



## Preface

John's Gospel is the mature reflections of the last living apostle. John the apostle wrote this book approximately fifty-five years after the resurrection of Jesus. During those years he had reflected on the words and deeds of Jesus and the result is that the pages of the Gospel contain the seasoned thinking of one of Jesus' closest friends. When John wrote, not only did he think about what Jesus said and did, but he considered what it meant for his audience. The Fourth Gospel is not a distillation of abstract theological ideas, but a powerful presentation of the most magnificent life ever lived. It is also more than the recounting of historical events. John chose each scene with the utmost care and thought and presented it in a way that accomplished his overall purpose in writing (20:30-31).

I have written this commentary for the non-specialist, including those who are only beginning their study of the Fourth Gospel. I have sought to make my exposition straightforward and unencumbered by technical issues that can bog down one's initial study of the Gospel. As I wrote I kept in mind the layperson, the ministerial student, or even a pastor that wants a clear explanation of the biblical text. Furthermore, I have sought to make comments of relevant application to help the reader feel something of the Gospel's spiritual impact. Advanced students of the Gospel will be familiar with much of this material and will find that more technical commentaries delve more deeply into disputed matters. The footnotes indicate those who have had an impact on my understanding of the Gospel.

I am very grateful for the assistance Grayson Engleman provided by reading the manuscript and offering many



recommendations that greatly improved the reading of it. In addition, I am thankful for the work of my former doctoral student, Dr Jason Mackey, who tracked down numerous references for me. I have had the privilege of teaching for these past fifteen years at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and am indebted to Dr Al Mohler and the Trustees for the sabbatical time to work on John's Gospel. Furthermore, I express heartfelt gratitude to The Ninth and O Baptist Church for the privilege of serving as their Lead Pastor and giving me the privilege of preaching through John's Gospel.

I would be amiss, however, not to dedicate this work to my wife, Jaylynn. She has been a constant source of love and encouragement to me for the past thirty-three years and especially in the completion of this commentary. She continues to be the godliest person I have ever known and the love of my life.

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## A Brief Introduction to John's Gospel

### Who was John the apostle?

John was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. His name means 'Yahweh is salvation'. He was a son of Zebedee and a brother of the apostle James. Some have speculated that their mother was Salome. This connection comes by comparing Mark 15:40; 16:1 and Matthew 27:56. If she were the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother (John 19:25), then John and James would have been Jesus' maternal first cousins; however, this is far from certain. Traditionally five books of the New Testament are attributed to John: the Fourth Gospel, three Johannine epistles and the book of Revelation.

John is not referred to often in the New Testament, but it must be remembered that we do not know very much about the exploits of any of the apostles apart from Peter and Paul. When John does appear in the biblical witness he is usually in the company of others. It is learned in the Synoptic Gospels that John and James, along with Peter and Andrew, were four of the first disciples Jesus called to follow Him (Mark 1:19-20; Matt. 4:21-22; Luke 5:1-11). John and James had worked with their father in a successful fishing business, for they had 'hired servants' to help them (Mark 1:20).

John, along with James and Peter, were Jesus' 'inner circle'. They are found with Jesus on several significant occasions: at the resuscitation of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37); on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1); and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Unfortunately in the Garden they were overwhelmed with sorrow and fell asleep. What is significant, however, is that these were the men that Jesus wanted with Him at that moment of crisis. Furthermore,

during the final week of Jesus' life, John is mentioned along with Peter, James and Andrew as asking Jesus about the time of the destruction of the temple and the end of the age (Mark 13:3-4). Jesus also entrusted to John and Peter the preparations for His final meal in the upper room (Luke 22:8).

The Synoptic Gospels provide additional insight into John's personality. His only recorded words in the Synoptic Gospels reveal something of an exclusive outlook: 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us' (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49). Jesus rebuked him for his elitist attitude. On another occasion John and James wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village that refused to show hospitality to Jesus (Luke 9:54). While their faith in God's power is commendable, their aggressive dispositions revealed their continued need to develop more of Jesus' character. It is not surprising that Jesus called James and John the 'Sons of Thunder' (*Boanerges*, Mark 3:17).

