

## **The Greatest Book Ever Written, Doug Hayhoe, July 2022**

*It will never appear on the list of the world's greatest books. But people familiar with the Bible will probably agree that John's Gospel is the greatest book ever written. It's also the most important. For whether we accept its witness, or reject it, determines our eternal destiny.*

My favourite childhood book was *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. I cheered for Robin Hood when the evil sheriff tried to trap him, and was joyful when he always escaped. But you'll never find it on the lists of [the greatest books](#). What you see there are titles like *Hamlet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, and *War and Peace*. I read some of these in my high school English class, but none captured my imagination quite like Robin Hood!

The Bible seldom appears on these lists, either, although the Guinness World Records estimates that five billion copies of it have been printed. But the Bible is not just *a* book. It's a library of 66 books, written by 40 authors over 1500 years. Most readers have their favourite book in this library. For some, it's the Psalms – 150 poems mostly addressed to God. For others, it's the great prophet Isaiah, or Paul's letter to the Romans. For me, it's the Gospel of John. Here's why.

### **It uses the simplest vocabulary to express the greatest truths and metaphors**

When I studied Greek, I loved translating John's Gospel. It was so easy compared to the other New Testament books. Not only did it use simple verbs – *to love, to give, to believe* – but the key nouns were also straightforward – *God the Father, the Son, the world, life*. Although these words occur throughout the book, most are mentioned in one verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). This verse is the gospel in a nutshell.

In John, Jesus uses these simple words to teach the most profound metaphors for what he can do for us: “I am the bread of life ... I am the light of the world ... I am the door [to salvation] ... I am the good Shepherd [who gives his life for the sheep] ... I am the resurrection and the life ... I am the way, the truth, and the life ... I am the true vine” (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:4, 11; 11:25; 14:4; 15:1). Seven amazing sayings, each one followed by a personal invitation: “Whoever comes to me ... Whoever follows me ... Whoever enters through me ... The one who believes in me ... whoever believes in me!” What significance it gives, when we enter this door of relationship!



**Figure 1** [The woman at the well, by Glenda Stevens](#) (Reprinted with permission)

### **It vividly describes Jesus' personal interactions**

John's Gospel portrays Jesus' personal interaction with widely contrasting people. Consider the pious Jew Nicodemus in chapter three. His curiosity was aroused by the miraculous signs Jesus did. But he didn't dare put his reputation on the line by visiting Jesus by day. So, he came by night. What a blunt welcome he received from Jesus: “No one can enter the kingdom of God ... unless they are born again” (John 3:3, 5). Then, in the very next chapter, a Samaritan woman who was anything but pious meets Jesus alone by a well (Figure 1). What does

he do? He teaches her truths about worship – profound truths for that age – that neither Nicodemus or his own disciples were up to hearing: “True worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Just thinking about how Jesus acted so opposite to what our way of thinking is, in his contrasting interactions with these two people, makes me almost want to cry! And there are many more examples of this in the rest of the book.

### **It carefully recounts seven miraculous signs that Jesus did**

John’s Gospel was first written for God’s people, the Jews. They never forgot the ten great miraculous signs Moses did, many centuries earlier, to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. So, the apostle John structures his gospel around seven great miraculous signs that Jesus did, to show that *he* was sent to deliver his people from the slavery of sin: “everyone who sins is a slave to sin ... [but] if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36).

Interestingly enough, Jesus’ first sign in John’s Gospel is the *opposite* of Moses’ last sign. Jesus turned water into wine, at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2), whereas Moses turned water into blood in the river of Egypt (Exodus 11). As the author John pointed out in chapter one, “The law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:16).

The other signs in John’s Gospel follow in close succession. Jesus healed the royal official’s son (Ch. 4) and the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda (Ch. 5). He miraculously fed five thousand and walked on water in the terrible storm (Ch. 6). Finally, he healed the man who had been blind from birth (Ch. 9) and raised Lazarus from the dead, in front of the multitude (Ch. 11). Seven signs to convince us that Jesus is the Saviour of the World. What more could we ask for!

