

“The Word Became Flesh... In Him Was Life”

Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-18

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Starting today, we take a break from our study of the Psalms. It had been a joy and a great encouragement to study King David's and other psalmists' sorrows and joys, complaints and praises to God. We will go back to the Psalter at some point, perhaps even before we end the study of the Fourth Gospel.

As in all other Biblical studies, we must first find out who the author is, his purpose in writing the book, his original audience, the historical backdrop of the book, and its place in God's salvation plan for his people.

The title of the Gospel says that it was written by John, son of Zebedee. Biblical evidence indicates John's authorship: (1) an apostle (1:14; cf. 2:11; 19:35); (2) one of the 12 disciples, specifically, *“the disciple whom Jesus loved”* (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20); and (3) John the son of Zebedee (Mark 10:35). The early church fathers also support John's authorship. Most scholars agree to a date of publishing as early as A.D. 60-65, or as late as A.D. 80-100. Early church tradition places the writing of this book in Ephesus, where John lived later in life until his death.

Why did John write his Gospel? In what seems to be an end to his book, he writes in John 20:31: *“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.”* He says that Jesus performed many other signs that were not written in his book, but the single purpose of Jesus' signs and teachings was for his readers to believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God.

Throughout John's Gospel, there are several things that are prominent. First, Jesus revealed the glory of God the Father in his appearing. But he also revealed God's plan for redeeming the world through his sacrifice. Second, Jesus is almost always in conflict with “the Jews.” He constantly attacked the religious traditions of “the Jews,” specifically the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and chief priests. Because of this, he and his disciples were persecuted by them. Third, John writes and explains to his Christian readers many theological issues, including: (1) the role of John the Baptist in redemptive history; (2) the sacraments in worship; (3) the doctrine of Christ's two natures, divine and human (Christology); (4) the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and his role in regeneration and sanctification; and (5) the Second Coming of Christ.

Did John write his book, beginning to end, in one sitting? Most scholars agree that John developed his book over a period of time. Most likely, he composed his Gospel in a long series of editions, the final form of which is what we have today. This form is structured differently from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) in that it is arranged by themes, and not necessarily chronologically. There is a consensus on a twofold division in the book. The Prologue is John 1:1-18, the incarnation of the Word. The Epilogue is Chapter 21, the last resurrection narratives. Here's a brief summary of the twofold structure of the Gospel:

“The Book of Signs” (John 1:19-12:50). Here, Jesus performs “signs” (Grk. *semeion*) and teaches in public. John uses Jewish institutions (Chapters 2-4) and festivals (Chapters 5-10) as a backdrop to Jesus’ teachings. For example, in Chapters 7 and 8, Jesus teaches that he is the true “Light of the World,” not the Feast of Tabernacles, a feast of Water and Light.

“The Book of Glory” (John 13-19). Here, John writes about Jesus’ last week on earth, when he teaches his disciples in private, and then is crucified by his enemies.

So to begin our study of the Gospel of John, we explore the Prologue, verses 1-18. Our theme are some words from verses 14 and 4: **“The Word Became Flesh... In Him Was Life”** in four headings: (1) **This Word is God**; (2) **This Word is the Creator**; (3) **This Word is Rejected by the World**; and (4) **This Word is God Incarnate**.

John begins his Gospel with what some scholars think is an ancient Christian hymn, just as some texts in Paul's epistles are thought of as hymns. In the medieval church, this prologue was so popular that it was sometimes worn as an amulet against disease and demons. It was read to the sick and new converts, and was used at the end of the Roman mass.

If it is a hymn, the prologue can be divided into four stanzas. The first is verses 1-2 where John affirms the Word as eternal, without beginning, and this Word is very God of very God. The second stanza is verses 3-5, wherein he declares that this Word, who is God, is also the Creator. The third stanza is verses 9-12, a contrast between darkness and light. The Word is the Light that the dark world rejected. Lastly, in verses 14-16, John declares that this Word, existing from eternity, assumed human flesh and blood.

Within this hymn, John inserts his own comments. We will discuss these later.

This Word is God

The connection of John's Prologue back to Genesis 1:1-2 is unmistakable. Genesis 1 is about the creation of the world; John's Prologue is about the re-creation of the fallen world, specifically mankind. God created light to light the dark, empty world. In the fullness of time, the Word, who was the Light, came into the world. The Spirit of God hovered over the waters, and proceeded creating life out of nothing through the Word. He breathed the breath of life into Adam. But the Word, who has *“life in himself”* (John 5:26), breathes life into fallen human beings, who were formerly dead in sin. The Word made them into a new creation, with new hearts and new minds.

