

# JOHN

## THE WORD INCARNATE

Volume 1 (Chapters 1–10)

A 13-LESSON STUDY

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REFORMED EXPOSITORY  
BIBLE STUDY

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and **RICHARD D. PHILLIPS**

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken  
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

## INTRODUCING JOHN

The gospel of John is one of the world's true treasures. It contains many of the sayings that are most memorable and blessed to God's people. The book 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 life. It is said that John is a pool safe enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to drown in. 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>

Although this gospel does not specify its **author**, we can be sure of his identity from both internal and external evidence. The book 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, a second-century bishop who knew people who had personally known 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 the subject.<sup>2</sup>

We do not know the exact **date** when John wrote his book. It is traditionally thought to be the last of the four gospels to be composed. Some

1. Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, *The Coming of the Light: John 1–4* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 13.

2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, trans. W. H. Rambaut, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers 1*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 414.

scholars place its writing before the destruction of the temple in AD 70. But the consensus holds that John wrote it no earlier than AD 80 and perhaps as late as the AD 90s.

Although we must surmise the gospel's author, its **main purpose** is clearly stated: "These 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" (20:31). John is sometimes called the "gospel of belief," because it was written to inspire faith in Jesus and his gospel. Specifically, it tells us that we are to believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and also that, through faith in him, we receive "life in his name." Given this statement of purpose, we may approach the gospel of John as especially communicating these two precious themes.

The first **theme**—the gospel of John's overwhelming presentation of Jesus as the Son of God—makes it widely recommended to those who are looking for an introduction to the Christian faith. Its opening lines refer to Jesus as "the Word" who in the beginning was "with God" and "was God" (1:1). Then, toward the end of the book, the disciple Thomas believes and falls before Jesus, after his resurrection from the dead, crying, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). In between these two poles, the book presents numerous claims of Jesus's deity. John's prologue in chapter 1 describes Jesus's incarnation in terms of Isaiah 7:14's promise regarding *Immanuel* ("God with us"): "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" (1:14). Joined with John's teaching about Jesus's deity is his equal insistence on the doctrine of the Trinity, since Jesus is "the only God, who is at the Father's side" and "has made him known" (1:18).

After John's prologue comes what scholars refer to as the "Book of Signs" (1–11), which consists largely of Jesus's miracles. These further display his deity. Jesus turns water into wine in John 2; performs miraculous healings in John 4, 5, and 9; feeds more than five thousand people with a few loaves and fish, then walks on water, in John 6; and raises Lazarus from the grave in John 11. His claim to deity brings him into conflict with the religious authorities, which leads him to make even clearer statements regarding his divine nature. For instance, when Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58), he deliberately takes God's most sacred self-revelation and applies it to himself (see Ex. 3:14).

John's gospel is known for its seven famous "I am" sayings. Jesus associates his ministry with God's gift of manna to Israel in the desert: "I am the bread of life" (6:35). He sets himself forth as the true source of divine blessing: "I am the light of the world" (9:5). He is "the door" (10:9), "the good shepherd" (10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "the true vine" (15:1). These claims are clear and bold, and by them we learn how Jesus brings God's saving grace to a world that is lost in sin.

Connected to the theme of Jesus's divinity is the idea that he is "the Christ." The Greek word *Christos* is a translation of the Hebrew *Meshuach*: the long-awaited Messiah of God's people. This word means "anointed one" and refers to the three anointed offices that Jesus came to fulfill: prophet, priest, and king.

- Jesus is the true prophetic revelation of God's being and character. By his gracious nature, righteous deeds, and saving words, Jesus reveals God to all the world: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).
- Jesus also comes as the true King of God's people, in the line of his earthly father, David. When the Roman governor Pontius Pilate claims authority over Jesus, Jesus replies to him, "My kingdom is not of this world" (18:36)—referring to the kingdom of heaven.
- Jesus comes as the Priest who cleanses believers from their sins by offering himself as their true atoning sacrifice. The second main portion of John's gospel, known as the "Book of the Passion" (12–21), records the events surrounding Jesus's crucifixion and his glorious resurrection from the grave.

