I sense a call for our community to just be deeply rooted in Jesus.

And I sense that we'll need lives of faith that are rooted, deeply, deeply rooted. And I think that the Gospel of John is just the book to use as our guide.

So today, what I'm going to do is just say a few simple things about the Gospel of John, particularly about the prologue, the beginning, the opening of the Gospel of John. And then I'm going to ask us to engage in some, what I call communal proclamation, what Pastor Anthony says is small group discussion, Tony, a small group discussion.

All right, whatever you want to call it, we're going to talk a little bit today more than we usually would. All right, does that sound good? Got it? Okay. So let's talk for just a second about John 1, 1 through 18, which will be on the screen or you can find it on your phone.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.

[6 : 44] He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him. Not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.

Life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overtake it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of men, but of God.

[7 : 53] And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. The glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth.

John testified to him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, he who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is the only son, himself God, who is close to the father's heart, who has made him known.

So unlike the other gospel writers, John doesn't start his gospel with a narrative describing the origin of Jesus. There aren't any cute babies or shepherds or magi.

We don't even find John the Baptist beside the River Jordan baptizing and inviting the crowds to repentance. What we do get is a claim that the Word began outside of history and then entered our history.

[9 : 06] And what we do get is a claim that the Word is God and the Word created and is continuing to create by giving us life and light.

And to convey the weight of those truths, the writer John uses the exact same words as are found in the Greek version of Genesis, in the beginning. John has the audacity to claim the coming of Jesus means new creation, means new beginning.

This word who, verse 17, identifies as Jesus became flesh and lived among us. He tinted among us, recalling the way in which the glory of the Lord dwelled with the Israelites, even as they wandered in the desert, full of grace and truth, ever making God known.

This passage is one of those theological heavy hitters. There are so many things that I could say about it. But there's one thing, just one simple thing I want to focus on this morning.

And that is its invitation to believe. Verse 12 says, But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

[10 : 23] The invitation to believe echoes through the Gospel of John and is, in fact, the stated purpose of the entire book. And then in the second to the last chapter of the book, it's made even more crystal clear.

This is what it says, Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. For the writer of John, believing in Jesus is the most important thing. But what is also important to know is that when John uses that phrase, to believe, it is always active. He always uses the active tense. It's never belief. It's always to believe or believing. Believing is not this passive intellectual exercise.

To believe is always energetic. For John, it's synonymous with abiding, with communing. It is participation in Jesus.

[11 : 42] In his devotional Honest Advent, Scott Erickson says something startling that I think gets at what John wants us to understand, as he invites us to believe.

Nothing, he says, can truly be known through observation, only through participation. Nothing can be truly known through observation, only through participation.

Harrison then goes on to illustrate his point by referencing one of my favorite movies, Good Will Hunting. Hopefully, if I tell you the end of it, it won't be a spoiler alert.

It's a good 20 years old, I think. So there is a scene in the movie that you might remember if you've seen it, where Will, who's this boy genius, he has all these kind of relational issues, trauma issues. He's played by Matt Damon. He meets with his court designated therapist, Sean, who's played by Robin Williams. And there's in Sean's office, and Sean starts to ask Will these vulnerable questions that make Will uncomfortable.

[12 : 53] And so Will decides just to basically poke at Sean's character. There's a painting on the wall hanging, and he's like, this is garbage, just like your career. And the meeting basically ends super abruptly.

And then the next day, on a park bench, you see the two of them sitting, and Sean tells Will that he stayed up all night thinking about what Will had said about his career.

But then that he slept like a baby when he realized something really important. He realized that Will was just a kid who had just observed. He'd never even left Boston.

He knew that Will, who was a genius, could tell him all about the Michelangelo, or tell him all about Michelangelo from the books that he had read, but he could not tell him how the Sistine Chapel smelled.

What it felt like to actually look up in that beautiful building. Will could tell Sean all about marriage, and he'd tell him, like, a quote, would recite love poetry and sonnets.

[13 : 56] But he couldn't tell Sean what it meant to wake up next to a person day after day for years and know that you're truly loved. And then Sean invites Will out of his fear and into genuine participation in his own life.

That's something like what the Gospel of John is asking of you when it invites you to believe. It is summoning you out of fear and into genuine participation in Jesus.

The Word that gives light and life. So, over the next few weeks, we're going to dig deeply into this Gospel, into the Gospel of John.

We'll look for what it might have to teach us about new beginning as we move through the start of the year, and we'll allow it to more deeply root our faith in Jesus. But today, at the start of this new year, as you walk that fine line between a healthy desire for better habits and a compulsion toward change and the lie of perfectibility, I want more than anything to urge you to commit to intentionally participating in Jesus.

If you've fallen into a rut of just observing, out of tiredness maybe, or out of cynicism, or out of overwhelm by the number of questions that you have, consider how you might begin to participate in your faith again.

[15 : 34] You don't have to do all the spiritual practices or sign up for all the classes. But what is one small step you can take to enliven your belief?

To participate. Something far better than the smell of the Sistine Chapel awaits. All right.

So now we're going to move into that small group discussion, reflection, communal proclamation.

So here's what I want you to do. So in a second, I'm going to ask you to get into groups of like, let's say four.

So that, you know, if some of you may want to talk more, some of you may want to talk less. So the group big enough to allow some people to be quiet if they want to be quiet and just listen, all right?

So get into that group. I encourage you to move around.

Talk to some people you don't know. Share your name, your pronouns. Share something, like a fact about yourself so that people get to know you a little more. It can be the neighborhood you live in, your job.

[16 : 39] It can be anything. Okay, whatever you want to share. A hobby. And then kind of move through these questions. Consider them. And there may be one that you want to focus on as a group. So in the past, what has deeply rooted faith looked like for you?

If you don't think or not sure you've ever had one, what do you imagine it might look like for you?

The key is for you, not for anybody else, but based on your personality.

What new beginning hope do you hold for yourself this year? Not a resolution. You can whisper it. But what do you hope for? And then what might it mean for you to believe, to participate in Jesus this year?

All right. So can we do that? We're going to take about 10 minutes. There are snacks and coffee outside if you need to, in bathrooms and all that, if you need to walk around. But yeah, meet some new people.

Take about 10 minutes and then I'll come back up and pray. Thank you. Thank you.