

## **The Eternal, Creative Word Shines**

John 1:1-5

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*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 anything made that was made. 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.*

– John 1:1-5, ESV

### **Introduction: A Most Simple & Profound Gospel**

John's Gospel has frequently been described as a river in which a child may safely wade and in which an elephant can swim. It is both simple and profound, easy to grasp and yet impossible to ever fully comprehend. The language John uses is easy: word, God, light, life, darkness, truth, believe. He doesn't use technical terms or polysyllabic theological jargon. He speaks of being born again, of having the light of life, of vines and branches, of gates and sheep, of the bread of life and the light of the world.

Yet simple is not the same as simplistic. While the basic meaning of the Gospel is not difficult to understand, a lifetime of study will continue to reveal new depths, insights, nuances and new levels of meaning and application. The reason for both the simplicity and profundity of John's Gospel is clear: John's main goal is to reveal Jesus, to show who He really is, what He has done and what it means to believe in Him and have eternal life in Him. Because the message of Jesus is so important, John makes it as simple as possible. But because He who is revealed to us is the eternal Son of God who became man for us and for our salvation, the richness, depth and wonder of his message is fathomless.

My hope, as we begin this study together, is that we will see the message of John's Gospel plainly. I don't want any of us to miss the simple and clear message that "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life." But I also hope that those who already believe in Jesus- even those who have been trusting in Jesus for decades- will see new wonder, new depth, new profound insight into this wonderful Gospel and the eternal Son of God it reveals to us.

### **I. The Eternal Word (vv. 1-2)**

John's Gospel begins very differently than the other three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mark gives us the briefest introduction – "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" – and then he immediately begins telling of the ministry of John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke each begin their Gospels with extended birth narratives and genealogies. Matthew gives us a genealogy and then a birth narrative, while Luke gives us a birth narrative and then a genealogy. John's Gospel begins very differently with a prologue, or introduction, of 18 verses, which begins, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*"

John's distinctive opening is setting us up for the fact that this is a very different Gospel from the other three. It is most likely that John's Gospel was the last Biblical and Apostolic Gospel written – many other so-called "gospels" were written much later by people who were not apostles or eye-witnesses. In fact, John's Gospel may have been written 20-25 years after Matthew, Mark and Luke. We don't know this for sure, but if it is true, it makes sense that John's Gospel is so different. Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels are called "synoptic" Gospels because they give us a synopsis – or summary – of the life and ministry of Jesus. John's Gospel is different and is much more theologically driven. John is more concerned with helping us understand the truth of who Jesus is than in giving us yet another summary of His life and work.

John's focus on the Person of Jesus is very clear in the opening verses. John writes four short statements about "the Word" to give us a short summary of who Jesus is:

1. In the beginning was the Word.
2. The Word was with God.
3. The Word was God.
4. He was in the beginning with God.

In simple vocabulary, John has stated the most powerful and profound truths:

1. The Word is eternal, for "In the beginning was the Word" and "He was in the beginning." He did not come into being in the beginning. He did not become. He was, in the beginning. Thus, the Word is eternal.
2. The Word was with God. The preposition John uses for "with" means "to/toward," as in "The Word was toward God." John uses this preposition instead of the standard word for "with" to indicate a close and intimate relationship. The Word wasn't just with God like you might have your car keys with you; it's more like when a husband is with his wife. It's an intimate relationship.
3. Still more, the Word was God. Here, the statement is so carefully crafted in the Greek. John is saying that the Word was fully God and yet a distinction can be made between God the Father and the Word, whom John will more consistently refer to as "the Son" throughout his Gospel.

So, here, in very few words, John is teaching us the eternity and full deity of the Word and yet is teaching that a distinction can be made between "God" and "the Word," who exist in intimate relationship with each other.

But the words "In the beginning" are more significant than simply indicating the eternal nature of the Word. John opens very intentionally with the same opening words as the Book of Genesis – that is, with the same opening words as the Scriptures, the Word of God.

Much ink has been spilled over the origin and significance of John's use of "the Word" in these opening lines. This is the Greek word "Logos," which was very significant in certain Greek schools of philosophy, where the "Logos" was seen as the rational principle and organizing and creative power of the universe. We get our word "logic" and the suffix "ology" – as in "the study of" – from this word "Logos." And while I think John is trying to connect and communicate with a Greek-speaking audience, He is echoing Genesis 1 and calling us to the Scriptures that we call "the Old Testament" for our understanding of "the Word."

Simply and profoundly put: All that the Scriptures of the Old Testament say of the Word of God, John is now intending to bring to mind and apply to Jesus, beginning with Genesis 1.

What do we see God doing "in the beginning" in Genesis 1? Well, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." And how do we see Him creating in Genesis 1? He does so by speaking forth His Word, "Let there be . . ." and there was. God spoke the Word and the Word brought creation into being. And the first word that God spoke was "Let there be light."

## II. The Creative Word (v. 3)

John goes on in verse 3 to say even more about the role of the Word in creation: "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." John is making a very strong statement about the role of the Word of God in creation.

If we look in the rest of the Scriptures to see the relationship between the Word and the creation, we'll come to Psalm 33 (which we read earlier) and see the role of the Word in creation confirmed:

*“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.” – Psalm 33:6*

This is one of the most powerfully Trinitarian verses in the Old Testament, because we have the Lord, the word and “the breath of his mouth.” Breath is the same Hebrew word as “Spirit.” Later, verse 9 of Psalm 33 says, *“For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”*

So we can see in both Genesis 1 and in Psalm 33 that the word of God was the agent of creation. Later in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:3 says, *“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God.”* It is this word, this creative, powerful, light-forming word that John is describing in the opening verses of His Gospel.

