

John 1:10-13 Believing, or not?

In the same way that a cornerstone sets the position and shape of the building, so the prologue of John's gospel (John 1:1-18) sets the main themes and direction of the gospel. How we understand the prologue will shape our understanding of the whole gospel, and this is especially true for John 1:10-13.

1. His world (1:10) What does John mean by *the world*?

The word *world* is very significant in John's gospel, appearing 80x's. Compare this with just 12x's in Matthew, 3x's in Mark and 7x's in Luke. In John 1:10 it appears three times: *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him*. In English we use the word *world* in different ways. We use it to describe planet earth. In this sense the *world* is 'His world': *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it* (Psalm 24:1). When God made the world and filled it with abundant life, he called it *good* (Genesis 1:4,10,12,21,25). When he made the first man and woman, He called them *very good* (Genesis 1:31).

John 1:10 tells us, *He was in the world*. God took on the form of physical human flesh and became part of this world. This is the mystery of the Incarnation. Although Jesus was fully God He was also fully man. He was born in Bethlehem; He was brought up in Nazareth with brothers and sisters; He was educated according to Jewish norms (as a star pupil); He had a bar-mitzvah aged 12/13 years old; He trained and worked for many years as a carpenter earning a living. From this point of view Jesus was as part of this world as we are. Paul taught the believers at Thessalonica to work with their hands to win the respect of outsiders (1Thessalonians 4:11-12).

We use the word *world* in other ways as well. We can use it to talk about the people of the world. When John says, *God so loved the world*, we do not think about planet earth, but about the people of this world who God loves. We can also use *world* to refer to people in different parts of the world, such as the English-speaking world, or the industrialized world, or the third world.

There is another important use of *world*, which means the world social relationships and ideas, for example, the political world, the secular world, or the Christian world. John says, *He was in the world*, that is, the world He originally made, filled with life and human society, but *the world did not know Him*. Something had gone wrong; that something was sin, which affects and alienates each one of us from God. I agree with the commentator Eyzenburg: "*the world*" in John's gospel appears to be, '*the world that opposes Israel's God*. In Jesus' day, it was in particular the world of the political and religious authorities based in Jerusalem that opposed Jesus and finally crucified Him.

But, also in John, most significantly, *the world* is the focus of God's redemptive love and restoration, because it was once created by God through His everlasting Word. John the Baptist said, *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29, see John 3:16).

2. His own (1:11) Who are 'His own'?

Who are His own who did not receive Him (John 1:11)? A more precise translation of this verse could read, *He came to his own things/domain, and his own people did not receive him*.¹ Perhaps it means He came to the world of His own people, but they did not receive him. Who were His own people? The obvious answer is the Jews. Today, Jew has a very broad meaning to mean all physical descendants of Abraham, or those who have converted to Judaism². But in the first century to be a Jew meant to be Judean, of the tribe of Judah. There are other Israelite groups in John's gospel, such

¹ There is a footnote in the ESV. The YLT says *own things*

² Who is, and isn't, a Jew, is often contested

as the Galileans and the Samaritans. I believe *His own who did not receive Him* in John 1:11 refers to the Judeans who represented the dominant and worldly power base in Jerusalem. They are *His own* because Jesus was also Judean, from the tribe of Judah. One of the greatest Messianic prophecies in Scripture is found in Genesis 49:10,

The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

This prophecy was uttered by Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, on his deathbed, as he was blessing His twelve sons. Though Jacob was dying, he was still able, with the eye of faith, to see the Messianic king who would one day come from the tribe of Judah; to Him would belong the obedience of the nations. When Jesus said, *salvation is from the Jews* (John 4:22), more accurately I believe this means, *salvation is from the Judeans*.

In John's gospel *His own* are Jews, or Judeans, who are the dominant sub-group of the wider Israelite society, and it's they in particular who rejected and crucified Jesus. Just like we shouldn't blame all Muslims for terrorism, we shouldn't blame all Jews for the death of Jesus, even though historically this is just what the Church has done. But it's not even true that the Judeans were responsible for the death of Jesus, because Jesus willingly gave His life for us all (John 10:18).

His Name (1:12-13) How are we saved?

To all who did receive him and who believed on His Name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12). We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9). In John's gospel there are many who did believe in His Name, for example, the Samaritans (John 4:39-42). The Samaritans believed not only because of the woman's testimony, but because they heard him and came to believe for themselves Jesus was truly the Saviour of the world. Faith needs to become real for each one of us. But how is this possible? We can only become a child of God by being born of God (John 3:3-5). This doesn't mean:

- a. ***Born of blood*** – being saved doesn't depend on ethnicity or nationality. It didn't depend on being born an Israelite, part of God's chosen people. This would have been surprising for most in first century Judaism did believe salvation depended on being part of Israel and keeping the Torah.
- b. ***Born of the will of the flesh*** – being saved doesn't depend on parentage. God does not have grandchildren. Having Christian parents should be a blessing, doesn't make the children believers. Neither are we a child of God because just because of the will of our parents, because we exist.
- c. ***Born of the will of man*** – being saved from our sins is not something we can do for ourselves, nor is it something another human being can do for us. Religious ritual, including baptism as a baby or as an adult cannot and does not save us. Baptism is our response to the gospel, but it does not save us.

If salvation doesn't depend on ethnicity, or on parentage, or on human will, what does it depend on? It depends on God, because God in Jesus Christ is our Saviour. We need to hear His word and believe on His Name. We cannot save ourselves, but we have been given free will, and it is up to us to respond, to receive Him and to believe. Just as a drowning man will grab hold of a lifeline, so we must take hold of Jesus Christ by faith. As we do, we are born of God (John 3:5). As we will see, John unpacks this more in chapter 3 in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus.

Billy Graham who died this week said, *We do not know Christ through the five senses, but we know Him through the sixth sense that God has given to every man – which is the ability to believe.*