

Really Useful Guides

John

Robert Willoughby

Series editor: Derek Tidball

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Each Really Useful Guide focuses on a specific biblical book, making it come to life for the reader, enabling them to understand the message and to apply its truth to today's circumstances. Though not a commentary, it gives valuable insight into the book's message. Though not an introduction, it summarises the important aspects of the book to aid reading and application.

This Really Useful Guide to John will transform your understanding of the biblical text, and will help you to engage with the message in new ways today, giving confidence in the Bible and increasing faith in God.

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Foreword

Robert Willoughby taught New Testament and political theology at London School of Theology (LST) from 1984 to 2015. He loved teaching, encouraging students to be curious, to think boldly and expansively, to grow in their faith in and love for God. The lecture room, the seminar room or conversations over lunch all provided opportunities for discussion.

One student from the '90s wrote:

As I think of Robert, I think of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Robert helped me and other students to understand and appreciate John's gospel. The content and tone of his lectures and life have left a lasting impression. It was clear that Robert was not only a disciple whom Jesus loved, but a disciple who loved Jesus and whose students loved him.

John's gospel was Robert's favourite book in the whole world.

Throughout his ministry at LST, he regularly preached to wider congregations who appreciated his ability

to place complex truths in their grasp. More recently, he preached very regularly, after being ordained and serving as a priest in St Michael's Highgate. He was a teacher and pastor. He loved to preach from John.

Some years ago, Robert introduced a sermon on John 14:1–17 by reflecting on what people might leave behind, as a last will and testament. Robert treasured his father's copy of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. John Wesley apparently left a cloak, a Bible and a silver spoon. Jesus left a seamless cloak. But all three left behind far more than just material things, overwhelmingly so in the case of Jesus. Robert reminded his listeners that people who are grieving the death of a loved one, unconcerned about material goods, will often simply say, 'I just didn't want *you* to go. It's *you* that I want!' Jesus' disciples could not conceive of life without him. In John 14, Jesus was preparing them for his departure. He promised he would not leave them as orphans. He gave them hope. This was part of his last will and testament.

Robert died very unexpectedly in September 2018. He had just completed the text of this book. It is the distillation of 40 years of reflection and delight in John's gospel. He wanted his readers to share his

enthusiasm and to burrow their way deeper into the gospel.

As a family, Mark, Louisa and I would loudly echo the words of Robert's sermon – 'We just did not want *you* to go. It's *you* that we want!' But Robert's life on this earth is over. He has completed what God had called him to be and to do. On the resurrection day, he will join with Christ and all the saints (which includes us, family, friends, colleagues and LST students over the years, all with our resurrection bodies) in the new creation, the new heaven and new earth.

This book, as it explores the gospel of John, is part of the last will and testament of Robert Frank Willoughby!

Ro Willoughby

Introduction

Dear Reader

John is my favourite book. Not just in the New Testament, nor even in the Bible – but my favourite book. Full stop. Over all the years of my conscious Christian life, it has delighted me, puzzled me, comforted me and astonished me. It has raised more questions and caused me to think more deeply and persistently than any other piece of literature. By anyone's measurement, it stands among the truly great achievements of the human spirit and ranks among the greatest literature ever created. I may be exaggerating there, but I don't think so.

So what is it that makes me so enthusiastic about this book, which can be read by many people in its entirety in less than two hours and is just shorter in length than the book you are holding in your hands? There are several reasons, of course, but I'll offer just four.

First must be that it's got the best stories: the wedding feast at Cana, Nicodemus, Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, the raising of

Lazarus, etc. And I'm less than halfway through. These stories are told at length and with significant incidental detail without ever becoming tedious or overlong.

Second, and related to the above, John has some of the most memorable and delightful of characters: they ask questions, have opinions and feelings, and clearly experience the normal reactions to life that we all do. We feel we can know them.

I once asked my daughter, when she was about seven, 'What's your favourite story?' I genuinely was not fishing for a Bible story, but she said, 'Oh, when Lazarus came back to life.' Initially surprised, I asked her, 'So what's your next favourite?' The reply came back: 'The wedding at Cana.' This made me think and I soon realised that, of course, any little girl could easily relate to a sad story of two sisters losing a brother and having things put right by this wonderful figure of Jesus. And which little girl would fail to warm to a wedding story with a twist? To paraphrase what John says in chapter 1, 'The Word became just like us and lived out his life doing our sort of things. We saw it' (John 1:14).

