



BEFORE TIME BEGAN

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John 1:1-5

First Message

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The gospel of John is probably the best known and most quoted of the four gospels. It is the gospel that is most frequently recommended to people who are investigating Christianity, and the one that is read first by new Christians. The language of this book seems simple, yet it is hard to understand. Sitting under this text is like gazing at a work of art by a Rembrandt or a Michelangelo. The text is a masterpiece that is not easily grasped. It is filled with wonder, mystery and complexity.

John's account is very different from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It has differences of chronology, geography, style, language, theme and content. These differences have sparked much debate over its reliability, historicity and authorship. In recent times, this has led to confusion among Christians and non-Christians alike, especially college students who find themselves challenged by confident, liberal professors.

We could spend hours talking about this, but that is not our task today. However, I will say this. Up until the 18th century, John's gospel was held in high regard. Tradition has always maintained that the author was the apostle John, the "beloved disciple" mentioned five times in the story. For every challenge to the gospel there are plausible and sensible counter-arguments. John wrote his gospel later than the other gospels. He probably had different sources, and he certainly had more time to reflect on the life of Jesus. John wrote with an ear to the issues of the day. He is not just presenting a Jesus of faith, but a Jesus of history.

I would also like to say something else about John's gospel as we begin this study. This story is not written solely for non-believers. In chapter 20, John says that his purpose is that people might "believe and have life." While many have come to faith in Christ by reading this gospel, the noun "faith" is not mentioned in the text. What we find instead is the verbal form of the same word, "believe," which is used some 98 times. Believing is an ongoing activity for Christians. John's message is very comforting and grace-filled for the sinner who approaches Jesus like a helpless child, knowing his need. On the other hand, John's message is sharp, penetrating and explosive to the Pharisee—the one who is religious, knows the answers, and uses religion as a source of pride and superiority, the one whose heart is imprisoned by accepted and traditional practice. John's purpose is to completely break down all the categories in our lives by redefining Judaism in particular and relig-

ion in general in the person of Jesus. The continual refrain of the gospel is found in the question, Do you believe? That is the question we all have to face.

While studying this text I find that this is the very question I awaken to in the morning. I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, but it is a completely different thing to say that I believe in the resurrected life, when all the evidence points to the contrary. I find it easy to hold onto the security of religion but not to abandon myself foolishly for Jesus. If you are weak and broken, John's text is great news. If you are feeling safe and secure, this text will challenge your world. I am going to do as much as I can, by the power and leading of the Spirit, to put us in touch with Jesus and to allow God's Word, both written and living, to help us as a community of believers experience eternal life together in the present.

The first 18 verses of John's text make up the prologue. This is no ordinary introduction. In these words we hear a heavenly voice that perks our interest and stirs our soul. Without knowing what the words mean we hear the music: "In the beginning was the Word...in Him was life...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...we beheld his glory." We know we are hearing life-imparting truth that may unravel the mystery of our humanity.

John's prologue presents both the main themes of the book and reveals where the story is going. Like an overture to an opera, a prologue presents in brief the melodies that will be sung in full as the story develops. The opening five verses highlight four themes that we will encounter in John: the identity of Jesus, creation, life, and light.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1-2 NASB)

The first theme centers on the identity of Jesus. Who is Jesus? Echoing Genesis, John, the poet, begins with the phrase "in the beginning": "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Mark opens his gospel with John the Baptist; Matthew with Abraham and David; Luke with the story of Adam. But John goes all the way back to before time began. This story is not defined by other stories. This is the story that defines everything.

But John does not begin his story by naming Jesus. Rather, he chooses the Greek word *logos*, or Word. He

uses this word in verses 1 and 14. John is a good preacher. He uses a term filled with meaning for both the Jew and the non-Jew. The Stoics understood *logos* to be the rational principle by which everything exists; the reason or thought that give order to the universe. A wise person lives in harmony with the order or reason of things. In Hellenism, this was a principle, not a person. Philo makes a distinction between the ideal world, which he calls the “*logos* of God,” and the real world, which is but its copy. For Philo, *logos* can refer to the ideal, primal man from whom all empirical human beings derive. *Logos* can refer to inner thought, hence “reason,” even “science.” It can refer to outward expression, hence “speech” or “message.” It is a word that allows a thought to be made visible, to be expressed.

