

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-18, Key Verse: 1:14

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The four gospels are rightly considered the core of the Bible. They show us Jesus most directly through the story of his life, death, and resurrection. The first 3 gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, give straightforward descriptions of Jesus’ life, teaching, works, and death on the cross, leading to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the promised Savior. That’s why the first three gospels are called “synoptic”, from the word “synopsis”, which means “summary.”

John’s gospel, while covering many of the same events, is written in a very different style. You can say that John gives us the punchline from the very beginning. He starts with a deep theological proclamation of divine identity of Christ as the pre-existent Word of God. Then he proceeds to demonstrate that identity through Jesus’ words and the miraculous signs he performs. John also most clearly states the doctrine of salvation through faith in several places, most famously in 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John’s gospel is also known for using simple words that describe very deep concepts. Three of those concepts we can call the three “L’s”: Life, Light, and Love. We want, no, we need to have these things. John is going to tell us how we can have those things in Jesus.

Today’s passage is the prologue of John’s gospel, the part that lays down that cosmic framework for everything. Each verse is deep and profound and could be a key verse. Among them, we will focus on verse 14. We will study this passage in three parts: the eternal word (1-5), a witness to the true light, (6-9), and the result of the incarnation (10-18) I pray that we find the light of life through this study.

I. The eternal word is the source of life and light (1-5)

Interestingly, John’s gospel doesn’t mention Jesus by name for a long time. John starts by making a claim about a cosmic, eternal reality of God. Clearly, this author intends to give us a comprehensive worldview, a framework for understanding life as a whole. Look at verses 1 and 2. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” Here John refers to something called the “Word.” In Greek, the word “Word” is “Logos”. Greek philosophers actually used it to refer to the rational principle behind the universe. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines ‘logos’ as “the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning.” John is starting with the existing significance of this word that his Greek readers will understand, and then he’s going to instill that word “Word” with much more personal meaning.

Verse 1 starts, “In the beginning was the Word...” This verse echoes Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Again, John is taking the whole universe into view, from its creation. Here the phrase “In the beginning” is simply used to explain that the

Word was already existing in eternity, before time began. Then John relates the word to God. 1b-2: "...and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." "The word was with God" indicates that this Word was closely related with God, and yet distinct. However, right after that it says, "the Word was God", seemingly saying that the word is equal to God. Well, which is it? Was the word with God or was the word God? The doctrine of the Trinity comes from this seeming paradox. It is a great mystery. Maybe we can say that the word, while distinct from God, is also divine in the same essential way that God is. I'm not qualified to argue the technicalities of that; but the point is that this word is pre-existent, in an eternal relationship with God, and is himself divine, partaking of the very nature of God.

Next, John gives the Word's role in creation. Look at verse 3. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Again, this relates back to Genesis where we see God as the creator of the entire universe. Here John is claiming that the work of creation was done through this divine word. We can understand this very simply in the sense that God, in Genesis 1, created the world by speaking. He said, "Let there be light", and there was light (Gen 1:3). Psalm 33:6 says, "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth." So this word is very powerful. We can also relate it to this Greek sense of "logos" as the rational principle behind the world. It means God created the universe with reason and meaning. John puts double emphasis on this by restating it in the negative form: "without him nothing was made that has been made." There is no part of creation in which the word was not involved. To us personally, this means that no matter how chaotic life seems, there is the divine word behind everything.

Now the attributes of the Word get more personal. Look at verse 4. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." The phrase "In him was life" is an amazing statement. It declares that the Word is the origin and source of life and the author of life. Life is very mysterious. Life is hard to define, but we know it when we see it. Life is alive! Life has energy. Life doesn't just sit there, but moves and grows. This verse teaches us that life is not just some accidental feature of creation; life is part of the very nature of the Word himself. We have life because the Word has life in himself.

Furthermore, verse 4 says that that life, the life that's in the Word, was the light of all mankind. So the purpose of the life in this Eternal Word was to help us, to help human beings, by giving us light. Here light is a symbol for knowledge, for meaning, for purpose and direction in life. To have light is to know where we came from and where we are going, just like a car's headlights light up the road in front of it. Of course, light from God has been shining all along. Psalm 19 verses 1 and 2 say: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." But John's point is that light has begun to shine in a new and brighter way.

Verse 5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Where does this light shine? In the darkness. The opposite of light is darkness. Spiritually, darkness refers to sin, hopelessness, despair, ignorance. Nobody would deny that there is darkness in the world. It's not hard to see that people all around us are walking in darkness in many different aspects of life. But the good news, according to verse 5, is that light is going to shine in that darkness, and that the darkness has not overcome the light. Throughout human history, darkness

has fought back against light. Out of prejudice and self-interest, people and human institutions try to cover up or blot out the light of truth. But it will not finally succeed. Why not? Because light always shines. It's impossible for light not to shine, because it's of the very nature of light to shine, to cast itself abroad to illuminate everything around it. An alternate translation of this verse says that darkness has not understood the light. That's another explanation of why darkness opposes the light. Darkness is so far from overcoming the light because darkness cannot even understand the light, and light keeps shining.

What a hopeful worldview John has given us in these few verses. Everything was created through the Word. The word has life that shines the light to all mankind, and darkness cannot overcome it. If we accept these, we can also begin to have light shining in our darkness.

II. The light's coming into the world (6-13)

If the previous section seemed a little abstract, it's because John has so far only been talking about eternal realities. Only now he does he begin referring to specific events in space and time. Look at verses 6 and 7. "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe." The person named John here is not the John who wrote this gospel, but John the Baptist. As we know, John the Baptist was the prophet in the spirit of Elijah who came to prepare the way for Christ. He is the one who Baptized Jesus. But here John is referred to very simply as a witness to the light. What is the importance of a witness? A witness is someone who testifies, and in that way is used to establish the truth. The law of Moses in Deuteronomy said that the truth of a legal matter should be established by two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6). This shows us that human witnesses are very important for people to find the light.

