

John 1:1-2

Introduction

The Gospel of John begins with these words:

- John 1:1-2 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This one¹ was in the beginning with God.

In these verses there is on the one hand a complete childlike simplicity of language and expression and on the other hand a depth of meaning that will finally surpass all our comprehension. There's a sense in which we read these words and we feel—like Moses when he was at the burning bush, or like the seraphim standing in the presence of God—that we ought to hide our faces – that we ought to cover our faces rather than peer into mysteries that are too great for us (cf. Exod. 3:1-6; Isa. 6:1-2). It's this attitude that we should have as we nevertheless come to this passage this morning not presumptuously peering into mysteries that are too great for us, and yet not hiding or covering our faces either, but rather gazing in humility and joy at these mysteries that God has made known to us – mysteries not for us to comprehend, but for us to know and believe. We read in verse one:

I. John 1:1a — In the beginning...

We recognize those words, don't we? Genesis one, verse one, "In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth." Those aren't just the first words of the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, this is actually the title of the book of Genesis: *beresit*, "In the Beginning." Or, in the Greek, as John writes here: *en arche*, "In the Beginning."

As the creatures that we are, we all know instinctively that just as we had a beginning, so also all that we see around us, even the whole physical universe had a beginning. The Bible doesn't stop to "prove" to us something that's so self-evident. Neither does the Bible stop to "prove" to us what kind of a beginning this must have been. Instead, the Word of God simply proclaims to us the truth that "In the beginning, *God created* the heavens and the earth." Matter is not eternal. There was a time when the earth, and the trees and plants and animals, and the sky, and the sun, and moon, and stars and planets did not exist – when there was no "matter" at all. And then, "in the beginning, God created..."

Genesis starts with *this* beginning and then moves forward into time and history. Here in the fourth Gospel, John starts with this *same* beginning, but then—astonishingly—he moves backward — not forward into time and history (not yet), but backward, as it were, into eternity "past" (cf. Lenski).

II. John 1:1b — In the beginning *was the Word*...

We could say, "In the beginning, the Word already was." Or even more simply: "In the beginning, the Word *was*." Are you sensing and grasping for yourself the *full* import of this? The

¹ Gr. *houtos*. The masculine demonstrative pronoun matches the gender of *logos* (Word).

meaning of this is not that *before* the physical universe was created, the Word was created or came *into* existence. The meaning of these words is that there never was any time when the Word was not. The meaning of these words is the existence of the Word from all eternity past. So we ought to let the full power and grandeur of these words literally reverberate in our minds and hearts: “*In the beginning WAS the Word.*” I think here of what God said to Moses in Exodus chapter three:

- Exodus 3:14 — “I AM WHO I AM.” And [God] said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

We can think of what Jesus said to the Jews in this very same Gospel:

- John 8:58 — Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, *before* Abraham was, I am.”

The point of this absolute language of existence is a *self*-existence that is by its very nature eternal. So we can never, ever agree with Arius who, in the 3rd or 4th century, said of the Word: “There was once when he was not” (cf. Carson). In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the Word already *was*.

But what—or who—is this Word? Are we allowed to ask this question? In light of the connection with Genesis chapter one, don’t you think it’s only natural to assume that this Word must be in some sense the *Word of God*? Ten times in the creation account we hear this refrain, “And God *said*.” And so we see from the very beginning that the word of God is at least in one major way not like the words that we speak. The Word of God is powerful to irresistibly effect whatever God has purposed. So we read in Genesis chapter one:

- Genesis 1:3 — **And God said**, “Let there be light,” **and there was light.**
- Genesis 1:9 (cf. 1:6-7, 11, 14-15, 24) — **And God said**, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” **And it was so.**
- Genesis 1:20–21 — **And God said**, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” **So God created** the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind.

In this last passage “and God *said*” is the equivalent of “so God *created*.” Are you seeing in this word of God the majesty and absolute sovereignty of God? The Bible emphasizes not just that God created the heavens and the earth, but that God created the heavens and the earth *by His word*.

