

## Lesson 1: John 1:1-18 Prologue

### Introduction

There is discussion in scholarly circles questioning who wrote the Gospel of John. Was it really John the Apostle or was it another disciple of Jesus referred to in ancient texts as John the Elder? Or was the gospel put together by a community of disciples who followed after John. For a full discussion on authorship and the background of John, I recommend D. A. Carson's *The Gospel of John* from the Pillar New Testament Commentary series or *Encountering John* by Andreas Kostenberger. That's a very good introductory text.

I myself am quite committed to the belief that John the Apostle wrote this gospel. That he does not mention his own name in the text is not a problem, but rather affirms this conviction. It is noticeable that the author leaves out the name John while mentioning others like Peter, Andrew, and Philip, referring to himself only as the beloved disciple. That does not mean he saw himself loved more than the others. It is definitive of his own experience with Jesus. With Jesus he felt himself beloved. I believe he intentionally downplays his own presence because he does not want to write a gospel about John. The Gospel is not about John. The Gospel is about Jesus.

At the beginning of the book he writes of Jesus, "we have beheld his glory." And at the end he writes of himself, "This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his witness is true." He is claiming to be an eyewitness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He was one of the men very close to Jesus. And as much as we would love to know more about him and his life, that is not the story he wants to tell. He wants to witness for Jesus. He claims to be a first-hand witness not to build himself up but to give credibility to his account. And he removes his name to center the focus on Jesus. He wants us to see Jesus.

That's what he says in his purpose statement. Not all books of the Bible give us purpose statements. John helps us out in that way. He gives us his purpose in 20:30-31.

<sup>30</sup> Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

There are four key words here that have been important through the gospel by the time we get to the end of chapter 20: signs, believe, Jesus, and life. John wrote about certain, select miracles which he calls signs. "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written..." Why? Why did John write about these signs? "So that you may believe." What does he want you to believe? He wants you to believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." And why does he want you to believe that? Because of this conviction, "that believing you may have life in his name."

The Gospel of John is an evangelistic book. John the Apostle is an old man, the last remaining member of the 12, and, according to tradition, the only one not to be executed for his faith, the only one to die of old age. John has been preaching about Jesus all his life. Now, before his death, the Holy Spirit leads him to write out his witness. Three other Gospels had already been written. They are all closely related in the stories they tell and the language they use. John's language is unique, and he tells us some stories not yet heard. The synoptic Gospels emphasize the kingdom and repentance. John's gospel emphasizes eternal life and belief. John wrote his gospel to appeal broadly to Gentile peoples. But he certainly also wrote his gospel to appeal to his fellow Jews. The Gospel of John is firmly rooted in the thought of the Old Testament. We will see that in this lesson. It is also written after the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Many Jews at this time are disoriented and uncertain. How do you do Judaism without the temple. John may be seizing on the opportunity of that disillusionment or that disorientation to witness to Jews. He assures his readers that Jesus Christ is the full realization of all Moses that spoke about. The temple may be no more. And we may no longer be able to celebrate the great feasts in Jerusalem. But all this was meant to pass away. Jesus

has replaced the temple. Jesus has replaced the feasts. Consider these signs that I am writing to you so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John is going to take us on a journey with Jesus focusing on these three major themes: the nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, and the nature of discipleship. Who has Jesus truly revealed himself to be? What does it mean to believe in him? And how does a true believer live? The nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, the nature of discipleship.

This podcast series is designed to follow along that journey. We are going to cover the whole text of John. And we will have this tension. There is so much to consider in the text, we could spend two years going verse by verse. But with such a focus on detail, we would miss what John wants to show us. We need to let the narrative flow. So, I am thinking more like 36 lessons in this series. We will see. I will be around that number. We need to take larger chunks of text, so that we can maintain the connection from one narrative to the next. And John is mostly story, presenting the words and actions of Jesus and the words and actions of people responding to Jesus. We will have to slow down during chapters 13-17 when we move from narrative to prose discourse. But for the most part, we need to keep moving along with the narrative.

We start this lesson with the prologue, John 1:1-18. This section is not narrative. These verses have been referred to as highly structured prose, note quite poetry, but denser and more structured than typical prose writing. We will have to focus in carefully here. Still, I want to make sure that we capture the whole of this passage. John sets up ideas here that he will later explain through the narrative. So, I will leave some things unsaid. We can trust John to develop ideas for us as we move along in the gospel.

