

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

(Part 1)

by Philip Eichman



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Introduction

The Gospels are the story of Jesus, his life, and how he came to serve others. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell the story of Jesus in much the same way, differing only in certain details. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, tells the story of Jesus in a different and unique way that emphasizes faith and how certain individuals came to know Jesus as the Son of God.

The author of the Gospel of John is not given in the book itself. The traditional view is that the Gospel was written by the apostle John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee. Some may differ, but there are no substantial reasons for not believing that the author of the book was John the apostle and friend of Jesus.

John probably wrote his Gospel at the end of the first century. Time had brought many changes and John was writing to a different audience than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This no doubt accounts for the unique content of John's account.

About the Author

Phillip Eichman has been a teacher most of his adult life. He holds master's and doctoral degrees in biology and was a biology professor for more than thirty years. He also completed master's degrees in Bible and ministry at Harding University and has taught Bible courses in Christian schools and colleges. He has served as a Bible class teacher and part-time minister. He is now retired and lives with his wife, Nancy, in South Carolina where he enjoys spending time studying and writing.



Lesson 1

The Beginning of the Story

John 1:1-18

Key Verse:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

WARM UP



One Sunday morning my brother and I got up early, put on our good clothes, and Mom took us to church. I was twelve years old and had never been to any type of church before, so this was a new experience for me. I still remember how some of the words seemed strange, and some of the things done in the service, such as the Lord's Supper, were totally foreign to me. In time, I was able to understand what was going on, but I still remember how new and different it was at first.

Missionaries living in another country with a different language and culture often face an even greater challenge. What they are teaching is often very foreign to those who hear it. They must search for ways to connect with the new culture and communicate God's Word in a context that the people can understand.

As John began to write his story of Jesus, he faced a similar situation. It was toward the end of the first century and at least sixty years since the church began. In the early days the church had been made up of entirely Jewish converts, but as time passed, Paul and others had carried the Good News far from Jerusalem and shared it with Gentiles as well as Jewish listeners. This led to a change in the make-up of the church. By the time John was writing his Gospel, there were more Gentile Christians than Jewish converts. Many of these Gentile Christians had little or no knowledge of the Jewish religion, and concepts such as the Messiah were foreign to them. And so like missionaries today, John sought to connect with these people from a different background by introducing Jesus in a way that they could understand.

WORK OUT



There are a number of different names and titles for Jesus in the New Testament, but John began by referring to Jesus as “the Word,” a term that Gentiles would recognize from Greek philosophy. In the original language of the New Testament, the word is *logos*, could refer to a written or spoken word, speech, or language. In Greek culture, *logos* had a much larger meaning. It was used to refer to reason and intelligence that was believed to permeate and give order to the entire universe. The Greek philosophers did not recognize a Creator of the universe as did the Jews and Christians, but they did believe that there was something that would account for the world around them. This was the *logos*. By identifying Jesus as the *logos*, John was able to connect with those who because of their cultural background might not be able to initially understand the concept of the Messiah.

John's presentation of Jesus as the "Word" would also appeal to a Jewish audience. References to the "word of God" and expressions such as "the word of the Lord" are found throughout the Old Testament. The concept of "wisdom" in Jewish culture was also similar in some ways to the Greek view of the *logos* as a sort of cosmic intelligence. We see this especially in the personification of "wisdom" in passages such as Proverbs 8, for example.

As John goes on to tell his story, he makes it clear that Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah, and the Son of God. However, the initial contact that his Gospel made with many of his readers was through the depiction of Jesus as the "Word."

Jesus as the Word

Mark begins his Gospel with the baptism and early ministry of Jesus. Matthew and Luke take us further back, beginning with the details of Jesus' birth and early life. John, in his own unique way, takes us back to the very moment of creation with his opening statement: "In the beginning was the Word."

Jesus was with God at the beginning of the universe. John repeated the same thought a second time in verse 2, probably for emphasis: "He was with God in the beginning." Like God, Jesus is an infinite, spiritual being that exists outside of the physical world in which we live. Jesus was not a created being—he existed before the world began. This may seem obvious, but in the early centuries of Christianity, there were those who claimed that Jesus was a created being and lower than God. There are even religious groups today who still teach this, but John laid aside ideas like these in the very first words of his Gospel.

Continuing his introduction of Jesus, John wrote, "and the Word was with God." Jesus was with God in the beginning. Even before the

world began, there was personality and personal relationships. God and the Word are persons and have a personal relationship with each other.

Scientific theories attempt to explain human personality as a result of evolutionary processes, but John explains that personality and personal relationships existed before the creation. God as a father and Jesus as a son are personal beings and had a personal relationship with each other before the first human beings were created. As human beings, we have personality because we were made in the image of God, who like Jesus is a personal being (Genesis 1:27).

Not only was the Word with God in the beginning, John also tells us “the Word was God.” In the Greek language there is usually an article before a noun, but there is no article here. John did not write, “The Word was *a* God” or “The Word was *the* God.” He simply said, “The Word was God.” The absence of an article indicates that the two are equal. The Word has the same nature and qualities as God. In other words, Jesus is divine. He is deity. Jesus is God.

The world did not recognize him

John also describes Jesus as a light that came into darkness, but sadly those who saw the light did not understand it. Jesus came to the people that God had selected and prepared for his coming, but they did not receive him. There was considerable expectation among the Jewish people concerning the Messiah. Unfortunately, they were looking for a mighty military leader to drive out the Roman oppressors and establish their country as a world power. Jesus, however, came for a very different reason, and this is why they did not recognize him as the light that was shining in darkness.

The Word became flesh

At the beginning of this chapter John introduces Jesus as deity (“...the Word was God”). In verse 14 he introduces Jesus as man (“The Word became flesh...”). The way that John expressed this is interesting. He did not say, “The Word became a human being.” Instead John used rather strong language in saying, “The Word became flesh.” John may have used this expression to emphasize the idea that Jesus was a real flesh and blood human being.

In the latter part of the verse John says that the Word, “made his dwelling among us.” The original word refers to a “tent” or a dwelling. Jesus became one of us and lived among us, or as Eugene Peterson translated this verse, Jesus “moved into the neighborhood.”

Jesus was not part God and part man. Jesus was fully both God and man, not one or the other, equally both—human and divine. God in the flesh—we may not be able to fully understand it, but we can realize that without Jesus, our lives would be hopeless and the world would be a dark and desolate place.

COOL DOWN



In verse 18, John tells us that Jesus coming into our world allows us to know God. It is one thing to know *about* someone, but is another thing to know someone personally. We can know *about* God from various passages in the Bible, but we can only know God *personally* in the Word that became flesh.

Discussion Questions:

1. Sometimes you will hear a person say that Jesus was merely a prophet or a teacher. How does this compare with John's introduction of Jesus?
2. What did John mean when he wrote "in him was life"? Is this physical or spiritual life (or both)?
3. We see here an example of John's use of themes such as light and darkness. How did John contrast light with darkness in these verses? In what ways did "the light shine in darkness"?
4. In verses 12–13, John wrote about "children of God." How is this important and how did Jesus make it possible for us to become children of God?
5. In what way does Jesus coming in the flesh make Christianity different from all other religions?
6. How does Paul's statement in Galatians 4:4–5 relate to the Word becoming flesh?
7. What are some things that we can know about God that we would not know if Jesus had not come in the flesh?