

1

THE WORD MADE FLESH

Let's begin our study of the Gospel of John with what is called the Prologue, one of the loftiest and most inspiring passages in the New Testament. It lays out the major premise of the Gospel, so it's a good way to start our exploration.

In spite of its weight and importance, the Prologue is actually quite short, consisting of just the first eighteen verses of John. However, because of their weight and importance, we could easily write an entire book just on these verses.

Most scholars believe that portions of these first eighteen verses were an early Christian hymn influenced by Greek and Jewish philosophical ideas. John incorporated the hymn, reworking it a bit, because it captured profound ideas about who Jesus is and the meaning of his life.

Before delving into the meat of this section, I want to point out what you no doubt have already noticed, that the Gospel begins

with these three words: “In the beginning.” You’ll recall that another book of the Bible starts with these same words. Genesis 1:1 starts, “In the beginning. . . .” John’s use of these words is no accident. He is pointing back to the creation story. For now, I merely want you to notice the reference, and I’ll say more about it at various points throughout the book.

The premise of the entire Gospel, so beautifully introduced in the Prologue, is that Jesus embodies God’s Word. The Greek term used by John for Word is *Logos*. It is the root of our words *logic* and *logical* and is seen as the suffix of words such as *biology*, *psychology*, and *zoology*. It can simply mean “word,” but in the Greek world it often meant much more. It conveyed knowledge, wisdom, reason, and revelation. The Stoics, a group of philosophers in the third century B.C., spoke of *Logos* as the mind and purpose of God that permeated all of creation. In the first verse of John’s Gospel, he speaks of a Word that was in the beginning. This was the mind and heart of God. The Word was “with God” and “was God.” John goes on to say: “Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being” (John 1:3a).

Remember that in Genesis, God *spoke* and creation happened: “God said, ‘Let there be light!’ And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was” (Genesis 1:3-4a). In God’s speech—the Word—were the heart, character, will, and creative mind of God. It was the logic that created the cosmos. I think of the physicists and cosmologists who speak of the universe in terms of principles and mathematical equations or the biologists who unravel human DNA. John affirms that it was God’s logic, God’s Word, that set the universe in motion.

It was by this logic that we “live, move, and exist” (Acts 17:28). The Word is God’s heart, God’s reasoning, God’s mind, God’s purposes, God’s character, God’s creative power, and God’s desire to reveal himself to us.

Up to this point in the Prologue, no first-century philosopher or theologian would object to what John has said. Jews and Greeks would agree that the universe is logical and that its logic is the mind of God. God is logical. Further, God desires to speak to us. The premise of the Bible is that the God who created the universe wants to be known by human beings. Again, few in the first century would have debated this lofty and powerful statement.

But then we come to verse 14, where John makes this outlandish claim: “The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” In other words, as John begins his Gospel on the life of Jesus, he is telling us that God’s heart, mind, reason, logic, will, and desire to reveal himself to the human race have been wrapped in human flesh and have come to us as a person, Jesus Christ! The very mind that ordered and brought forth creation took on flesh and “spoke” to humanity in Jesus Christ.

John ends the Prologue by restating his outlandish claim in different words: “No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made God known” (1:18). We speak of this idea of the Word becoming flesh as the Incarnation. The Latin word *Incarno* means “to enflesh.”

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John does not tell us how this happened, how Jesus embodied God’s word. In fact, the church would spend the next three hundred years working out how to express Jesus’ simultaneous divinity and humanity, and the nature of the Trinity. John, however, is not concerned with those complexities. He is concerned that you and

I know that Jesus embodies the Word of God. The Word of God comes to us most completely, most clearly, and most compellingly, not in a book, but in a person. Thus, everything John will say about Jesus points to who God is and what God is like. When we pray to God, we picture Jesus Christ. We come to know who God is by looking at Jesus. We abide in God by abiding in Jesus. The invisible God is made visible in Jesus Christ.

For many generations before Jesus was born, people believed in God. Prophets and lawgivers and preachers tried to describe God based upon their experiences of God and their own logic. But then in Jesus, God stepped into our world. His birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection answered the questions “Who is God?” and “What does God expect of us?”

This earthshaking idea, expressed so beautifully and uniquely in John, is why Jesus is so central to our faith as Christians.

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. (John 1:3b-5)

Permeating John's Gospel are two ideas: light and life. Light is a metaphor for several things and is always understood over and against darkness. Sometimes darkness is synonymous with spiritual blindness or a failure to understand what it means to be human. Sometimes darkness refers to evil.

Jesus came to dispel the darkness. He came to be the light for us. At our Christmas Eve services at Church of the Resurrection, we turn off all the lights and stand in the darkness. Babies cry and people cough and little children squirm, and it's uncomfortable for

a while. In the darkness we talk about the darkness we experience at times in our lives. Then we bring in one candle from the back of the room. This candle represents Jesus. We read the Prologue of John and remember that Jesus came to bring light to our darkness. He dispels the darkness. You're likely familiar with the service: each person has a candle, and we pass the candlelight throughout the room, saying to one another, "The light of Christ." Soon the entire room is filled with light. John would be pleased, for it captures a premise of his Gospel: Christ came to push back the darkness in our world and in our lives.

