

## **John: The Word From Above**

**John 1:1-18**

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*September 1, 2002*

We are going to look at the gospel of John, and the series is going to be called, "That You May Believe." Many of you, of course, will be familiar that that is the purpose of John's gospel, because it's in the 20th chapter that "these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

We begin this evening with what is often called the prologue, the first 18 verses of the first chapter. Turn with me then, to the Word of God, to John's gospel, chapter 1 and verses 1-18. Hear the Word of God.

Have you ever noticed how the gospels begin? Of course you have. Matthew and Luke begin in the way we might expect, with the story of Jesus' birth, of Bethlehem, and the angels, and the stable, and the shepherds, and the stall, and the wise men, and all of that. Mark is always in a hurry so he can't be bothered with all of that. He goes straight to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan with John the Baptist. These three gospels we sometimes call the Synoptic Gospels. But Matthew, Mark and Luke, all of them begin, as it were with Jesus down here from below, on the earth, in ministry, in flesh and blood.

But John begins in an all together different way. John doesn't try to bring Jesus in surreptitiously and then, as he will, tell you half way through the story, this Jesus is God's Son. No, John tells you right up front. He doesn't even begin, as it were, from below. He begins from above. His eyes are turned heavenward; and as he begins to tell the story of Jesus, he begins with some of the most sublime words that have ever been written in all of literature.

One of the earliest Christians, and I think it was Gregory, but I'm not sure, but the senior minister will correct me afterwards if I'm wrong, it's in his providence, I believe it was Gregory who said that the Gospel of John could be summed up like this: "that an infant can paddle in it and an elephant can swim in it." Isn't that beautiful?

Well, the metaphor is a little clumsy, but you understand what he is saying. There are truths here in the opening verses that a little child could understand, and a

little child could learn, and a little child could repeat like a catechism question and answer. But there are profundities here that would baffle the most erudite and recondite of minds. A child may paddle here, but an elephant may swim here.

In these opening verses, John introduces us to the centerpiece of the whole gospel. Usually these verses are referred to as the prologue. John's gospel can be divided more or less into two parts. The first twelve chapters introduce to us the signs that Jesus gives of His real identity, the miracles that He performs. And John will add, ever now and then, "this is the first of the signs," and the second of the signs, and the further the signs and so on. And that first half of the gospel of John is often referred to as the Book of Signs.

Then from chapter 14 to the end of the Gospel, Jesus withdraws from the world and focuses His ministry upon His disciples and discloses to them some of the most profound mysteries of His being in person and mission. The discourse, you remember, in the Upper Room in John 14 and 15 and 16, and that High Priestly Prayer in John chapter 17, all of that is before us. And, therefore, in those chapters, Jesus is revealing something of His inherent glories. And the second half of the Gospel of John is sometimes referred to as the Book of Glory. So we have in John the Book of Signs, and the Book of Glory.

But these verses here are the prologue to those two halves of the Gospel of John. And what we have in the prologue is a little bit like an overture to an opera, where some of the major themes of the opera are played in just small little snippets. So the references here in the prologue to *light* and *life* and *glory* and all, as it were, are things and issues and aspects that John is going to enlarge upon in the Gospel.

He wants us to see, for example in verse 16, that from the fullness of the grace of Jesus Christ, we have received one blessing after another. And how have we received it? As he tells us in verse 12, by believing on the name of Jesus Christ. That's why he has written this gospel. That's why he focuses upon Jesus, in order that we may believe.

## **I. Jesus existed before the beginning of creation.**

Now, there are three stages of the glory of Jesus Christ that unfold in the course of this prologue. The first of these stages has to do with the origin of Jesus. Look at the opening two verses. In fact, just look at the opening three words, three words in English, but two in the original. Just look at these opening words, "In the beginning." And those of you who have your ears attuned tonight will know immediately what John is doing, because when he begins his gospel with the words, "In the beginning," some of you have already remembered that that's the way the Bible begins. That's the way the Book of Genesis begins. That's the way the first book of the Bible opens. "In the beginning God created the heavens and

the earth.”

You see what John is doing. John is taking you further back than any of the other gospels. Matthew goes back to Abraham in his first chapter, but that's not back far enough. And John is saying if you really want to understand who Jesus is, if you really want to grasp something of the glory of Jesus Christ, you have to go back to the very beginning. You have to back to that moment when matter was formed and particles came together and atoms and molecules and neutrons and all of those sub-atomic particles and forces came into existence by the creative Word of God. That's where you have to start.

And what John is saying is this: That at that moment, when creation came into being, the Word of God, namely Jesus Christ, already was. He already had existence. And if He was there at the beginning, then Jesus Christ is not to be thought of as part of the creation. He is uncreated. He is not part of the world, He is not part of the universe, He is not part of the solar system, He is not part of this great universe in which you and I live. Because at the very moment when this creation was brought into being, He already had been, He already was, He already existed. “The Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Now that's very easy to say, isn't it. And it's very easy to write, I suppose. But it's one of the most profound sentences ever to have been written. I think you can search, and I haven't done it, I'm not claiming that I have, but you can search all of literature to come up with a more profound statement than that which John makes in this opening verse, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Either He was God or else He was with God. And if He was with God, then He wasn't God. And if He was God, He wasn't with God. Do you see the problem? How can “be God” and “be with God” at the same time?