He says later in verse 14, *“And 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.”*

Further, any reader familiar with the Old Testament relationship between God's word and creation would also be familiar with Proverbs 8, which tells of the role of wisdom, the wisdom of God, in creation. In Proverbs 8:22-31, wisdom speaks and sings of its joyful and masterful role in creation:

*“The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of old.  
Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth,  
before he had made the earth with its fields,  
or the first of the dust of the world.  
When he established the heavens, I was there;  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master workman,  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the children of man. (ESV)*

This is also part of the background behind John 1:1-3. The Word is the creative word and the wisdom of God. So, to fully understand all that John means by “Word,” we need to have a full sense of everything Scripture means by the word of God, the Torah of the Lord and the wisdom of God.

For example:

*I bow down toward your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,  
for you have exalted above all things  
your name and your word. - Psalm 138:2*

Why should the word of God be exalted to the same highest place as the name of God? Because the Word is God.

The Word of John 1 is all of these things – word, wisdom, Torah - concentrated in the person of the Son of God who became flesh and dwelt (literally “tabernacled”) among us.

### **III. The Life-Giving, Shining Word (vv. 4-5)**

The last line in this wisdom song from Proverbs “*delighting in the children of man*” helps us understand the meaning of John 1:4: “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*” The Word has life in Himself, and especially that life which enlightens man, which is the light of men. Later, in verse 9, John will refer to the Word as “*The true light, which gives light to everyone.*”

The wisdom of God was rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the children of men, because of all of God’s created world, the children of men are uniquely created with the ability to receive wisdom from God, to be enlightened. As human beings made in the image of God, our life is fundamentally different from other forms of life. We have the light – the true light – enlightening us. The fact that people choose to reject this light and hide in the darkness is a sad reality that shows our deserved condemnation. This is a theme we will revisit in depth in John 3.

But John 1:4 is telling us that the Word has life in Himself, and that the life which He has in Himself is the light of men; that is, His life enlightens everyone. That’s because, if we understand what the Scripture teaches about the Word and the wisdom of God, everyone who in any way truly understands or perceives any truth, any goodness or any beauty is benefitting from the Word and wisdom of God.

So, the scientist who understands the intricacies of the workings of the human body or the ecosystem of a forest, the artist who understands form and line and color and light, the writer who understands language and its power, the mechanic who knows how to fix a car or a heat pump, the firefighter who knows how to extinguish a fire, the cook who knows how to prepare a tasty and nutritious meal – all of these people are benefitting from the life that is in the Word, the life which gives light to everyone.

So also, anyone who has ever enjoyed a good meal or known love or enjoyed beautiful music or laughed at a joke has experienced the life that is found only in the Word, the life which gives light to everyone. This is general revelation, and John is saying that it all comes from the Word. What is sad is that most people experience it without ever knowing or acknowledging its source. They remain in the darkness of ignorance and unbelief.

General revelation enlightens everyone, but it is not enough to bring them out of the darkness of ignorance and alienation from God and into the light of truth. For this, we need special revelation, which also comes from the Word:

*The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple. – Psalm 119:130*

The word described in Psalm 119 is the word of Christ, the Word, as Romans 10:17 says: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

Verse 5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” The Light of the Word shines in the darkness of this world. Light is a metaphor for truth and goodness.

Here John is confronting the common dualistic assumptions of his culture, which still dominate much of our culture’s thinking about reality. Greek philosophy would speak of light and darkness and would hold these in tension with each other, in balance. You may have heard talk of a balance between the light side and the dark side- you know, of the Force. The idea of an ultimate dualism, that reality is a balance between light and darkness, is one of the oldest and most persistent ideas in human thinking about the divine.

John is directly attacking this idea, and he will do so again and again in his Gospel. He does not deny that there is light and darkness. Anyone who lives in this world must acknowledge that fact. The world is full of both light and darkness – goodness and wickedness, gentleness and cruelty, hope and despair, love and hate, giving and taking, truth and lies. But what is not true is the idea that these things balance each other in any sense.

If I enter into a dark room and turn on the lights, the light and the darkness do not balance each other in some harmonious dance. No, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. Light penetrates darkness. Light is powerful, penetrating and inextinguishable by darkness.

John uses an interesting word for “overcome” here in verse 5. Your translation may say “the darkness did not comprehend it.” That’s because the word John uses here can mean either “overcome” or “comprehend.” I actually think the New English Translation (NET) chooses a good equivalent when it says, “the darkness has not mastered it.” You could also use the words seize or grasp.

The darkness in this world – the lies, the selfishness, the wickedness, the violence, the unbelief, the greed – cannot overcome or comprehend the light of Christ, the light of the Word, the light of life. Light is higher, better, stronger, purer and more powerful than darkness, and that’s why the darkness cannot master the light, cannot seize the light, cannot overcome or comprehend the light.

This statement is both very hopeful and very insightful. It is hopeful to know that the light of the Word will never be extinguished. We do not need to fear that it will be. It is insightful because it helps us grasp why so many people reject the light of the Word and just don’t “get it.” The rejection of the Word is also a major theme in John’s Gospel, one we’ll begin to explore in two weeks, as we continue to work through the Prologue of John, looking at verses 6-13.

### **Conclusion: Have You Heard the Word?**

As we conclude this morning, the question we all need to ask ourselves is this: Have you heard the Word? John has chosen a very unusual way to introduce His Gospel. He doesn’t name Jesus until the end of his Prologue, in verse 17. Instead, he introduces us to “the Word” and “the life” and “the light of men.” So John gives us other ways to ask if we’re trusting in Jesus, if we believe in God’s Son:

Have you heard the word of God? Have you received His message? Have you received His wisdom?

Do you have the life found in the Word? Have you come to share in His life?

Do you see and walk in His light? Or are you still walking in darkness?