

The Gospel of John
Session One: Introduction
Commentary

John 1:1-18

1:1–2. Some interpreters have translated the opening phrase of this Gospel, “Before there was a beginning, the Word had been.” Indeed, the familiar repetition of Genesis 1:1 almost looks as if John wrote a Gospel of two beginnings—a creation account that parallels physical birth and spiritual rebirth. But it is important to notice that we are dealing with two beginnings, not creations. The central focus of this verse is eternity. Like his heavenly Father, Jesus always was and therefore existed at the beginning of time.

It is interesting that John should call Jesus the Word rather than some other name to introduce his book—interesting, but not surprising since the Jews often referred to God in such terminology. The doctrine at stake here is the deity of Christ. Jesus is God, and John wanted to make that point immediately. In fact, this prologue (vv. 1–18) begins and ends with a strong statement of this doctrine.

The term Word (*logos*) would have been familiar to the Greeks as well. Their understanding centered on ultimate reason or the rationale of the universe rather than the personal God revealed to Abraham and his descendants. John claimed that the God of creation, the ultimate mind of the universe, had taken on human form; he had become incarnate.

The Bible allows no place for atheism and no room for doubt about how God has spoken—through the Word. Before there was a beginning, the Word had been coequal with God throughout all eternity. But what did the apostle mean by with God? The Greek word is *pros* which literally means “toward,” implying a face-to-face relationship. John would have neither atheism nor unitarianism. He told us later in his Gospel that the Godhead consists of a trinity, but here in verse 1 we learn plurality.

So Jesus, the Word, is eternal and personal. Nothing can separate the heavenly Father from his Son. Verse 2 merely emphasizes verse 1. I like the way Gary Vanderet puts it: “John intends that the entire book be read in light of this verse. The deeds and the words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God” (Vanderet, *Prelude to Deity*).

1:3. Unlike the Gospel writers before him, John tells us that Jesus participated in creation and again states his case twice for emphasis. Surely this is a deliberate link with Genesis, and it sets the stage for other New Testament Scriptures which show us Jesus’ involvement in creation: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Col. 1:16). “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1:1–2).

Creation is a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. Virtually every other aspect of theology rests upon our understanding of God as the origin of all life and of the role Jesus Christ, the Word, in creation. John could hardly say it more clearly: without him nothing was made that has been made—everything from subatomic particles to galaxies. Only God who created all things can redeem them. Creation is the foundation stone of the gospel. Christ could not have been created, for he created all things. There was a “historical Jesus,” but this terminology refers only to his thirty-three years on earth. His life had no beginning, and it will have no end.

1:4. Here we find the first appearance of our key word—life. The revelation of the Lamb was also the revelation of life. No fewer than thirty-six times in John, we find the word *zoe*. Jesus Christ the Creator provides physical life; Jesus Christ the Redeemer provides spiritual life; and Jesus Christ the Savior provides eternal life. In verse 4 John also introduced another key word—light. The life becomes the light of men. Notice these positive terms. What a wonderful contrast to death and darkness.

In the Word, God’s person and power were revealed to humanity. Here again we see a reference to creation since, in the Genesis account, light was the first evidence of God’s creative work. God is always the source of light and life. Christ the Son, the Creator, provides life and light to humanity. He alone is the life-giver and the light-bearer. John is getting ready to write new lyrics to an old melody, “With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (Ps. 36:9).

1:5. In this verse John picked up a common first-century theme, the symbols of light and darkness representing good and evil. The word understood might be rendered “overcome.” All the forces of Satan tried to prevent life and extinguish the light—but they could not. These five verses tell us that Jesus came to the world with a message of hope, and he came from heaven where he had lived eternally with the Father. Often I find myself humming the theme of the television miniseries *Winds of War* which aired in the mid 1980s. Based on the Herman Wouk book, the series ran for a total of eighteen hours. This theme played over and over again—in the key of D minor. John’s key words are like that, especially “life” and “light.” The word rendered “understood” in the NIV is translated “seizes” in Mark 9:18 and “overtakes” in John 12:35. God sent his light into the world, but mankind did not understand it, could not grasp it. But the world will never be able to defeat it.