And in order to get out of that conundrum and problem, of course, some have resorted to a different translation, amongst them, of course, being the Jehovah Witnesses in the New World Translation. And, of course, they resort to a translation that the “Word was with God and the Word was a god.” Not “the God” but “a god,” some smaller more insignificant demi-god amongst the pantheon of gods. Now that sounds wonderful. The only problem with it, of course, is that's not what John says. It's neither grammatically nor contextually compatible with what John writes. John did not say that Jesus was a god, some minor deity. John says that Jesus was God. The only God there is is Jesus Christ.

Now you've heard of that little expression, haven't you? – “Not an iota of difference. It doesn't make an iota of difference.” You've heard that expression, that little saying, “It doesn't make an iota of difference.” An iota of course is the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet equivalent, more or less, to the English “i.” And in the 4th and 5th centuries there were little children reciting a little chorus that they had been taught. And in that chorus, in the streets, the little children

would be heard saying things like, "There was a time when the Son was not." There was a time when the Son didn't have existence. There was a time when Jesus did not exist and part of the controversy that ensued between Arius and his counterpart, Athanasius, was over one little Greek letter. Whether that letter was included made the difference between two words, and ultimately whether Jesus was homo-ousias or homoi-ousias. The only difference between those two words is the letter "i"—"iota." And someone saying it doesn't make an iota of difference; but Athanasius, against the whole world, said "that that little letter made all the difference in the world."

So, what's all the fuss about?

Last year in the football playoffs, there was a little incident between the Patriots and the Raiders. And it was all to do with something called the "Tuck Rule." Was it a fumble or was it an incomplete pass? They are still talking about it now. I don't even know what I'm talking about. But my son tells me they are still talking about this. You know those men in suits, over weight, on TV, who talk about sports? You know those men. They are still talking about this issue. Was it a fumble or was it an incomplete pass? Because the whole game could have changed.

Now to be honest I couldn't care less. But I could care all of my life's worth on that little iota. For this reason my friends, because if Jesus isn't God, then I'm still in my sins. If Jesus isn't the true God, the very God of the same substance as the Father, then I'm still in my sins. Jesus is God. John says that.

And here is another error: He is not the only one who is God. Now I'm using my language very carefully here. We're on the precipice. He is God, but He is not the only one who is that one God. He is God, but at the same time He is with God, face to face with God, literally towards God, moving in fellowship and harmony with God. There is the one God, but within that one God, there is plurality. There is one, and within that oneness there is more than one. There is God the Father, there is God the Son, and although this prologue doesn't mention it, there is God the Holy Spirit. And John wants us to understand, that before the creation of the world, before any matter or particles have come into existence, the Word of God already had being. And that Word of God, Jesus Christ, was in fellowship and in harmony with the Father.

And do you know why he is telling us that? Because as he goes on to say in verse 18, "no man hath seen God at any time, but Jesus Christ, the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known." "He has explained Him," in the New American Standard. He has exegeted Him.

Do you want to know what God is like? Of course, you do. And John is saying, God is like Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ has been enjoying the closest possible fellowship with the Father for all eternity and has come into this world to

show us what the Father is essentially like.

Isn't that the most beautiful thought that you can ever have? That here is the Father, and here is the Son, and they are one God, in fellowship with each other, in the mystery of the communion of the Trinity, and Jesus Christ has come into the world to make something of that mystery known to us. Isn't that the most extraordinary thing? So that when you enter into fellowship with Jesus Christ, you are experiencing something of the intimacy and the fellowship that exists between the Father and the Son. And that is one of the most beautiful things that we can think about.

## **II. Jesus is the creator.**

Well, if the first thing has to do with the origin of Jesus, the second has to do with creation. Look at what he says in verses 3 and 4. Two things he tells us: "All things came into being by Him and apart from Him, nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life and the life was the light of men."

He is saying at least two things. That Jesus created everything and that He is the one who sustains everything that is. That's it. It's so simple to say. Jesus made everything and sustains everything. Creation and providence are in the hands of Jesus Christ. He may be unrecognized by the world, but look again, He is God, not only because He pre-existed with God from before creation, but also because all of the characteristics of deity are expressed by Him. He creates all things and He upholds all things.

Now why is that important to John? Because one of the things that John wants to tell us is that Jesus' great ministry is to recreate. You know, if you are a Christian tonight, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a part of the new creation. "If any man," and this is Paul speaking now, "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation." What has taken place in the heart and soul of a believer in Jesus Christ is an act of recreation. I think that is why John is referring so much to creation here in the opening chapter.