A similar incident occurred when John and James approached Jesus about sitting on His right and left in the kingdom (Mark 10:37). Jesus responded by telling them that these privileged positions were not His to give; however, Jesus predicted that they would drink the cup (of suffering) He would drink and be baptized with the baptism (of suffering) He would experience (Mark 10:35-40; Matt. 20:20-28). Jesus' words to them came to pass as James was the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2) and the early chapters of Acts describe Peter and John being arrested. Toward the end of his life John would be exiled on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

In the book of Acts, John is listed among the twelve (Acts 1:13) and when James is executed the author notes that he was John's brother (Acts 12:2). Every other reference to John in Acts finds him in the company of Peter. John and Peter are described as healing a lame man on their way to the temple to pray (Acts 3:1ff). The religious leaders arrest them for preaching about the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4:1ff). These leaders saw them as 'uneducated and untrained men', but by this they meant they lacked formal rabbinic training; however, they did recognize them as 'having been with Jesus' (Acts 4:13). Although commanded not to preach in the name

of Jesus anymore, they demonstrated bravery by refusing to be silent. The last explicit reference to John in the book of Acts was when he and Peter were sent by the Jerusalem leadership to investigate the revival in Samaria under the ministry of Philip. When Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritans they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14). The only specific reference to John in the Pauline epistles is Galatians 2:9; when Paul described John, along with Peter and James (Jesus' half-brother), as a pillar of the Jerusalem church.

The apostle John is not mentioned by name in the Fourth Gospel; however, the 'sons of Zebedee' are referred to in John 21:2. Many evangelical scholars understand the individual referred to as the 'beloved disciple' in the book to be the apostle John (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24). The only person called 'John' in the Gospel is John the Baptist; however, his title ('the Baptist') is never used. This omission is highly unusual. However, since John the apostle is never mentioned by name there is no need to include 'the Baptist' to differentiate him from the apostle. Furthermore, Peter is associated with the beloved disciple in three instances (13:23-24; 20:2-9; 21:20-24) and a close connection between these two has been established in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. Therefore, while the evidence is not beyond dispute it seems reasonable to assume that the 'beloved disciple' and the apostle John should be understood as the same person.

The 'beloved disciple' is first mentioned in the Gospel as leaning back on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper and asking Jesus to identify His betrayer (13:23). The Gospel of Mark (14:17) makes clear that this meal was reserved for the twelve. The beloved disciple's nearness to Jesus at the meal and the fact he could make inquiries for the other disciples indicates his relationship with Jesus was very close. As Jesus hung on the cross the beloved disciple along with Jesus' mother stood nearby (19:25-27). Jesus entrusted His mother into this disciple's care. Presumably this was because Jesus' brothers did not yet believe in Him. This makes even more sense if perhaps John and Jesus were cousins. On the resurrection morning the beloved disciple and Peter ran to see the empty tomb (20:3-10). After examining the empty tomb John left

believing that Jesus was alive, but he did not understand at that time the resurrection from the Scriptures (20:9).

The beloved disciple was present when Jesus appeared to a group of disciples at the Sea of Galilee after His resurrection. After an unsuccessful night of fishing, Jesus asked them if they had caught anything. The beloved disciple recognized that it was Jesus standing on the shore speaking to them (21:7). Later, following a discussion between Jesus and Peter about the latter's death, Peter asked Jesus about the beloved disciple's future (21:22). Apparently some misinterpreted Jesus' response ('if I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?') to mean that the beloved disciple would not die before Jesus' second coming (21:23). When these words were written the beloved disciple in all probability was near death.

