

Lesson 1

Gospel of John



Prologue

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

Introduction

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue that introduces themes present throughout the rest of the book much the way an overture introduces the musical themes of a symphony. In his opening verses, the Evangelist sets forth theological ideas that he'll return to again and again. He immediately captures readers' attention with the startling disclosure that a Palestinian rabbi who died an ignominious death some 30-60 years earlier is, in fact, the God of Israel and Creator of the universe. Then the apostle John goes on to demonstrate how this stunning news was anticipated in Hebrew Scriptures and foretold by the prophets. He introduces the last and greatest of these prophets—John the Baptist. Finally, the Evangelist distinguishes the Son of God and his mission from Old Testament prophecy and law—both of which were given by God the Father in order to bear witness to the Son. That Son—the second person of the Blessed Trinity—now is revealed to be Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word made flesh.

John 1:1-18

1 ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God; ³all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

⁹The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. ¹¹He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:1-18

¹⁴**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.** ¹⁵(John bore witness to him, and cried, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) ¹⁶And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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Study Questions

It’s best to read all of John 1:1-18 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

The Word

John 1:1-5

1. Read Genesis 1:1-5, and list the parallels between the opening verses of the Gospel of John and the opening verses of Genesis.
2. Who is the Word that the apostle John writes about in the prologue to his Gospel? In John 1:3, what is meant by “all things” (see *1 Cor* 8:6 and *Col* 1:16)?
3. John 1:4 states that “the life was the light of men.” Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, what are the meanings of the words “life” (see *Jn* 3:16, *Jn* 3:36, *Jn* 6:27, *Jn* 10:10b, and *Jn* 14:6) and “light” (see *Jn* 3:19-21 and *Jn* 8:12)?

4. What kind of darkness is the Evangelist writing about in his prologue (see *Ps* 82:4-5, *Prov* 4:19, *Acts* 26:18, *2 Cor* 4:4, and *Eph* 5:8)? The word translated as “overcome” in John 1:5 also can mean “understood.” What does that double meaning suggest in John’s Gospel?

A Man Sent from God

John 1:6-8

5. What is John the Baptist’s mission? What does the Gospel say isn’t John the Baptist’s mission? Why might the Evangelist need to emphasize in his Gospel that John the Baptist isn’t the light?

The True Light

John 1:9-13

6. What is the contrast between “all who received him” and “his own people” in John 1:12-13? What is the difference between a birth “of blood”—“of the will of the flesh” or “of the will of man”—and birth “of God”?

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:14-18

7. **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.** John 1:14 (our suggested memory verse) records that “the Word became flesh.” What is meant by this?
8. In John 1:15, John the Baptist bears witness that Jesus was before him. What is the double meaning of the word “before” in this statement?

John Lesson 1 Study Questions

9. In John 1:16, the Evangelist mentions grace. How does the Catholic Church define grace (see *CCC* 1996 and 1997)?

10. In John 1:17, the Evangelist mentions Jesus by name for the first time. What reason does he give for why Jesus is superior to Moses (see *CCC* 578)?

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in John 1:1-18 might apply to your own life:

1. In what ways does your life “bear witness to the light” as John the Baptist’s did? Describe a time when you were afraid to be bold and speak out for Jesus. Does someone you know—perhaps a friend, family member or co-worker—need you to be a witness to the light of Christ for them right now?

2. As a result of the Incarnation, whenever humans look at Jesus, they’re looking directly at God. John 1:17-18 explains that grace and truth are given by Jesus to help us see and know the Father. In what specific ways has your relationship with the Father changed as you have come to know the Son?

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder—*John 1:1-18*

John and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture

John, like all of the New Testament writers, sees Scripture as having multiple layers of meaning. When the Old Testament describes God’s feeding the people of Israel with manna in the wilderness, John understands this as an historic literal event but he also perceives it in a more-than-literal sense. The Evangelist knows that the event itself points to a greater truth—Jesus is the Bread of Life revealed in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The idea that Scripture has both “outer” and “inner” realities forms the basis for the apostle John’s thinking and writing. As St. Augustine put it, the New Covenant is hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New. It’s impossible for readers to fully understand the Gospel of John if they aren’t familiar with key Old Testament events. John begins by peppering his prologue with allusions to creation as recorded in Genesis. At the same time, it’s difficult to fully comprehend creation without an understanding of Jesus as the eternal Word through whom God made the world and everything in it.

This interplay between the Old and New Testaments is what the Fathers of the Church call the “divine economy.” It shows who God is and what he’s like, similar to the way a work of art reveals information about the artist who created it. Knowing God leads to greater understanding of his works and words. Paragraph 236 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “God’s works reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works.” In short, human beings know who God is by what he does, and God’s people come to understand the meaning of what God does by coming to know better who he is.

Overture

Light, life, the creative Word of God, and other important themes strongly articulated by John in the prologue of his Gospel (*Jn* 1:1-18) aren’t ideas that the Evangelist has simply pulled from thin air. With his first three words, John suggests a connection between the events he’s about to relate and the very roots of Old Testament revelation. In the beginning verses of the book of Genesis, these same ideas—light, life, the creative Word of God, and others—are articulated for the first time. By making this important link, the apostle John is saying all that was present “in the beginning” now is being revealed in fullness in Jesus, the Incarnate Word. Jesus isn’t an afterthought or a break with Old Testament revelation. He’s the very fulfillment of it.

John’s prologue is dense with meaning. For example, the first verses simultaneously recall the book of Genesis and reveal with amazing compression the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. When the Evangelist writes about the Word he isn’t referring to any sounds uttered by human beings, or even to Scripture itself, but to the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son who is both God from all eternity and yet a person distinct from God the Father. The Word is God the Father’s perfect self-expression, uttered from all eternity, through whom God made all things.

