

# “In the Beginning Was the Word”

## The Second in a Series on the Gospel of John

*Texts: Genesis 1:1-2:3; John 1:1-18*

---

In order to be a Christian one must believe in the doctrine of the Trinity and in the Deity of Jesus Christ. And it is not an accident that in the *Creed* we confess, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” All of these doctrines are addressed in the “Prologue” of John’s Gospel when John identifies Jesus as God, yet distinct from the Father, and that God created all things through Jesus Christ, who is the eternal Word (*logos*) made flesh.

As we continue our new series on the Gospel of John. Last week—the first in our series—we dealt with background materials regarding John’s Gospel including authorship (John wrote it!) and dating (between 80-85 AD) before we addressed the Gospel’s purpose statement in John 20:30-31—“*now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”

Based upon John’s purpose statement, it is evident that throughout this gospel John is answering the question “who is Jesus?” and making his case as to why his readers should believe in Jesus so as to receive life in his name. Given the likely circumstances under which this gospel was written—the chaos in Palestine after the Fall of Jerusalem—it is reasonable to conclude that John’s purpose statement is an indication that his gospel was written to equip Christians to bear witness about Jesus Christ, especially to those Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who had questions about Jesus’ identity, and who may have been wondering about the purposes of God after the Roman army captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Jewish temple in 70 AD. If people in John’s day were asking “who is Jesus,” so too are people in our own, and as we will see John’s answer to this question is just as profound in our day as it was in his.

We will begin to work our way through the first 18 verses of chapter 1, the so-called “Prologue” to John’s Gospel—a prologue is an introduction to what follows. Some speak of this prologue like a foyer (entrance) to a building because the first eighteen verses do serve as the entrance to the body of the gospel itself.<sup>1</sup> Another writer speaks of the prologue as “an introduction to the history of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> This too is a helpful way to look at this because John’s prologue informs us about Jesus’ true identity, so that when John opens his account of Jesus’ preaching and miracles in verse 19 of chapter 1, we already know a great deal about who Jesus is—he is the Word made flesh.

The prologue to John’s Gospel is densely-packed so we will spend three Sundays in this very important section of the gospel unpacking its important doctrines *because* the prologue to John sets the stage for everything which follows in the gospel’s twenty-one chapters. In fact, virtually everything we find in the

---

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 23.

prologue is restated later on in the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> If we know the prologue to John, we'll already know much about his gospel. We will concentrate Jesus as the Word in verses 1-4, next time we will take up verses 5-13 and consider John's metaphor of light and darkness. Then, Lord willing, in two weeks we'll take up verses 14-18 and concentrate on Jesus' incarnation.

The first two verses of John's Gospel are well-known to Christians and packed with important theological truths. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*" When we read these opening words in John, we should immediately think of the creation account (which we read as our Old Testament lesson). Anyone familiar with the Old Testament would immediately make the connection between Genesis 1 and the words of John 1 which echo them. Every Jew understood that Genesis 1 is the very heart of God's revelation in the Old Testament—this passage contains the opening words of the Torah. God's self-revelation begins with the declaration that God created all things—heaven, earth, and everything in them—therefore God is distinct from creation and cannot be identified with it. From the get go, this eliminates all forms of pantheism (the confusion of God with world) or panentheism (the idea that creation is within God). Israel's God (the only true God) created all those things the pagan Canaanites foolishly sought to worship. How then can the Israelites worship the creation like their pagan neighbors and not its creator? They cannot.

