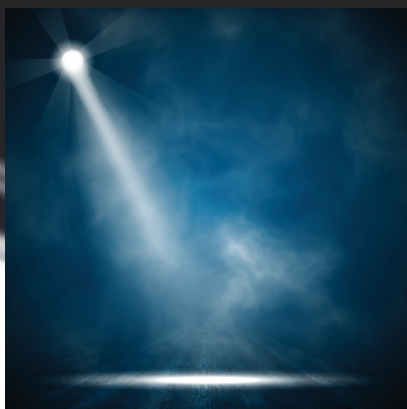


JOHN 1-4

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INTRODUCING JESUS



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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MATT OLLIFFE



matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Introducing Jesus

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what the passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learned.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

We quote from and refer to the English Standard Version, which we recommend. There should not generally be any problems, however, if you are using a different translation. (Nevertheless, it might be useful to have an ESV on hand in case of any confusion.)

6. About John's Gospel

Strictly speaking, John's Gospel is anonymous, but it claims to have been written by a particular eyewitness to

Jesus' life and ministry. The early church was unanimous that the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, was the author. Together with his brother James and Peter, John was privileged to be in Jesus' inner circle (e.g. Matt 17:1; Mark 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). While he is not mentioned by name in his Gospel, the phrase "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20) is almost certainly a humble convention by which he refers to himself. While at one time John was ambitious and quick tempered (e.g. Mark 3:17; 10:35-40; Luke 9:54), he later became known as 'the apostle of love', because he exhorted believers to "love one another" (cf. the letter of 1 John).

As to when John wrote his Gospel, the most likely date is towards the end of the first century AD, when John was a very old man. Early church history tells us that John published his Gospel in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) after the other three Gospels had already been issued.

John explicitly tells us why he wrote his Gospel: "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 20:31). John's Gospel is about Jesus' identity ("Christ, the Son of God"), the appropriate response to his identity ("believing"), and its result ("life").

» STUDY 1

GOD WITH US

[JOHN 1:1-18]

The Gospel from above

AMONG THE FOUR BIBLICAL BIOGRAPHIES of Jesus, John is unique. Matthew, Mark and Luke start their accounts on the banks of the Jordan River (Mark), with two surprised expectant mothers (Luke), and with a list of ‘great-great-to-the-power-of-25’-grandparents (Matthew). These are often called the ‘synoptic Gospels’ because their similarities allow them to be easily compared.

But John’s Gospel is different. For one thing, the events of John’s first four chapters aren’t recorded in the synoptic Gospels at all. Even more importantly, John opens his Gospel by taking us way back before humans existed, before the dinosaurs, before sun, moon, and stars—in fact, before anything was created. In the beginning there was God and there was ‘the Word’.

The synoptics give us an account of Jesus ‘from below’, providing a human perspective on the identity and acts of Jesus and showing us Jesus the man as he revealed himself by his words and deeds (ultimately revealing, of course, that Jesus is much more than just a man). By contrast, John gives us a perspective ‘from above’, leaving nothing in doubt from the very start and giving us the divine, top-down declaration about who Jesus is and what he came to do.

John’s Gospel is rich with majestic and profound statements about the identity of Jesus, and his very first verse is the most profound of them all. With elegant simplicity, the apostle John unambiguously declares that this Word is God himself.

'The Word'

The idea of 'the Word' (the Greek word *logos*) has a rich history in Greek-speaking philosophical and religious thought. To the Greek world that groped towards the idea of the *Logos* as a sort of rational principle behind the universe, John declares that the *Logos* is a person who was *with* God and who *was* God, and thus who personally communicates God's self-revelation to the world. From its very beginning, John's Gospel makes a profound claim about its subject that answered the deepest questions of ancient society, but in terms that it understood.

'The darkness has not overcome the light' (v. 5)

The word translated 'overcome' in the ESV has a double meaning (a technique John often uses) which is captured by the English word 'grasp'. This conveys both the idea of understanding (to grasp with the mind) and the physical 'taking hold of' (to grasp with the hands). As we will see, people continually fail to understand Jesus because they are caught in a cosmic battle between light and darkness. Further, given John's use of irony, the double meaning of 'grasp' unites the widespread failure to understand Jesus with the fact that Jesus could not be defeated.

Read John 1:1-5.

1. When, where, and who was the Word? What was made through him? (vv. 1-3; cf. Gen 1:1)?
2. What does the very description '**the Word**' tell us about him (cf. v. 18; Heb 1:3)?
3. What does the Word have in himself (v. 4)? How does this add to the picture of the Word that has already been presented in the first three verses?
4. What relationship between the Word and the world is established in **verse 5** (cf. vv. 10-11)?

Starting Jesus' story

NORMALLY, A 'WORD' IS THE SKIN OF a living thought, an idea wrapped in and delivered by human language. But John describes the Word not as a proposition, a principle, or a personification, but as a person. This Word is identified as being 'in the beginning', 'with God', and as one who 'was God'. Just as our words express who we are, this Word profoundly expresses who God is and makes God known. The Word was distinguishable from God in some sense, and yet was identifiable with God's very being and essence. Verses like these are the reason why Christians believe in the Trinity—that the one true God exists eternally as three distinct persons in relationship with one another.

