

The Literary Structure of John

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[0:00] Well, amen and good morning. Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in John chapter 12. Whenever I preach, I'm always very reticent to draw any attention to myself, which is, I know, a little ironic because I'm standing up here and you're listening to me.

But I don't want you to pay a whole lot of attention to me. I want to draw your attention to the text that we're in. And so that's why I wear the same jacket every Sunday. It's not because I don't want to own multiple jackets.

It's because I see no need to, and I just want to be kind of boring for God's glory. I just want to get up and preach and have you hear God's Word preached. So sometimes when there's something about me that might be distracting, I don't know if I should draw attention to it or not draw attention to it.

And so this morning I'm going to draw attention to something that perhaps is distracting, and maybe not. Thank you for those of you who have asked. Maybe you haven't noticed. But I have a pretty decent gash on my cheek this morning. I don't know if you can see or not on my cheek here.

Because this week I got into a fight with a rather obtuse pry bar that cared nothing about the opinion I was sharing with it. And to my shame, it drew first blood, and I don't think I hurt it at all.

[1:19] So that's what's happening with my cheek. Again, thank you for those of you who asked. All is well with me. We have been working our way through John's gospel account.

Last week we concluded chapter 11. But before preaching verse by verse, the beginning of chapter 12, I want to take a unique break.

I've been planning on doing this for some months now. For our time together, you're going to need two things. Your Bible. You already turned to chapter 12, I hope. And we're going to spend a bit of time there eventually.

And number two, you're going to need that bulletin that was handed to you on your way in. I don't always, in fact, I rarely include any notes within the notes section of your bulletin.

But in this case, I have, and they will be very helpful for you to follow what I am saying. I think you might be entirely lost if you don't have that opened up in front of you.

[2:23] I want us to take a unique break to consider broadly the literary structure of John. If you've been with us in our study, this concept will not be new to you.

So, why, you might ask, take a step back from the book to consider it as a whole. We've been talking about chiasmic literary structure almost every week that we've been in John.

So, why look at it as a whole is the question that's in front of us. I hope doing this is going to elicit three responses for you.

So, here's my answer to that question. Number one, I hope it'll elicit in you humility. This book is brilliantly constructed.

And while we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, that is, in this case, the Holy Spirit worked through the pen of John, we believe that it was breathed out by God through the pen of John, we do not believe this happens apart from the author's experience, cultural background, education, intellect, etc.

[3:35] That inspiration uses the personality of the individual. So, John the Apostle, formerly John the Fisherman, was a brilliant man, which I find should humble us.

We are not the smartest people to ever live. I think that John would have run circles around every single one of us intellectually.

Further, grasping the complexity of a book like John should show us that none of us know our Bibles quite as much as we might think that we do.

We've got a lifetime ahead of us, right? As long as the Lord tarries and He leaves us here, that we can study this Word and understand it more and more and more.

So, I hope to work humility in us this morning. Secondly, I want to elicit a response of wonder. John wasn't alone, as I mentioned in writing of this Gospel.

[4:45] The Bible is God-breathed, and it is magnificent. We can spend the entirety of our lives studying this book, and we will not unpack all of its beauty.

Now, it is true that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture states that all that is necessary for life and godliness is clear in the Bible.

We, yes and amen, that reality. But that's where a lot of people stop. They stop understanding it and mining its depths at that level.

But this book is just amazing. It's amazing. Written by various authors across time. It contains such singular focus.

It's just layered, layered, layered with awe. We truly worship an incredible God, and our study of His written Word is but a drop in the ocean of Himself.

[5:50] I am convinced that we will spend eternity enthralled by discovery of the person of God, and we get to begin with this book.

We should just be amazed by it. When structure like this exists, when the connections are apparent to us, we just ought to stand in awe of it. So I hope to promote wonder in us this morning.

And third, I hope to elicit attention. I want to draw your attention to what I believe, and I'm not alone in this, is the central phrase of the whole of John's Gospel.

A central phrase. I believe he means for us to notice this central phrase and have it inform our reading and study of the rest of the book.

And so I hope to grab your attention this morning. Now, I've mentioned taking a unique break to consider literary structure. I've mentioned a central phrase.

[6:55] If you've been with us, you know exactly what we're referring to. If you haven't been, I want to introduce you to a literary structure we called chiasms.

Much of the Bible is chiastic. They're all over the place. They're not everywhere, but they are all over the place. It is a broadly employed mnemonic device used to help in the memorization of long texts.