One last comment before we start in with the text. If you will take about 15 minutes to observe the text before listening to the podcast, you will triple your benefit from this study. Simply read through the text, write down whatever stands out to you as important or strange or interesting or confusing. Questions make great observations. Why did he say this to that person? What does this mean? Who is he talking to? Where are they headed? When did she meet him? Who, what, when, where, why – pepper the text with questions for about 15 minutes before each podcast to get the most out of the teaching. Or listen to the podcast, and then observe the text yourself, and if you want, listen to the same lesson again. Or observe a chapter or two before listening. However you can, add in a component of reading and observing the text of John for yourself.

We start with John 1:1-5 and one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith.

### **John 1:1-5 In the beginning...**

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. <sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. <sup>5</sup> The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

In verses 1-2, notice how the text begins and ends the same. “In the beginning was the Word...He was in the beginning with God.” In the beginning he simply was. And then, in the beginning he was with God. Something similar is said in the middle of the two verses. Two statements: First, “the Word was with God,” and then, “the Word was God.” This is the mystery. How can the Word both be with God and how can the Word be God at the same time? The word for Word here is *logos*, a concept full of abstract meaning in Greek philosophy. But the Word is going to be defined quite concretely by John. We are not talking abstraction. By the time we get to verse 18, we clearly see that the Word is Jesus who is a personal being both distinct from God and yet also defined as God. This is the concept of trinity, at least two members of the trinity. This is the idea that God can be one being and also three persons. The Word was with God and the Word was God, both at the same time.

Christian cults typically twist this idea. Mormons allow for Jesus to be god, but not the God. Jesus is a god. Jehovah's Witnesses go the other way. Jesus is divine, but Jesus is not God nor is he a god. Mormon's and Jehovah's Witnesses would both claim that the English here does not translated the Greek well. And that reveals either a lack of knowledge or a lack of honesty about the Greek. John balances the Greek so elegantly to create this tension that is rightly translated in the English. The Word is somehow both with God and at the same time the Word is God.

I've heard a lot of illustrations, trying to get across the idea of trinity. (1) An egg is three in one, the shell, the white, and the yoke. (2) A man can be father, son, and husband while being one man. (3) Water exists in three states, liquid, gas, and solid ice. I don't know if you have heard any of these illustrations. But all of them ultimately reject the biblical concept of trinity. They are all heresy. The egg is a description of three different parts that make one whole. The man is one person who simply has three roles. And the water is one substance that can appear in three different states. And all of those can be helpful just trying to get us thinking about trinity but none capture correctly the true idea, the true biblical idea of trinity. We really have one being in three separate persons.

I love what C. S. Lewis does in Mere Christianity. He does not attempt to illustrate trinity. Instead, he illustrates why we cannot illustrate trinity. I will let him say it in his own words. I am reading from Mere Christianity, unfortunately without a British accent.

You know that in space you can move in three ways – to the left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of those three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two, you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body, say, a cube – a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.

Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways – in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.

Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings – just as, in two dimensions (say on a flat sheet of paper) one square is one figure, and any two squares are two separate figures. On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine. In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube. But we can get a sort of faint notion of it. And when we do, we are then, for the first time in our lives, getting some positive idea, however faint, of something super-personal – something more than a person. It is something we could never have guessed, and yet, once we have been told, one almost feels one ought to have been able to guess it because it fits in so well with all the things we know already.<sup>1</sup>

So, all our illustrations here in our reality ultimately break down because we are talking about something beyond our reality. That is why we call the trinity one of the great Christian mysteries. We can only begin to approach an understanding of God's true nature. And this is not illogical. If God is

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996) 142-143.

God, then there ought to be things about God that we can not wrap our minds around. If you can understand all there is to know about the nature of God, then God is not greater than your finite mind. God is not beyond you. He is limited to the size of and ability of your mind. Do you really want a God that is no bigger than your mind? Lewis remarks that a god you can capture with your human minds is not a god worth worship. For God to be God there must be some mystery about his nature that defies human understanding. He must be beyond us. The trinity, the fact that the Word is with God and the Word is God is one such mystery.

