



PRELUDE TO DEITY

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 1:1-18

First Message

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John begins his gospel with an 18-verse introduction, the theme of which is the question, "Who is Jesus, really?" Where did Jesus come from? These verses focus on the central fact of our Christian faith.

Christianity is not a philosophy. It centers on a person, and that person is central to everything Christians believe. Taking Jesus out of Christianity is like trying to take numbers out of mathematics. Other major religions center on a set of beliefs, but Christianity centers on a person, an astonishing, marvelous, beautiful person.

A great many impressions of Christ are popular today, but most of them are far removed from the biblical picture of Jesus. Here, however, is a wonderful picture of Christ, by author Dorothy Sayers:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe. . . He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a "gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humour that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (Creed or Chaos)

Jesus is the most radical and revolutionary character in human history. More books have been written about him, more music has been composed to him, more pictures have been painted of him than any other person ever. Why? Why have human beings focused so much attention and interest on Jesus of Nazareth? We will discover why in these 18 verses from the opening chapter of the gospel of John this morning, a section that summarizes John's most profound convictions about Jesus of Nazareth

These verses make up a section technically known as the prologue. It is important, however, that we not think of this

as merely a preface to the book; it is far more than that. This section sets the pace for and gives a glimpse of the entire plot and emphasis of the book. Like an overture to an opera, these verses touch all the great themes that will be developed later: life, light, truth, witness, children of God, glory, and grace. The rest of the gospel is the history of the Word made flesh. Some feel that John wrote the gospel first and then composed this profound prologue to introduce Christ, the unique Son of God who existed from eternity, who created all things and became flesh in order to reveal the person of God to us. There are two primary subjects in these verses: First, the Word (John's term to describe Jesus Christ), and secondly, John the Baptist. Today we will focus on Jesus; next week we will discuss the verses that speak of the ministry of John the Baptist.

Here is how this fascinating book begins.

I. The Eternal Word:

The Nature Of Jesus Christ 1:1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

These verses obviously hearken back to Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God . . ." The God who was active in creation is active in the new creation. He is active in revelation. As he begins to answer the question, "Who is Jesus?", John goes back long before the incarnation—back to the very beginning, in fact. He uses terms and categories that people will understand if they are going to make any sense of what he says. And he begins by introducing us to "the Word." This term *logos* would have rung bells in the minds of his readers, both Jews and Greeks alike. It has a rich background in both Jewish and Greek culture. To the Jew, "the Word" in the O.T. implied God's powerful self-expression in creation, revelation and salvation. To the Greeks, it implied the ultimate reason behind things, why there is order and not chaos in the world.

Logos, then, was an important word to both Greeks and Jews. Both gave it the highest place in the universe—so it was a perfect choice for John. But it brought utter amazement to everyone else. Nobody had ever said or would ever say, "the word became flesh." The mind of God become a human being? That was unthinkable! You can't know what's going on in my head unless I clothe my thoughts in words. Words enable me to disclose myself and they enable you to grasp what I'm thinking. What an amazing statement then: "the word became flesh." The mind of God became tangible, something that we could get a hold of in the person of Jesus. Jesus was the very mind of God clothed in

a Word, not a word that we could erase off a page, but a Word that we have to encounter in flesh. He speaks our language, and he speaks it without an accent.

Notice the four mighty assertions that John makes about this Word.

(a) He is Eternal

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

The Word has been with God from all eternity. He is God himself. He shares God's nature. There has never been a time when Christ did not exist. The Father and the Son are eternal in their relationship. John uses the strongest word possible to say that Jesus is God. This Word shares the nature and the being of God! John intends that the entire book be read in light of this verse. The deeds and the words of Jesus are the deeds and the words of God. The New English Bible captures John's thought in the words, "What God was, the Word was . . ." Though he was not called Jesus before he came to earth, he was still the Son. We do not have any history before we come to earth (no matter what anyone might tell you), but Jesus did. He was with the Father before the universe began.

