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Characters Make Stories

John 1:1-18

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¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.") ¹⁶And from his fullness we have all received, grace





upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No-one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

I have had a number of late nights recently. Please don't feel too sorry for me, though, because it is really my fault.

The source of my lack of sleep is not overwork or tending a young baby. Rather it is the addictive draw of trying to keep up with my box set of hit US drama series *24* (series 2) which has kept me up into the small hours of the morning.

Those who are not already hooked on this programme may find the addiction hard to understand. But once you start watching, I would be surprised if you didn't suffer the same sleep deprivation as me!

Much about *24* is very predictable. The world needs saving from evil assassins and terrorists, and one man, Jack Bauer, is the man who spearheads the rescue mission. The drama is played out in 'real time' with each programme covering one hour of the story. Watching it is not relaxing! The adrenalin is pumping as one eagerly anticipates the next twist and turn in the plot line. Indeed, at 10.24 pm *24* time, he is just about to offer his life to save millions of people from a nuclear explosion.

'One man dying to save many' is a popular movie theme at the moment (*Superman*, *Spiderman* and similar). Why is that, I wonder? Maybe it is because we all need heroes? Don't we still have a hope that someone will rescue the world from itself and its own destruction? Yes, it is as Bonnie Tyler once sang:





I need a hero
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night
He's gotta be strong
And he's gotta be fast
And he's gotta be fresh from the fight.

The other thing that is remarkably addictive about 24 is the way in which multiple stories are all going on at the same time. We catch a glimpse of the villain whose every evil twist and turn is examined, making us wonder whether he will succeed. We get to know a bit about the hero, his flaws and strengths. He is regularly knocked back, but will he be knocked out? We meet powerful forces for good and powerful forces for evil. We see the very personal threat that this evil has upon the most powerful man in the world (the US President), and upon Jack Bauer's own family.

What keeps the watcher hooked is that all these stories are going on at the same time. They create suspense and they remain sufficiently unresolved to keep me watching, willing on the next episode and going to bed far too late. I almost found myself hoping that I would go down with a nasty cold that's going around so that I could sit in front of the TV with a Lemsip and get the whole twenty-four hours out of the way in one shot!

This all might reveal rather a lot about me. But, it seems to me that it also reveals quite a lot about why John 1:1-18 is so loved and quite remarkable. It also reveals why these first few paragraphs of John's Gospel are important for our theme, 'Lives Jesus Changed'.

What keeps the TV viewer's interest is that none of the little stories, the snapshots of 24, make sense outside of the big story. The little stories are all about human



conflict, love, suspense, action, frustration, the quest for truth, the goodies and baddies, and so on. But the big story is all about a plot to rescue the world from destruction.

In the opening of John we have a number of little tasters of what his Gospel is about. This is why John 1:1-18 is recognised as ‘the prologue’ to the Gospel. In this section we ‘watch’ cameos and anticipations of the future action that John will develop later in his book. These short cameos, which we will turn to now, should be read in the light of the big story, the one that unites them all together. Here are goodies and baddies, heroes and villains, the stuff of all good stories. But the great thing about this story is that it will come to a climax and a resolution – and it is true!

Cameo One: A man called John (John 1:6-8, 15ff.)

We are told that John was on a mission, sent from God. His particular task is to witness, or to testify, to the light.

We know that John was a fiery preacher who attracted great crowds. In fact, he aroused such great interest among the crowds of people that later in John 1 they ask him: Are you the rescuer King we have been waiting for?

He denies that this is his role. Though great, he is not God. In fact, John is described as the voice crying out. John is the witness, the signpost.

Whenever the camera homes in on John the Baptist we see a man who is fiery, but humble. In John we meet a man who is attracting great crowds but always pointing away from himself towards one whom he considers to be greater than him: one who has surpassed him (v. 15).

