

Contents

1	Signs That Point the Way —September 28–October 4	6
2	Signs of Divinity —October 5–11	14
3	The Backstory: The Prologue —October 12–18	22
4	Witnesses of Christ as the Messiah —October 19–25	30
5	The Testimony of the Samaritans —October 26–November 1	38
6	More Testimonies About Jesus —November 2–8	46
7	Blessed Are Those Who Believe —November 9–15	56
8	Fulfilling Old Testament Prophecies —November 16–22	64
9	The Source of Life —November 23–29	72
10	The Way, the Truth, and the Life —November 30–December 6	80
11	The Father, the Son, and the Spirit —December 7–13	88
12	The Hour of Glory: The Cross and Resurrection December 14–20	96
13	Epilogue: Knowing Jesus and His Word —December 21–27	104

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Themes in the Gospel of John



Sitting in a shop in Tehran, Iran, the Persian rug depicted an ancient forest. Beautifully done, it re-created a scene in Switzerland: mountains, a waterfall, a turquoise lake, forested hillsides, and an expansive blue sky dotted with clouds.

Anyone in that shop could have spent their time noting the details: the number of knots per square inch, the fabric of the carpet, the types of dye used—all the minutiae that resulted in the rug.

Or the person could have focused, instead, on the arresting techniques and themes that gave the carpet its unique beauty: the sky reflected in the lake, the snow that capped the mountains, the verdant forest complemented by the deep green moss. The themes of the carpet combined with one another in a deftly coordinated display of beauty to manifest the splendor of that serene spot in the Alps.

This quarter we will be studying another finely crafted masterpiece. This work is not the result of a brush on canvas, a precisely framed photograph, or a skillfully woven carpet. Rather, it is the Word of God as artfully expressed in the Gospel of John.

Words have meaning within their contexts. For anyone to understand what Scripture intends to say, it must be studied in context—the immediate sentences, chapters, and sections, and the overall message of the Bible itself. Finally, because the entire Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, each part should be studied in the context of the whole.

The intention this quarter will be to understand the message of John's Gospel. It is unique among the four Gospels, often focusing attention on personal interviews between Jesus and just one or two people—such as Nathaniel, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, the man born blind, Lazarus and his sisters, Pilate, Peter, or Thomas. Many of these stories appear only in John.

The Gospel of John is the Word of God conveyed to us through the apostle. As with the entire Bible, the Gospel came by the will of God, rather than by the will of humanity. John was merely the willing instrument that the Holy Spirit used to convey many crucial themes: the Word (*logos*), light, bread, water, the Holy Spirit, oneness, signs, testimony, and prophecy. These themes mutually enhance and illuminate one another throughout the Gospel.

May the Gospel of John carry us back to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal.

Bible study often concentrates on the meaning of a word or a small passage of Scripture. We check the meaning of the word in a Bible dictionary. We examine the grammar, the immediate context, and the historical context; and—using our analogy of the carpet—we get caught up in the examination of the number of knots per square inch, the fabric, the dyes, and the backing. All of these details are important.

But let us not miss the big picture while examining the details. Indeed, just as the Persian carpet could transport someone to that beautiful Alpine scene, so may the Gospel of John carry us back to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal. The details have a role, which is to point us toward the big picture, and in John that big picture is a divinely inspired revelation of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

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