

Study 22: The Gospel of John – Part 1: The Word Made Flesh

Background: The Apostle John. We first encounter the apostle John in the Gospels when Jesus called him and his brother James [Mt 4:21] to what they likely never suspected would be a lifelong vocation. Only moments before Jesus had called two other brothers, Peter and Andrew, and both sets of brothers responded in the same way: they immediately left their work as fishermen and followed Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had told them, “and I will make you fishers of men” [Mt 4:19].

John and James (often called James the Greater to distinguish him from James the Less, son of Alphaeus), had been working with their father, Zebedee, whose business apparently included a small fleet of fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. It’s quite possible that Zebedee’s commercial connections in Jerusalem permitted John on that tragic day a few years later to gain entrance for himself and Peter to the courtyard of Caiaphas, the High Priest [Jn 18:15]. But on this day in Galilee John foresaw nothing of that. Moved by the Spirit, he knew only that he must drop everything, leave his father at once, and follow the call of Jesus.

John, along with eleven other disciples of Jesus, would also be selected as apostles, as those who would ultimately lead the early Church in obedience to Jesus’ command to spread the Good News throughout the world. But John was singled out even among the Twelve and would join James and Peter as members of Jesus’ inner circle. These three became Jesus’ special confidants, men privileged to accompany Jesus on some very special occasions: the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law [Mk 1:30]; the raising of Jarius’ daughter [Mk 5:37; Lk 8:51], the Transfiguration [Mt 17:1; Mk 9:2; Lk 9:28], and the Agony in the Garden [Mt 26:37; Mk 14:33]. Peter and John were also favored as the two sent by Jesus to prepare the Last Supper, the Passover meal that Jesus shared with His apostles the night before His death [Lk 22:8].

Regarding John’s character we know very little. We know he was young, likely the youngest of the apostles. We know he was an impetuous young man who, along with his brother, James, would earn the nickname “*Boanerges*”, from the Hebrew meaning “Sons of Wrath” but translated in the Greek as “Sons of Thunder” [Mk 3:17]. He and James were also ambitious men who hoped for high places in Jesus’ Kingdom [Mt 20:20-28; Mk 10:35-45]. And yet on that dark Friday afternoon it was steadfast John (“the disciple whom He loved”) who, alone among the apostles, joined the faithful women at the foot of the Cross and watched his Lord die [Jn 19:26]. Jesus’ love for John was further demonstrated when from the Cross He placed His mother, Mary, in the apostle’s care [Jn 19:26-27]. As he relates in his own Gospel, John (“the other disciple”) outran Peter as they hurried to the empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday [Jn 20:2]. And it was John, too, who was the first to recognize the risen Jesus on the shore of Sea of Galilee: “It is the Lord!” [Jn 21:7].

Luke also mentions John in the *Acts of the Apostles*. When Peter cured the lame beggar in the Temple, John was with him [Acts 3:1-10]. John also joined Peter when they were called to appear before the Sanhedrin and, along with Peter, boldly proclaimed the Good News [Acts 4:13]. Subsequently he shared Peter’s imprisonment by the Sanhedrin [Acts 5:17ff.]. Later John accompanied Peter on their mission to Samaria to bring the first non-Jews into God’s family of faith [Acts 8:14ff.]. Their imposition of hands on these new Christians is linked by the Church with the sacrament of confirmation, an integral element of the process of Christian initiation. Paul also mentions John, along with Peter and James, calling them “pillars” of the Church [Gal 2:9]. And it was John who became the subject of a rumor spread among some of the disciples

that he would not die until Christ returned in glory. John addresses this in his gospel, essentially squelching it [Jn 21:23].

Other non-scriptural traditions surrounded John. He is said to have become a leader of the churches of Asia Minor and that during the early persecutions was banished to the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. It was there that John experienced the visions that led to his writing the Book of Revelation. Other accounts relate how he converted the leader of a band of criminals, raised the dead, and preached constantly the gospel of love: “My little children, love one another!”