### **It faithfully records Jesus’ “outrageous” claims for himself**

What stands out most in John’s Gospel is not the signs Jesus did, but the claims he made for himself. When I read John 8, recently, I found twenty-five claims in this one chapter. Here are a few. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness (v. 12). I am the unique pathway to knowing God (v. 19). If you don’t believe this, you will die in your sins (v. 24). By following me, you can have complete freedom from your sins (vv. 34-36). As for me, no one is able to prove me guilty of sin (v. 46). I existed with God the Father, long before Abraham was born (v. 52). These claims, and an equal number in the rest of the Gospel, show that Jesus was completely self-aware of who he was, as God’s unique Son, equal to God the Father.<sup>1</sup>

These claims may seem outrageous to people who think Jesus was only human and not divine. But if he really is God the Son, then his claims, rather than being outrageous or unbelievable, are just a reflection of the fact that he always told the truth, another key word in this great book. For as he once said, only “the truth sets us free” (John 8:32).

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<sup>1</sup> Some skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman claim that Christians later wrote these sayings into Jesus’ story ([How Jesus became God](#), 2014). But other Bible experts, such as Michael Bird and Craig Evans, have carefully responded to this skepticism and shown that we should take these claims at face value ([How God became Jesus](#), 2014).

## **It presents Jesus' unique teachings for the church**

After giving his final public sign, Jesus celebrated with his disciples *The Last Supper*. Chapters 13 to 17 focus on Jesus' teaching to his disciples during this last meal together. The core of his teaching is this. Jesus' followers should love each other just as he has loved them. In fact, they should be ready to lay down their lives for each other. They should also obey his teaching, if they really love him. Anything else is a deception. And, third, "another Advocate," the Holy Spirit, would come to take Jesus' place on Earth after he leaves. This "Spirit of truth" would remind Jesus' followers of what he said, would help them testify before the world, and would guide them into all truth.

This all happened in the early centuries of the church. It was one of the key things that made Christianity unique. How it would revolutionize the world again if such love, such dedication to truth, and such Spiritual power was demonstrated by Jesus' followers today!

## **It describes Jesus' death and resurrection appearances in a unique way**

John's Gospel comes to a climax with Jesus' last words on the cross, "it is finished" (John 19:30). What was finished? The first chapter of the Gospel has the answer. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). And all through the book, the focus is kept on Jesus coming to *finish* the work of salvation by *dying* on the cross for our sins (John 3:16; 4:34; 5:36; 6:51b; 10:11; 11:50-51; 12:24; 15:13). With his death on the cross, this great work of removing sin was finished! What an incredible event! It is only equaled by his resurrection from the grave three days later.

Jesus' conversations with key people after his resurrection are noteworthy. Mary was the first he appeared to, a striking fact in a day when the witness of women was not recognized as valid (Ch. 20a). He then appeared to Thomas, the disciple who couldn't quite believe that Jesus had actually risen (Ch. 20b). But after touching the nail prints in Jesus' hands, and spear mark in his side, Thomas is convinced, and exclaims, "my Lord and my God!" Finally, Jesus appeared to Peter (Ch. 21). What a tender conversation Jesus had with his friend, who had earlier betrayed him. What does he do? He reinstates him to be one of the great apostles and shepherds of Christianity!

## **Conclusion**

The irreducible minimum of the Christian faith is a personal belief in Jesus Christ as the unique Son of God. He was with God in the beginning, creating the universe (John 1:1-3). He became a true human being, to bring light to the world, and to give his life so we could have eternal life. He then rose from the dead as his greatest sign. He invites us into a personal relationship with him.

Our part is to believe in Christ. Once confronted with his personal claims and his miraculous signs, including the evidence of his resurrection, we can either believe in him or reject him. This one decision seals our eternal future (see John 3:36; 5:24; 8:24; 12:48; 20:31).

*Credits: Frank Allan suggested some of the points in this essay, in an introduction he gave to an online study of John's Gospel a few years ago.*