Often used by ancient peoples, this kind of structure to help people memorize things because they didn't have paper and pen readily available the way that we do.

But it also served to drive particular points, to grant interpretive lenses to a text. So in your bulletin, I included a simple definition by a man named Jim Hamilton.

And he is, I have called him the contemporary king of chiasms, which is chiastic and it alliterates. That's free for you today.

[7:58] But he says this, the word chiasm derives from the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X. The idea is that the first and last points match, as do the second and second to last, with as many in between as the author desires, hinging at a central turning point.

Okay, so it's just that simple. And you'll be able to see what that looks like as I've included some notes for you in your bulletin as well. Before we proceed, let me lead us in a prayer.

Father, we do ask that you would bless the preaching of your word this morning, even as we look at it in a broader sense. I pray that you would work in us humility and wonder, and that you would draw our attention to the saving work of Christ, that we would perhaps for the first time today, receive him as Savior and Lord.

And if we already have, that we would relish him all the more. We humbly recognize that we cannot do this without your help. We need your spirit to work in us. And so we pray that you'll do this very thing.

Amen. Okay, so firstly, I wanted to look at John chapter 1, verses 1 through 18. You read this as a responsive reading earlier. And I want to do this because this is an undeniable chiasm.

[9:21] Even people who don't like the work of looking at chiastic structures in the Bible agree. All the scholars go, yep, we see it there. So you read it earlier.

I'm not going to read it in its entirety to you. But you may have noted that it's a little bit odd in its structure. You get this mention of John, and then a departure from John, and then a return back to John once again.

It's always read strange to me. I've always thought, man, the first chapter of John is a strange chapter. It's like he's forgetting things he wanted to say, and going back and filling in some details, and then going back to the thing.

Like, whoopsie-daisy, I went off to John the Baptist. I better circle back around and say some things about Jesus, and then go back to John the Baptist. Like, he didn't have an eraser, and he just had no choice but to do that.

I didn't really think any of that. But it just always read odd to me. Well, the reason it reads a bit odd is because it's a chiasm. So if you look, there, I put that in the bulletin for you.

[10:26] You'll notice I've demarcated things by A and A prime. So those two correspond with one another. So those beginning four verses, you see Jesus presented as light.

He's coming from God, a representative of God. And then in that last portion, verse 16 through 18, no one has ever seen God, God the only Son who is at the Father's side.

He has made him known. So you see him presented as light and then as glory come from God.

Then very obviously, the B and the B prime.

You have a man sent from God whose name was John. And then picking up in verse 15, John bore witness about him and cried out. There's that piece, John there, and then John picking back up again in verse 15.

Then you have C and then C prime. Once again, the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. Verse 14, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

[11:35] Again, light and glory. So the central piece of that is verses 10 through 13. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

There's the central turning point of this text. And what John is doing is he's setting up a theme that he's going to carry all throughout the book of receiving Jesus and rejecting Jesus.

We see this over and over again, back to back to back. Chiastic structures again and again and again. Receiving Jesus, rejecting Jesus, receiving, rejecting. And he explains on what basis this happens.

Why is it that some reject and some receive? Some are not born of God. God is building this case right at the beginning, right here.

[12:42] How is it that they come to faith in Christ? It's that they're born of God. God quickens them, makes them alive, births faith in them.

And he's going to continue to argue this out all throughout the book. You can see it, I hope, right? So I gave you like a little, little tiny hint at a chiasm that I made up about Jim Hamilton.

And now you're seeing it here in John in these first 18 verses. And can you see that X structure the way that it lays out before you? Right. I hope that you can.

I hope you're with me. Now, let's take some time to look at the book as a whole. And I'm working you toward a point, right? So I'm flying through some things, but I'm working you toward a point.

And that is that I want to draw your attention to the central phrase of the text. So if you look, I think you have to flip your page. I can hear pages flipping. I've enumerated the chapters.

[13:40] It starts broad and gets smaller. I did not AA prime demarcate at this time for the sake of space. But you'll notice, again, corresponding chapters in the entirety of the book.

So chapter 1 corresponding to chapters 20 through 21. I would really encourage you to take some time to read these chapters. Read chapter 1, then read chapter 20 and 21, and notice the things that are happening in these places.

Chapters 2 through 4 correspond with chapters 18 through 20. So you see from Cana to Cana, from garden to garden. This is where, in those chapters where Jesus talks about destroying the temple and raising it up in three days.