Theme of the Gospel of John. Like the other evangelists, John had a unique insight into the person, work, and life of the Lord. By the time John wrote his Gospel – probably c. 95 AD – hardly a man or woman was alive who had known Jesus personally. John, one of the few remaining first-hand witnesses, was by then an old man. A new generation of Christians was taking the Church into its second century and was facing new challenges that had not yet appeared when Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote their Gospels. And so John’s Gospel is different. It provided Christians at the end of the first century with new insights into Jesus’ ministry and person. And it addressed those new challenges by confirming Jesus’ identity as true God and true man and highlighting the sacramental life of the Church. No doubt there was also a sense of nostalgia among this new generation, a sense that they had missed something because they had not known Jesus in the flesh as John had. But reading John’s Gospel one gets the impression that John is telling the Christians of his time (and us), “You haven’t missed a thing, for Jesus Christ is just as present now as He was when I walked with Him in Galilee – present in the flesh and blood of the Eucharist. And His eternal presence is doing even more wonderful things right here and now in His Church through its sacramental life.”

This is one of John’s greatest contributions to Christian theology, his insight that Christ is eternally present and acting in and through His Church. Indeed, as we read his Gospel and Letters we see repeatedly how this truth influenced his choice of material. Accordingly, his Gospel seems to satisfy our yearning to experience Jesus as He was experienced by the apostles. I believe this is why Christians have always been especially attracted to John’s Gospel.

In addition to John’s insight into the *living presence* of Jesus in the Church, his lifelong meditation on the mighty acts of God led to many more dimensions of meaning. For example, John also introduces his Gospel to us as the *Gospel of the Spirit*. In other words, John is determined not only to recount the words and deeds of Jesus, but also to present them in their full significance. For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to separate John’s relating of what Jesus said from his own explanatory commentary on Jesus’ words and deeds. For the believing Christian, however, this should present no real difficulty, since we believe that John wrote his Gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His commentary, therefore, internal to the gospel, remains the Word of God. It is a divinely authenticated interpretation of the significance of Christ’s life among men.

John seems to have written his Gospel with the intention of fulfilling the Lord’s promise: “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming” [Jn 16:12-13].

John’s Gospel as History. Not unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John too desires to tell us “what happened.” Christianity, after all, like Judaism before it, is certainly historical since it finds its origins in history and relates God’s active involvement in the lives of men. But perhaps

more importantly the essence of the Christian faith centers on events that took place at a definite time and in a definite place, events that will shape the history of humanity until the end of time.

But neither John nor the other evangelists intended to present a verbatim, on-the-spot, day-by-day account of the Lord's life and public ministry. John makes no effort to tell us everything that happened. Indeed, in the final verse of his Gospel he makes this very clear: "There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written" [Jn 21:25]. And so John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had to pick and choose what to relate. The evangelists, then, were not historians or biographers in the modern sense, concerned with presenting a chronological account or a life story. They did not concern themselves with detailed information on the origins or development of events or the physical appearance of the people we meet in their Gospels. And this is particularly true of John's Gospel. After all, he knew full well that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke had for some time been in the hands of Christians. There was no need for another Gospel that simply retold the same events from a slightly different perspective.

No, John had another purpose. He was concerned with shedding light on the *meaning* of Christ's life, a unique life, both human and divine. Like the other evangelists, John was certainly writing history, but he was writing a *theological* or *spiritual* history, a history of events bound to eternal truths. His overriding purpose, then, is to repeat faithfully and propose for our belief the total significance of the life of Jesus Christ. Understand, too, that the symbolism we encounter everywhere in John's Gospel is not something he read into the events after the fact; rather it is a part of the total meaning of the history of Jesus that he relates. This is the meaning the disciples recognized only after the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

John, then, is telling us what *really* happened as Jesus preached the Good News on His way to His Cross and Resurrection. For John, as for any believing Christian, the real is not just what we can examine with our senses. The real also embraces the whole universe of spiritual realities.

The Prologue of the Gospel of John. In this first study guide devoted to John's Gospel, we will focus only on the first 18 verses of Chapter One, what is also known as the *Prologue of the Gospel of John*.

The *Prologue* is really a meditative hymn on the meaning of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. In it John previews the central ideas of his Gospel, giving us a glimpse of what is to follow. Recalling and relying on some of the highest insights of Hebrew thought, he fuses elements of Greek culture with the Christian experience and produces a beautiful proclamation of Jesus as the Word of God. These verses are key to understanding all that follows in John's Gospel. They also explain how he expects us to approach his presentation of the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

For these reasons we will devote the remainder of the study to a brief examination of these 18 verses.