Unlike the pagans who worshiped created things (the sun and moon, creatures), the Israelites worshiped the true and living God who had revealed himself to them through his word. When John uses the words "in the beginning" his Jewish readers would immediately catch the reference to the creation account and they would be aware that John writing about a new beginning, a new creation, something brought about by the Word (the *logos*) of whom John is speaking. To make this point with more power, John even uses a number of words which figure very prominently in the creation account: "life," "light," and "darkness."<sup>4</sup> All of these terms will be used to explain the creating and redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

As John tells us, the creator of all things mentioned in the Genesis account (the God of Israel) is now identified as the Word. This Word existed before anything else was created. Since the Word is God, the Word is eternal, without beginning or end. Since the Word was before all else, the Word is that one who created all things. And, says John, that Word is none other than Jesus Christ. The implication to John's reader is crystal clear, profound, and unmistakable: Jesus is God. That one who became flesh and of whom John the Baptist bore witness, and who began calling disciples at the beginning of his public ministry is none other than God in human flesh. To understand what follows in his Gospel, John's reader must understand that Jesus is the Word become flesh.

There are a couple of points raised by John's statements in these opening verses which we need to address. The first is John's use of the term *logos* or "Word." The word *logos* was widely used in various ways in John's time, but John assigns to the term a very unique meaning. The Greek stoics thought the *logos* was the principle of human reason, which was the essence of the human soul. The proto-Gnostics associated the *logos* with the secret knowledge possessed by the enlightened ones (called the *logoi*). The influential Jewish philosopher Philo, who was a devoted follower of Plato, thought the *logos* was the ideal (primal) man from which all other humans derive our existence. But John does not use the term

---

<sup>3</sup> See the chart in Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 72-73.

because of any supposed influence coming from any of these sources.<sup>5</sup>

John uses the term *logos* of Jesus because it captures so many different Old Testament themes and images uniting them together in that one person (Jesus) through whom God has chosen to reveal himself. To begin with, when God created all things, he did so by “speaking.” As we read in the creation account, the heavens and earth were brought forth from nothing by the “word” of the Lord. God speaks and his word comes to pass as a demonstration of his power. In addition to the creation account in Genesis 1, the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 33:6, that “*by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.*” God spoke and everything that now is came into being.

In Psalm 29:3-9 we read of the power of God’s word as follows: “*The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”* God’s word reveals his power.

John also uses the term *logos* because God’s word is also associated with redemption. In Psalm 107:20, we read, God “*sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.*” God’s word creates, God’s word delivers. In Isaiah 55:8-11, YHWH declares, “*for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*” God speaks and it is so.

Then we read throughout the Old Testament that it was the “word of Lord” which came to the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), which they, in turn, communicated to Israel. It is through his word that God reveals to us both his will and his plan of redemption. There are also strong connections between the “wisdom of God” in Proverbs (especially chapter 8 where Wisdom is both a gift from God and the agent of creation) and the word of God (the *logos*) because they share similar attributes. As Carson puts it, “God’s ‘Word’ in the Old Testament is his powerful self-expression in creation, revelation and salvation.” But more importantly for John, this is how Christians in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine have come to know Jesus—as creator, redeemer, and revealer of God’s saving will. To identify Jesus as the *logos* (Word) is to identify Jesus with all of these Old Testament images, as well as the church’s current experience of Jesus as the one who spoke to them his word and in doing so gives his people faith and eternal life.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, when John uses the term *logos* of Jesus, the disciple whom Jesus loved is saying that Jesus is God’s self-expression (that one through whom God reveals himself), that Jesus was with God in the beginning, and as the Word, Jesus is distinguished from God—which is the foundation for the distinction

---

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 114 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 116.

made throughout Scripture between the Father and the Son. But although distinct from the Father, nevertheless the Word is God, without beginning or end. This can be seen in John's use of the verb "was." "The Word was God." It is a simple way in Greek to say that Jesus "always was." Jesus never "came into being." If the Word *was* before all things were created, then the Word *is* eternal, and at no point in eternity past did the Word not exist in his fulness. This is John's point when he speaks of the Word as being with God in the beginning. The Word *was* God. The Word always *was* God. The Word *will always be* God. Jesus has no beginning and will have no end. He is eternal.

John not only teaches the deity of Jesus Christ (that Jesus is God), but in the distinction John makes between God and the Word (the distinction between the Father and the Son) we have the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, when we look at John 1:1-2 in light of Genesis 1:2, where we read "*the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters,*" we see that all three members of the Trinity are revealed by John and Moses in connection with the creation account. Therefore, when Jesus begins his public ministry (as we will see in John 1:19), John has already told us in his prologue that Jesus is God (and because he is distinct from the Father) he is also the second person of the blessed Holy Trinity.