### **A few matters of introduction to the Gospel**

Strictly speaking the book is anonymous. Scholars believe the superscription ('According to John') was added about A.D. 125 to distinguish it from the other Gospels. The traditional understanding is that the Gospel was written by the apostle John in his old age. This view goes back to Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in the late second century. Irenaeus claimed to have a link to the apostle John through Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna martyred in 156 at the age of eighty-six. In a letter preserved by the early church historian Eusebius, Irenaeus tells a friend how, as a young man, he sat at Polycarp's feet and heard him recount conversations with the apostle John and the instruction he received from the apostle.<sup>1</sup> We can imagine Polycarp as a young man listening intently and soaking in the teaching of the aged apostle.<sup>2</sup> While certainty is not a possibility, there is a consensus among evangelical scholarship that John wrote his Gospel in the mid-80s of the first century. There is also a consensus that he wrote his Gospel in Asia Minor, likely in or near Ephesus.

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1. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23.

2. Johannine authorship will be accepted for the Fourth Gospel in this commentary. Admittedly, Johannine authorship is a debated subject in biblical scholarship. For a full discussion of the topic, consult any good New Testament Introduction or any technical commentary.

John's purpose is stated plainly in 20:30-31: 'Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.' The manuscripts of the Greek text of the Gospel vary slightly here, in a way that allows some scholars to hold to an evangelistic purpose for the writing of the book and others to hold to a discipleship purpose. The variation affects the tense of the verb translated as 'may believe'. Some manuscripts have the Greek aorist subjunctive, which would allow for the paraphrase, 'may come to believe.' Other manuscripts have the present subjunctive, which would allow for the paraphrase, 'may keep on believing.' The latter suggests that John's primary audience is believers; while the former suggests a focus on converting unbelievers. One wonders if this may be putting too much weight on the significance of a verb tense. It may be better to allow for the overall narrative of the Gospel to be the main factor in determining if the purpose is evangelistic or discipleship. Carson makes a strong case for an evangelistic purpose for the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> I think, however, it is possible that John wrote with both thoughts in mind.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Gospel likely would have been read in Christian house churches in Asia Minor. As the text was read, believers' faith in Christ would be greatly strengthened and their love for Him would grow deeper. They would also be better equipped to share their faith using the stories of Jesus they heard read from the Gospel. They would have learned how Jesus dealt with different kinds of people, and this would have helped them as they evangelized family and friends. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that there would have been seekers that would gather with family and friends to learn more about Jesus. As the Gospel was read and taught undoubtedly many would come to saving faith. Today many evangelistic Bible studies begin with the Gospel

3. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction To The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 168-72.

4. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 196.



of John and many current seekers begin their search for Jesus there as well.

As one reads the Gospel one should continually return to John's purpose statement and ask, 'How does this scene fulfill John's intention?' John accomplishes his purpose in the stories he tells, in the statements of Jesus he records (for example, the 'I am' sayings), his presentation of Jesus' signs, and the recounting of Jesus' sermons. With every story, statement, sign, and sermon John wants his readers to know that 'Jesus is the Christ'.







## Jesus Christ is God!

*(John 1:1-18)*

You can say almost anything you want about Jesus today, except that He is God. Most contemporary people, like most people in Jesus' day, find that thought offensive. If one believes that Jesus is God then they must believe what He says is true. To acknowledge that Jesus is God is to affirm that all other religions are false and that Christianity alone is true. This is exactly what John teaches in his prologue. John's prologue may be the most magnificent and beautiful passage in the Bible. There is no passage of comparable length that sets forth in grander fashion the deity and majesty of Jesus Christ.

The passage begins with a stirring announcement of Jesus' deity ('and the Word was God') and concludes in like fashion ('the only begotten God'). In between these two dramatic affirmations is a stunning declaration that the eternal Word became 'flesh and dwelt among us'. It is as if the aged apostle did not think that his readers could properly comprehend his story unless they understood from the very beginning that the central figure, Jesus Christ, is God. One cannot help but stand (or fall!) in speechless wonder before the Word made flesh. Scholarly discussion on the background and structure of the passage, although important, should not distract the reader from this spectacular presentation of our glorious Savior.