- Psalm 33:6, 9 — **By the word of the LORD** the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... For **he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.**
- Hebrews 11:3 — By faith we understand that the universe was created **by the word of God**, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.
- 2 Peter 3:5 — The heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water **by the word of God.**

It's in the light of this living, active power of the word of God to create and bring into being and also in light of the power of this word to reveal and make known to us in the creation the God who is invisible (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-20) that it was only natural that this "word" could be personified in the Old Testament. We see the word of God personified as the agent of creation:

- Psalm 147:15-18 — **He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.** He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold? **He sends out his word**, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.

We see the word of God personified as the agent of judgment:

- Isaiah 9:8 (cf. 31:2) — The Lord has **sent a word** against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel...

And we see the word of God personified as the agent of salvation:

- Psalm 107:20 — **He sent out his word** and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.
- Isaiah 55:10-11 (cf. Heb. 4:12-13) — My word... that **goes out** from my mouth... 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.**

There's a prophet in 1 Kings 13 who speaks in a rather unusual way; he says that he was "**commanded... by the word** of the Lord," and then, later: "It was **said** to [him] **by the word** of the Lord" (1 Kings 13:9, 17). We hear some variation of this expression just over 100 times in the Old Testament: "The word of the Lord *came* to me, *saying*..." (cf. Jer. 1:4). One commentator writes of the words that God speaks in Genesis chapter one: "These are not mere sounds that Jehovah [utters] as when a man utters a command, and we hear the sound of his words" (Lenski). What we've seen so far this morning is that the word or the speech of God is, *as it were*, alive with the very life of God (cf. Jer. 23:29). And so it's not only by this living, powerful word that God creates and sustains the world, but also by this living, powerful word that God—who is invisible—reveals *Himself* personally to us. In Genesis one it's the word of God that gives visible form and shape to the previously hidden thoughts and purposes of God in creation. We read in 1 Samuel three:

- 1 Samuel 3:7 — Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

And a little later in the same chapter:

- 1 Samuel 3:21 — The LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

Do you rejoice that God is not silent? Do you rejoice that God is a God who speaks and that He has opened our ears and sovereignly, graciously given us ears to hear His word? It is *by His word*

that God creates and sustains the universe. It is *by His word* that God shows *Himself, personally*, to us. And so the word or the “speech” of God is, *as it were*, alive with the very life of God.

- Hebrews 4:12–13 — The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

None of this is to deny that men heard the word of God as the sound of literal words with their physical ears. None of this is to *equate* all of God’s speech in the Bible with the eternal Word here in John chapter one. We must not *confuse* these things (cf. Ridderbos). And yet in some mysterious and wonderful way, underlying the reality of this living and active speech of God in the Old Testament there was always another even more ultimate and eternal reality: “In the beginning... *was... the Word.*”

III. John 1:1c — In the beginning was the Word, **and the Word was *with* God...**

Do we dare to keep looking on mysteries like these? Do we feel that sense of humility and unworthiness that says we ought to look away? And yet the Spirit of God invites us here to look, and to see, and to understand things that God has made known to us for our salvation – and for our joy in our salvation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God...”

What does this mean—that the Word was *with* God”? First of all, from all eternity, God has never been “alone.” There has never, ever been a time in all eternity past when God was, as it were, “solitary” – living in “isolation.” Nothing could be further from the truth. For all eternity past the *Word was with God.*” Are you already sensing and grasping what this tells us about the Word? Since God is a personal being, therefore, the Word that was “*with*” *Him* must also be a personal and relational being.² But there’s more than this. The point here is not simply that the Word was with God in the same room or in close “proximity,” as it were, but rather that the Word was “with” God in the closest and most intimate relationship possible – an intimacy of relationship, and even of oneness, of a kind that is inconceivable to us. Lenski writes: “The [Word], then, is not an attribute inhering in God, or a power emanating from him, but a person in the presence of God and turned in loving, inseparable communion toward God, and God turned equally toward him.” Can you see, here, the infinite love that must have been displayed to us in the incarnation?