John affirms that the Word *“was in the beginning with God.”* As the Son of God, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead, he is eternal. He was the Son of God from eternity. He had no beginning, nor end. Before there was anything, he was already with the First and Third Persons of the Trinity. This did not sit well with Arius, a pastor in the 4th century, who taught that the Word, the Greek *Logos*, was created by God in the beginning. He was the first created Being, and God created the world through him. Still, Arius taught that the Son is a mere created being. According to him, “there was a time when the Son was not.” Arius plunged the early church into a great controversy that raged for almost a century. In 325, the Council of Nicaea

condemned Arius and his teaching, affirming the full deity of Christ, having the same essence as the Father.

Jehovah's Witnesses and other sub-Christian cults follow Arius' distortion to this day. The most notable distortion by this cult is their translation of John 1:1 as, "*and the Word was a god*," implying that Christ was merely a divine being like angels, but not God. They say there is no definite article (English a, an, the) in the Greek, so it should be "a god." But no sound Greek scholar agrees with their ludicrous distortion, because it is commonly known that verse 1 follows a well-known rule of Greek grammar. More evidence of their unsound exegesis is seen in other verses in John, where there is no article in Greek, but their own translation accepts "God," and not "a God." Verse 6, for example, is translated as, "*there was a man sent from God*" (ESV; see also 1:12, 13, 18, 49; 8:39; 17:17).¹

Already in the ancient church, some taught that he was merely a special man (Ebionites). Still others said that he was a mere man, later adopted at his baptism by the Father as the Son (adoptionists). Still others did not distinguish between the Three Persons of the Trinity. These people taught that God is only one Person manifesting himself in different roles: the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the New, and the Spirit after the Son's ascension (modalists). These are only a few of the many false teachings about Christ's two natures.

Beware that you do not fall into one of these false teachings about Christ. So we must be very careful here. We must know our doctrine of Christ: Christ is one Person, fully divine and fully human. And we must not mix, change, divide or separate these two natures.²

Through this Word, God Created the World

In the next stanza, John writes that this Word who existed from eternity is also the Creator, "*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*" John echoes the creation account, when all things were created by God when he spoke his Word,

¹ "A word should be said concerning the use and non-use of the article in John 1:1, where a narrow path is safely followed by the author. "The Word was God." It both God and Word were articular, they would be coextensive and equally distributed and so interchangeable. But the separate personality of the Logos is affirmed by the construction used and Sabellianism is denied. If God were articular and Logos non-articular, the affirmation would be that God was Logos, but not that the Logos was God. As it is, John asserts that in the Pre-incarnate state the Logos was God, though the Father was greater than the Son (John 14:28). The Logos became flesh (1:14), and not the Father. But the Incarnate Logos was really "God only Begotten in the bosom of the Father" (1:18 correct text)." A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 67-68.

"It is nowhere more sadly true than in the acquisition of Greek that "a little learning is a dangerous thing". The uses of the Greek article, the functions of Greek prepositions, and the fine distinctions between Greek tenses are confidently expounded in public at times by men who find considerable difficulty in using these parts of speech accurately in their native tongue.

"Those people who emphasize that the true rendering of the last clause of John 1:1 is "the word was a god", prove nothing thereby save their ignorance of Greek grammar." F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963), 60-61.

² From Chalcedonian Creed (AD 451): "one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably."

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” And in the first five days of creation, the pattern of creation was, *“And God said... and it was so.”* Even man was spoken into being.

So John and other New Testament writers are consistent in teaching that God the Father created the world through the Son. Paul says, *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth... all things were created through him and for him”* (Col 1:16; cf 1 Cor 8:6). The Hebrews writer also says the same thing, *“through whom [Christ] also he [God] created the world”* (Heb 1:2).

This Word through whom the world was created, also created light out of nothing. John calls him *“the light of men.”* Then he inserts his comments about John the Baptizer in verses 7-8, *“He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light...”* The Baptizer was a witness to testify that Jesus, not him, is the true light, the appointed Messiah (John 1:20). The Greek noun for “witness” is *martyria*, from which the English word “martyr” is derived. The Baptizer appeared on the scene to reveal and glorify the Christ. So later, when asked about Jesus, he testified, *“I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him... He must increase, but I must decrease”* (John 3:28, 30).