1:6–7. We’ve already noted the recurring themes of life and light; here is another—witness. In order for John the apostle to introduce the Son of God historically, he had to first introduce John the Baptist. We should notice, however, that John emphasized the function of the Baptist, not his identity. Luke tells us much more about John the Baptist’s birth and life; John focuses on why he came and who sent him.

A good witness does not attract attention to himself but to the person or facts which he represents. The Greek word for “witness” by John in this Gospel appears only three times in Mark and only once in Luke. The verb (usually rendered “testify”) shows up thirty-three times in

John and only once each in Matthew and Luke. All this points up the uniqueness of each account and particularly the intensity with which John will seek to fulfill his purpose. As Tenney puts it, "Although vv. 6–8 seem alien to the general content of the text, they are not irrelevant. As the Word came to bring the heavenly light to humanity, so John came to speak from a human level and to awaken people to their need of God's revelation" (Tenney, *The Gospel of John*. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981). How interesting that John the apostle should write about John the Baptist and tell us he was sent. He used a verb form upon which the word apostle is built. Actually, both men were apostles in the functional sense because they were sent from God with a message to people who needed to hear it.

As implied above, the words witness and testify are essentially the same word from which we get our English word martyr. John used it often, accounting for forty-seven out of seventy-six times the word appears in the New Testament.

1:8–9. John had no problem using repetition to make a point. Though John the Baptist's message was enlightening, he was not the true light. We have created virtually every kind of artificial light possible for special effects on television and films. But nothing can compare with watching God's sunrise or sunset, or perhaps staring from the blackness of an Arizona desert into the night sky at stars and planets God has made. Jesus is the true light, not some imitation. But what does it mean to say that Jesus gives light to every man ... coming into the world? The intended contrast between the Master and the messenger strikes us dramatically: John was a man, Jesus is God; John was a witness, Jesus is the Word; John was a servant, Jesus is the Son. The last phrase of verse 9 surely refers to the incarnation of Jesus, though some have interpreted it to mean the conscience God provides every human being, or even the natural revelation everyone can see. The structure of the verse, however, favors a reference to Christ's birth even though the past tense seems awkward in this context. A major theme of this section is regeneration, and these first four verses provide its announcement.

1:10–11. Immediately after describing the announcement, John tells us about apathy toward the message of regeneration. The world (*kosmos*) is another of John's theme words; he used it seventy-seven times. With the device of repetition, John taught incarnation, creation, and rejection all in one verse (v. 10). Depravity and blindness thwarted God's efforts to reach out to his own creation—and still do. As Marcus Dods declared,

There He was, the Creator Himself, that mysterious Being who had hitherto kept Himself so hidden and remote while yet so influential and supreme; the wonderful and unsearchable Source and Fountain out of which had proceeded all that men saw, themselves included—there at last He was 'in the world' He Himself had made, apparent to the eyes of men, and intelligible through their understanding; a real person whom they could know as an individual, whom they could love, who could receive and return their expressions of affection and trust. He was in the world, and the world knew Him not (Dods, *The Gospel of Saint John* (2 vols.). London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908).

In verse 11, the first appearance of the word *own* appears in the neuter gender and the second is masculine. What significance could such a distinction have for interpretation? One possibility is that Jesus came to earth, the place he had created, and the second tells us that the people who lived there turned him away. He was not welcomed or accepted.

1:12–13. Early in his book, John established the heart of the gospel, still two chapters away from the famous John 3:16. From the announcement of regeneration followed by apathy the apostle introduces the acceptance of regeneration.

