

# OpenTheo

## #144 Why is John's Gospel so different? What did Paul know about Jesus?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright and Justin Brierley are back with a fresh batch of listener questions on the gospels this week including: How do I reconcile John's portrayal of Jesus with the other gospels? Are the timings of the crucifixion accounts in conflict? And what did Paul know about Jesus? New Testament scholar Justin Bass also joins the conversation.

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## Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome back to the show, I'm Justin Briley and this is brought to you in partnership as ever with NTY Right Online and SBCK Tom's UK Publisher. Tom and I back with a fresh batch of your questions on the Gospels this week, including, "How do I reconcile John's portrayal of Jesus with the other Gospels? Are the timing of the crucifixion accounts in conflict and what did Paul know about Jesus?" New Testament scholar Justin Bass is also joining us for the conversation again this week.

Thanks to Dave Smithe in South Africa, who says of the podcast well presented, "Enough

time for substance but easy to fit into a daily schedule, an interesting range of topics with a breadth in answer to the truth." Thanks. We do love hearing from you, so if you can leave us a rating in a review, it helps others to discover the show too. You can buy more about the podcast at our website, [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com), registering for our newsletter there also gets you the secret link to ask Tom a question.

Now on to today's show.

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome back to today's show. It's always a great joy to be joined by Tom to answer questions about the Gospels and the New Testament, but in today's show and in the next couple of episodes, we're also joined by Justin Bass, who we introduced on last week's show.

He's a New Testament scholar with a background teaching in Jordan. He's also the author of the *Bedrock of Christianity*, but we've got the wisdom of both Tom and Justin, not just in Briley, Justin Bass, for this one. So I'm looking forward to these questions that have come in.

Just before we get into these, we've got questions from John in Philadelphia, another John in the USA in Bob in Pennsylvania. It was announced just recently that Gordon Fee had passed away, Tom. I don't know if you have any recollections of him and the impact that his work made.

Yes, thank you. I knew Gordon a bit. He taught at Regent College Vancouver for many years, and I used to go and lecture there sometimes and sometimes overlapped with him in one memorable week.

He and I co-taught a course together, and actually we had set that up because I and Sven Sodaland had edited a *Festschrift* for Gordon, a volume of essays to congratulate him on his whichever birthday it was. Gordon didn't know about this, and the only way we could be sure that Gordon would be in town to receive this surprise gift was for him and me to be teaching the course together. And then I think we ended the weekend with me doing a public lecture which he chaired or something like that, but it turned into a celebration of his life and work.

So, yeah, I've had some good times with Gordon, and one of the lovely things about Gordon is his deep love for the text of the New Testament, and he was a text critic. That is to say somebody who compares the ancient manuscript readings to check that we've got exactly the right reading verse after verse, etc, etc. Most people who do that tend to be rather shy, withdrawn, introverted people who love fiddling around with the details.

Gordon was anything but. He was a Pentecostal preacher, and he would preach sometimes with tears rolling down his cheeks because he was so full of joy of the glory of the Lord, and all that God was doing in him and through him. And he was a pastor as

well.

So, a lovely man who combined in himself bits of the scholar and bits of the pastor and bits of the preacher in a way which you don't often see. So, he had been ill for some while. I think his mind had been going a bit.

He was living laterally in New York. I hadn't seen him. He hadn't been at conferences for the last three or four years.

So, I was not surprised to hear of his passing, but I miss him and I mourn him and I thank God for him and wish we could have some more like him. Yes, I know many Christians have benefited from books like *How to Read the Bible* for all its worth and his great commentaries. Yeah, absolutely.

*Books on Christ and the Spirit in Paul*. Yeah, that's what I was going to bring up. In seminary I read *God's Empowering Presence* where he went basically every place that the Holy Spirit has mentioned in Paul's letters.

That's a fantastic book. Really, really great. Amazing.

Well, look, let's go to some questions that have come in on the Gospels this week. And a couple of people sort of asking specifically about John's gospel. This is from Stephen in Philadelphia who says, "I'm a pastor at a local church and have been a Christian for over 30 years.

I love scripture. I believe it's God's Word. I'm enthralled with the person of Jesus in the Gospels." However, I've always found it harder to connect with the portrayal of Jesus in John than in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The quick action, compelling stories, and vibrant teaching in the Synoptic seem to me a stark contrast to the longer theological speeches in John. The difference almost makes it seem like two different people, and I find I relate more to the Synoptic Jesus. I believe all the Gospels are inspired and I'm not discounting John at all, but how do you reconcile those seeming differences to come to a single understanding of the person of Jesus? I'll start with you, Tom.