This Word is Rejected by the World

In this next stanza, the apostle says that this “Light” was rejected by the world, *“the world did not know him... his own people did not receive him”* (verses 10-11). What does John mean here by “world”? The Greek word for “world” is *kosmos*, from which is derived the English word “cosmic.” In the Gospel of John, “world” can have different meanings, depending on the context. The most well-known use is, *“For God so loved the world”* (3:16). Here, the meaning could be the world that he created, which he loves and will in the future restore to perfection. Or it could also mean the world which does not know him, rejects him, and hates him. This is the most common use by John and other New Testament writers. For example, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you”* (15:18). Concerning his disciples, Jesus says, *“the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world”* (17:14).

If the world hates the Word, the Light of the world, and this Light is the Life of the world, how will the world have life? John's answer is in verse 12, *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* Although the world despises him, there will still be many from all the nations who will receive his good news of salvation by God's grace through faith in him, a faith given by the Holy Spirit. They will be called children of God, even children of promise through Abraham (Gal 3:29). In his letters, John frequently calls believers *“children of God”* (1 John 3:2, 9; 4:4, 7, 12-13). As the Light of the world has overcome the darkness of the world, God's children has also overcome the world, the devil its ruler, and his followers, *“for he who is in you [Christ] is greater than he who is in the world”* (1 John 4:1-5).

But those who receive the Word are not able and willing to believe on their own. Here, we have what we call in Reformed theology as “total depravity”: no one can come to God out of his own will, but only by being given a new heart and a new mind by the Holy Spirit. This is

why John says that the Word is Life, and those who believed in the Word *“were born [again], not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”* (verse 13).

This Word is God Incarnate

Finally, in the fourth stanza, John gives us a glimpse of the doctrine of the Word incarnate, *“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”* (verse 14). What a great mystery this is! The eternal Word, the glorious Son of God dwelling in heaven, taking the humble form of a mere human being, even a Suffering Servant of God. *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God”* (1 John 3:1). This Suffering Servant transformed us from slaves of darkness to children of light.

Who can fathom this mystery of God dwelling with his people? The Jews knew all too well that only God dwelt with them in the tabernacle in the wilderness and in the temple in Jerusalem. Now John is saying that this Christ, the Word of God, has assumed human flesh and blood to be the Tabernacle and the Temple himself. Who is this blasphemous man who claims to be God dwelling with his people? No one except the Word of God incarnate!

But the Word was even better than Moses. Moses gave them the Law so they would be convicted of sin and be driven to the Messiah the Savior. But the Word became flesh to reveal God's grace in him who will save his people from the darkness of the world. He became flesh to reveal God's truth in him who is the only Way, the Truth, and the Life. Moses was forbidden to see God, or else he would die (Exod 33:20). But the Word, God Incarnate, was seen, heard and touched. John describes the disciples' experience with the eternal Word who became flesh, *“which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands”* (1 John 1:1).

Dear Friends in Christ: John's Prologue provides us with a clear and firm foundation upon which to stand as faithful believers in Christ. First, we do not have a God who is remote and impersonal, but who is also human, one who can sympathize with all our weaknesses. We do not have a God who welcomes all people who worship other gods, but a God who receives us based *only* faith on the Word who came down from heaven to be the Savior of his people. We do not have a God who winks on the darkness of this sinful world, but who will return in glory to judge and restore the whole creation to its perfect state.

Second, we are encouraged that in the midst of this rebellious, dark world, the Light of the world has come. Christ is ridiculed, rejected and hated everywhere, and all his believers also suffer the same tribulations. But John promises us, *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* No matter what ridicule, rejection, hate, persecution, torture and martyrdom, the dark world around us will never overcome the Light of Christ. The gates of death and hell will not prevail against his church. John declares that in Christ is life, eternal life! We may be few. We may be weak in the eyes of the world. We may be besieged from all sides, even by civil authorities, and without protection from those who hate Christ. But no one else other than Christians are *“children of God,”* inheritors of the glorious kingdom of God.

Lastly, we know that the Word has delivered us from the bondage of darkness and sin. The Word, through the Holy Spirit, transforms us into a new creation. It is not by our own will, our own good works, but only through God's grace and truth that we have been *“called out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*