Verse 3 adds on to our understanding that the Word is more than creation. The Word simply was. He did not come to be. He was in the beginning. Everything else came to be. And it came to be through the Word. John makes this emphatic by stating it in two ways. First, "All things came into being by him." That is pretty clear. Just to be absolutely clear, John goes on, "and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being."

The creative power of the Word leads into verse 4 and the claim that in the Word is life. He is the source of life. And interestingly, the life that is in him is also light. In a sense we will see that through the resurrection. He will come to earth, he will lay down his life, and he will take up life again. Death cannot keep the source of life dead. And in taking his life back up again, people will see. Through the cross they will see. Through the resurrection they will see. The life in him is light. At the same time, this statement must be more than the resurrection. Because the life that is in Jesus shines out the whole time he walks on the earth.

Verse 5 tells us that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it. Or your translation may say the darkness does not overcome it. The Greek Word John uses literally does mean overcome. The darkness cannot overcome or snuff out the light. Metaphorically, the Greeks also used that word to talk about comprehending an idea. When your mind overcomes something, it understands that which it overcomes. We do not have to decide yet, between overcome and comprehend. We can let the Gospel story play out and pay attention to what happens. What is the darkness presented in John? And will the darkness attempt to overcome the Word and fail? Or will the darkness fail to understand the Word? Or both?

In these five verses, John could not have made a more magnificent statement about the nature of Jesus Christ. He is with God. He is God. All things came to be through him. In him is life. And therefore, he is the light. Darkness cannot defeat him. Amen! John gives everything away at the beginning. It gets even better when you notice the background John has just painted. We have been focusing on the foreground of the picture. These are the main ideas. The most important stuff. But did you catch the background? What context is John alluding to? What other text of Scripture is drawn into the picture through John's word choice?

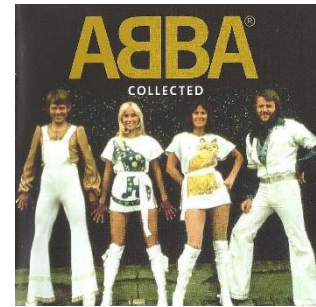
"In the beginning," what does that remind you of? "In the beginning," "Word," "all things came into being," "life," "light," what does that language bring to mind? It is the creation. John starts the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the first words of the Old Testament. Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John 1:1 and 3, "In the beginning was the Word...all things came into being by him." Genesis 1:3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." Genesis 2:7, "the Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This is how God created. He spoke, "Word, light, life, the beginning." This is the magnificence of God. This is the magnificence of Jesus.

### **The Chiastic Structure of the Prologue**

Now having considered the first five verses, let's step back and think about the whole, all 18 verses of the prologue. There is structure here that points us to several key ideas. And it is a chiastic structure. In other podcasts, I've spoken about chiastic structures that appear in Romans, Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy. Chiasm is a type of parallelism that shows up most clearly in the Psalms and other poetic literature but is also used in narrative and prose discourse. Western education focuses on linear structures, Part I. A. B. C., Part II. A. B. C. and so on, in a straight line progression of ideas. A

chiastic outline creates parallels. You might have three ideas, A. B. C. and then come back to those same ideas in reverse order, C' B' A', ending up back where you started.

A famous European chiasm is the 70s rock group ABBA. Quite literally they present themselves in an A B B A pattern. The band name is the first letter of each member's name. Agnetha, Benny, Bjorn, and Ani-Frid. A B B A. They always posed for photos chiastically with the guys on the outside and the girls on the inside. That's chiastic, guy, girl, girl, guy. They didn't use that for the band name, Benny, Agnetha, Ani-Frid, Bjorn. That would be BAAB, which is chiastic but doesn't have the same ring as ABBA. ABBA is a great chiasm.



We are going to see a lot of chiasm in John's gospel. I am going to go through the whole of 1-18 quickly to show you the pattern, and then will come back for a closer inspection of the text. I'll also post on the John resource page at [observetheword.com](http://observetheword.com) a structural chart, so that you can see the chiasm, and a more in-depth article about the chiastic pattern if you would like more detail.

One of the oddities about John's prologue is the double reference to John the Baptist. This is the first clue to consider, to get us looking. The first reference comes right after the verses we have already considered. This is John 1:6-8.

<sup>6</sup> There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He was not the Light, but *he came* to testify about the Light.