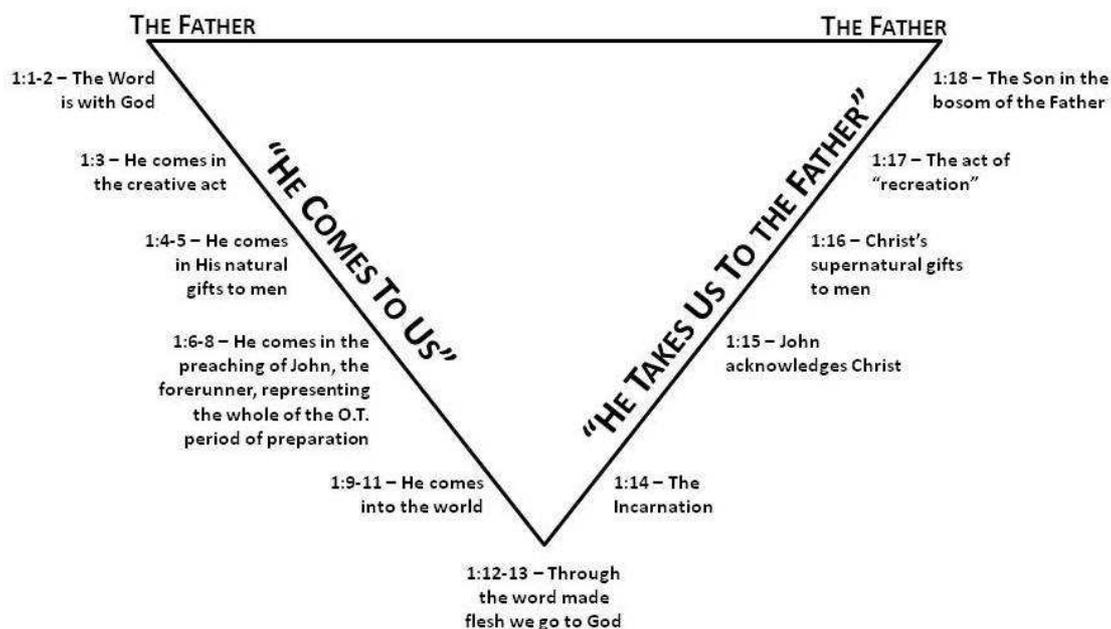
Now open your Bible and read the *Prologue to the Gospel of John*; that is, John 1:1-18. As you read you might want to make the following notations in the margin alongside these portions of the *Prologue*:

- ✠ Part 1: The Word of God – Jn 1:1-5
- ✠ Part 2: The Word and the World – Jn 1:6-13
- ✠ Part 3: The Word Made Flesh – Jn 1:14-18

Behind the Words. Many scriptural scholars believe that John's *Prologue* was taken from an ancient, first-century Christian hymn – a hymn, by the way, for which we have no direct evidence. This conclusion seems to stem from the Prologue's evident poetic rhythm and a belief that something that beautiful must have been written by someone other than the apostle. I think it more likely that the opposite is true, that many ancient Christian hymns had their source in John's *Prologue*. This scholarly prejudice is also evident in some commentaries on the great Pauline hymns; for example, Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20. Despite the fact that they have no evidence to the contrary, they can't seem to accept John and Paul as the authors of these beautiful hymns.

From a literary perspective there is a double movement running through these 18 verses. First Christ comes to us (verses 1-13) and then He takes us to the Father (verses 14-18). The below diagram should help you see this movement more clearly.

Plan of John's Prologue



Like all the apostles, John was a Jew steeped in Old Testament scripture. This is evident in the *Prologue* since much of it is written in the style of Hebrew poetry and reminds us especially of the "hymns to Wisdom" found in a number of Old Testament books (e.g., *Wisdom*, *Sirach*, *Proverbs*, *1 Kings*, etc.). In all of these hymns the Wisdom of God is personified as her relationship with God is described. We are then told of Wisdom's pre-existence to God's creation, her active role in creation itself, her mission to God's chosen people among whom she dwells on earth, and finally the blessing she bestows on those who diligently seek her. John followed this familiar Old Testament hymn format as he composed his "*Hymn of Redemption*" and adapted it to the Word of God. To appreciate this you should take a moment to read one of these "*Wisdom Hymns*" in the Old Testament. Open your Bible, and read Proverbs 8:22-36 and Wisdom 9:9-12.

Studying the Prologue.