John's ministry of baptism of repentance was so popular among a spiritually thirsty people that many people wondered if he was the Christ. But verse 8 makes it very clear: "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." To make a further contrast, verse 9 says, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." The words "the true light" show us that this is a unique, once-in-history event, providing a light that other human teachers could not give. Well, there's no more point in being sly about it; we all know the light in this passage is referring to Jesus of Nazareth. He was born into this world as a human being; you can read about how that happened in Matthew's or Luke's gospel. But John's gospel describes it in a purely spiritual way: as true light that gives light to everyone coming into the world.

What do you think would happen when such a light came into the world? We might hope that all humanity would rejoice together at the revelation of the true light of life from heaven. But that's not what happened. Verses 10 and 11 give us the great, sad irony of the gospel: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." Why did the world not recognize the true light? It's because there was too much darkness in people's hearts. Here, "That which was his own" refers to the Jewish people, whom God chose as the guardians of his promise to send the Messiah. But instead of celebrating his coming, their leaders rejected Jesus and had him crucified by the Roman authorities.

It might have seemed like darkness totally crushed out the light. But strangely, the plan to shine God's light into the world was still successful. By his atoning death and resurrection, Jesus became the way of salvation for all people. Now, those who receive Jesus are given an amazing blessing. Read verse 12. Look at verses 12 and 13. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

What blessing do we get? It's a blessing that solves our fundamental identity problem. We receive the right to become children of God. People are born into all kinds of situations—some rich, some poor, some loved, some unloved. Some people are proud of their human background, and some people are ashamed. There are so many people who might say, "Is my existence an accident?" Yet through receiving the true light, Jesus, anyone can receive a new birth, not a natural but a spiritual birth, to become a child of God.

Believers have the right to consider themselves children of God. What difference does that make in a person's life? Being born again as a child of God means our life can be redefined to have a brand new start based on the redeeming love of God, free from everything that once pulled us down. One who knows they are a child of God has no need to feel inferior to anybody. Do you have a sense of your divine new birthright as a child of God? We can and should make use of this right, not to lord it over others, of course, but to look at our lives without any doubt as to our value and worthiness. This is how God wants us to view ourselves in Jesus.

III. Grace and truth (14-18)

Let's read verse 14. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." This eternal word did something seemingly impossible. He became flesh and made his dwelling among us. As we just studied in Philippians, Paul described this self-emptying of Christ: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" But though he was so greatly humbled and emptied, his becoming flesh enabled people to see his glory. John saw that Jesus was full of grace and truth. In verse 15 John testified to Jesus' pre-existence. Even though Jesus became flesh, he did not lose his divine character. Jesus became fully man while continuing to be fully God. That is why Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Ti 2:5).

What does it mean that the Word was full of grace and truth? These are the two very things that we need the most. First, grace. The word "grace" refers to the unearned favor of God, given as a free gift to the undeserving. The word becoming flesh reveals the abundance of God's grace because it is how God took the initiative to come to us as we are. God is holy and we are sinful, but God did not withdraw himself from us or refuse to deal with us because of our uncleanness. On the contrary, when the word became flesh in Jesus Christ, he chose to live most closely with the most undeserving. As we'll see in studying John's gospel, this expression of grace gave a new life to people whom the religious leaders thought were beyond hope.

Second, truth. I like to think of truth as what is consistent with reality as it is. Jesus the Word is full of truth because he is the true light that shines in the darkness. As we'll see in John's gospel, in his earthly life Jesus was truthful because he exposed deeds of darkness. Sometimes we think grace and truth are incompatible. But that's because we have a superficial understanding of grace as "being nice" and truth as "being tough." But if God's will is indeed to reach out to and save lost sinners, then that truth is full of grace—even though it might hurt when we have to confess our sins. Paul referred to "speaking the truth in love." Because Jesus is the Word became flesh, Jesus is the one who shows us how grace and truth go together. I pray that through studying John's gospel we can all learn how to show grace and truth.

Finally, the author makes a contrast to show how much greater Jesus' grace and truth are than what came before. "Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Moses, of course, is the central figure of the Jewish religion, the one who gave the law to Israel, starting from the Ten Commandments. Law is very good; we need law to show us a holy standard. But law is strictly inferior to grace and truth, because law has no power to save those who have failed to meet its demands; it only exposes guilt. God giving us the law is indeed a type of grace; but there was a greater grace to be given on top of that law, to fulfill the law and also do what the law could not do. The Word, Jesus Christ, became our righteousness when we were powerless to fulfill the law's righteousness. Practically speaking, Jesus' forgiving love sets us free from guilty feelings and the power of sin and enables us to serve God freely. This is really grace upon grace.

The conclusion of John's prologue is verse 18. It says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship to the Father, has made him known." I like this verse because in it John faces the fundamental fact of God's invisibility. There were various manifestations of God in the Old Testament, but when you get down to the root of the matter, no one has or can see God. This also means that all the logical reasonings that people try to make about God really get us nowhere. But because Jesus is this eternal divine Word became flesh, the one and only Son—because he came, as the King James version of verse 18 says, from the bosom of the Father, that is, the very heart of God, he can and does make God known.

So that gives us a very ambitious goal for studying the gospel of John. It is to know the heart of God himself through the life of Jesus Christ. I pray we may have a sense that the Word is indeed dwelling among us. May God bless your study of John's gospel to fill you with the light of life.