After moving on from the Baptist in verses 9-14, John comes back to him in verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"

Why do that? Why not say all you have to say about John the Baptist and then move on. If a student were to write this way today in an essay or a journalist in an article, it would be considered bad style. It breaks up the flow. But as with any oddity we come across in the Bible, it is wise to stop and think about what might be going on. When you see parallel elements in a text, one thing you can do is look for other parallel elements. We have seen what comes before the first reference to the Baptist. That is what we looked at in verses 1-5 at the beginning of the passage. So, what comes after the second reference at the end of the passage. This is John 1:16-18.

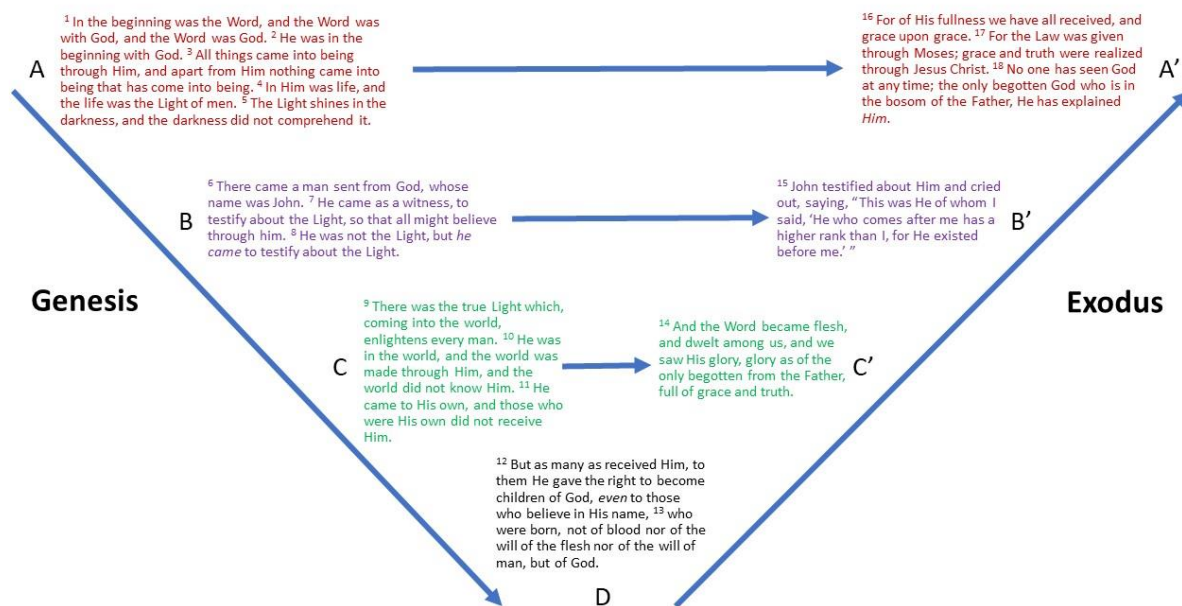
<sup>16</sup> For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.

In the beginning of the prologue, we have the Word with God and the Word is God. Here at the end, we have Jesus Christ described as the only begotten God who is also with God, "in the bosom of the Father." Also, in the beginning, the Word is described as the light of man. He is the one who makes God known. Here at the end, we are told that "he has explained" God. He has made God known.

Okay, that looks like parallelism of ideas. So, what happens in the middle of the passage? Any parallelism there? Well, yes. The verses immediately after the first reference to the Baptist, verses 9-11, describe the light coming into the world. And the verse immediately preceding the second reference to the Baptist, verse 14, describes the Word as coming into the world. Both are about Jesus coming into the world.

At the center of the passage, we have verses 12-13, describing new birth as the effect of receiving the one who comes into the world. Our passage, then, has seven elements, a favorite number of John. We have three pairs and a lone middle: A, B, C, X, C', B', A'. That's our structure. Now let's focus back in at the text, and I am going to do that following this chiastic structure. So, I am going to consider A and A' together, then B and B', then C and C', and end with X at the center.

## Chiastic structure John's Prologue



### A and A' Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known.

We begin with the beginning and the end verses 1-5, which we have already covered, and 16-18.

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. <sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. <sup>5</sup> The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Now the end, 16-18.