In verse 3, John makes explicit a point implied in verses 1-2 when he writes, "*all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*" If the *logos* was with God in the beginning (pre-existent), then the *logos* was eternally present before anything was created. John tells us plainly what we already expect was to come. Jesus is not only God, Jesus is the one who created all things. "All things" were brought into being by Jesus, and nothing exists apart from Jesus' work in creation. So, when we read in Genesis that God spoke and all things came into being, John tells us that Jesus (the *logos*) is that one *through* whom God created all things.

That Jesus is the creator of all things is taught throughout the New Testament. In Hebrews 1:2 we read "*in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.*" Paul says much the same thing in Colossians 1:16-17. "*For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" The New Testament is clear and unambiguous in its teaching that Jesus is God, and that he is both the creator and sustainer of all things. This point would not only speak to Jews who knew the creation account and who now learn that God created all things through Jesus Christ (God's son), but since Jesus' role as creator and sustainer has cosmic ramifications this would speak to Gentiles as well—who had all kinds of theories about the origin of the universe.

The ramifications of this point are many and profound. Since God created all things through Jesus Christ, this explains why the creation account indicates that all created things are "good." To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, God likes matter because he invented it. This fact alone eliminates all forms of pagan dualism in which it is taught that spirit is good (because divine) and matter (created things) is evil. It is only by rejecting the biblical doctrine of creation can false religions teach that our spirits are divine, and are currently trapped in our bodies (which are evil, because material).

Created things reflect the glory of their creator, just as humans reflect the glory of God because we are created in his image. Yes, there is evil and suffering in the world not because matter is evil, but because Adam rebelled against God. This also means that matter is not eternal—all things were created by God through Jesus Christ and therefore have a beginning (that moment when God brought them into being through Jesus Christ). John's point is that everything which now exists has come into being through the agency of Jesus Christ (the Word) when God spoke and it was so. To put it yet another way, "the world

is God's world."<sup>7</sup>

In verses 4-5, John adds "*in him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" Because Jesus created all things, he is the source of both life and light. Lord willing, we will address the contrast between darkness and light in some detail next Sunday. But it is important at this point to consider the fact that throughout John's Gospel the terms "life" and "light" are used in reference to eternal life and salvation from sin. But here in verses 4-5, the terms are used by John specifically in reference to creation. Because Jesus created all things, and in him all things hold together, Jesus is the source of life. As John tells us in chapter 5:26, "*for as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.*" Because Jesus is the source of life (or because Jesus has life in himself) he is the ultimate source of light (truth) which any human possesses. Jesus is that one whom John will later tell us is the "*light of the world*" (John 8:12). Because Jesus is both life and light, John may be speaking of the fact that Jesus is that one in whose image we are created, or he may mean that Jesus is that one who illumines every human being through the light of nature.<sup>8</sup> He may be speaking of both.

As we wrap, it is very apparent that in the opening verses of the prologue John tells us that Jesus is God, that he is distinct from the Father, and that through him all things were created. Here are the doctrines of the Trinity (in seed form), the deity of Jesus, and that fact that God created all things through the person of his Son. John could not have found a more appropriate way to speak of Jesus than to describe him as the *logos* (the Word).

If we do not know who Jesus is when John begins to speak about the dawn of Jesus public ministry in John 1:19, then we will miss the critical point that in the preaching and miracles of Jesus, God is revealing himself in the person of the Word made flesh. In this sense, the prologue is much like the Book of Job, where in the first two chapters the reader is told the reason for Job's suffering and trials, something that neither Job nor his friends knew as the story unfolds.<sup>9</sup> This not only explains the source of Jesus' miracles (the power of God which created the heavens and earth), it also tells us why Jesus can utter the famous "I am" statements without committing blasphemy. Take, for example, John 8:58 ("*before Abraham was, I am*") or John 14:6 ("*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*"). Only God in human flesh dare speak such a way. Because we have read the prologue to John's Gospel we already know who it is who is saying such things, while those who were eyewitnesses to these events struggled mightily to figure it all out.