There are several questions that must be answered as the passage is examined: What is the structure of the passage?



What is the cultural and philosophical background to John's use of the term 'Word' (*logos*)? What is the main point John wants to communicate to his readers? As to the structure of the passage, some scholars have suggested that the prologue is an early Christian hymn the author incorporated into the Gospel. This is possible, but in its present form the prologue is a fitting introduction to many of the Gospel's principal themes. Others understand the prologue to be in the form of a chiasm (inverted parallelism).<sup>1</sup> Again, while this is certainly possible, the chiasmic arrangement puts the emphasis of the passage in the wrong place – on mankind's response to the Word (1:12-13). The main thought of the passage is found in the affirmation of Jesus' deity. Therefore we should understand the structure to unfold along the lines of heightened prose.<sup>2</sup>

John identifies Jesus as 'the Word' (*logos*). The term *logos* had a conceptual background both in Greek philosophy and Judaism.<sup>3</sup> In Greek philosophy, the *logos* referred not only to the spoken word, but also to the unspoken word still in the mind – reason. When applied to the universe, it referred to the rational principle that brought order and unity to the cosmos. Others point to the similarities between John's *logos* and the personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs and later Jewish wisdom literature (Prov. 8:22-31; Wisdom of Solomon). It is more probable that John's primary conceptual background is the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God's word is the dynamic force of His will. God created the heaven and earth by His spoken word (Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6). God speaks, and His will is accomplished (Isa. 55:11). John was fully aware that the term would resonate with both his Jewish and Gentile readers.

As I have already suggested, I believe the main point of the passage is to declare the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God, the

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 247.

2. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 113.

3. See Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, vol. 89 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) and Carson, *John*, 114-16.

preexistent creator who took on human flesh in order to make the unseen God visible and to provide a way of salvation for those who would believe in Him. One final thought: this passage should not be seen as disconnected from the rest of the chapter. In the prologue we hear John the apostle's witness to Jesus. In 1:19-34 we will hear the testimony of John the Baptist and in 1:35-51 the testimony of some of Jesus' earliest followers.

### Jesus the Word and God (1:1-5)

John makes four dramatic points concerning the Word in these opening verses. First, he affirms twice the Word's preexistence with God (1:1a, 2). John's opening comments direct his readers back to the opening lines of the Bible in Genesis ('In the beginning...'). His point is that there has never been a moment in time or in eternity past when the Word did not exist.

Second, the thought that the 'Word was with God' suggests that the Word exists in the closest possible relationship to God, but at the same time is distinct from God (1:1b-2a).<sup>4</sup>

Third, John confesses that the Word 'is God'. In verse 2, John repeats the thought of the Word's eternity. His assertions are remarkable. Our familiarity with this passage has dulled its impact upon us. Jesus' deity is a battleground in our pluralistic age. You can say almost anything except that 'Jesus Christ is God'. Yet, this is the very thing John declares here.

Fourth, John continues by explaining that God created all things through the agency of the Word (1:3-5). He makes his point both positively (1:3a) and negatively (1:3b). This repetition of a thought is characteristic of Johannine style. His point is that there was nothing created that the Word did not create. John next introduces two of his major themes,

4. Cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses assert that 1:1c should be translated, 'and the Word was a god.' Sentences, however, of this form in the Greek (two nouns joined by a form of the verb 'to be') normally placed the article before the subject of the sentence, regardless of the word order. So the translation, 'the Word was God,' is the correct translation. This rule is often called Colwell's rule after the thorough examination by the Greek grammarian E. C. Colwell in 'A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 (1933): 12-21. For a contemporary discussion, see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 266-69.

'life' and 'light'<sup>5</sup> (1:4). These concepts tie back to the creation account in Genesis as well. All life and light, both physical and spiritual, come from the Word.