The notion of Word would have also been a powerful concept for the Jew. In the O.T., the word (*dabar*) of God is connected with God’s powerful activity in creation, revelation, and deliverance. God spoke and the world was created: “‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). The “word of the Lord” came to the prophets, bringing revelation. And God’s word was a delivering word: “He sent His word and healed them, And delivered them from their destructions” (Ps 107:20). For the Jew, *logos* is also a poetic personification of wisdom separate from God but with God (Prov 8:22). Don Carson writes: “God’s ‘Word’ in the Old Testament is his powerful self-expression in creation, revelation and salvation, and the personification of that ‘Word’ makes it suitable for John to apply it as a title to God’s ultimate self-disclosure, the person of his own Son.”¹

John is a good preacher. He knows his audience. He is culturally aware. How do we speak to our culture today about Jesus? What kind of terminology do we use? How would you begin your gospel? If you were speaking to the Star Wars generation, perhaps you would say, “In the beginning was the force.” Maybe we would say, “In the beginning was the Matrix,” or “In the beginning was technology,” or “In the beginning was the fellowship of the ring.” We need to be creative and relevant. That is what John is doing. He is a good model for us.

So John begins his story by saying that in the beginning was the Word and that this Word was with God. This is like saying that reason or order or wisdom was with God. But John is being more specific. The word “with” implies relationship, i.e., the Word is a person. But then he says that this Word was God. The order of the text puts the emphasis on God. John is not saying that the Word was a god (as the Jehovah’s Witnesses wrongly take the grammar), but that the Word was God. “Before Abraham was, before Adam was, before time was, God was....If we ask the fundamental question of the philosopher ‘Why is there not nothing?’ the answer is that ‘in the beginning was the Word.’”²

John introduces the identity of Jesus at the beginning and then develops the theme. We discover that Jesus is the Son of Man of Daniel 7. He is the Son of God. But

more than that, he is God. This claim provoked violent reaction to Jesus. At the end of chapter 8, when Jesus said, “I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am,” the Jews knew exactly what he was saying, and they tried to stone him.

John’s story is about someone who was in the beginning. He was not created. He did not come into being. He always was, pre-existent with God. He is God. Is this how the world understands Jesus? Is this how we understand and relate to him? Is he God or merely a genie to whom we look for blessing?

Creation is the second theme we encounter in our text.

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (1:3)

John’s opening phrase alerts us to the creation story in Genesis, and here he makes it clear that Jesus is the agent of that creation. John states this truth both positively and negatively. There is nothing that exists that hasn’t passed through the hands of the Word. Paul says the same thing in Colossians 1:16-17: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

John not only ties his story to Genesis with his opening phrase “in the beginning,” but then he writes, in verse 29, “the next day”; and again, in verse 35, “the next day”; and again, in verse 43, “the next day”; and then he begins chapter 2, “on the third day.” And again we hear Genesis: “There was evening and there was morning, one day” (Gen 1:5), a second day, a third day.

John begins his story with a new creation week. He is saying that the agent of the first creation is the One who re-creates, the One who speaks a word and something that had never existed is brought into being. Jesus is not a created being; he is the one who creates. We are created beings. We have been created to become fully human and bear the image of God in his glory. We know that we fall short of this intended purpose. We lack something, and thus we pursue every avenue possible seeking to become that for which we were created. But since we are the created beings, we lack the ability to re-create or make ourselves new. Doesn’t it make sense that if we are to be re-created, that will take the work of the One who created us in the first place?

Say that we paint a picture or write a song. That work of art or piece of music cannot change itself even if it wants to, because it was created outside of itself. If it is to be changed, made new, it will have to be changed by the one doing the creative work. In the same way, if we are to be re-created, changed and permanently made new, that must be the work of God. This is the story of salvation. Jesus “is” so that we can “become.” As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Light

shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

God speaks a word and we are created anew in the same way that the world was brought into existence. But we must abandon our own methods, especially our religious efforts. Believing means we are sold out to a new creation.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. (1:4)

The third theme we encounter is the theme of life: "In Him was life." In this gospel, life means eternal life, the life of the ages. The Synoptic writers were concerned about the kingdom of God, but John's concern is that true life to be embraced and experienced. And since the Word is the source of life, not just the source of creation, then we must go to that source if we truly want to live.