A third reason is that John's focus is constantly upon Jesus. Like all the gospels, it is not the incidentals

that matter but the Master who matters. It is a wonderful portrait of Christ, and it directly draws out his importance and his magnetism without any hesitancy or uncertainty. The reader is overwhelmed by the central character.

Finally, John always deals with important issues. This is always true of the Bible, but that's what makes this book in particular so gripping, for John gets straight to the theological heart of what matters about God sending Jesus. These issues mostly concern our Lord's life and death, but John finds room for many other important issues. The more you read, the more you discover and are astonished by.

My recommendation is that you put down this book right now, turn to John and, if you are able, read it through in its entirety. Try not to stop, even if you don't understand something or are so thrilled that you want to reread a chapter. Just keep on and enjoy the complete story. We'll come back to the whole story in chapter two.

Robert Willoughby

1

Beginning at the beginning

Do you know the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*? Very dramatically and seriously it opens the film with a shot of the earth from outer space, accompanied by majestic music, and moves to the creation of humanity on the earth. John's gospel has a somewhat similar opening. Its first 18 verses take us outside of time and set the story of Jesus against the backcloth of creation, the story of Israel and the coming of the Messiah.

These verses introduce a great many of the themes that are important as we read the gospel (which are emboldened below). They are poetic and deeply philosophical, take a very broad theological perspective and place the incarnation, as it should be placed, in the context of creation. Indeed, not a few scholars have suggested that the stories of Genesis constitute an essential background to reading John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

JOHN 1:1–3

In the first five verses Jesus is identified as *logos*, a common Greek word meaning ‘word’. Jesus was **God’s eternal word**, his active agent by which he created the whole universe. God speaks, communicating through his creation and to it. This is revelation and John is very interested in this theme. People don’t always want to hear, which is why John describes how Jesus, the Word, has constant opposition from the Pharisees and those people he simply refers to as ‘the Jews’ (more of that later). Even his own followers frequently misunderstand him, so he has to try and further explain what he is doing or saying. This often leads to highly ironic situations where we, as readers, understand what is going on, but the people in the gospel do not. Sometimes you even want to laugh, but feel you shouldn’t. Indeed, if we had been there, we’d have made the same stupid mistakes. (See Pilate in chapters 18–19.)

Jesus is the source of light and life – themes taken up a number of times in John’s account of the life

of Jesus. Not for the last time, Jesus is identified as closely as possible with God Almighty, the creator and sustainer of all things. Later in the gospel (8:12), Jesus declares that he is the light of the world, and John follows this up with the wonderful story of the man born blind. He receives his sight – the light – in his healing by Jesus, but the Pharisees, who hate Jesus and the man, reveal themselves as those who are really blind.

In John 1:5 we read, ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’ This is actually a piece of wordplay, a double meaning, which is very typical of John. The Greek word translated ‘overcome’ by the NIV (and indeed, it can mean that or ‘dominated’) can also mean ‘understood’. So John manages to convey two ideas at one and the same time: that darkness tries but fails both to understand the light and to overcome or suppress it.

Following this majestic opening, John brings us resolutely back to earth, introducing Jesus in relation to John the witness (1:6–9). He is never called ‘the Baptist’ in John, though we are told that he baptises; nor do we read an account of his baptising Jesus. He is simply a witness who speaks out and identifies the Messiah, but is not in any way to be mistaken for that

person himself. So straight away, if we are familiar with the other gospels, if we are observant, we will soon recognise familiar features of the story (in this case, John), but we may also be left puzzled over the unfamiliar treatment in this gospel.

Witness is an important concept that reappears in the story. So also is **world**. Jesus the Word comes into the world that he has made but, ironically, is **rejected** by it – another theme that crops up frequently. Even his own people reject him, though immediately we are encouraged by the thought that those who had **faith** were given power to become children of God (1:10–13). The juxtaposition of ‘his own people’ and ‘children of God’ is intentional and at once we encounter one of John’s main questions: will Israel, God’s people of old, embrace his coming in the person of their Messiah? Some will and some most certainly will not. **A new birth, a new creation**, is needed. John will return to this theme.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:14

John 1:14 is one of the great verses of the Bible and sums up the incarnation. No wonder John 1:1–14 is habitually read at Christmas in Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols the world over, usually as a climax of the service. While many pagans in the ancient world might have been able to embrace the message of the first 13 verses of John, verse 14 would act as a terrible shock. God's eternal Word becomes flesh – everything that the surrounding world despised and thought to be unlike God – decaying, sickening, transient and in many other ways bad and contemptible.