That Jesus is eternal God means that Jesus is not some sort of divine man, or an enlightened teacher or guru, or merely a prophet. Jesus is that pre-existent creator who brought everything which now exists into existence. This is why we speak of Jesus as God in human flesh, and this is why we must see in Jesus the very image of God revealed to us in the person of his Son. The Word *was* God (the word *always was*) God, and the word *will always be* God.

As you may have already experienced, this is one point where your faith will be severely tested. Some

---

<sup>7</sup> Morris, The Gospel According to John, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Kostenberger, Encountering John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 49.

Saturday morning when you least expect it or want it to happen, the JW's will come to your home and attempt to convince you of the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity (hinted at here) and the deity of Jesus Christ were pagan in origin and that John is really teaching that God alone is eternal, that God created Jesus Christ before all things, and that Jesus then created everything else. This is, perhaps, the most pernicious heresy ever to confront Christ's church—the so-called Arian heresy, made popular by the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century arch-heretic Arius who was born in Alexandria in Egypt, and who, over the course of his life, nearly convinced the churches that Jesus was not eternal God, but “the first born of all creation,” who in turn created everything else. I know there are those who are bored by church history, but all the ancient heresies eventually return in new forms even at your front porch, and this ancient heresy is now propagated by those nice friendly JW's who will be all too happy to give you one of their cheesy magazines and then attempt to convince you that John's prologue doesn't teach what you think it does.

The answer to Arianism is spelled out in the prologue of John's Gospel and even if you had no other passage than the first 18 verses of John, it is crystal clear that Jesus is God and that he created all things, therefore he is not a mere creature. When the Arians sang “there was a time when he [the son] was not,” Christian responded with the words of John, “*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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*” Every Christian should know how to defend the deity of Jesus against heretics like this, and even though the JW's like other such groups will try to play all kinds of games with the Greek text or church history, the words of John stand. If you are familiar with the prologue of John, you are ready defend yourself against this ancient heresy.

For those who have encountered the Dan Brown novels (*DaVinci Code*) or have read anything from Bart Ehrman (a former fundamentalist turned critical scholar and now best-selling author), you've seen the related argument that Arianism was just one of many legitimate expressions of Christian faith at the time (so-called “Christianities”), and it was not until the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian in 310 AD that he used the political muscle of the Roman empire to convene the Council of Nicea and condemn the “other Christianities” based solely upon the political preferences of the anti-Arians currently in power. According to this theory, there were many different and legitimate views about who Jesus was in the early church, but the “orthodox” view won because of Constantine's political power.

But the only way Ehrman and Brown can argue this case is to ignore biblical passages like the prologue to the Gospel of John, which teaches us that Jesus is God in human flesh, that he is distinct from the Father, and that Jesus created all things. Despite all the voices to the contrary, the deity of Jesus was not the invention of the 4<sup>th</sup> century church, but is the clear teaching of John (and of the entire New Testament for that matter), who specifically answers the issue raised by Arius and those like him who deny that Jesus is God in human flesh. But then, if you know something about the prologue to John's Gospel, then you are already well-equipped to deal with this, and when you hear this stuff, you are not rattled.

As we will see next Sunday, Lord willing, in his distinction between light and darkness John tells us why it is that people teach such things, and why they deny what is so plainly taught in Scripture. People love darkness because their deeds are evil. But in the words of the Prologue, John confronts us with the one who not only is the light, but who created the 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. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*” Jesus is that one who created all things (including each one of us) and who sustains them (it is Jesus who is the source of life). Yet, this same Jesus took to himself a true human nature to save us from our sins (darkness) and to grant us eternal life by believing in his name. He not only demands our trust (faith), he is worthy of it.