(b) He is the Creator

All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

Did you know that it was Jesus who was the Creator? I was years into my Christian life before I realized that it was Jesus who created the world. I thought it was the Father. But Jesus as Creator is a theme repeated throughout the N.T. Paul writes in Colossians: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The writer of Hebrews says in 1:1-3: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word..." John says in Revelation 4:11: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

These passages portray a cosmic view of Christ. I mentioned last week that often our view of him is small and inadequate. Perhaps Jesus fills a slot for us on Sunday, perhaps a devotional time in the morning. But we are talking about the one who set the stars in the heavens, the one who keeps the laws of physics in operation, the one who lies behind the basics of biology. He not only created the visible universe, he also created the microcosms within the universe. And he holds all of it together! Have you ever been astonished by the marvelous symmetry of things? What lies behind visible matter—molecules, atoms, the makeup of a flower, the stars? Have you ever pondered the obvious design behind all of it? Jesus lies behind it all! He is the one who spoke the universe into existence at the beginning.

And that word became flesh for us. Will you remember that this Christmas season as our world tries to trivialize his birth? The little baby in the manger at Bethlehem holds the

universe in place. He understands it. He knows how it functions. He is able to direct it and guide it. And because he is the Creator, he knows what his creatures need. You can entrust your life to him.

(c) He is Life

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

In verse 3, John declares that it was through Jesus that all of the physical creation came into being. All spiritual life will come into being through him as well! The message of Genesis 1 is that God's Word has the dynamic power to bring life and order out of chaos in the physical realm. The message of John 1 is that God's Word, Jesus Christ, has the dynamic power to bring life and order out of emptiness and chaos in the spiritual realm.

Jesus is the only one through whom life comes. He is the sole source of life. It is not that he has life, he is life—*aiōnios* life, eternal life, the life of the age to come. And he came in order to give it away. Life comes from relationship to him. There is no other person we can go to, no other relationship we can have, no support group we can join, no job we can find, no degree we can earn, that will give us life. In both the physical realm and the realm of our spiritual lives, Jesus is the one and only author of life. No physical life came into being without him and no spiritual life can come into being without him. Quite simply, there is nowhere else and nobody else we can go to to find true life.

Jesus defined eternal life as a relationship, as knowing God and Jesus whom he has sent (John 17). It is a quality of relationship, not a quantity of days added on to the end of our stay here on earth. If you want to know how satisfying life can be, Jesus says in 4:14 that it is like a spring of water bubbling up inside of you. We were designed to live in relationship with someone who is unfailingly strong and lovingly involved, someone who will enable us to handle the important tasks he gives us. Without this kind of relationship and impact life is profoundly empty. No number of imperfect friends, impressive work, excitement or pleasure can take its place.

But many cope with life by pretending—pretending we haven't been badly disappointed or hurt. If we refuse to acknowledge the deep disappointment of our relationships, however, we will never experience the kind of deep thirst that Jesus promised to quench. Stop running away from the pain. That only leads to all kinds of problems and compulsive behavior. Face the disappointment, feel the hurt, and let it drive you to the one who can quench your thirst, the lifegiver himself. He who has the Son has eternal life. All of us are breathing this morning, but I'm not sure all of us are living, in the truest sense of the word.

(d) He is Light

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but [came] that he might bear witness of the light. There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

Jesus is the one who brought light into that first creation, when darkness was over the surface of the deep. God spoke and said, "Let there be light." In the same way, Jesus now brings light into the moral darkness of our world. Apart

from that light our world is shrouded in darkness.

John had heard Jesus say in his final public words: "For a little while longer the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, in order that you may become sons of light." Let us think about this by imagining the world as a big stage in a completely dark theatre. All of us are groping around onstage in the darkness, stepping on each other's toes in unsatisfying relationships. Because we are blinded by our selfishness we are constantly bumping into furniture—boundaries we can't see or understand. The result, obviously, is chaos. But our eyes gradually become accustomed to the darkness. We begin to distinguish other figures and objects and we can maneuver our way around without stumbling too much. We become complacent in the darkness; we think darkness is normal. Then someone turns a spotlight on the stage. Suddenly we are faced with a choice: We can remain in the darkness and live in the hazy world we are used to, or we can step into the light where we can begin to see ourselves for the first time, where we can see others for the first time, where we can see the stage for the first time, where we can feel the warmth of the light.

Light reveals. By means of light we see things as they really are. It is in this light that we are able to recognize our true condition: We are desperately sick with sin and in need of a Savior. But the trouble with the human situation is that when light reveals it, we discover that it is usually a mess. So we see something else: Light judges. Thus John writes in 3:19: "And this is the judgment, that the light is 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, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light." Light reveals the darkness and shows it up for what it is.

