

God with God

John 1:1-18

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
December 30, 2007*

This sermon is part of the sermon series "Nine Lessons and Carols"

We come this evening to the Ninth and final Lesson in the series known as “The Service of Nine Lessons and Carols.” Over the month of December, through the Sundays of December (bar one of the services, where we had the “Music of Christmas”) we've been looking at these Nine Lessons. The Service began in King's College in Cambridge in 1918, on Christmas Eve at half past four, as has been the tradition since 1918, and since 1928 that service has been broadcast on the television and on the radio—and these days one can pick it up here through various means, PBS and, I think, through the internet. My wife and I were in Scotland on Christmas Eve, and at 4:30, ritually we sat down and listened to the Nine Lessons and Carols. To my great, great consternation, some of the Lessons had been changed and some modern poetry or doggerel had been substituted instead of the traditional Lessons. I am perfectly certain there will be some protests about that!

Well, these Lessons — two of them from Genesis; two from the evangelical prophet, Isaiah; three from the Gospel of Luke; and one, as we heard this morning, from the Gospel of Matthew (the Old Testament, the four Old Testament lessons predictive of the coming Messiah, four of the New Testament Lessons from Luke and Matthew) describing the nativity story. And now we have one more.

And in his great wisdom Eric Milner White (who was the man responsible for putting together this series of Lessons) chose to end with something of a peroration, something of a climax - the prologue of John's Gospel.

I haven't been able to trace it...I know that Luther said it, I know that Gregory said it, and I think Augustine is the origin of this famous statement that “the Gospel of John is deep enough for an elephant to swim in, and shallow enough for a child to paddle in,” or words to that effect. As we read the prologue of John's Gospel, you have to understand that if you were to study Greek for — forgive me, Guy! — but if you were to study Greek for a couple of weeks...a month, say... you could probably read and roughly translate the prologue of John's Gospel.

They are very simple words. They are basic words. They are words that are very common in the Greek language. They are some of the first words that you would learn as you learn any language. The grammar is very, very simple. It gives you great confidence! It's one of the "test passages" to boost your ego, to translate the prologue of John's Gospel from Greek into English. But every phrase, every sentence is full of meaning that takes your breath away: "He was in the world, and the word was made by Him." And your mind explodes, simply trying to comprehend the incomprehensible!

As we turn now to the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel, let's look to God in prayer. Let's pray.

Father, we do thank You for Your word. We thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You especially for this prologue, and pray now, Holy Spirit, that we might once again be blessed of You to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's word:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 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.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.')" And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

May God add His blessing to that reading of His holy and inerrant word.

In the medieval period, a period of iconography, the four Gospels were represented variously. The Gospel of Matthew was represented by a human-like figure, and Mark was represented as a lion, and Luke as an ox. And John was an eagle. And the reason for John being represented as an eagle was that it was thought that an eagle could look straight into the sun. And that's how John begins. He doesn't begin like Matthew or Luke—no genealogy, no Bethlehem, no stable, no Herod, no shepherds on the hillside, no angels, no archangels, no flight to Egypt. No wise men. No gold and frankincense and myrrh. Not even an account of His teenage life in Nazareth. Not even does John begin at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. He begins at the beginning. Every story begins like that, doesn't it? You tell your children stories—"A long, long time ago, in a place far, far away...." Well, John begins something like that... "A long, long time ago...."

I. The incarnation of Christ.

Now, "In the beginning...." It reminds you of something, doesn't it? It reminds you of the way the Bible starts. John's been reading Genesis. John's been reading Genesis for his devotional: "In the beginning, God...." That's how the Bible begins. And because one of the things that John wants to do in this gospel—Matthew and Mark and Luke had probably all been written by the time John writes his Gospel, and one of the things John wants to do is to demonstrate that Jesus is none other than God; that He is the Lord, the Lord of Glory, the only God there is; that He's the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David. What other way could he begin the Gospel, then, but the way that the Bible itself begins: "In the beginning, God...."?

In the beginning the Word already was. The *Logos*, the Word, the revelation of God—God making himself known to us in Jesus Christ—He already was. But John has another purpose. He tells us very clearly in chapter 20 that the reason he writes his Gospel is an evangelistic one. He writes so that you and I might believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that believing we might have life. Life, true life, the fullness of life; the life that is the consequence of a new birth that John will speak of in chapter 3: that I am alive in Jesus Christ.