But John says that the Word embraced that fate. He 'made his dwelling among us'. John describes the Word, Jesus, making friends and living with ordinary human beings. Not for him the gorgeous palaces and weighted advantages of the rich and powerful. His followers tend to be very ordinary people who have ordinary needs. He has friends and followers to accompany him and '**abide**' with him, that is, they remain with him, stay with him and follow him everywhere.

The phrase 'made his dwelling among us' could be inelegantly translated, 'he pitched his tent/his tabernacle alongside of us'. We saw him, as he did this; we saw **the glory of God, his grace and his truth** – all

three crucial concepts that reoccur in this gospel. John remains still rooted in the historical account. John the witness has his say again (1:15) and we are told bluntly that, although God had poured his grace upon Israel in the past by giving them the law, through Jesus his Son truth and revelation were made perfect. This made his followers believe that the Father and Son were as close as possible without confusing them as just one person.

John 1:1–18 is often called the prologue of John (or we might say, the introduction that gets you started), and from verse 19 we step back into a more normal account of the gospel story. Some believe the prologue was written by another hand and is detachable from the gospel itself. It certainly seems to stand a bit apart from what follows. However, it is more reasonable to read it as an introductory poem which sets up what is to follow, placing us outside of time and encouraging us to read the story whole, as we do when we think of someone's life after they have died, understanding each of the parts in the light of the whole. The main difference here is that John's gospel is certainly no obituary, and one of his main messages is that the Jesus we read about is alive and active today.

2

What to look out for

We have already seen that John has his own idiosyncratic way of beginning his gospel, a fresh way of introducing and speaking about Jesus and a somewhat surprising way of speaking about that important person whom many of us would think of as ‘John the Baptist’. Here are a few other things to look out for that are specific to the gospel of John.

The Jews: For most of Christian history, John’s gospel has been thought of as being particularly angled towards pagan Greek enquirers. The last hundred years have seen a sea change in that perception. Nowadays, many readers are struck by the very Jewish nature of what we read. There is a great deal about ‘the Jews’ and much of the gospel is theological debate between different Jewish groups. We read of how Jesus fulfils all of the main items of Jewish faith and practice. He replaces the old wine and the temple (chapter 2); he brings a new creation (chapter 3); he

extends the boundaries of Israel (chapter 4); he fulfils the main festivals (chapters 5–8); and so on.

The interlocking and interweaving themes: These emerge and subside, only to reappear later like threads on a tapestry – themes such as the Holy Spirit, truth, ‘abiding’, faith, glory, ‘lifting up’, witness – sometimes these themes occur principally in what happens and not just in the dialogue.

The number seven: For example, the seven signs, the seven ‘I am’ sayings and any other multiples of seven you might discover. The narrative is very cleverly constructed to include patterns, sometimes overlying patterns.

Contrasts: John frequently uses contrasting elements, known as dualisms, to express his message, such as light and darkness, truth and lies, life and death, belief and unbelief, knowledge and ignorance.

Deeply ironic situations that occur and reoccur: The central irony is that the creator of the whole world comes to what really belongs to him and is rejected by it. This irony is frequently accompanied by crass misunderstanding. One of the most ironic

and culminating points in the gospel is that kings are normally 'lifted up' to be admired and gazed upon, but King Jesus is to be lifted up in shame and agony to be looked at on the cross with his crown on. This is his enthronement, and from here he passes judgement on the spectators. Thrilling or chilling?

Symbolism: John uses symbolism repeatedly, which is not evidence that a saying or an event didn't happen but that the events have a meaning beyond the surface. Take the feeding of the five thousand – in John's gospel it is not just a humanitarian gesture to keep a crowd from starving but hard evidence that God, who is able to feed thousands in the wilderness, is here among us. Similarly, the story of the man born blind is not simply about a man receiving his sight, but a pointer to who really is the light of the world. More or less universal symbols recur throughout John: light, wine, food, darkness, blindness, gardens and so on.

The story: As with any good story, you might like to enjoy the plot and the way that John stretches it out over the first half but speeds it up (while in some ways slowing it down with detail) in the second half. Or you might like to enjoy how he links stories up by themes and recurring patterns.

Any good story has great characters. If you find many of the subsidiary characters in the other gospels rather flat or two-dimensional, enjoy the complex characters that John includes: Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, the man born blind, Thomas, the Samaritan woman, Pilate, Nicodemus, 'the Jews', Nathanael and so on. These are often brief portraits, but very memorable ones.



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