But there is another wonderful element to light which John speaks of in this book: Light saves. Here are the words of Jesus in 8:12: "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." And John writes here in verse 5: "And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

There is a sense of triumph in John's words. Although we don't completely understand the origin of the darkness of the world, we do know that the light has come, and that light banishes the darkness. Now the darkness serves merely as the background on which the light is seen to be light, in the same way that wedding rings are set out on a dark velvet background to enhance the glory of the setting.

There may be people here this morning who feel that the darkness of their life overpowers the light. You have made choices that have resulted in deep scars; you have lost hope that things can ever be made right. Hearing that Jesus can turn that dark past into light seems unbelievable. Light and darkness may be opposites, but they are not opposites of equal power, however. Light is stronger than darkness. Darkness disappears when light enters. That is the good news! The light of the world cannot be overcome by the power of darkness, as we will see in this book.

Next, in verses 10-18, John moves from the infinite realm of eternity to time.

II. The Incarnate Word:

The Manifestation of Jesus Christ 1:10-18

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 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, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of 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.'" For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained [Him].

The universal light had come into the world. The Creator was coming into the world he had made. The owner was coming to his own home. It was indeed the midpoint of history. Well might the angels bow in wonder. This is incredible stuff! We should never believe it unless we found it almost incredible.

And what John finds amazing as he dictates this gospel is that when God came to his own, they didn't want to know! Jesus came to the place where God had put his name, to the temple that was dedicated to his Father, to his own people in that place—the chosen ones who had been instructed for centuries that there was one coming who would be the suffering servant of Jehovah, who would bear their own transgressions upon himself—and his own people received him not. Not only did they not receive the light, in their darkness they even attempted to extinguish it. Light was refused. Life was refused. Love was refused. Truth was refused. Glory was refused. The Word was refused. In view of all that God had done, John says that their response was incredible. That action of refusal is going to spelled out more clearly as this gospel proceeds.

But, according to John, it wasn't a failure. This is one of the strange paradoxes of Scripture that we run into again and again. God seems to allow everything to appear totally lost; the whole thing seems a failure. Maybe he has done that in your life. But when it looks like everything you set your hopes on has failed, then God starts to work. That is what happens here. Though the Messiah was rejected and the Creator was unrecognized, nevertheless in the midst of the rejection God was producing a new creation, a new humanity.

And, says John, this new creation began just like the old one—with a birth. Every person in this room entered human life by means of a birth. That is true in the new creation as well.

John shares how we enter this new family. Notice that we enter it through the shattering realization that we are not children of God already. Jesus is Son of God by nature; we can be sons of God by adoption.

And notice also how you do not enter the family. "It is not by blood." It is not because you are an American or because your parents are good Christians. You can grow up in

a Christian home, attend a Christian school and spend all your life in Christian activities, but until you are born again you are not a Christian. Nor is it, says John, "by the will of the flesh." You can't talk yourself into becoming a Christian. You can't work yourself into it by any amount of good deeds—by joining a church and doing all the right things. Nor is it accomplished "by the will of man." Nobody else can do it for you: no bishop or priest, no ceremony or creed, no confession, not by being sprinkled with holy dust. Only God can do it. Only he begets. It is what happens in your heart that makes you a Christian. It is a new birth, and it is all by God. So it is beyond human effort or manipulation. John describes believing as receiving. When you receive the risen Lord Jesus into your life, when you yield to him, surrendering to his Lordship, that is how you become a Christian.

And when that happens, a miraculous transformation occurs deep in your spirit. Now God does this. You cannot do it. When faith meets the Word of God, a new life begins in the human spirit. Just as a mother cannot tell when conception has occurred in her womb, we cannot always feel the moment when the new birth takes place. But a new creation has begun which will grow into the image of Christ.

Most of you here have become new creatures in Christ already. That is why you come week after week—to worship him, to love him, to be fed and to grow. But there may be some among us who have never opened their hearts, who have never come to Jesus and received him as Lord. If you will admit your need and receive him, today can be that moment of new birth for you.

Jesus, the Word, the full disclosure of God who fills out all that Moses outlined in the Torah—the grace and truth of God which came imperfectly through the Torah—has come in full through Jesus Christ. The glory of God has pitched his tent amongst us, tabernacled with us and revealed to us the Father's heart of grace, mercy and love. The only begotten, himself God, has given the perfect exegesis of what God is like: He has made known to us the Father's heart.

The Creator has come to seek you in your darkness and turn that darkness into light. I pray you will not reject him.

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