Now let's see what John has to say to us along four lines of thought. First of all, the pre-existence of Christ...the pre-existence of Christ. "In the beginning...." Before time, before Bethlehem, before Herod, before David, before Moses, before Abraham, before Adam—in the beginning the Word, Jesus, already was. He already had existence. He already had being.

Where is John getting this idea of calling Jesus "the Word" from? Well, we don't have time. There are all kinds of theories, but the most probable theory is the Genesis theory, from Genesis, chapter 1. In the beginning, God spoke creation

into being. God verbalizes and creation comes into being. And follow that line of thought, and Jesus is the revelation of God. He is God communicating himself to us. The Word...and He exists before creation. He exists before the universe. He exists before anything that exists. John is countering—(already, towards the end of the first century, there were various groups...they would flourish in the second century, they would flourish even more in the fourth century)—people who denied the deity of Christ. And John wants to set Christ firmly before creation: In the beginning, before the world ever was, Christ already had been. That's the first thing that he wants us to see, the pre-existence of Christ. This baby in the manger has an existence before He was born. There's an aspect of this baby that has existence, that has being, before He was born.

II. The divinity of Christ.

The second thing he wants us to see is the divinity of Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word...was God.” He was God. However you define God—in terms of His names, in terms of His attributes, in terms of His characteristics, what God can do (“Can God do anything? Yes, He can do anything He wants”)—the Word was God, absolute God, true God, very God. Not partly God, not almost God, not just like God, but God! John is using the simplest grammar so that a child can understand this, the attribution of deity, the attribution of Godhead to Jesus Christ. He's the one who creates all things. Christ is the one who breathes creation into being. He's the one who gives life. He's the one who has life in himself, and He is the one who creates life. “Without Him was not any thing made that was made.” Everything in the universe bears a stamp “Made by Jesus Christ.” He was God. He upholds all things by the word of His power. He judges all things. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. He is true God. [Oh, I know the Jehovah Witnesses have some problems with the grammar here, but take away the attribution of deity to Jesus and the whole gospel falls apart!] The whole point of John's Gospel is to prove the deity of Jesus. That's what John wants us to believe, and that believing it we might have life.

The pre-existence of Christ, the divinity of Christ, and the fellowship of Christ. “And the Word was *with* God.” Now follow the language. It's very simple.

III. The fellowship of Christ.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was *with* God. He was God, and He was with God. God with God! And yet there's only one God. And you're gasping...your mind can't take that in, that there is more than one who is the one God; that within the one Godhead there is plurality: there is the Father, and there is the Son, and there is the Holy Spirit, and they are with one another. And John is using a little tiny preposition that can mean *with*, or it

can even mean *towards*...not so much as static side by side, but a movement towards...God towards God. Within the one God there is this fellowship, this communion. Oh, theologians gave it a fanciful name. In Greek, they called it *perichoresis*; in Latin, they called it *circuminsessio*—the fellowship, the communion, the rapport, the infinite understanding, the infinite love of the Father toward the Son, and the Son toward the Father, and the Father and the Son toward the Holy Spirit.

Augustine was once asked what was God doing before He created the world. “Making hell for people who ask questions like that,” he said. But actually another answer to the question is that God was in love. He was in love within Himself. There was a fellowship, there was a rapport that we cannot begin to understand. ‘I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me,’ Jesus would say. They are simple little terms, aren't they? “With...in.” And you'll spend eternity trying to understand it, and never fully understanding it, but simply gasping in wonder and adoration...God face to face with God; the Word and the Father in face to face fellowship.

The pre-existence of Christ; the divinity of Christ; the fellowship of Christ.

IV. The incarnation of Christ.

And then, in verse 14, the incarnation of Christ. This is John's nativity story: the Word who was God, who was in the beginning, who was with God, became flesh. You notice the change in the verb now. He was God; He didn't have to become God; He already was God, but He had to become flesh. He was God, but in addition to being God—not by subtraction...you can't subtract from deity and still have deity—in addition to being God, He became flesh.