Like most things in life, there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to God. The right way (and the only meaningful way) is to believe the gospel, receive the Savior and accept new birth as a result. The wrong way somehow links a relationship to God with human qualities such as physical birth, self-determination, or the choice of another person. In John's theological vocabulary, *believed* and *received* are synonymous when it comes to the gospel. Patrick Henry once said, "The most cherished possession I wish I could leave you is my faith in Jesus Christ, for with Him and nothing else you can be happy, but without Him and with all else, you'll never be happy" (cited in Detzler, A. *New Testament Words in Today's Language*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1986).

1:14. This may be the most important verse in the Bible on the doctrine of the incarnation. John went back to verse 1 to pick up one of his favorite themes, the Word. God became human; God showed us his glory; God offered us grace and truth; God literally "tabernacled" among us. Remember the tabernacle in the center of the camp? It represented the place of the law, the abode of God, the source of revelation, the site of sacrifice, and the focus of worship. Now in the new covenant, Jesus provides all these.

And not only was Jesus here, but he demonstrated the glory of the One and Only. Other prophets, including John the Baptist, were sent from God, but the Word came directly from the Father's presence. Borchert reminds us of some important implications: "This text makes it absolutely clear that the mission of the Logos was unique in the history of the world. This uniqueness of the Son makes it impossible for Christianity to be a syncretistic religion. In our mission to the world we cannot say 'Jesus and Caesar' or 'Jesus and Buddha,' and so forth. Our confession is Jesus, the one and only! The early Christians suffered and died because they refused to recognize any other pattern than that which was revealed in Jesus Christ" (Borchert, p. 121).

Finally, we cannot pass lightly over the wonderful phrase, full of grace and truth. John used the word *grace* again in verses 16 and 17, then never mentioned it for the rest of his Gospel! He used *truth* many times, but here the combination grabs us. Jesus perfectly blended two of the most important qualities of the divine nature and displayed them in human personality.

1:15–16. The full expression of John the Baptist's comparison between himself and his Lord does not appear until chapter 3, but the phraseology of verse 15 answers the question, "When did the incarnation occur?" Historically, many conservative Bible scholars place the date at 4 b.c., but that is hardly the point of this passage. The incarnation occurred at a specific point in

God's plan for the world. Paul spelled it out clearly in his letter to the churches of Galatia: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4–5). In time Jesus followed John the Baptist, but in importance he holds the preeminence.

At this point in his narrative theology, John the apostle could not hold back a testimony to God's grace: We have all received one blessing after another. Various Bible translations and paraphrases render this phrase differently:

- NIV: "one blessing after another"
- KJV: "grace for grace"
- LB: "blessing upon blessing heaped upon us"
- NLT: "one gracious blessing after another"

1:17. The contrast between law and grace forms a major portion of Pauline theology, but we get a thumbnail sketch here from John. Moses provided a standard of righteousness—that no one could meet. Then the Prophet whom Moses promised (1:25) came, and he brought a standard of righteousness centered in grace and truth. Like John the Baptist and John the apostle, Moses was a servant. But Jesus is the Son. This verse drives the dividing spike between the old and new covenants, introducing a new way of God's dealing with humankind.

1:18. This verse takes its place beside verse 14 as key passages on the incarnation, telling us that Jesus is the exclusive explanation of the Father. But did not Moses see God (see Exod. 33)? Not in this sense. Moses saw what theologians call a "theophany"—God's appearance in some temporary form. Now, John tells us, he has taken on human flesh and will live among people on earth. Some New Testament experts have translated the phrase, "God only begotten." John left no stone unturned, no argument unclarified. Jesus is the very essence of God and, according to this verse, his purpose in coming to earth was to exegete, to interpret, to explain the heavenly Father.

Numerous Bible passages remind us that Jesus came to feel what we feel, to show us what God is like, to prioritize human life—and all of that is true. But ultimately he came to die. And as John's Gospel will show, the incarnation became the gateway to the cross.¹

¹ Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).