<sup>16</sup> For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

The key idea shared by both of these passages is that Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known. In Jesus is life and that life is the light of men. Light makes things visible. Jesus is also described as the fullness of the glory of God. Grace and truth are realized, understood, seen, in Jesus Christ. When you see Jesus, you see the fullness of grace and truth. Jesus embodies for us the character of who God is. Jesus can reveal God because Jesus is God.

Jesus also shares a special relationship with God the Father. Jesus has been with God since before the beginning of all created things. And Jesus enjoys intimate relationship with God. The phrase that Jesus is in the bosom of the Father communicates that intimate relationship. And the original readers would have gotten the image, even though it is lost on us. We encounter the same idea at the last supper in John 13:23, "There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved." Back then diners reclined in the ancient style to eat, laying down on cushions without a chair, leaning towards the table on the left arm, with their legs pointing out away from the table. And the right hand then is free to take the food. In this position, when a diner tilts his head back towards the person on his left, his head would be almost up against the chest of that person, if they are laying close together at table. If there is noise or chatter going on, then that position of leaning back creates an opportunity to speak in a low tone or whisper to communicate privately at the table. That's why Peter told John to ask Jesus who the betrayer would be. Jesus must have been just to the left of John. Peter would have needed to speak loudly. But John could speak quietly. He could just lean back. We are told in 13:25, "[John] leaning back thus on Jesus' breast, said to him, 'Lord who is it?'" John was

in a position to communicate intimately and quietly about what was going on. He got special knowledge from Jesus.

This is the image we get of Jesus and God in verse 18 of the prologue. “The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him.” Being in the bosom of the Father brings out this image of being at the Father’s right hand at table, sharing close, personal conversation. Jesus, being in unique and intimate relationship with the Father is uniquely able to reveal the Father.

### **B and B’ Disciples witness for Jesus.**

The next pair of passages abruptly move us into the concrete, specific reality of history. We move from what might be abstract word, life, light, to a specific man, living in a specific time in a specific place. This is our B and B’, verses 6-8 and verse 15.

<sup>6</sup> There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He was not the Light, but *he came* to testify about the Light.

Then jumping to verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’”

The reference to John the Baptist has this effect of bringing us from abstract religious concept of light into concrete reality. People in society, they love to talk positively about the need for light and the power of love and the importance of faith. But as human solutions, those concepts are usually left general and without real content. What concrete truths does the light reveal? How does love practically interact with justice and evil? Who is the object of the faith? Verses 1-5 could be accepted by the abstract philosophers of Greece. But John the Apostle sees no solution in that. He is going to ask his readers to believe in the name of Jesus; to believe in Jesus as Jesus reveals himself – that’s the light he is talking about; to believe in the concrete, historical reality of wrath, justice, love and grace that are brought to bear on the cross of Calvary.

We are assured that John the Baptist himself is not the light. John is defined in relationship to Jesus. That’s where his identity lies. We are not looking for a human leader. The goal is not to become a disciple of some man. This is not the story of John the Baptist. He is not the light. This is not the story of John the Apostle, he does not even want to mention his own name. This is the story of Jesus. He is the light. He is the greater one coming into the world. John the Apostle presents John the Baptist here, in a sense, as the ideal disciple. The primary role of the disciple is witness. The Baptist came to witness. And that’s why the Apostle wrote this book, as a witness. We are going to follow this theme through the gospel, paying close attention to what the people in the narrative say about Jesus. What’s their witness?

### **C and C’ Jesus, coming into the world, reveals the glory of God.**

We move back to Jesus in C and C’. These are 9-11 and verse 14.

<sup>9</sup> There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup> He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

Then verse 14.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We have recognized that Jesus is uniquely able to reveal God. How is he going to do that? By coming into the world. “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world...” We humans have a great problem. We are very capable at uncovering truths about our physical world. We can replace a broken human heart with a new one. We can send people to the moon. We can microwave popcorn. We can facetime overseas at no extra cost. We

have done amazing things. And yet, we really struggle to come up with an agreed upon moral code or a definition of human purpose or an understanding of the nature of God. Who is God? Who am I? What's my purpose? Three pretty essential things we are not so good at figuring out.