- John is the voice – but he is not the Word.
- John is the messenger – but he isn't the message.
- John is the signpost – but he points away from himself towards another.
- John the Baptist baptizes with water – but waits for a man who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Who is the Baptist speaking of and what is he pointing towards? It is not until 1:29f. that John tells us: 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (NIV). But that is days away; for now, the crowd is left asking: 'Why do you say what you say and do what you do? Who are you? Are you the one who will pull off this daring rescue plan?' It is only as the story unfolds that we see the full significance of this scary and humble man.

Cameo Two: A world in darkness (1:5, 9-11)

There is a second theme which weaves its way into the early paragraphs of John's Gospel.

It is quite clear that the main character on stage is God. The world was made by God. God is the author of all that there is. By His word He made the world: 'And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light' (Gen. 1:3).

But the shocking news is that this world has chosen to live without a concern for its Creator. Immediately we begin to see that when John the Gospel writer refers to the 'world' he is not talking about trees, plants, animals, birds, oceans and deserts. The 'world' is the thinking, ideals and systems that human beings hold to.

In other words, the 'world' in John's vocabulary is the people He made, living without any reference to Him.



Human beings were carefully and marvellously made by God, but we now do not know Him. In fact, when our Maker does try to shine into our darkness, we try to snuff the light out (v. 5).

Many contemporary movies take as their theme the cosmic battle that is going on between light and darkness, good and evil. But John's Gospel is quite clear that that struggle is personified. The people whom God made prefer to live without reference to Him. They'd rather not pick up the phone and speak to Him. They won't answer His e-mail. The God who made us is keen to keep in touch with us, but we give him the cold shoulder and ignore Him.

John tells us that the problem in the world is decidedly personal.

Many people think of God as a kind of cosmic traffic warden who walks down a line of cars issuing everyone with a ticket for somehow breaking his commandments. And though we might be tempted to punch the traffic warden on the nose, and certainly won't put him on our Christmas card list, when we get a parking ticket it isn't personal. He's just doing his job and we haven't personally offended the traffic warden.

But John thinks that the darkness's attempt to snuff out the light of God is personally offensive to Him, and inexcusable.

To develop the analogy a little, it isn't that God is like the traffic warden issuing us a ticket. We haven't just offended an anonymous bureaucratic power. Rather we are, as it were, parking on the traffic warden's foot. It is personal.

The light/dark theme is suspenseful. It is the stuff of all good stories and it forces the readers to ask themselves: Will the darkness triumph over light?



John's answer – hinted at here – is that the light of this world is not an impersonal force, but a person. The Bible story doesn't say, 'May the force be with you'. God Himself will come to this earth as a tiny baby, and the other Gospels tell us His name is Immanuel, which means 'God with us'. God will change our world by changing people. And the way He will do this will be by coming down Himself and living among us.

The veteran evangelist Dr Billy Graham tells the story of walking in the woods with his young son. All of a sudden his son stops and cries out in horror. Looking down they notice that he has trodden on an ants' nest and there is carnage everywhere! The sensitive conscience of the young boy muses: I wish that we could do something. If only I could make myself an ant and go down to be among them and tell them I love them. At least they would be able to see what I am like and see the world from my perspective. Well, Billy Graham explains, we cannot do that for ants, but that is just what God did for us.

Hence probably the most famous verse in the whole of the Bible: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16, NIV). He personally goes out of His way to show love even to the very people who have tried to overthrow Him.

Cameo Three: The people God calls His own (1:11-13)

The third little cameo which interweaves the plot line of John's Gospel is the surprising response which the rescuer receives from the very people who need His help. 'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (v. 11, NIV).



It is rather like this imaginary scenario. A highly trained SAS team drops into a dark and distant tropical island inhabited by marauding beasts and wild savages. Their purpose is to rescue a small group of shipwrecked Westerners who have been marooned on the island for many years. Distress signals have been picked up and over the months in which they have been stranded passing ships have occasionally noticed smoke signals and SOS messages.