The first hint of the incarnation is described as 'a light shining in the darkness' (1:5). The evangelist alludes to trouble on the horizon. There is debate as to whether the darkness could not 'understand' (NIV, NASB) or 'overcome' (ESV, NLT, RSV) the light. Both thoughts can be argued from the content of the Gospel. It seems slightly more probable that John intends the idea of 'to overcome'.<sup>6</sup> The battle between darkness and light will be a major theme in the book. Light is closely associated with Jesus throughout the Gospel (3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). John's use of the present tense of the verb 'shining' may be his way of saying that even after fifty years the light of the Word still illuminates the darkness.

### Jesus the Word and John the Baptist (1:6-8)

The second movement of the prologue is a contrast between John the Baptist and the Word. In this Gospel, the Baptist is referred to merely as John. In contrast, the Synoptic Gospels refer to him as John the Baptist. The difference likely has to do with the fact that in the Fourth Gospel John the apostle is never mentioned by name, and therefore there is no need to distinguish him from John the Baptist. The contrast between John the Baptist and the Word could not be stated any more plainly: 'There came a man sent from God' (1:6a). The Word has been described in terms of deity, while John is called 'a man'. But John is not any man – he is a man sent on a mission from God (1:6b).

The purpose of John's mission is 'to testify to' or 'to bear witness to the light'.<sup>7</sup> The thought of John as a witness is the

5. 'Life' is a key theme in John. He uses the term thirty-six times in the Gospel; no other New Testament book has it more than seventeen times.

6. See Carson, *John*, 138; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 76.

7. 'Witness' is another key word introduced in the prologue. The noun ('witness' or 'testimony') is used fourteen times in the Gospel. By comparison, Matthew does not use it, Mark uses it three times, and Luke uses it once. John uses the verb ('to testify' or 'to bear witness') in the Gospel thirty-three times; in contrast, Matthew and Luke use it once and Mark does not use it.

most common characteristic of him in the Fourth Gospel. He is the first in a long line of witnesses to Jesus in this Gospel (cf. 5:31ff). The goal of the Baptist's testimony was that mankind might come to believe in the Word.<sup>8</sup> The apostle John makes an unusual comment when he notes that John the Baptist was not the light. This has led some to think that the Gospel was written in part against a John the Baptist cult (cf. Acts 19:1-10). However, the evidence for this is slight. It is reasonable, however, to assume that man's natural inclination to lift up powerful personalities to a dangerously high level may in part be the reason for the apostle's comment. Great men of God, like John the Baptist, are never comfortable with the spotlight on them but instead desire to direct people's attention to Jesus (cf. 1:29-35).

### Jesus the Word Rejected and Accepted (1:9-13)

Scholars debate whether verse 9 belongs with verses 6-8 or with verses 10-13. I understand it to relate to the latter (NASB, ESV, NIV; contra NLT). Verses 9-13 introduce the thought of the incarnation ('coming into the world') and mankind's rejection and acceptance of the light (1:10-13). John the Baptist's witness was not to an abstraction, but to a person. The reference to Jesus as 'the true light' affirms Him as the authentic light over and against every false light.

The term 'world' (*kosmos*) is used three times in verses 9 and 10 and is especially important in John's Gospel.<sup>9</sup> *Kosmos* is used in several different ways in the Johannine literature: the material universe as the object of creation (John 1:10); Satan's system of priorities and thought focused upon the temporal (1 John 2:15-16); humankind (and the earth) as the object of God's love and redemptive plan (John 3:16); and the mass of unbelievers who are hostile to God's plan as a result of succumbing to Satan's system of priorities and thought (John 15:18). This is all the more astonishing when we consider that the 'world' in its rebellion is the object of

8. John uses the verb 'to believe' ninety-eight times in the Gospel, but he never uses the noun (faith).

9. The term 'world' is used seventy-eight times in the Gospel and another twenty-three times in 1 John; by contrast, the next largest occurrence is twenty-one times in 1 Corinthians and only forty-seven times in all of Paul's writings.