We have three insurmountable problems. One, we are inside the experiment. We cannot look from the outside in objectively. We did not make ourselves. We have been made. We do not know the mind of our creator or the nature of the spiritual world. He is on the outside. We are on the inside. Two, we are limited in our knowledge and our rational ability. Three, and even worse, we have been corrupted. Even if we did have full knowledge and astounding rational capability, education and skill are not our primary problems. The compass of our heart does not point true north. We cannot define morality or justice or goodness. We get some thing right, but we get so much wrong. We cannot define God or purpose, because our hearts and minds have skewed off track away from our original design.

Truth may be able to set us free, but how can we hope to know the truth about God if God is the only one who knows the truth about God? Our only hope is for God to enter into this world, the world he has created and to show us, teach us, guide us. That is exactly what John announces in verse 9, "The light has come into the world."

In verse 14, we move from the image of light coming into the world to the image of the Word coming into the world. And what we read shocks. "And the Word became flesh." Wait a minute. The Word does not become. The Word is. The Word was in the beginning. The Word was with God. The Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Everything else became through the Word. The Word does not become. The Word is not made. The Word simple is, yesterday, today, and forever. The Word is.

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, the incarnation, God becoming man. The Word not only came into the world, the Word became flesh. That's the stuff people are made of. Is that even appropriate. Can flesh be good? Its uncomfortable. Its too mundane, too common place. How does holy, eternal God become anything, much less become human flesh? We don't know. Again, this is mystery beyond our ability. We sense something, something both humiliating but also glorious in the willingness of our Lord to "empty himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8)."

John sees the incarnation as glorious. The glory of God has come down to reside with human beings. And in his focus on the glory of Jesus, John changes the background to our canvass from Genesis to Exodus. In the book of Exodus, after God cuts covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, the next step is for Moses to go up on the mountain, receive the tabernacle pattern, build the tabernacle and watch God indwell the tent in the midst of the people. And even though there is the major problem along the way with the golden calf, this plan becomes reality in the last paragraph of the book, Exodus 40:34-35,

<sup>34</sup> Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. <sup>35</sup> Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

After the golden idol rebellion, God had told Moses he would not dwell in the midst of Israel because they were a stubborn, stiff-necked people whom God would end up destroying. It is the great problem depicted by the burning bush. How does fire not burn up the bush? How does holy God not burn up a flammable people? The answer is in the name of God. And after Moses prays, telling God that Israel cannot be his people if he does not go up among them, God relents, having taught Moses the lesson he intended for Moses to learn. Moses then asks to see God's glory. He wants to see the nature of the holy God who is going to be able to live among a sinful people without destroying them. And God tells Moses that he cannot see the fullness of his glory. No man can see the full glory of God and live. But God will speak his glory. He does this by speaking this name in Exodus 34:6-7,



The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; <sup>7</sup> who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished...

John draws upon this story here in the second half of his prologue. When he says that he has beheld the glory of the Word, “glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth,” that phrase “full of grace and truth” is a fair rendering of the name of God in Exodus 34:6, “full of lovingkindness and truth.” The Word is full of the glory of God.

When John says in verse 14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” the verb he uses for dwelt is not the normal Greek verb used throughout the gospel. It is a unique word used only this once in the whole book. It literally means to live in a tent, to tabernacle. As God’s glory came down to dwell in the tabernacle, Jesus Christ came down as the glory of God to dwell in the tent of a human body.

In verse 18 we are told that “no man has seen God at any time,” a reference to God’s word to Moses in Exodus 33. And in verse 16 we are told that from the fullness of Jesus “we have received grace upon grace.” “Grace upon grace” might mean abounding grace, lot’s of grace. The pronoun in the Greek means more literally grace in place of grace. I think John is saying that the Law was given to Moses and in that there was grace. But it was a lesser revelation of grace. It was the grace of God spoken in words. It was the grace of God, provided symbolically, looking ahead to the greater grace revealed in Jesus Christ. In Jesus the glory of God is not spoken in words. The Word became flesh. He is the full realization of grace and truth.

Jesus is Word. Jesus is light. Jesus is the fullness of the glory of God. Jesus reveals who God is. You want to see God. Look at Jesus.

#### **X Those who believe in Jesus become children of God.**

And so we come to the middle of our passage, verses 12-13. In verses 9-11, we had this problem. Even though the light of Christ came into the world, the very world he created, the world did not know him. His own people did not receive him. Israel rejected him. That’s the great tragedy imbedded in this prologue. The tragedy of human sin. We already caught a hint of it in verse 5. Even if God does come into the world to teach us the truth about himself and about us, the darkness will not comprehend, the darkness will seek to snuff out that light. Our primary problem is not education. Our primary problem is sin and that we don’t like the light. Even so, there is hope in John 1:12-13.

<sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him,  
to them He gave the right to become children of God,  
even to those who believe in His name,

<sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man,  
but of God.

“But as many as receive him” is parallel to “even those who believe in his name.” To receive and to believe are here two ways of saying the same thing. And the result is stated twice, also. To those who receive and believe, “To them he gave the right to become children of God” and then again “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Those who believe in Jesus become children of God.

#### **Conclusion**

Let’s sum up using the chiastic structure of the text. On either end of the passage we have this idea, Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known. Moving one step in we have the repeated idea that the true disciple witnesses for Jesus. Moving in another step, we are told this truth, Jesus, coming into the world, reveals the glory of God. That’s the how. Jesus is in the unique position to truly reveal that nature of God, how does he do it? He does it by becoming one of us. And even though the darkness in humankind will misunderstand him and try to extinguish him, those who do receive Jesus, who believe in him as he has revealed himself to be, they will become children of God.

These truths are rooted in the long story that began in Genesis and moved through Exodus and has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. You can be part of this story, too. John invites you to come walk with Jesus. He wants to teach you something about the nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, and, if you are willing, the nature of discipleship.

Along the way, John is going to use three words first used here in the prologue to challenge your thinking on faith. From verses 10-12, the three words are know, receive and believe. We will see in this gospel those who claim to know but do not know, claim to receive but do not receive, claim to believe but do not believe. It is not enough to be religious. It is not enough to believe certain things about Jesus or to wear a cross or to call yourself a Christian. John is going to invite you to consider what it truly means to know, to receive, to believe.

These are not simple themes. Can we truly know God? The two great mysteries of trinity and incarnation raise that question. Can anyone truly know God?

That question reminds me of my oldest daughter Julia as a toddler on the beach in North Carolina. I have a picture of her with this happy, determined face marching towards the water. I remember the scene. The tide had just gone down. She chases after the water towards the ocean. Seconds later she will be turning around with a squeal, running away from the water as the ocean flows back up the beach. And I think to myself, "Did Julia, then, did she know the ocean? At that time in her life did she have any knowledge of the depth and power and beauty of the ocean?" Yes, she did. She knew that the ocean was so deep it could go over her daddy's head. She knew it was so powerful it could knock her daddy down. And she knew, too, of its sparkling beauty. She could see the light on the water like diamonds glinting on blue satin. She possessed real knowledge about the ocean. At the same time, she had no idea, no idea at all of its unfathomable depths, of its crushing power, of the breathtaking beauty under those waves.



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This is one of the great glories of the Christian faith. You can know God, because he makes himself knowable. He is willing to invite you into true experience with him. At the same time, you can never fully know God. He is infinite and unfathomable. Forever is not a long enough time to delve the depths of his beauty, of his power, of his wisdom, of his grace. There is always something new to discover. You begin knowing by looking deeply into Jesus Christ. If you truly see him, you truly see the glory of God.

### Reflection questions

1. Read John 1:1-18. Make a list of things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing. What questions come to mind?
2. Consider the text chiastically. Do you agree or disagree that the beginning verses 1-5 and end verses 16-18 both picture Jesus Christ as uniquely able to reveal who God is because he is God and he is with God? Does that seem right to you?
3. The chiastic pairs in this prologue do not simply repeat one another. The second part restates a shared principle with new information. What do verses 16-18 add to the idea of revelation in 1-5?
4. What stands out to you in the references about John the Baptist in verses 6-8 and 15?
5. Both verses 9-11 and verse 14 discuss the Light/the Word coming into the world. What ideas do you get in 9-11 that you do not get in 14? And what ideas do you get in 14 that you do not get in 9-11?
6. What do verses 12-13 reveal about the basic human response to Jesus Christ? What seems important to you in the language John uses?
7. The glory of Jesus Christ is important in John. Glory is the revelation of the true nature of Christ, his true name. What are some things that are glorious to you about Jesus? How have you seen Jesus?
8. Take time to pause and praise God for the glory of his character and to ask him to help you see him as he truly is.