And then in chapters 18 through 20, the temple, Jesus is crucified. And then he is raised on the third day. Chapters 5 through 11, you see Jesus' public ministry.

He's among crowds. He's at feasts. Summary things. Chapters 12 through 17, he's in private. He's with his disciples. He's at a particular feast, the Passover feast.

[14:48] Chapter 11, narrowing the scope, verses 45 through 53. Caiaphas, the high priest that year, unknowingly prophesied that it's better that one man would die for the nation.

And John explains to us what's meant by that. That he would die for the people of Israel who believe in him. And not only them, but for the nations. And then what do we see as a correspondence to that?

Chapter 12, verses 12 through 19. The triumphal entry. Where he is proclaimed to be the Christ. The one who is going to deliver his people. Chapter 11, verse 54 through 57.

Right there at the end of the chapter, this question is being asked. Will he come? Is Jesus going to show up to the Passover feast? And you see the Sanhedrin has put out an order.

They're seeking to arrest. They want to know if he shows up. They want to arrest him. And we know that they've already decided that they're going to kill him at this point.

[15:50] And then the corresponding text is chapter 12, verse 9 through 11. Where he does in fact come. Right? He shows up. And there's a mention there of them seeking to kill Lazarus.

Am I making sense? How it builds into a central point. The central text is chapter 12, verse 1 through 8.

Where we see reject. This theme emerges of receiving Jesus as the Christ. And rejecting Jesus as the Christ. On one side of that, you have Mary.

On the other side of that, you have... My brain just went totally blank. He has a name. Judith. Thank you so much.

Somebody whispered it. I appreciate you. Okay. So that's where we're going to spend our time looking at this. Now we are, next week, Lord willing, we're going to look at this text more broadly. So some of the details. But here we're just, we're working the chiasmic structure down to the central phrase.

[16:52] Okay. Now, we've spent some time. You've seen it on paper. And now you guys are chiasmic professionals. So I did not include verses 1 through 8 because I want you to look at it yourself.

So now you've got your Bibles open to John chapter 12. We're going to look at verses 1 through 8. I'm going to walk you through this and bring you to the central text. And then we'll talk a bit at length about that.

Okay. So let me read it in its entirety. And then I'll go back and point things out. All right. So beginning in verse 1, chapter 12. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary, therefore, took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, said, Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?

[18:02] He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. And having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, Leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

For the poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me. All right. So beginning with verse 1, right? Jesus comes to Bethany.

It's a suburb, essentially. It's a couple miles outside of Jerusalem. This is just before the triumphal entry that we'll read about soon. to the house of Lazarus, who he's just raised from the dead at the end of chapter 11.

And his presence is there. He's there, right? He physically goes to this place. And then in verse 7, right, what does he say? The poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me. So you see Jesus' presence being mentioned in both places. He's there physically, absolutely, but literally he's being mentioned. He comes to that place. You do not always have me.

[19:12] Verse 2. So now we're going to step in in our chiasmic structure. So this would be B, if you're demarcating it. So they gave a dinner for him there.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. And I suggest to you the corresponding verse would be verse 6, which is explaining what Judas said.

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

So you have this dichotomy being set up between the two of them. You have Martha serving. She's serving others. And here you have Judas serving himself.

So service of others corresponding to service of self. Then our next step in in our structure, verse 3, or C if you'd like to mark it out.

[20 : 19] Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. So there's a mention of the expense of this ointment.

I'm sure you can now see the correspondence to that. Judas gets upset. Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii?

Very expensive this sacrifice was and given to the poor. So the expense of the ointment mentioned in both of these places.

Which brings me to the central phrase. And you may have noted that I did not read the end of verse 3. And here it is. I believe this is a central phrase to this piece of text and to the entirety of the book of John.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

[21 : 26] We are so quick to read past details like this. Why in the world did John, the inspired by God himself, John, record this detail?

It's striking to me that there was mention in chapter 11 about the potential smell of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, but no explanation of that whatsoever. Never, right? Never a mention he might smell.

Never does John give us any detail about that at all. And yet here he mentions the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Here is how the literary structure serves us.

Between two corresponding responses, one, Mary kneels at the feet of Jesus. She has received him as the Christ. The other, Judas, misunderstanding everything going on and only concerned about his personal temporal gain.

Again, we'll look at more next week. We have this phrase. There's these two different characters. One receiving, one rejecting.

[22 : 42] The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Now, I did not discover the significance of what John is doing here on my own.