Now let’s just say out loud what should already be clear to all of us: If the Word was “*with*” God, then the Word must be “personally” distinguished and distinguishable *from* God. There is a distinction here—a distinction between the Word and God—that God very specifically, very carefully, reveals to us, and that we must therefore be very careful to *believe*. And yet immediately after saying that the Word was with God, in the very same breath John can also say that the Word *was* God.

² Whenever the Greek *pros* is used with the meaning, “*with* [someone], it is always a person who is *with* that person (never an object or an idea, etc.; cf. Mat. 13:56; Mk. 6:3, 51; 9:19; 14:49; Lk. 9:41; 1 Cor. 2:3; ; 16:6-7; 2 Cor. 5:8; 11:9; Gal. 1:18; 4:18, 20; 1 Thess. 3:4; 2 Thess. 2:5; 3:10; Phm. 13; 2:1; compare John 1:1 with 1 Jn. 1:2).

IV. John 1:1d — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, **and the Word was God.**

If we aren't going to hide our face from mysteries so bright, then surely we ought to bow our knees and worship. And yet there are some who would ask: Is this really a mystery beyond our comprehension or is this actually a contradiction? What does Deuteronomy chapter six say?

- Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (cf. Gal. 3:20) — Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And what does God say in Isaiah 48?

- Isaiah 48:11 — My glory I will not give to another.

If, then, there is only one God—if, as the Old Testament tells us, Yahweh is God and there is no other (Deut. 4:35, 39; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 45:5, 21-22; 46:9)—then how can that Word who is *with* God and therefore distinct from God also *be* God? We can't pass this off by saying, "you just have to believe" (though that would be simpler!) because the God who created you and me as rational beings will never ask us to believe a contradiction. John himself was well aware of this problem and so he was very careful in what he wrote – writing as he was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

While we all read English, the Gospel of John was, of course, written in Greek, and Greek works differently from English. So if we were to translate this verse woodenly from the Greek it would read: "And the Word was with the God, and God [no 'the'] the Word was."³ In the first instance, when John speaks of "the God" (*ho theos*) he's speaking of God **personally** (as the Father; "with"/relationship and "the"). When John speaks of "God" (*theos*) however, he's speaking of God not personally but in terms of His *essence* or "substance" as the Divine **Being** ("was"/being and *no* "the"; cf. Ryle). What we have here, practically speaking, is a distinction between the person of God and the "being" of God. If John had said that the Word *was* "the God" (*ho theos*) then he would have *so identified* the Word with "the God" that it would be contradictory to say at the same time that the Word was *with* "the God" *that He was* (cf. Carson). For instance, the Word cannot be *with* the Father and also *be* the Father at the same time. That's a contradiction, and therefore it *is* "nonsense." But John is more careful than this. First John says that "the Word was *with* [*the*] God," and then John says that "God [no 'the'] the Word was." In other words: The Word partakes *fully* of *all* that the one and only undivided God *is* (therefore, the Word was God – the *indivisible* God), and yet at the same time God is not "exhausted" simply by the Word (therefore it can also be said truly that the Word was *with* God).