Okay. I very much understand the question. It was obviously one must, but the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke give you the sense that Jesus' public career consisted of these tiny episodes, each of which would last maybe a minute and a half, where Jesus comes into town, heals somebody.

Somebody asked him a silly question. He gives an answer, and that's it. Done.

Now, real life ain't like that. What those stories say to me is that this is how somebody remembered that. You know, if you meet somebody famous and you have a quick

exchange, then you go and tell your friends, your family about, "Oh, I saw so-and-so," and they said such-and-such, and that quickly gets shaped into a polished little anecdote, which you can repeat at dinner parties or whatever.

And it takes not very long, and it gives you a little nugget. But actually, if the people were hanging around, the discussion might have gone on a lot longer, but you don't remember that into an anecdote, as it were. So I see so much of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Obviously, not the Sermon on the Mount. I mean, things like that are a bit different. But as a succession of, a collection of these short anecdotes, this is basically form criticism, if you like.

Whereas with John, I think what we have here is somebody who was very close to Jesus, who drank in every word, going around with Jesus, and who was able to mull it over and repeat it prayerfully and so on and so forth, and then being able to display these extraordinary discourses. Some of which are quite difficult. They seem to us to ramble this way on that, which is, of course, how, if you're with a group of disparate people having a difficult discussion, often things do ramble and go this way on that, and different points are made.

So I think what we have to say is that John may well be what it was actually like to be there when Jesus was doing some extended teaching with a crowd of people who didn't always get it, and he had to explain things, whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke have boiled it down for us, collected these anecdotes from different communities and so on, and put them together to make a complete whole. But I don't see any reason to say, as your questioner is careful to say, that they don't, any ultimate disparity between them. Just in any thoughts on this, because often people do say critics, especially, you know, well, John was set down a lot later, perhaps, than the synoptics, and therefore, perhaps it was more the product of some sort of theological reflection on Jesus from a community and so on, and so that's why you find such an apparent difference between the nature of his sayings and so on than in the synoptics.

What do you say to that, Justin? Yeah, I completely agree with Tom, and just building on what he said, a great example that I'd like to use is how the feeding of the 5,000, one of the few miracles that's found in all four Gospels, and in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus has a little bit of interaction with the disciples, he feeds the 5,000, and then we move on. But in John, what do we get? We get this long discourse teaching about what is the implication of this miracle and what it means that they're getting bread from heaven and how he is the living bread. And so, you know, just kind of a common sense thing, can you imagine a person like Jesus doing a miracle like that and not teaching about it? Not saying anything about it? But to me, it makes a lot more sense that John is giving us something of the sermon.

He's giving us probably more than just, you know, the New Testament scholars talk about the verba versus the vox of Jesus. You know, sometimes we're getting the actual literal words Jesus said, like "Abba," when I say "Abba," that's exactly what Jesus said when he prayed to the Father in Aramaic, or sometimes we're getting the vox. Sometimes we're getting the voice of Jesus, and so I think it's more kind of a theological deep reflection, like Tom was saying, that John had 60 years later, and when weaving in, and I think also guided by the Holy Spirit, he's filled with the Spirit, he remembers what Jesus said, and he's bringing in from that sermon that Jesus did give on that day, the great depths that he's learned about Jesus over the last 60 years, and applying it now to his audience, you know, an Ephesus in the, you know, some time around.

And you know, some time around, you know, sometime in the 90s, probably. One footnote, I mean, I'm interested that you do that dating, and I have no problem with that if John is written in the 90s, John is written in the 90s, I don't think we'll ever actually know, but I just note that the current Lady Margaret Professor of New Testament in Cambridge, George Van Kooten, is arguing in his new book on John for a much, much earlier date, a date I think, maybe even in the 40s or certainly the 50s, and I would say actually you don't have to wait a long time to get deep theological reflection. You know, the highest Christology in the New Testament, apart from leaving John Attwick for the moment, is probably Philippians 2, 6 to 11, which may well be a poem which's already written before Philippians, in other words, in the late 40s or early 50s.

So theological development doesn't take place on a slow chronological line. It takes place in leaps and bounds, and it's quite possible that actually the traditional dating of the Gospels in scholarship, which has a late John, may well be wrong, and actually it doesn't matter happily. Yeah, yeah, when it comes to a Christological development, I think that's a poor argument for arguing for it being late, because like you said, not only in these early hymns and creeds, but also Paul himself, the earliest writings in the New Testament are high Christology.