Oh, how I wish I did. How I wish my mind was so saturated with the scripture that this detail left off the page at me.

It did not. I have read past this little detail as if it was insignificant all the years. But at the same time, I'm thankful for the help I received from others and continue to, and in this case, Jim Hamilton pointing out this structure in this book.

What are we to make of this? Just moments ago, Jake led in the reading of an Old Testament text that is printed in your bulletin this morning.

It's like I do things sometimes by design. Leviticus chapter 16. Look at that for me.

[23 : 52] Jordan mentioned it when he got up to lead the next song. It is argued that the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, are chiasm, the whole thing, and that it centers on this text in Leviticus.

The Day of Atonement. The entirety of those five books of the Bible have this central point in the middle of it all. I think that John knows this.

I think that he's assuming his readers are going to know it. I think that if we really knew our Bibles, these connections would fire off and be made in our minds. What's happening here is just a blip.

There's a lot of instruction about the Day of Atonement. But here it is giving instruction for the Levitical high priest, the first of whom was Aaron, and how he was to make sacrifice for the people of Israel on this particular day.

So let's look at that text again together. I'm going to read it for us quickly and draw your attention to a few things. So Leviticus 16, starting in verse 11. Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

[25 : 04] He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony so that he does not die.

Are you making the connection? Your brain making the connection? You're not awake if you're not. Verse 14. And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness.

No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the holy place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

[26 : 25] So Aaron and then his progeny beyond him those who served as high priests would go one time of year into an inner place first in the tabernacle that's where the instructions are given here and then into the temple a place that was the most holy of places.

One time of year this one man could go in and he had to follow very strict instructions or else he would be struck dead. One of the things that he had to do was bring in incense and burn it to fill the space to cover the mercy seat so that he does not die.

He made an aromatic sacrifice in that moment and God withheld his wrath for all their uncleanness as he goes about this process of making all of this sacrifice of blood.

The incense the first thing I want to draw your attention to right? That other I really want you to see is the solitude of it. It's Aaron by himself going into this place and burning this incense filling this room with this fragrance.

fragrance. So, back in John chapter 12 and verse 3, as Mary kneels at the Lord's feet, receives him as the Christ, makes this lavish sacrifice of service to him.

[28 : 02] And on the other side of that you see Judas rejecting Jesus, wanting what he could get from Jesus' ministry, you see this phrase, the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

John means for us to see Mary worshiping in the very presence of God himself. Isn't that cool?

That's the moment that's being recorded here.

Mary has gone in behind the veil and she has made sacrifice and Jesus has welcomed her. The whole book is turning on this phrase, the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Now, why does that matter, right? You could preach through the book of John and I think you could preach it faithfully and miss this. I'm sure without Jim Hamilton's help I would have definitely done that going through the gospel of John.

But I think he's doing something particularly helpful for us. So, he says in John chapter 20 verse 30 and 31, I've read this to you many times in our study so far, now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written 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.

[29 : 36] You're probably very familiar with this, if you're at all familiar with John's gospel. He wrote these things down so that we can believe Jesus is the Christ and have life. And what we do so often when we think about life, we think about eternal life, as we put that in juxtaposition to eternal death.

And there's some rightness in doing that, but we see it as an escape from punishment and nothing more. Nothing more. Justification.

What an important doctrine. We want to stand on a hill and die for the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. How can you stand before God?

How can you have the penalty of your debt expunged from you? How can you be given the righteousness of Christ so that you can stand before God and not be destroyed? That's the doctrine of justification.

By grace, through faith, in Christ. It's an incredibly important doctrine. But I think our minds stop there. I think if we're not careful, it always ends there.

[30 : 43] But John, in saying that we're going to have life in Jesus' name, has already defined what life is a few chapters earlier. In chapter 17, verse 3, he says, and this is eternal life.

that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. Beloved, we are justified in order to be adopted, to be welcomed back into God's family, for to be back like in the garden before the fall when God walked with Adam in the cool of the day, to get to have him as our God and we be his people, to dwell with him.

He's the end point, right? That restored relationship, to be reconciled back to God in Jesus Christ. And I think our minds stop too low.

Justification, yes, teach it, defend it, stand firm on it, but so that we're adopted, so that we can be welcomed into the presence of God forever.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. I think that John wants us to have this in our mind, right?

[32:14] The Lord of the universe, the word made flesh, dwelling with man, welcoming a woman who's willing to give everything that she might sit in his presence.

Let's pray together.