*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 1:1-2

John begins his Gospel with a deliberate reference to the opening verses of the *Book of Genesis*. This is John's way of showing not only that the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament, but also that a new creation has come to be which is proclaimed by the Gospel. But John's "beginning" is not merely the beginning of *Genesis*, the beginning of history; John takes us outside of time itself to the eternal existence of the Word with God.

John is also ensuring that first-century Christians understand that Jesus, the Word of God, is eternal and uncreated, that He was present when creation came into being, and that He has no beginning since He "was" when God created everything. This theological insight would be important in the early Church when it was confronted by such heresies as Nestorianism and Arianism.

This expression – "The Word of God" – has a long history in the Bible. In Hebrew thought, for example, the Word of God is a *creative* word. In the Book of Genesis we read, "*Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light*" [Gn 1:3]. God's word is efficacious; what He says becomes. The Psalms, too, make this point clearly: "*By the Lord's word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host*" [Ps 33:6]. And it is the Word of God that compels a man, a prophet of the Lord, to become God's messenger: "*The lion roars – who will not be afraid! The Lord God speaks – who will not prophesy!*" [Amos 3:8] Finally, this Word of God was personified and embodied in the *Torah*, the Law given to Moses.

Furthermore, many of John's readers were familiar with the Greek concept of Word, or *Logos*, which from the time of Heraclitus (c. 535-475 B.C.) had become an increasingly popular way to describe the inherent rationality and orderly wholeness of the cosmos. It is important to understand, though, that the source of John's thought on the Word was God's revelation to the Jewish people, and not Greek philosophy. John takes the Greek concept of *Logos*, perfects and transforms it by showing that this creative Word which from all eternity was in God and was God, took flesh and dwelt among us.

These Hebrew roots and Greek influences provided John with a way of thinking and a vocabulary necessary to express the Christian experience of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh.

*All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John 1:3-5

Again we find parallels with the opening verses of Genesis. In Genesis, God's Word is creative and is first evident when God says, "Let there be light." And it is here that John introduces one of the major themes of his Gospel. The conflict between the Light which is Christ and the

darkness which is the fullness of opposition to God takes form in John's Gospel, growing until it reaches a climax in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here we see the tragic irony of the human condition. For us life should signify the Light, since it is from the Light, the Word, that we came into being. Creation, too, exists to manifest the Word, and yet rejects it. The rejection of the Light is, then, darkness; and for John this darkness is cosmic, signifying that all of creation is in need of redemption. The Light of Christ cannot, however, be extinguished. It stands out like a lighthouse in the dark of night, eternally unquenched but not yet dispersing all the darkness. Human beings, God's children, must come to the Light; they must walk to the Light to escape the darkness that surrounds them.

Within the *Prologue* we encounter another reason I believe John wrote the entirety of his Gospel: his obvious fondness for language and for words that have multiple, supportive meanings. For example, the word with which he begins his Gospel, "beginning," refers both to the beginning of creation and to the eternity of God beyond time itself. And here, in these verses, the Greek word we translate as "quench" also has two meanings: to understand and to overcome. In this instance John uses both senses of the word. The darkness remains darkness precisely because it refuses to understand the Word of God; it will not see the light. But it is also unable to overcome and quench the Light. Darkness will do its worst, but the Light of the World will shine out at the Resurrection.

*A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,
so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.
John 1:6-8*

In these verses we encounter another of the author's concerns, the role of St. John the Baptist in God's plan for our happiness and salvation. He wants to ensure we recognize that the Baptist's role, although prophetic, was subordinate. Indeed, he points this out throughout his Gospel to counter those who considered the Baptist as the messiah.

John's Gospel stresses heavily the role of many witnesses to Christ, something we addressed earlier when we studied the gospel preaching found in Acts [Study Guide 17]. Repeatedly, throughout the course of his Gospel, John introduces us to these witnesses:

- John the Baptist [Jn 3:22-30]
- The Samaritan woman [Jn 4:6-42]
- The crowd at the raising of Lazarus [Jn 12:17-18]
- The Twelve [Jn 15:27]
- The Beloved Disciple [Jn 21:24]
- The "Signs" of Jesus [Jn 5:36]
- The Father [Jn 5:37]
- Hebrew Scripture [Jn 5:39]
- Jesus Himself [Jn 8:14]
- The Holy Spirit [Jn 15:26]

All of these "witnesses" appear in John's Gospel and all, like John the Baptist, give testimony to the Light.