There is that wonderful climax, you remember, at the end of the Gospel of John in chapter 20, when Jesus comes in His resurrection body and He does something extraordinary. He breathes on the disciples – we will come to it later – but it's an extraordinary passage. Jesus comes and breathes on the disciples and it is often sometimes mistakenly thought to be a sort of pronouncement of the coming day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit will be poured down. I don't think that is what John is referring to.

Why did John refer to that act? None of the other Gospel writers even refer to that. Because just as John had been reading the first chapter of Genesis as he wrote this prologue, John had also been reading the second chapter of Genesis

as he wrote this prologue. Do you remember what is in the second chapter of Genesis? How God created out of the dust of the ground a human being, and breathed life into that when He had created. And it may well be here that when John refers to Jesus as the creator and sustainer of all things, that what he wants to allude to in particular is that this Jesus is the one who is coming, not only to save individuals like you and me, that we might believe in Him, but He is coming to form a new creation. He is beginning a new creation.

### **III. The Son of God took on human flesh and form in all its weakness.**

But if the first thing has to do with Jesus' origin, and the second thing has to do with creation, the third has to do with the incarnation. Because the glory of Jesus Christ is seen, not only in the origin of Christ, not only in His creation, but now also in His incarnation.

Look at the text in verse 5: "The light shone in the darkness. Verse 9: "The true light was coming into the world." Verses 10 and 11: "He was in the world," and especially in verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us."

Now, flesh, my friends, is the Bible's word for humanity in its weakness and frailty. So what John is saying to us is that when Jesus was born, when Jesus became incarnate, when the only true God took to Himself in addition to His deity humanity, He took humanity as *The Shorter Catechism* puts it, "in its low condition." He didn't come to be born in a palace. He didn't come to be born with all the accoutrements of this world. He didn't just come and hover above us. He actually, physically, came into this world. He made His dwelling among us.

John says in verse 14 that "He tabernacled" among us. He actually uses that word *tabernacle*. He tabernacled among us. What is the significance of that? Now pay attention because that is where we are going on Sunday nights as we study Exodus. We are going to go into that tabernacle and we are going to look at every nook and cranny of it. What is the significance of the tabernacle? Because the tabernacle is the one place where a Holy God and sinful men and women might meet together.

Do you remember one of the names for the tabernacle in the Old Testament? A tent of meeting. Because that is where the glory of God, the Shekinah glory cloud, shined in all its magnificence. And yet it was a place where sinners could come into fellowship and communion with God.

John is saying that this Word, who was with God and was God, made His dwelling amongst us. He took flesh and blood. He came into this world as a human being. He lived in our physical and social and spiritual environment. He shared our pains and frustrations. You see what John is saying? The Word was

made flesh. He is saying what the author of Hebrews says: "We do not have a High Priest, who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We have a High Priest who knows our frame, that we are dust." He knows what it is to be tired. He knows what it is to be exhausted. He knows what it is to be thirsty. He knows what it is to stand before a tomb and weep. He knows what it is to have His back lacerated and torn apart. He knows what it is when rusty nails pierce His hands and feet. He knows what it is to have thorns pushed down into your skull. He knows what it is to be betrayed. He knows what it means to be lonely. He knows what it is to be single. He knows what it is to "face the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare put it. And you see what John says; it's just a little glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ and who He is.

And you see the responses? Look at the response in verse 10: The world didn't recognize Him. Look at the response in verse 12: "His own did not receive Him." Here is Jesus in all His magnificence and glory and splendor, and men and women refused Him.

But, oh, look at another response in verse 12: "To as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become the children of God." "The children of God" and "to receive," as one translation so beautifully puts it, to "receive one grace after another."

Are you in darkness tonight? Then, Jesus is the light that pervades that darkness. Is your soul empty, tonight? Is there that God-shaped void in your soul? Then Jesus, the Word of God, is the one who can fill that emptiness? And you ask, "How?" By believing in His name, John says. By believing, by trusting.

"Who is He in yonder stall, at whose feet which shepherds fall?  
'Tis the Lord, O, wondrous story, 'tis the Lord, the King of Glory.  
At His feet we humbly fall, crown Him, crown Him, Lord of all."

Do you remember in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, in the very final book, in book 7, *The Last Battle*, when Tirian and Lord Digory are looking into that stable, and there is that astonishing statement that the inside of the stable was bigger than the outside. Do you remember what Lucy says? "In our world, too, a stable once had something in it bigger than the whole world." A stable once had something in it bigger than the whole world.

Do you know what this prologue is meant to do? It's not meant to bring comprehension. It's meant to bring wonder, awe, reverence, a sense, a sight, a little glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together.

*"Our Father in Heaven, we have just scratched the surface. We've barely penetrated a hole small enough to peer through at the astonishing reality of One*

*who is God and who is with God. We trust and believe. Lord Jesus, we take You as our Lord and Savior. We bow before You in all of Your sovereign majesty and we worship and we adore and we mingle our voices with angels and archangels to declare You to be the King of kings and Lord of Lords. Hear us, O Lord, grant us Your blessing that we might continue to receive one grace after another. For Jesus' sake, Amen."*

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