

## The beloved book by John

by EARL F. PALMER

*Some dogma, we are told, was credible in the twelfth century, but is not credible in the twentieth. You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays. But what a man can believe depends upon his philosophy, not upon the clock of the century ... if a man believes in a will behind law, he can believe in any miracle in any age.* (G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 74-75)

For sure the hardest of all miracles to really believe is that in the man Jesus Christ, God was self-revealed and spoke to those on earth, making our planet forever known as the visited planet. The book of John is a book about that grand miracle, and other miracles too. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us ...* (John 1).

How are we to understand such a book and the miracles we find there? Is John's Gospel the journal of a man who knew Jesus of Nazareth personally, the book of the youngest of the disciples — one of the two sons of thunder — or is it a dogmatic tract by committee, perhaps written to support Christian doctrines a century later than the story it describes? Every pastor and every reader of this Gospel and the whole of the New Testament needs to decide a way to go with just such questions. What I do with the book and what I allow the book to do to me is influenced by the way I choose to read it.

The Christians who founded the early Church favored the first not the second way and this is why the fourth Gospel is especially honored when it is read in the worship tradition of the Christian Church. John has described encounters that Jesus had with people in which ordinary people discover God's love. He carefully narrates the story of what Jesus said and did, it is a story that leads to Holy Week, Good Friday, and Resurrection victory. For John, Jesus the man is the "will behind law," the one who is before and beyond everything else that is. John's Gospel is an "in close" journal written to and in behalf of his century for those who wondered about the truthfulness and meaning of the man at the center of the story, Jesus Christ.

Twenty-one centuries later, the questions being raised in our Tuesday of history are really very much the same as John's companions were asking

on their Monday of history's week. The central questions for us are the same as the ones they faced; do I dare to put my weight down upon the promises of Jesus? Is the story true? What, after all, is the meaning of life and of my life? Is God able to speak for himself? Is this book an accurate accounting of Jesus, the man who makes the promises?

My pilgrimage with these questions brought me into my own encounter with the Gospel of John. I remember that I was surprised by the boldness of the book; I was embarrassed by its miracles; I was struck by its in-close and interior portrayal of the life of Jesus. After a while this book by John won my respect and I decided to trust John's witness to what Jesus said and did. The result of that decision on my part totally changed my life. I feel the same way today and John's book makes as much sense to me today as it did yesterday.

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John's historical earnestness as a writer is clear and detailed as he tracks the events of Christ's life and ministry. His carefulness in narrative together with the radical truthfulness he claims for his book are what give this Gospel a central place as the most treasured book in the New Testament. It is the beloved book. John explained his goals as a writer this way: *But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:31), *This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.* (John 21: 24, 25). This is why John's Gospel is as fresh and healing on the Tuesdays of our history as it was on the Mondays.

EARL F. PALMER is pastor of University Church, Seattle, Wash.