God's love (3:16), and the Father sent Jesus to give His life for the world (6:51) so that He may save it (3:17; 12:47). The phrase, 'the light enlightens every man,' is likely a reference to the general revelation through nature that exists as a result of the creative work of the Word (cf. 1:1-5; Rom. 1:19-20; Acts 17:27-31).

There are two main thoughts in verses 10-13. First, the stunning assertion of the world's rejection of the Word (1:10-11); and second, that those who believe in Him experience a new birth (1:12-13). The Word came into the world that He created, and mankind failed to recognize Him (1:10). Even worse, He came to His own people (Israel) and they did not receive Him (1:11). This is startling! The world the Word created did not recognize Him, and the people that waited for Him rejected Him. As the Jewish messiah He was not what they expected, or even what they wanted. They longed for a military leader and not a dying Savior.

However, all was not lost, for those who 'received him', that is 'believed in his name', 'he gave the right to become children of God' (1:12). John makes it clear that the work of being accepted into God's family is not the result of human decision (although there is a human element involved in 'believing' and 'receiving'), but it is the result of being 'born of God' (1:13a). John will elaborate on this supernatural birth in Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. For now this acceptance should not be understood to be the result of family relationships or human initiative, but a divine work wrought by God in a person's heart (1:13b). John makes it clear at the very beginning of the Gospel that membership in God's family is by grace alone ('he gave the right').

### **The incarnation of Jesus the Word (1:14-18)**

The final section of the prologue sets forth the incarnation of the Word as God's climatic revelation to mankind (cf. Heb. 1:1-4). Jesus is identified specifically with the Word for the first time in 1:17; however, John's audience would have known this from the opening lines. This theologically rich passage deserves considerable reflection. However, as theologically rich as it is, the primary message is straightforward. These verses, and indeed the entire

prologue, are moving toward the definitive assertion that Jesus, the Word, is God come in human flesh.

Each phrase in this paragraph is the distillation of John's fifty years of theological reflection on the incarnation. His assertion that the Word 'became flesh' suggests that the Word existed before the incarnation, a thought John had established earlier. John chose to use the term 'flesh' rather than the more natural term 'body'. The term 'flesh' does not carry for John the same theological meaning found in Paul's writings. Rather, John is making a powerful comment concerning the incarnation, that the Word became flesh with all the frailty associated with being a human being (1:14a).

The fact that the Word 'dwelt among us' means that He did not remain aloof or separate from those He created, but instead He lived among them (1:14b). Even more importantly, the word translated 'dwelt' is used in the LXX in relationship to the tabernacle, and literally can mean 'to pitch the tent'. The tabernacle was the place where God manifested His glory to His people in the days before the building of the temple (Exod. 25:8-9; 33:7ff.). John is stating that God's glory is now manifested in the person of the Word. He writes that because the Word dwelt among them they were able to see God's glory (1:14b).

John continues by confessing that the Word is 'the one and only Son' (NIV) of the Father, 'full of grace and truth' (1:14c). The word often translated 'begotten' (KJV) does not mean that the Word did not exist before He was born.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the idea here is that Jesus the Word is the Father's Son in a way that no one else could ever be. The phrase 'from the Father' suggests that God sent Jesus into the world.

John declares that the Word is 'full of grace and truth'. Truth is an idea that John makes much of; however, grace is used by him only in the prologue.<sup>11</sup> The Word is presented as the perfect balance of grace and truth; in fact, He is filled with both. The imagery harkens back to God's covenant faithfulness

10. The Greek word *monogenes* is best understood along the lines of being unique ('one and only'). It is used in this way in the LXX to describe Isaac over against Ishmael as sons of Abraham (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16).

11. John uses 'truth' twenty-five times and relates it closely with Jesus, who is 'the truth' (14:6).

to Israel (Exod. 34:6). The ultimate manifestation of God's covenant faithfulness is seen in the sending of His Son.