Jesus the Christ fulfills the work of the prophets by revealing God through his own life. He restores kingly rule over God's redeemed people, and he ministers as the true Priest by shedding his own blood, just as John the Baptist predicted (see 1:29).

If the first part of John's purpose is to persuade us that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God," the second part, and second theme, is to show that we receive eternal life through personal faith in Jesus. The most well-known verse in John—and perhaps the whole Bible—eloquently states this gospel truth: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that



whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). The appeals that the book contains about taking up personal faith in Jesus start with Jesus’s call to his disciples in John 1. After Jesus’s first miracle, we read that “his disciples believed in him” (2:11). Jesus says that “the Son of Man [must] be lifted up [on the cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14–15). God the Father invests Jesus with the authority to save, and so Jesus declares, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment” (5:24). Again and again, John connects personal faith in Jesus to forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In addition to the themes of Jesus’s deity and our salvation through faith, John includes additional content that is absent from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In particular, the early chapters of his gospel provide more scenes from Jesus’s ministry of evangelism, as the Savior calls disciples to trust and follow him. John provides new information about Jesus’s calling of the disciples and follows it with his nighttime encounter with the Pharisee Nicodemus, during which Jesus tells him, “You must be born again” (3:7). Particularly uplifting is Jesus’s saving encounter with an unnamed woman by a well, whom Jesus offers the “living water” of spiritual life (4:10; see also v. 14). When the woman believes, she immediately tells the people of her village about Jesus, and they too believe. Like this woman, readers are motivated and instructed to spread the gospel by Jesus’s command at the book’s conclusion: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (20:21).

Further new material consists of Jesus’s Farewell Discourse in John 13–16, followed by his High Priestly Prayer in John 17. In these chapters, John provides great detail about Jesus’s last meal with his disciples on the night of his arrest. After humbly washing their feet, Jesus discusses at length the provision of the Holy Spirit after Jesus has departed from the world. In John 17, one of the most remarkable and informative chapters of the entire Bible, Jesus prays to the Father for his church as he stands on the brink of surrendering himself to the cross. As we listen to the Son of God praying for us, we stand like Moses on holy ground, filled with astonished adoration as Jesus’s love for our souls is revealed.

As do Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John narrates the details of Jesus’s atoning death and glorious resurrection, but this book again provides a wealth of material that is not found elsewhere. The world, in all its malice,

conducts a false trial to legitimize Jesus's murder. Pilate, who represents the authority of man's kingdom, cynically consigns Jesus to death despite his clear innocence. Jesus is presented to the Jewish crowd in a "crown of thorns and [a] purple robe" (19:5)—in mockery of his divine claims—and Pilate affixes a sign to his cross that reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (v. 19). As Jesus dies on the cross for our sin, he cries aloud glorious words of victory—"It is finished" (v. 30)—before giving up his life. After he rises from the grave on the third day, he meets with Mary Magdalene and "doubting" Thomas, among others, to present them with his resurrection body. The book concludes with Jesus's tender pastoral ministry to Simon Peter, as he graciously gives him the commission "Feed my sheep" (21:17).

Countless readers have discovered the truth about Jesus and his gospel in the pages of John. It is, in fact, Jesus himself whom we meet in this book, through the ministry of God's Holy Spirit and the words of inspired Scripture. Jesus himself promises you that if you believe in him and read this gospel in faith, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:32).

Richard D. Phillips  
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series  
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Bible Study series  
Author of *John* (REC)



## LESSON 1

# THE ETERNAL WORD

John 1:1–18

### THE BIG PICTURE

Matthew, Mark, and Luke—which are often referred to as the *Synoptic Gospels*—share many accounts, organizational structures, and themes. The gospel of John stands apart from them by providing many unique insights into the incarnation, life, teaching ministry, signs, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In this lesson, we will study John’s thoroughly theological introduction to his gospel.

In these opening eighteen verses, John echoes the opening verses of the Bible as he presents Jesus as the eternal “Word” of God, who is eternally existent, coequal with God the Father, and active in the creation of the universe (1:1–3). This Word came as the “light” in order to shine in a world that is dark with sin and rebelling against its Creator (1:4–5). John then introduces the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist, who, as the final prophetic witness to the Son of God and light of the world, preceded Jesus and heralded his coming (1:6–8). After this, we are told that many will sinfully reject Jesus, when he comes, but that some will believe and be saved by him—and will thus take on the privilege of being “children of God” (1:9–13).