*The true light, which enlightens everyone,
was coming into the world.
He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him,
but the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
but his own people did not accept him.*

John 1:9-11

John uses the term “world” frequently, almost 100 times in his writings. It has several different meanings, though. In addition to meaning the planet earth on which we live, it can also mean all of humanity in general. But another meaning refers to the social ways of those who live in darkness apart from God.

John tells us that the Light makes clear to everyone the true meaning and purpose of life. It has always been there for all of humanity but never with the brilliance found in the events about to be narrated in the Gospel. Typically John offers another sense in which the Light enlightens the world: it comes into the world. In other words, through the Incarnation, Christ’s presence in the world as the Light reveals men for what they are, good and bad. These verses again equate Jesus with the creative Word of God and show us that the world, living in darkness, rejected the Light. “He came to what was his own” – in other words to the human family – but we did not accept Him. This Gospel, then, offers insight into the judgmental aspects of Christ’s coming into the world.

*But to those who did accept him
he gave power to become children of God,
to those who believe in his name,
who were born not by natural generation
nor by human choice
nor by a man's decision but of God.*

John 1:12-13

These important verses will be more fully developed later in John’s Gospel when we witness the nocturnal dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus [Jn 3:1-21]. Here John emphasizes that this “Life” must not be confused with mere physical life, but rather that it originates solely and directly from God, and that it becomes available only to him who believes. Another key aspect of these verses are their opposition to the idea, accepted by many Jews at that time, that, regardless of their conduct, they would gain entry into the Messianic kingdom solely because they were members of God’s chosen people, children of Abraham. John returns to this on numerous occasions in his Gospel. We are also introduced in these verses to the gratuitous nature of this “life” that comes from God, what we usually call “sanctifying grace.”

*And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14

This verse, coupled with the first verse of the Prologue – “and the Word was God” – displays for us John’s contribution to the Old Testament understanding of the Word of God. These two expressions are not only a magnificent description of the mystery of the Incarnation, but they also provide the key to John’s understanding of history. Repeatedly, during the course of his Gospel, John will help us recognize the spiritual in the material and the divine in the human.

“Glory,” another of John’s favorite words, has an extensive Old Testament history. Indeed, the “Glory of God” is an all-encompassing phrase that refers to the power, character, radiance and physical accessibility of God. When John tells us that the “glory” came to dwell among us, he is not only referring to Christ’s Incarnation, but also to the visible manifestation of God’s presence with His people; for example, in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night as He led them to the Promised Land. It also refers to the cloud that hovered over the Arc of the Covenant as a sign of God’s presence (“tabernacling”) among His people in the desert and which in Jerusalem hovered around the Holy of Holies in the Temple. And as we read further in John’s Gospel, we will see that the “glory” of Christ is not only His unique union with the Father, but also His fulfillment of the Father’s will – the work He has been given to do – in and through His human life.

In the Liturgy. Despite its brevity, this brief study of the *Prologue* should help us understand why these verses have always been especially revered by the Church. For many years, the *Prologue* was used as a blessing read over the sick. And prior to Vatican II it was used by the Church at the conclusion of almost every Mass. Although it is no longer used in these instances, it is included in the Lectionary as the Gospel for the Masses on Christmas Day and on the Second Sunday after Christmas.

The *Prologue* is also a wonderful meditative vehicle through which we can come to an appreciation of how the great saving acts of the Redemption are made present and effective in our daily lives. Use it, too, before Mass as a meditative preparation of thanksgiving to your participation in the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving and Praise, the Eucharistic celebration.

Unity of the Two Testaments. The *Prologue* is a beautiful example of the organic unity of God’s revelation to humanity as it brings to fulfillment so many of the Old Testament’s key themes, showing how they find their true meaning in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Study Questions:

1. What do you think is the main point of the Prologue?
2. What image of the *Word of God* do we find in Jn 1:3? Compare this verse with Ps 33.
3. Compare Jn 1:4-5 with Rom 1:18-23.
4. Do you see any connection between the Prologue and Is 55?
5. From this study we see that John conceives of Christ’s redeeming work as the establishment of a new creation (for a parallel, see Rom 8:19-22). What does this tell us about our mission as Christians in the world?
6. Describe the connection between the *Prologue* and the Book of Genesis.