In the same way that the presence and the absence of "the" is so important, so also is the fact that John does not say that "God was the Word." If John had said that "God was the Word," this

³ The absence of the article, here, does not mean that the Word was *a* god (small "g") or that the Word was merely "divine" (*theios* vs. *theos*). The translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses ("a god") contradicts not only the immediate and larger context of John but the witness and testimony of the entire Bible concerning the supremacy and "oneness" of the only true God (cf. Deut. 6:4-5; we remember here that the "Word," as "deity," is eternal).

would have been to *so identify* God with the Word as to say that God is *only* the Word – which would make it contradictory nonsense to say that the Word is *with* God. But once again, what is it that we see as we look on these mysteries? God is *more* than the Word because the Word was “with” God, and yet the Word partakes *fully* of *all* that God *is* because “God the Word *was*.” Because of the way our English grammar works, we have to translate with this word order: “the Word was God”⁴; and yet in the Greek it’s the word, “God,” that comes first (“and *God*, the Word was”) in order to place all the emphasis on the full deity of the Word. Yes, God is *more* than the Word (therefore the Word was *with* God), and yet at the same time the Word partakes *fully* of *all* that the one and only, indivisible God *is* (therefore the Word *was* God – the *indivisible* God).

There is not a single, logical contradiction here in John. There is nothing here at all that is irrational. And yet what we’re left with still is a mystery so bright and so glorious that it will forever infinitely surpass our ability to comprehend. *At the same time* that this is a mystery surpassing our ability to comprehend, it’s also a mystery from which our eyes should never want to—or be willing to—look away. Why is this? Because it’s only in this mystery of the Word who was *with* “[*the*] God” and who, at the same time, *was* “*God*” that we can ultimately come to see God as God *with us* – The God who *creates* by His Word, the God who *reveals Himself* to His creation—to us—by His Word, and finally, the God who even enters *into* His own creation for our salvation – in and by the eternal Word. We know what John will go on to say in verse fourteen don’t we?

➤ John 1:14 — And *the Word* became flesh [in Jesus Christ] and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

If God was not more than just the Word, then the Word could never have become flesh and died for us. This is infinite mystery. And yet if the Word did not partake *fully* of *all* that the one-and-only, indivisible God *is*, then He could never have accomplished my salvation and He could not finally be the object of my faith and hope. Here is a mystery, then, from which our eyes should never want to look away. Calvin says it like this:

“Since apart from God we ought not at all to seek life and salvation, how could our faith rest on Christ, if we did not know with certainty what is here taught? By these words, therefore, the Evangelist assures us that we do not withdraw from the only and eternal God, *when we believe in Christ.*”

To the contrary, as Ryle says: “Let us mark that the Savior in whom the believer is bid to trust is nothing less than the Eternal God, One able to save to the uttermost all that come to the Father by Him.” Our salvation is founded entirely in this mystery of the person of the Word which is here set before our eyes. Therefore, to quote Ryle once more: “Happy is he who can receive [this great mystery] as a little child... ‘It is rashness to search too far into it. It is piety to believe it. It is life eternal to know it’” (Ryle, quoting Bernard)

⁴ The Greek article (*ho*) identifies *logos* (“Word”) as the subject, which means that *theos* (“God”) is the predicate nominative.

John himself certainly felt the power and the beauty of these things that he was writing. In verse two he gathers up everything he's just said in these three short sentences and he condenses it even further into a single sentence "bursting," as it were, with glory.

V. John 1:2 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with [the] God, and the Word was God. *This one [this very Word who was God] was in the beginning with [the] God.*

Lenski writes:

"Just as we read 'the Word,' 'the Word,' 'the Word,' three times [in verse one], like the peals of a heavenly bell, like a golden chord on an organ not of earth sounding again and again, so [now] the three rays of heavenly light in the three separate sentences fuse into one — a sun of such brightness that human eyes cannot take in all its effulgence [all its brilliant radiance]. 'It is as if... the Spirit of God... meant to bar from the beginning all the attempts at denial which in the course of [history] would arise; as though he meant to say: I solemnly repeat, The eternal Godhead of Christ is the foundation of the church, of faith, of true [worship]!'"

On the one hand, John repeats and summarizes these truths in verse two because it is so essential that they be understood and believed. On the other hand, as that which is essential to be understood and believed John repeats these truths because they are worthy of our unceasing wonder and awe as we *believe* specifically in the Jesus who *is that* ETERNAL WORD made flesh.