My argument, just I think the early church fathers got it right, they seem to put John towards the end, you know, and so that's basically why I agree with the 90s date, one of the reasons. Well, let's go to another interesting question, another John in the USA this time says, why does Mark say the crucifixion happened at about 9am, but John's Gospel says it was around noon? How could Mark Source, who he says his Peter, have been so mistaken? I wonder if you want to take a fast crack at this again, Tom, and then we'll see what Justin has to say. I was going to say it's Justin's turn to help us crack.

Well, let's not with Justin this time, okay, go ahead. Yeah, you know, I'm torn on this one. I'm not, I'll tell you where I lean, but I am, you know, I think there's some very good arguments for a harmonizing with the calendars.

There's some, there's some great scholars. In fact, my professor, the late Harold Honer

from Dallas Geological Seminary, he wrote a book called *The Chronological Aspects of Christ*, and he shows how Mark and John are basically using different calendars, a Roman and a Jewish one, and he manages, you know, he has his charts and shows how ultimately they're talking about him being crucified the same day. Interestingly, Colin Humphrey's, I don't know if you read his book, Tom, on the *Mysteries of the Lord's Supper*.

He's a British physicist. I think he teaches here somewhere here in London. But he makes a very fascinating argument, you know, paralleling the calendars a little bit different than Harold Honer, but on the same line.

So that could be, but for me, I'm completely fine with John making basically a theological move, moving the crucifixion to where, like, if John was written in the 90s, and, you know, the dating and the understanding of the crucifixion on Good Friday at 9 a.m., you know, as Mark says, and I think Matthew and Luke agree, if all the Christians kind of knew that and they kind of knew what John was doing, that he was making a theological point that basically Jesus was being crucified at the same time. The lambs were being sacrificed because that's exactly what the timing suggests in John. Then he would be doing something similar to Luke in the temptation account.

So I think in the temptation accounts, the actual, probably historical order is in Matthew, but Luke changes it to make Jerusalem the climax of the temptation accounts. And so that same theological move may be what John's doing, but I'm open to being persuaded. Yeah.

And I noticed that as far as I'm aware, the early church in the second and third and fourth century, who are reading and studying and pouring over these texts, were not bothered by that kind of what to us looks like a discrepancy. And even in the writings of the same person, Josephus, who covers some of the same material in his autobiography that he does in the Jewish war, and to some extent in the antiquities as well, when he comes to the same incident, he doesn't always tell it the same way. The ancient world, they don't seem to be as fussy about that sense of precision as we are.

And I mean the convergence on the fact that Jesus is tried in front of Pilate and then gets crucified and is on the cross for some hours. That's the basic story and whether it's not, but by our, you know, they didn't have watches. There wasn't any synchronization of time in those days.

It's basically you look at the sun and where are we in the day. And some might say, well, it's first thing in the morning. It can't be that early in the morning because Jesus has just had a trial before Pilate.

And okay, they probably did get up quite early. The Romans like to do business in the morning. But for John, as you say, it may be highlighting the middle of the day for

various reasons.

I want to say it's not a big deal. The other example that occurs to me is the story of when Peter is denying that he knows Jesus and the rooster is calling it. And the rooster is crowing.

And I'm sure, Justin, you've run into this one, that if you try and harmonize the accounts of when Peter said what he did and when the rooster crowed, it's actually very difficult to put all the accounts together. And one of the famous old ways, I think in the 19th century, some apologists did, was actually to have the rooster crowing nine times, which is what none of the accounts say. In order to say that they're all right, you have to say they're all wrong.

So I think when you get into weeds like that, it's the time to say, look, sorry, this is not what the question is about. That's actually more a defense of a particular theory of verbal inspiration of scripture or something like that. And the point is, we are not saved by believing in the verbal inspiration of scripture.

We're saved by the events to which scripture still solidly bears witness. That's right. Yeah, well, that's really helpful.

I hope that's helped John in the USA somewhere. Final question, Bob in Pennsylvania asks, if Paul never met Jesus and the gospels were not yet written, how did Paul know so much and why should he be considered the authority on Christ? I'll start with you this time, Tom and go to different. Yeah, I mean, Paul had met the risen Jesus and is quite clear about that.

This was not a happenstance or hearing. It was a personal meeting. However, we describe that.