This theme runs throughout John's story. The word "life" occurs 36 times in the text: "For just as the Father has *life* in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have *life* in Himself" (5:26). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal *life*. I am the bread of *life*" (6:47-48). "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the *life*; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies'" (11:25). "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the *life*; no one comes to the Father but through Me'" (14:6)

Life, not death, is what we all desire. That is why all our energy goes into pursuing life and avoiding death in ways that are meaningful to us. That is why the advertisers offer "life" through the products they sell. Every commercial presents an image of life to be found in beautiful people and beautiful places. Every product offers the potential for life, things like beer, Viagra, cruises, beautiful hair, etc. AT&T has mLife. Panasonic has ideas for life. If you come to Harrah's, you come to life, we are told. "Learn the art of living," says an advertisement for a housing community on a golf course. Golf may get us closer to life, but it isn't life. None of these things gives us life. Yet we become professional consumers seeking life. We project the image that we have life by making our homes beautiful and taking exotic vacations.

What is life? We know that our hearts long for life even if it's difficult to put into words. We want something that is "other," something that will give us contentment and hope, joy and peace, even in the midst of suffering. John says the Word is life. Without this life we will experience death. And this life is available right now. John makes us ask the questions: Do we have life? Do we want life? Are we willing to let go of our life in order to gain life?

The final theme of these opening verses is light.

and the life was the Light of men. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it (1:4b-5).

John uses the metaphor of light 23 times in his gospel, six times in the prologue alone. Jesus used this word of himself on several occasions in John's gospel: "Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, 'I am the *Light* of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the *Light* of life'" (8:12). "I have come as *light* into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness" (12:46).

God's first words in Genesis were, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3). There was darkness, the earth was formless and void, but when God spoke there was light. Here God speaks again, and once more light comes into the world. "The life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it." "Comprehend" here could mean either "understand" or "overcome." If it means understand, then it anticipates the theme of rejection of verses 10-11 of the prologue: "There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him" (1:9-10).

If the word means to overcome, it would imply the truth that light wins out over darkness. Even though the darkness rejects the light and tries to extinguish it, it cannot overcome it. Light is stronger than darkness. Darkness cannot prevail over it. When you turn on a light in a dark room, the darkness dispels. There is not a peaceful coexistence of light and dark. They are opposites. But they are not equals. The darkness could not extinguish the light of Christ and it cannot extinguish the light inside of us. Perhaps John is being ambiguous and wants us to see both meanings in this word.

Light appeals to us just like life does. Light speaks to us of truth and goodness, warmth and safety. Darkness fills us with images of evil and falsehood, shame and fear. To live in the light means to live in belief. To live in darkness means to live in unbelief.

When I was in high school I was gripped by the image of darkness. My life was not particularly dark or ugly, but I felt I was in a place of darkness and needed illumination. I recall writing about darkness and light. I had the sense that I was surrounded by darkness and I was groping about because I couldn't see. But I also wrote about a light, a faint light way off in the distance. That image of a light filled me with hope. It gave me the assurance that one day I would be able to see. I didn't know it at the time, but that light was Jesus. Some years later that was the light that dispelled the darkness in my life.

Now even though the light is compelling and welcoming, sometimes it is not easily embraced or welcomed. John's gospel will present us with another question: Do we want to move into the light, so that we can experience life? John informs us that this will not be easy: "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does

evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (3:19-20). The truth is that we often love the darkness and prefer to remain in the dark. That was what the popular 60's song said: "Hello darkness, my old friend."

Life and light. Isn't this why we come to church? We want life and light. We are hoping that something will be said to dispel feelings of death and darkness. It would be absolutely absurd to come to church with the same attitude that we have when we visit our tax accountant or the gym: "Let's just get it over with; hopefully it won't cost me too much." "I know it's good for me, but I hope the time goes by fast." We want Word—*Logos*. We want God to create in us. We want life and light. "For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light" (Ps 36:9).

Life and light. This was why our visit to Romania was so special. We hoped the students we taught there would share their stories with one another, but we didn't know how hard a task that would be. They had never shared their stories in public. They were held cap-

tive by darkness and sin, guilt and shame. But as we convinced a couple of them to try it, God began to work in a wonderful way. We could see the life of Jesus replacing guilt and shame. We could see the light of Jesus shine on their faces, dispelling the darkness. This is why we wept and worshipped and experienced joy.

As I witnessed what happened there, it helped me refocus. It is easy to get away from life and light as we "manage" our Christian lives. We forget that Jesus is the life and the light. But we can experience the same thing right here, right now. This room is filled with darkness and guilt and shame. We all long for light and life. My prayer is that John's story will help us in this journey.

1. Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 116.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 2.

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