This Word, who was himself eternally God, made us and owns us (v. 3).

He has life in himself, and thus is our source of both 'life'—on which we as living beings depend—and 'light'—on which we as thinking and acting beings depend (vv. 4-5).

However, John also delivers some bad news: the darkness has not 'grasped' the light (v. 5). In the sense of 'grasping' the light as 'understanding', this is surprising, because light is self-authenticating: unless they are blind, no-one needs to be told that a light is shining. So right from the beginning, it is clear that there is a problem with humans and with the world that the Word had made.

Yet, in his kindness, God also sent a human witness—John the Baptist—to testify to the light so that all people might believe (v. 7).

Read John 1:6-18.

5. Who was (and wasn't) John the Baptist?

6. What was John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus (v. 15)?

-
7. What do you make of the response that the Word receives from the world and from “his own people” (vv. 10-11, cf. v. 3, 3:20-22)?
8. How do people become (and not become) the children of God (vv. 11-13)?
9. What decisive event is described in verses 9 and 14, and how is the world different as a result?
10. What are the differences between the ministries of Jesus and Moses (vv. 14, 16-17)?
11. Why is Jesus uniquely qualified to make God the Father known (v. 18)?

The Word became flesh

THE WORD MADE CREATION—AND John the Baptist, his slightly older cousin, testified to him. But most people—including the Jews, “his own people”—neither knew him nor received him when he came. The darkness could not grasp him (v. 5) because it is blind to the light and dead to the life. Yet there is still hope in the midst of this deep darkness, for people can become “children of God” (v. 12). This requires being “born... of God” (v. 13) so that we can receive and believe the Word.

But those who are ‘flesh’ can only become children of God through the Word also becoming flesh: a human being just like us, with skin, bones, fat, sinew, muscle, and nerve endings that could be slapped, pinched, sliced, punctured, bruised, and butchered—as they would be in due course.

This reality is described in theology as the ‘incarnation.’ God became fully human, just as we are, except that he had no sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15). He then “dwelt among us”—literally, he ‘tabernacled’ or ‘pitched his tent’ among us.

In the Old Testament, following the Exodus and prior to Solomon building the temple, God took up residence among his people in the midst of the camp in a ‘tabernacle,’ which could move around with and among God’s people. So too did the Word. Moreover, while the Word is now truly human (and will be forever), he dwelt among other humans in his world only for a short time. But despite the earth-shattering force of

the announcement in verse 14 that God had come to us, the first mention of the incarnation is actually in verse 9: “the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world”. Verse 14 also describes the Word incarnate as “the only Son from the Father”—or, more literally, the “only begotten”, driving home the unimaginably close relationship between Father and Son.

Then, in verse 17, for the first time in John’s Gospel, we learn the name of God in the flesh: Jesus Christ. ‘Jesus’ means ‘Yahweh saves’ and ‘Christ’ is his title, meaning that he is the long-awaited ‘Messiah’ (literally, ‘the anointed one’) promised in the Old Testament. But Jesus Christ is more than simply the Messiah. In the words of verse 18, he is “the only God” (ESV) or probably more accurately, “the only begotten God” (NASB). John is asserting the full divinity of the Son just as strongly as he did in John 1:1—Jesus Christ is God just as much as the Father is—but he adds to it something about the divine person of the Son: that he has eternally had the unique relationship of sonship with the Father. The Son is, as we declare in the Nicene Creed, “God from God, light from light, true God from God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father”.

In verse 18, as John’s draws his majestic opening section to a close, we’re told where the only begotten God is located: “at the Father’s side”. This is not where he has come from, but rather where he is. The richness of this phrase

is perhaps best conveyed by the quaint and outdated English word ‘bosom’—the intimate place of the chest, between the upper arms and under the chin, closest to the heart. That is where God the only Son is located, and that is why God the only Son—who has this unique intimacy with the Father—is the only one who can make the Father known.

John 1:1-18 is frequently called the ‘Prologue’ because it introduces the whole of John’s Gospel. Right up front, we learn that Jesus Christ is God the Son, the eternal *Logos* who pre-existed the world, the one who made everything

(including us), and the one who has come to reveal God to humanity. He has truly become human, and has brought grace upon grace. John introduces several key words that will play an important part in the rest of his Gospel: for example, ‘life’ and ‘light’, ‘witness’, ‘truth’, ‘the world’, and ‘glory’.

In the Prologue, John has also introduced the divinely appointed human witness to Jesus Christ, John the Baptist. He will next recount for us John the Baptist’s eyewitness testimony at greater length (John 1:19-39; 3:22-36).

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Do you give Jesus Christ the dignity and honour he deserves as “the Word” who “was God” (v. 1) and who is “the only God” (v. 18), and who made you and the universe you inhabit? What will it look like for you to give him this dignity and honour?

» Give thanks and pray

- Ask God for forgiveness and grace for the darkness you find in yourself.
- Thank the Father for sending the Son, and the Son for becoming incarnate, bringing grace, and making the Father known.
- Thank God for the right to become his child through Jesus Christ.
- Receive Christ and believe in his name, if you have not already done so.