

# The Word

## John 1:1-3

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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 nothing was made that was made (Jn. 1:1-3).

**T**he Gospel of John is one of the world's true treasures. It contains many of the sayings most memorable and blessed to God's people. John is so simple that children memorize their first verses from its pages and so profound that dying adults ask to hear it as they pass from this world. It is said that John is a pool safe enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to drown. Martin Luther wrote, "This is the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel... Should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a single copy of the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to John escape him, Christianity would be saved."<sup>1</sup>

### According to John

**T**his Gospel does not specify its author's name. Nonetheless, we can be sure of its composer, both from internal and external evidence. John claims to be written by an eyewitness and disciple of Jesus (21:24). We know from the other Gospels that the disciples closest to Jesus were Peter, James, and John. Of these, only John is never named in this Gospel, which is hard to explain apart from the author's modesty concerning himself. In his place we are told of a "beloved disciple" who is evidently both the author and the apostle John. The early church affirms this view. Irenaeus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:13.

bishop who knew people who personally knew John, attests that John “the disciple of the Lord,” wrote this Gospel in Ephesus, and his view is backed up by every ancient document that addresses this subject.<sup>2</sup> We do not know exactly when John wrote his Gospel, traditionally thought to be the last of the four Gospels. Some scholars place John’s Gospel before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 since it often mentions the temple. But the consensus holds that John wrote perhaps as late as the A.D. 90’s, and no earlier than A.D. 80.

According to church tradition, John wrote to provide material missing from the other three Gospels and to complement them with a “spiritual gospel.”<sup>3</sup> According to Irenaeus, John wanted to combat heresies that were rising, especially those that denied either the full deity or the full humanity of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Christianity spread beyond its original Jewish bounds, it seems that John wrote to make the gospel more accessible to the Greek mind. But John himself tells us his main purpose in 20:31: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” This is why when people ask for a place in the Bible to learn about Jesus, the most common Christian answer is, “You should read the Gospel of John.” Here is a treasure provided by God himself, as the Spirit moved the Beloved Disciple to show us Jesus as Savior and divine Son so that we might believe and be saved.

## Jesus, the Divine Word

John differs from the other Gospels in many ways, among them the manner by which he begins his account of Jesus. Like the other Gospel writers, he wants us to understand that Jesus is God made flesh – the very God who became truly man. Matthew and Luke approached this by explaining the virgin birth. But John’s prologue gives a theological explanation for Jesus’ coming into the world, beginning with his eternal origin before the creation of all things.

John starts, “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn. 1:1). This mirrors the way the Old Testament began: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). John places Jesus where we expect

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:414.

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 6.14.7 (New York: Penguin, 1965), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, 3.11.1.

God: “In the beginning, God;” “In the beginning was the Word.” The subject of this Gospel, the man Jesus who lived and died and rose again, is thus identified as God. Mark Johnson writes, “Without apology or qualification, John goes back in time beyond Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and Nazareth where he was conceived, indeed back beyond the beginning of time itself, and allows us a glimpse of a glorious person who has an eternal existence.”<sup>5</sup>

John 1:1 teaches Jesus’ deity in three respects, beginning with his eternal being: “In the beginning was the Word.” When the creation “was made,” Jesus – here designated as “the Word” – already “was.” This was an important statement in the church’s fight with the earliest heretics. Arius, for instance, whose heresy prompted the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., maintained that Jesus, though certainly God-like in many ways, was nonetheless less than God. Arius argued that Jesus was a created being, however glorious and close to God. But John tells us, instead, that when time and creation began, Jesus already “was.” Leon Morris explains, “The Word existed before creation, which makes it clear that the Word was not created... The Word is not to be included among created beings.”<sup>6</sup>

If the Word already was in the beginning, then he must either have been with God or he must have been God. John teaches both. His second statement says, “the Word was with God.” This tells us that the Word is a person who has a relationship with God.

In the creation account of Genesis 1 we read, “And God said,” eight times. It was by God’s Word that he brought creation into being. John now tells us that this Word is a person who was “with God.” This sheds light on Genesis 1:26, which reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image.’” God was speaking to the Word. John clarifies in verses 2-3: “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” So the Word is God’s executor in creation, the agent who accomplishes God’s will. God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and the Word made light. All through the Bible, it is God’s Word that does God’s will. Psalm 33:6 says, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.” Psalm 107:20 says, “He sent His word and

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66.

healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.” So the Word who made creation also brings God’s salvation.

With this in mind, we see that John wants us to understand not only the eternity of the Word but also the personhood of the Word. The Word is a person, the companion of God himself. This warns us against another perennial heresy, namely, that which denies the distinct personhood of the various members of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity states, “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons... God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> It is hard for us to understand how there can be only one God but three distinct persons in that God, but it is verses like this that cause us to believe it. When John speaks of *the Word*, he means God the Son, Jesus Christ, who eternally lives in relationship with and does the will of God the Father. Some people would deny that these are distinct persons, instead seeing Father and Son as different modes of the one, undifferentiated God. But while one person can be *by* himself, he is never *with* himself; John insists that *the Word* is a distinct divine person: “the Word was *with* God.”