Why does John say *flesh*, and not “He became a man”? That would be true. He became flesh, John says, because for John *flesh* had one of several meanings, but here I think for John *flesh* means something frail, something lowly, something tangible. “The light shone in the darkness” [verse 5]; “The true light was coming into the world” [verse 9]; “He was in the world” [verses 10-11]. He was *made* flesh. He was “in a low condition,” our *Catechism* says. He *tabernacled* is the verb. He was made, or He tabernacled, He dwelt among us. He tabernacled among us. What was the function of the tabernacle? It was where you came into the presence of God. God makes His presence known by becoming flesh, by dwelling in our midst, by taking a human body and a reasonable soul, in a low condition; not in St. Dominic's, or in Doctor's Hospital, or in UMC, but in a stable.

“The birds of the air have their nests and the foxes have their holes, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

John is countering, I think, a movement towards the end of the first century

known as *docetism*. Various forms of it from Cerinthus and Ebion and Marcion and Valentinus and others who denied the reality of the human body of Jesus. John wants us to see that this God became flesh. He took on frailty. We know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that “though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.”

Now what is John's point? He wants to say several things now, I think.

He wants us to see that the way we become rich is that as a consequence of Jesus' incarnation, as a consequence of the Word who was with God and who was God and who was made flesh, is that to all who received Him, to them He gave the right to become — what? — children of God. Children of God, to be adopted into a family of which Jesus is the elder brother. To bring the likes of you and me from the darkness and pollution of sin into fellowship and communion with God, through faith in Jesus Christ, so that you and I might be children — children of God. “And if children, then heirs,” Paul will say, “...heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.” You notice how he puts it in verse 17:

“The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

There's something about the dawning of the New Testament, there's something about the coming of Christ into the world that moves from shadow to fullness of light. Never once, you see, never once in the Old Testament would a believer have ever called God “Father” in the sense that a believer in the New Testament would. It's a staggering thing! You know in the Old Testament they were so fearful of the name of God, Yahweh, Jehovah...the divine name, the covenant name of God, the name that God revealed to Moses, the name that sounds in Hebrew a bit like “I Am that I Am”...they were so fearful of pronouncing that name that they just never pronounced it. They never pronounced it. And we can come, you and I, we can come and we can call “God our Father, who art in heaven.” What a privilege!

That's what Christmas means. It's the privilege of being adopted into this family, this extraordinary family that stretches across time and across space of believers who have been brought out of darkness not by the will of man, but by the will of God, into fellowship and communion with Christ, so that we can call God our Father.

You notice what he says in verse 18: “No one has seen God at any time.” Not really. They saw revelations of God in the form of angels and other things in the Old Testament, and bright lights and so on. And Ezekiel had this vision of a chariot with wheels within wheels, and it was breathtaking, but he didn't really see *God*.

Do your children ever ask you, parents...do they ever ask you, “What is God

like? What is God really like?" And the most basic answer that we can ever give to that question is "He is like Jesus. He is exactly like Jesus. He loves like Jesus loves. He's as true as Jesus is true. He's as faithful as Jesus is faithful." Because there is no un-Christ-likeness in God. God is like Jesus. "He has made Him known," John says. [He uses the word *exegete*.] He's exegeted, He's revealed God to us. If you want to know what God is like, look to Christ. Look to Christ.

You notice what he says in verse 16: "And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." From His fullness.... Do you remember what Philip asked? "Show us the Father... [I'm in the King James now] "...Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us." "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." It takes your breath away.

Do you remember? Thomas says at the end of John's Gospel, "My Lord and my God!"

Is your life empty, my friend? Are you trying to search for meaning and purpose in this world? Is there what Paschal called a "God-shaped void" in your heart? And you've tried all the broken cisterns and they've all failed. Well, look to Jesus. Look to Jesus, because from His fullness you will receive fullness. You will receive life. You will receive meaning and purpose, and integration, and grace upon grace upon grace, because

"Now are we the sons of God, but it doth not yet appear what we shall be. Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him."

This is John's prologue. It's just the beginning. We've barely scratched the surface of it. It takes your breath away:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And the Word was made flesh for the likes of you and for the likes of me. And the Bible says that if you believe in Him, if you trust Him and take Him as your Lord and Savior, and Prophet and Priest and King, your sins, though they be red like crimson, they will be as white as snow. What glory! What blessedness! What joy!

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this marvelous and extraordinary passage of Scripture. We ask now for Your rich blessing. We ask that You'd apply it to our hearts for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. Amen.

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