To their great surprise, the highly trained soldiers find themselves ambushed by the very people they are seeking to save and are nearly overcome. As they regroup and recoup, they discover that natives of this little island have long waited for someone to take them off this dark and scary place and beg the SAS team to rescue them instead. The original rescue mission – intended for their own people – becomes a rescue for all who agree to be taken away by them.

God came to His own people. But they didn't want such a rescuer.

However, says John, to all who received Him – that is, those who believed Him and trusted Him to do the job of rescue – He made citizens of heaven, members of God's own family and recipients of His marvellous and dangerous rescue expedition.

The third little cameo of this story is the unexpected rescue of people who were least deserving of it, but find themselves as the recipients of God's great saving plans.

As John puts it: 'to all who received him ... he gave the right to become children of God...'

Conclusion – the underlying plot that makes sense of all the little stories

We've looked at just three cameo shots in the opening chapter of John:



- A man called John who came to prepare the way.
- A world in darkness seeking to overthrow their Maker.
- The rescue of an unexpected and undeserving people.

All these little episodes – to which the writer John will return and interweave in his whole Gospel account – fit together in a grand overarching story. This is a story about God's great plan to save the world. It is a story about how Jesus came into this world to change lives.

One man will die to save millions. This is the man John calls: 'The Word [who] became flesh' (NIV). He is the most important and central character of the whole of John's little book:

- He made this world (v. 3).
- He is the true light (v. 9).
- He gives life (v. 4).
- He truly tells us what God is like (v. 18).
- He is full of grace and truth (v. 14).

There are two great realities which anchor the Christian perception of what is going on in the world. They are Jesus' first coming and His second coming. They are the bookends to God's big story. John's story began when the Word became flesh, but it will end when Jesus comes back as the judge of the living and the dead.

God's big story forces the hearers to ask: Will I be on the side of darkness or on the side of light? Will I be among those who received Him or among those who failed to recognize and acknowledge Him?

The hope for the world is to be found by looking back to the time when God broke into our world:

- The Creator came to tell His creation that He loves them;
- the true light shone into the world, blazing the truth of God's life and love;
- and the invisible God became visible, showing us what He is truly like.

The very good news is, as John says, that this rescuer is full of grace (forgiveness, kindness and mercy) and truth (speaking with all the authority of God).

The climax of His coming is not His birth as a baby but His execution under Roman law in his mid-thirties. John believes that it was there that Jesus defeated evil. He placated the understandable and just anger of a holy God against wrongdoing, and He offered forgiveness to all who would come to trust and believe in Him. Jack Bauer can't do it, but Jesus Christ can and has!

As far as John is concerned, the reason he has selected these snapshots and snippets which make up his Gospel is really quite simple. They are selected in order that you and I might make sense of God's plans to rescue this world and to put all our little stories into the perspective of God's grand big rescue plan.

John's explanation of how this story will end is summarized in John 20:30-31:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (NIV).

As we look at the characters in John's Gospel who have been changed by their encounter with Jesus

Christ, will you notice with me that John intends us to warm to Jesus? John believes that it is only Jesus Christ who can bring resolution to all the twists and turns of my daily life.

The big storyline is about Him. He is the beginning and the end. His story is the story that makes sense of history – and the plans and purposes for my life.

24 is gripping. But what about this story? Will you allow yourself to be absorbed in this great meta-narrative, this amazing and compelling drama? Will you become addicted to the focus of the plotline of the heroic, rescuing God who against all odds has come into this world to rescue you and me? And who will come back one day to banish darkness and allow the whole world to see that He reigns over all? Will you allow the characters to tell the story about Jesus Christ? This is the story which compels me and shapes my life far more than any TV drama. It is all about lives Jesus continues to change.

Points to ponder

- What is it about good stories that we find so compelling?
- Who do you find yourself siding with in this storyline:
 - ◇ The people of this world?
 - ◇ The ones whom he describes as those who received Him?
- Are you ready for some of the implications of having Jesus change your life?
 - ◇ What might it mean for your priorities and attitudes to how you live life now?