And in particular, he knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified and that God had raised him from the dead, and that he knew that Jesus had been crucified as a messianic pretender, and that the resurrection had therefore demonstrated that he really was Israel's Messiah. So Paul's focus, the stuff that he knows about, as your questioner says, about Christ and the word means Messiah, that stuff is about what Israel's Messiah had to come and do. And Paul is retrieving the Psalms and retrieving Isaiah and so on.

There's very little in Paul of the material that you find in the bulk of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Little hints here and there about the remark on divorce, for instance, which comes through in 1 Corinthians 7. But often people put the question the other way. Why is there so little of the story of Jesus life in Paul? And I think the answer is it's all summed up for Paul in the meaning of Messiahship, that Jesus has come as the king appointed by God to launch God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

The resurrection has done that because evil has been defeated on the cross. Therefore,

this is where we're starting from and now we're moving forward with the risen Jesus as it were leading the way in the power of the Holy Spirit. So Paul is not then thought of as the expert on all the details of Jesus life.

He doesn't mention most of them. However, of course, what we have with Paul is not gospels. We have letters to communities that were already Christian and which we can assume had been told a certain amount, at least, about who Jesus was.

And when we push back, we discover that in Galatians 1 Paul talks about when he went to Jerusalem after his conversion and he went to spend two weeks with Peter. And as one famous scholar said, we assume that they didn't spend the whole time talking about the weather. There was likely pretty good intense discussion about Jesus and what he'd done.

So that's where I would start. Anything to add to that? The CH dog quote is in my book, by the way. It's a great one.

It's a famous one. But yeah, that's the only thing I'd add is when you look at Paul himself in the way he defends himself as an apostle, which he has to do a lot in his letters, that I saw the risen Jesus. That's number one.

And then number two, as Tom said, he spent time. He had multiple trips to Jerusalem. And again, these are bedrock facts scholars agree across the board that Paul went to Jerusalem within three years of his conversion of seeing the risen Jesus.

And then he went again soon after that. He actually went three times. But those first two trips, I mean, he was hanging out with Peter.

He's hanging out with James, the brother of Jesus. The next trip, even John, the one time John's mentioned in his letters is with the three pillars. He's with Peter, James and John.

And who knows who else of the 12? Probably some of those 500 who saw the risen Jesus. He hung out with at that time. So Paul is there for the earliest events.

And he's there with all the earliest players and followers of Jesus. So it's, I think there's no better person to write 13 letters of the New Testament. And I suspect that Paul was aware that some people, maybe Mark, maybe Luke, whoever were working on producing the full set in a detailed account of who Jesus actually was during his public career and so on.

Although I have to say, it remains an interesting point that if you start with 1 Corinthians 15, which we talked about on the previous episode and say, "Here is the gospel Christ died for us since was buried, was raised, was seen," then you don't actually need all that stuff from Jesus baptism through to his trial and death. And so one has to be rather careful about a truncated gospel, which is simply about the events of the last three days.



Because Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, at least all think that in order to understand those events, you need to know what Jesus was up to beforehand, launching God's kingdom, as I would say, which is, of course, where Paul goes on to in 1 Corinthians 15 in the extraordinary passage verses 20 to 28, where he's expounding all those texts according to the scriptures.

In other words, which talk about the sovereignty of Jesus now over the whole world because of his risen messiahship. Well, and if I could add the account of the Lord's Supper, that's where Paul actually quotes the longest, you know, the most words that we have in Paul's letters quoting Jesus is quoting actually what Jesus said of the Lord's Supper, which of course is in the gospel, later becomes in the gospels. This is part of the story of Jesus, even before the crucifixion.

So, so you have Paul aware of that as well. Words that were repeated at a communion service that we were both at. Absolutely.

Just anyway, super stuff. I hope those have been helpful responses to to Bob and John and Stephen. And we're looking forward to continuing the conversation.

We're going to be talking about resurrection on next edition of the podcast. So thank you once again, Tom and Justin for being with me. Thank you.

Wonderful. Thank you.

[Music] Well, I hope you enjoyed today's show.

Next time, should I use the word heaven and will we know everything in the new creation? If you do find this show helpful, do consider supporting us at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) where you can also register for our regular newsletter and never miss a thing. That's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). And by the way, the next big thing coming up is our next live show with renowned New York pastor to skeptics, Tim Keller. It's going to be about his journey through cancer.

He'll also be taking your questions. So do join us live on Tuesday the 13th of December from anywhere in the world and ask Tim your questions. You know the website by now.

Unbelievable.live. It's absolutely free to attend as usual, but you do need to register. That's [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live) and the link is with today's show. For now, thanks for being with us.

See you next time.

[Music]

(buzzing)