John concludes his introduction by explaining the theological significance of Jesus’s incarnation. The eternal Word took on flesh and dwelt in the midst of God’s people (1:14–18). Through Jesus, the eternal God of the universe has made himself known to sinners, who can find grace when they believe in him.

**Read John 1:1–18.**

**GETTING STARTED**

1. Have you studied the gospel of John in detail before? If so, what about the book encouraged you the most? What aspects of it were challenging or confusing?
  
2. What tends to confuse people about the identity and person of Jesus Christ—especially as they concern his incarnation and his existence during eternity past?

**OBSERVING THE TEXT**

3. How would you describe the tone, style, and approach of the opening verses of John's gospel? What seem to be the most important points he is communicating?

**A Theological Introduction, pg. 7**

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. . . . John's prologue gives a theological explanation for Jesus' coming into the world, beginning with his eternal origin before the creation of all things.

4. What aspects of Jesus Christ's coming to earth does John emphasize in these first eighteen verses? What do we learn from them about Jesus's identity? What do we learn about human beings?
5. Who else appears, and is named, in these opening verses, and what role does he have in relation to Jesus Christ?

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. The opening verses of this passage shape the way we understand Jesus Christ as a member of the Trinity (1:1–3). In what sense is he distinct from God the Father? And yet how do these verses make it clear that he is also fully and completely God?

### **What Is Saving Faith? pg. 45**

If faith in Christ is the great distinction, we should want to know what faith is. John 1:12 gives a definition: "All who did receive him, who believed in his name." Faith, then, involves believing and receiving Jesus Christ as he has revealed himself—in his person and saving work.

7. What is the significance of the imagery of “light” and “darkness” that we see in 1:4–5—and how does this imagery echo the opening verses of Genesis?
  
8. What do we learn about John the Baptist in 1:6–8? What additional details are we given about him in 1:15? Why do you think the apostle John establishes what John the Baptist’s role is as his gospel begins?
  
9. How do many people in the world respond to the Word (1:9–11)? What about their response is surprising, sad, or ironic? How do you think John intends us to view this response?
  
10. John gives us eternally and gloriously good news in 1:12–13. What is the right way to respond to the light that has come into our world? What blessings come to those who respond this way?

11. What was an important consequence of the fact that Jesus came in the “flesh” to dwell in the midst of God’s people (1:14)? What contrast does John again draw between the ministry of Jesus and the role of Moses (1:15–17)? What does the Word ultimately and fully communicate to human beings (1:18)?

### BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read Genesis 1:1–3. What close echoes of these opening verses of the Bible do you see in the opening verses of John’s gospel? What is John communicating about Jesus by including them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
13. While we are beginning our study of the gospel of John, take a moment to read John 20:31—which is often identified as John’s “purpose statement” for why he composed this gospel. What does John want his readers to know and believe about Jesus? Why does he want them to know and believe this?



## THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. As we saw on page 9 of the introduction, Martin Luther called John “the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel” and wrote, “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.” Why do you think Luther would have held such a high view of this particular gospel? What is unique about the opening eighteen verses of John in comparison with the opening lines of the other three gospels?
  
15. Answer 21 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism explains that Jesus Christ, “being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.” What about Jesus Christ changed at the moment of his incarnation? What remained, and still remains, unchanged about the second person of the Trinity?

### **Give Yourself Wholly, pg. 41**

Do we receive Christ wholeheartedly, gratefully, and publicly? Or are we too enamored of the world to let it know that we have been saved out of it? Thank God that salvation is by grace alone and that there is forgiveness for our sin. But let us be grateful and receive Jesus as his people should, giving ourselves wholly to him.



## PRAYER PROMPT

As you come to the end of this first lesson, take a few moments to praise God for the amazing revelation of himself that he shared by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, in the flesh. Thank him for sending Jesus to dwell in our midst as one who is fully God and fully man. Praise him for the gift of salvation that he offers, by grace and through faith, to all who will believe in him.