Thirdly, verse 1 presents a straightforward statement that the Word is not only a companion to God but is himself divine. The best-selling novel *The DaVinci Code* asserts that Christians never considered Jesus to be God until the Council of Nicaea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. But here, in clear language, the apostle John writes, “and the Word was God.” He repeats this claim in John 1:18, saying that the one “who is in the bosom of the Father,” or as the English Standard Version puts it, “who is at the Father’s side,” is himself “the only God” (ESV). Likewise, at the Gospel’s end, when the resurrected Jesus appears to doubting Thomas, the disciple falls before him and cries, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28). That is the Christian confession. John wants us to know from the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus Christ, the *Word*, is God.

Because it states Christ’s deity so plainly, John 1:1 has long come under attack, beginning with Arius. His argument, used by Jehovah’s Witnesses today, is that John teaches not that Jesus is God but rather that Jesus is a god-like creature. He is divine, but not a deity. This is based on the fact that in this final phrase of verse 1, John places a

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<sup>7</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, II.3.

definite article (“the”) before Word but not before God. Literally, they argue, John says, “The Word was *a* God,” but not *the* God.

What is our reply? First, it is clear throughout the Gospel that John intends for us to identify Jesus as God. Our teaching of Christ’s deity does not depend on this verse, and what he says elsewhere clarifies his meaning here. Secondly, if John meant that Jesus was divine but not a deity, there was a perfectly good Greek word (*theios*) which he did not in fact use. The word he did use (*theos*) means God and not god-like. Thirdly, while the Arian and Jehovah’s Witness argument may convince novices in New Testament Greek, in fact, Greek grammar does not demand a definite article for both nouns when they are joined in this way. It is common for one definite article to serve for both nouns, and so the grammatical argument is simply wrong. Fourthly, there is an obvious reason for John’s construction. His point is both to identify the Word as God (meaning God the Father) but also as distinct from God. If he wrote, “The Word was the God,” that would be identifying Jesus with God in a way that they would be indistinguishable. His point is clearly to specify Christ’s deity while also distinguishing him from God the Father.

Martin Luther stated, “This text is a strong and valid attestation of the divinity of Christ... Everything depends on this doctrine. It serves to maintain and support all other doctrines of our Christian faith.

Therefore the devil assailed it very early in the history of Christendom, and he continues to do so in our day.”<sup>8</sup> As we begin his Gospel, John wants us first to realize Christ’s deity and his relationship to God the Father, insisting upon Jesus’ divine Sonship for our salvation. Jesus is God the Executor to God the Ordainer, doing the Father’s will within the perfect harmony of the Trinity. As A.W. Pink put it, “The One who was heralded by the angels to the Bethlehem shepherds, who walked this earth for thirty-three years, who was crucified at Calvary and who rose in triumph from the grave, and who forty days later departed from these scenes, was none other than the Lord of Glory.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*, Luther’s Works, v. 22 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 19, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 17.

## Jesus, the Saving Word

Jesus is the Divine Word. But John wants us to understand not merely Jesus' person but also his work. He wrote this Gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (Jn. 20:31). *Christ* means *Messiah*, or *Savior*. Jesus, the Divine Word, came into the world to be the Saving Word.

We are going to find that John employs words powerfully, often selecting a term that has at least a double meaning. There is no better example than his use of "the Word" to describe Jesus. The Greek is *Logos*, one of the most significant terms in Greek philosophy. By using this word, John built a bridge from the Greek philosophical world to the Jewish thought-world of the Bible.

One of the earliest Greek philosophers was Heraclitus (6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.). He thought about the fact that things constantly change. His famous illustration was that you can never step twice into the same river; it is never the same, because the water has flowed on. Everything is like that, he said. But if that is true, how can there be order in the world? His answer was the *Logos*, the *word* or *reason* of God. This was the principle that held everything together in a world of change. There is a purpose and design to the world and events, and this is the *Logos*.

The *Logos* fascinated Greeks from Heraclitus onward. What keeps the stars in their courses? What controls the seasons? Order and purpose is revealed everywhere in the world. Why? The answer is the *Logos*, the divine logic. The Word. Plato said, "It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, a *Logos*, who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain." In a stroke of divine genius, John seizes on this word and says, "Listen, you Greeks, the very thing that has most occupied your philosophical thought and about which you have been writing for centuries – the *Logos* of God... has come to earth as a man and we have seen him."<sup>10</sup>

This means that Jesus is the One who gives meaning to life in this world. People today are living without purpose or meaning, which is why our affluence fails to content us. We are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and it is only as we know God and do his will that we find meaning and joy. Speaking in Greek terms, John says that

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<sup>10</sup> Boice, I:35.

Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word who bears to us the mind and heart of God. Later in this prologue, John says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Life does not make sense until we meet Jesus. Peter realized this, and when Jesus asked if he was going to go elsewhere, Peter replied for us all, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68).

Jesus, the Word, also comes as the Answer to the great problems of life. Psychologist Erich Fromm has written that we are faced with three unsolvable dilemmas, existential problems that plague us. First is the dilemma of life versus death. We want to live, but we all die. Jesus answers that problem, giving eternal life to all who believe on him. He said, “I am the resurrection, and the life... Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25-26). “The second of Fromm’s dilemmas is the dilemma of the individual and the group. Jesus is the answer to that problem too, for He has come to break down all walls and to make of His followers one new man which is His mystical body (Eph. 2:14-16). The last of Fromm’s dilemmas is that arising from the conflict between our aspirations and our actual achievements. We all fall short of what we would like to be and believe ourselves intended to be. Is there an answer? Yes, Jesus is the answer to that problem also, for He promises to make us all that God created us to be in the first place. We are to be conformed to Christ’s image.”<sup>11</sup>

But our greatest problem is that we are alienated from God by our sins. Our guilt has placed us under his wrath, with no way of saving ourselves. For this, above all, Jesus is the Word who reveals and also achieves our only answer. He came to die for our sins that we might be reconciled to God. Jesus said, “The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:15, ESV).

The great industrialist Henry Ford once had a breakdown on his assembly line that no one could fix. In desperation he called Charlie Steinmetz, the mechanical genius who had designed and built Ford’s plant. Steinmetz showed up, tinkered for just a few minutes, threw the switch, and everything started running again. Days later Ford

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I:239.

received a bill for \$10,000, an exorbitant sum in those days. He wrote back, “Charlie, don’t you think your bill is a little high for just a little tinkering!” So Steinmetz sent back a revised bill: “Tinkering – \$10. Knowing where to tinker – \$9, 990.”<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Jesus knew how to fix this broken world, because he made it. But he came not just to do a little tinkering. Jesus fixed the world by shedding his own blood for our sins. And instead of presenting us a bill, he offers us the free gift of eternal life through faith in him.

## Jesus, God’s Word for Us

Jesus is the Divine Word and the Saving Word. But most important for us, Jesus is God’s Word for us.

Because Jesus is the eternal Word of God – and because, as John 1:14 tells us, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – *we can know God*. This flows from John’s description of Jesus as “the Word.” We all reveal ourselves though our words, and, in Christ, God’s speech is most eloquent. Hebrews 1:1-2 says that in the past, “God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” This is Jesus’ own testimony in the Gospel of John. He said, “I and the Father are one” (Jn. 10:30); “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). If you want to know what God is like – and this is the greatest of all questions – you need only learn about Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus is the living Word of God, and because God never changes, then God always was and is like Jesus – always Christ-like! God is holy, the way Jesus is shown to be holy in this Gospel. God is compassionate and caring, sovereign and mighty, just as Jesus reveals in this book. But, most of all, Jesus reveals God’s love for us. “What Jesus did was to open a window in time that we might see the eternal and unchanging love of God.”<sup>13</sup> This is what the greatest verse in John – and perhaps in the whole Bible – says: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (Jn. 3:16). “We have seen his glory,” John says, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). If you want to see the glory of God, in his

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<sup>12</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 18.

<sup>13</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:38.

holiness and compassion and might and especially in his love, you will find it only in the face of Jesus Christ.

If that is true, if Jesus is the living Word who reveals God to us, then *his coming is the most important thing ever to happen in this world*. In worldly terms, Jesus accomplished nothing. But God's Son did not come to build a financial or military empire, or to leave a record in the fading pages of worldly glory. Instead, he came to show the way to God that he himself would open for us by his death on the cross for our sins. Since he is God, and since he came to save lost sinners, what he did demands our fervent attention and heartfelt faith.

Lastly, if Jesus is the Divine and Saving Word, then *nothing is more important for us than our relationship to him*. When the new millennium began a few years ago surveys were taken as to who had been most influential in the previous thousand years. But no one can doubt who has most dominated all of history. Mark Johnson writes, "Even a complete atheist is forced at least to wonder what it was that made practically every nation in the world act in unison as the clocks struck midnight in the passage from 1999 to the year 2000. What was the great anniversary that inspired such celebration? The answer: the celebration of the anniversary of the coming of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Do you see who Jesus is and perhaps admire him, yet remain indifferent? Jesus, the Word, who "in the beginning was with God, and was God," and who came into the world to be God's Savior for us, calls for our faith. He calls us to believe not merely *in* him but *on* him. As one writer puts it, "We are called to worship him without cessation, obey him without hesitation, love him without reservation, and serve him without interruption."<sup>15</sup> John said, "These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31). Jesus said, "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). But, he added, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32-33).

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 36.