We can't appreciate the light until we recognize the darkness. We see darkness in the news when we read about another act of violence in a school, a movie theater, a community square. We see it in the natural disasters that leave communities in chaos. We see it in the terrorist attacks and the heinous crimes committed against humanity, sometimes in the name of God. For some, the darkness comes when our spouse leaves or we lose our job or we receive a frightening diagnosis. And, of course, all of us walk through the valley of darkness when someone we love dies. These are all expressions of the darkness into which Jesus offers light, comfort, healing, and hope.

In John, darkness is a metaphor not only for evil, despair, and hopelessness, but for losing our way. Those who walk in darkness are lost and blinded by sin. Jesus is the light that can guide us, helping us see the way by the things he taught and by what he showed us in the example of his life. He showed us forgiveness and love and grace. He showed us compassion and kindness and mercy. He not only removes our sin, he shines a light on the path we're to take. Jesus embodies the words of the psalmist: "Your word is a lamp before my feet and a light for my journey" (Psalm 119:105).

I'm reminded of times when I've taken cave tours, and I was so grateful for the guides who held flashlights and helped us navigate through the darkness. We are followers of Jesus as he illuminates

the way we're meant to follow. You know the way: loving God and neighbor, forgiving others, loving enemies, speaking truth, showing compassion.

In his Prologue, John reminds us that human beings at times love the darkness rather than light. But he also makes clear that the darkness could not overcome Christ's light. When we walk in the light of Christ, when we listen to, hear, and accept God's Word, we have life.

Jesus came to be the light for us so that we, as his followers, might in turn be light for others. As those who have the light of Christ and walk in the light of Christ, our task is to dispel the darkness—to bear the light of Christ and embody his light.

IN HIM WAS LIFE

In John's Prologue, notice what the light leads to: life. Jesus, the Word made flesh, offers life. This is a hugely important idea in John, who tells us that he wrote his Gospel "so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name" (John 20:31).

John uses the word *life* forty-seven times in his Gospel. Most of the time it is Jesus who speaks of the life he offers, and usually he describes it as "eternal life." The most famous of John's statements about life is what Martin Luther called the "gospel in miniature," John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."

For John, eternal life is not just what happens after we die, though it certainly includes life after death. For John, eternal life begins *now*. It is a state in which we are not afraid of death, in which we experience a new life in Christ. Jesus himself puts it this way: "I assure you that whoever hears my word and believes in the one who

sent me has eternal life and won't come under judgment but has passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

Jesus dramatically illustrates the promise of eternal life by raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11. He demonstrates it most powerfully in his own resurrection. But he also teaches us about living in God's kingdom here and now. As we know Jesus, trust him, abide in him, listen to his voice, and follow him, we experience forgiveness, hope, love, and a purpose-filled existence. We become a part of a community, a family, where we find love. We walk in his light and carry his presence to sustain us and keep us.

We are awakened from spiritual blindness and death as we trust in Jesus—in his words, his life, his death, and resurrection. We live differently because we know that death is not the end. Death is just a period at the end of a sentence before a new sentence begins. It's just the end of one chapter—we might even say the prologue—and the beginning of the great adventure God has in store for us.

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How do we achieve that life? In John, the primary way is by believing in Christ and learning to trust in him. We trust that he speaks the words of life. We trust that he is the way, the truth, and the life. And in trusting him, we begin to walk with him.

Russell D. Moore expressed it well in an article he wrote for *Christianity Today*:

JOHN: THE GOSPEL OF LIGHT AND LIFE

For too long, we've called unbelievers to 'invite Jesus into your life.' Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life's a wreck. Jesus calls you into his life. And his life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable.¹

That's what is meant when we talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is trusting in him, walking with him, talking with him, listening for him, believing him, following him, knowing him. In Jesus we find life, "and the life was the light for all people" (John 1:4).

IN JESUS' ARMS

When our children were small we would tuck them into bed at night, tell them a story, remind them of God's love, and then pray with them before they went to sleep. To this day I kneel before bed and entrust to God's care my now-grown children and my granddaughter, imagining Jesus holding them in his arms.

Several years ago Dick Bandy, the father of my wife, LaVon, passed away. He lived a great life and was a very special person in our lives. He lived outside Decatur, Illinois, but came to Kansas City often. The last time was just a few weeks before he died. At bedtime each night, LaVon walked him to his room. She tucked her father into bed and told him that she loved him, then we would kneel at his bedside and entrust his life, and our lives, to God. These were beautiful and tender moments, and ones in which we drew strength from our trust in the Good Shepherd, Jesus, whom Dick had sought to follow much of his life.

Dick returned home, and as he faced his final hours we prayed with him one last time by phone, then drove all night to be with him at the hospital. He died just minutes before we arrived. In that

moment of darkness he walked toward the light of Christ and trusted in that light.

I anointed his head with oil in the hospital room shortly after he died. Then we gathered around and prayed. Tears flowed as we said good-bye. But we knew this: Dick belonged to Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who came to reveal God to us, the same Jesus who shines light on our moments of darkness, the same Jesus who offers us life and who said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11:25). Dick belonged to Jesus, and we placed him in Jesus’ arms. And now we find strength to live with hope, because we know that our lives, too, belong to Christ, and someday we will see Dick once more.

John writes that we might have life in Christ’s name. I’d like to invite you to trust in Christ—to decide that you not only will follow him in the way that Matthew, Mark, and Luke followed, but that you will trust in him who offers light and life to all who believe.

Jesus, I trust in you, that you are God’s Word in the flesh. I trust that you are the light of the world. Illuminate my darkness. Help me to walk in your light and to love and follow you all of my days. In your holy name. Amen.