It seems odd for the evangelist to bring the Baptist back into the discussion at this point (1:15). I think that he does so for two reasons. First, what he has just said about the Word is almost too marvelous to believe, and the Baptist becomes a second witness to the apostle's comments. Second, he is preparing to openly identify the Word with Jesus, and John the Baptist was the one who came to testify concerning Him. John the Baptist's statement is another affirmation of the Word's preexistence (1:15b). John the Baptist was about six months older than Jesus, but the Word existed before the Baptist was born.

We should understand 1:16-17 to be the words of the apostle rather than the Baptist. The apostle now turns to the abundant blessings that Jesus bestows on His people. He focuses on the thought of grace ('grace upon grace'). This phrase has been understood in two primary ways. A number of evangelical scholars understand it in the sense of accumulation ('grace upon grace').<sup>12</sup> The thought is that of one wave of grace after another; the grace of God through Christ is inexhaustible. The phrase can also be translated as 'grace instead of grace', suggesting the thought of replacement.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation is that the grace of Christ replaces the grace of the law. The latter interpretation is to be favored in light of 1:17 and the thought of replacement that occurs in John 2-4. This interpretation in no way diminishes God's grace exhibited through the law, but emphasizes the greater blessings of the new covenant over the old covenant. The superiority of this gift is seen in the fact that 'the Law was given through Moses' (1:17a), but 'grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ' (1:17b). For the first time in the prologue Jesus is mentioned specifically by name.

John began the prologue by stating plainly the deity of the Word and he closes the prologue in the same manner (1:18).

12. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 1:43; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2003), 1:421.

13. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 1:15-16; Carson, *John*, 132.



He states that 'no one has seen God at any time', that is, in His totality or essence. God revealed Himself to His people in various ways as depicted in the Old Testament, but never in His fullness. Moses saw the back side of God's glory, but no one could look on God and live. Isaiah saw the train of His robe filling the temple. Now with the incarnation of Jesus, the invisible and glorious God has revealed Himself to mankind.

John highlights again the close relationship between Jesus and the Father ('in the bosom of the Father'). This picks up the thought in verses 1-2, that the Word was 'with God'. The intimacy of this relationship will be explained further as the Gospel unfolds in terms of the Father-Son relationship.<sup>14</sup> For now John is content to say that Jesus has made the invisible God visible.

### Reflections

There are three thoughts that I want to consider as we conclude this marvelous passage. First, we must recognize the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ. The twenty-first century evangelical church needs to recapture the glory and greatness of Jesus. The contemporary church has a vision of Jesus that is far too small, and it is evident in our lack of passion in worship and our hesitancy to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. When a church catches a glimpse of Jesus' greatness, her worship intensifies and her members willingly sacrifice time, money, and life to take the gospel to the nations. This is what motivated the early Christians to lay down their lives willingly in world evangelization.

Second, the prologue hints of the battle that lay ahead for Jesus (and the church!). Man is shrouded in moral and spiritual darkness and in desperate need of the light. Jesus' ministry will be a spiritual battle. It is the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. It will be a battle between God's truth and the devil's lies. The victory, however, belongs to the light, for the darkness cannot overpower it. The battle Jesus inaugurated with His incarnation is carried on by the church. The church should

14. There is a textual variation that reads, 'the only begotten Son' (KJV), but the better reading is 'the only begotten God' (NASB, NIV).

not expect to make significant advancement into the kingdom of darkness without significant resistance by Satan and his forces. The church must cling tenaciously to God's promise that the darkness will not extinguish the light!

The third point of emphasis is the possibility of transformation. Those who believe in Jesus become children of God. The apostle will illustrate this as the Gospel unfolds. Some will choose to stay in the darkness like Nicodemus (at least for a time) and others will come into the light like the Samaritan woman.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does John's opening line differ from that of the other Gospels?
2. Why do you think John begins his Gospel as he does?
3. What is John's main message in the prologue? Support your thought from the biblical text.
4. What aspect of Christ's person in this passage did you need to be reminded of most?
5. Where do you see this battle between the light and the darkness most clearly in your life?