Because of this, Jesus as the Word is “in the beginning” or “first” in a double sense. He’s first in that he exists before creation, but he’s also first in that he’s the author and Lord of all creation. He’s “in the beginning” both in sequence and in rank. Colossians 1:15-17 echoes the same theme about Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” While man is made *in* God’s image, Jesus *is* God’s image. The Word, then, isn’t the first thing created by God the Father. The Word is, instead, God the Son, through whom all things were made. The Evangelist firmly insists that the Word *is* God.

This tendency to use terms having double meanings or to make allusions that have multiple layers is a constant feature of John’s Gospel. The work is packed with words and ideas that are themselves loaded with allusions, connotations, and connections. To return to the musical analogy,

John Lesson 1 Points to Ponder

John almost never plays simple melodies—he likes to use chords. He deliberately forces his audience to ask: “Which meaning is he getting at?” Virtually always, the answer is: “All of them.”

The Evangelist wants readers to understand that Jesus is the same Creator God spoken of in the very first verse of Genesis—and as such he’s existed from all eternity. John also wants his audience to understand that Jesus is “in the beginning” in the order of being at the present moment—he’s “in the beginning” *right now*. All things continue in existence from nanosecond to nanosecond because the Word is holding them in being at this exact moment. Further, Jesus is “in the beginning” in the sense that he’s the holy God who—because of his deity—is greater, mightier and infinitely more holy than the whole of creation or anything in it.

Creation for the Sake of the New Creation

It’s a common mistake to try to assign different roles to each divine person in the Blessed Trinity. As a result of such befuddled thinking, Christians sometimes attempt to improve on the devotion of the Sign of the Cross by praying, “in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier.” To separate God in this way implies that God the Father created the world without God the Son and without the Holy Spirit. In such a view, the Incarnation is a sort of afterthought to a story that got away from its author, and redemption is seen as a last-ditch attempt by God to patch things up. In reality, each person of the Blessed Trinity is a full participant in all three actions of the Godhead—creation, redemption, and sanctification.

The apostle John wants readers to see God the Son as the author of creation whose plan for the redemption of the world is foreseen “in the beginning.” Jesus hasn’t been waiting in the wings during the eons before his Incarnation. From beginning to end, the whole universal production belongs to Jesus, in union with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Word spoken by the Father who brought all creation into being. He’s the Wisdom of God who knows all things and who orders all things to his glory and for the good of all the world.

According to John, creation was brought into being precisely in order that it might be redeemed by God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The world was made to be renewed. Redemption is not “plan B.” Creation and redemption are one seamless plan. The first creation, which was damaged by the fall of Satan and the original sin of Adam and Eve, is like a caterpillar to the butterfly of the new creation. One of the Evangelist’s other great biblical works, *The Revelation to John* (the *Apocalypse*), strongly reflects this. The old Jerusalem exists for the sake of the new Jerusalem. The old heaven and earth become the new heaven and earth. God made the world to renew the world. While the Old Covenant established the order of nature, the New Covenant infuses that nature with grace.

John the Baptist

In the prologue to his Gospel, the Evangelist introduces the figure of John the Baptist and takes special care to reiterate that the Baptist wasn’t the light but had only come to bear witness to the light. This theme repeatedly is emphasized—Jesus must increase and John the Baptist must decrease; after John comes one who is greater; John is only the friend of the bridegroom and not

the bridegroom himself. This repetition strongly suggests that the apostle John's audience included disciples of a sect that venerated John the Baptist as some kind of supreme rabbi. Acts 18:24—19:7 records that such a sect appears to have been centered in Ephesus. Its members, while familiar with the Baptism of repentance preached by John the Baptist, had only partial knowledge of Jesus or of the Baptist's witness to him, and they were wholly ignorant of the existence of the Holy Spirit and of sacramental Baptism. The Evangelist very likely wrote his Gospel in part to catechize adherents of this sect.

He Gave Power to Become Children of God

In the grand scheme of things as seen by the apostle John, the ultimate reason for the first creation is the new creation. The new heavens and the new earth are the end goal. This isn't to say that the first creation is "bad" and the new one "good." The Blessed Trinity is the author of both, and therefore, as readers of Genesis repeatedly are assured, all creation is "good." God creates through his Word so that Word can fill creation and redeem it by assuming it to himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus Christ perfects nature.

Through the mystery of the Word made flesh, Jesus assumes humanity so that humans may share in his divinity. That isn't New Age talk, nor is it pantheism (the belief that everything is God). Rather, it's the explicit teaching of St. Peter himself, who writes that Christians have been made "partakers in the divine nature" (2 *Pet* 1:4). It's also the teaching of the apostle John, who writes in his first letter: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 *Jn* 3:1).

Divine sonship and daughterhood, an enormously important feature of the faith, distinguishes Catholicism not only from other non-Christian religious traditions but also from many Protestant expressions of Christianity. A number of traditions teach that when a person is justified by faith he or she is "declared" to be justified through a sort of legal fiction but isn't, in fact, transformed and made just. To use an old image attributed to Martin Luther, sins are covered over and hidden from sight, but they remain present—much like dunghills hidden beneath fresh snow.

In contrast, the Catholic Church and the Bible teach that justification and salvation consist of not merely being called "children of God" but of actually *being* children of God (1 *Jn* 3:1). When a person receives sanctifying grace through the sacraments, he or she receives a mystical infusion of the very life of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the teaching of the apostle John himself, and it's remained the teaching of the Church down through the centuries. Pope Pius XI explicitly taught: "Ours is a religion of divine sonship."

In his Gospel, the Evangelist sees the new birth that Jesus offers as greater than any physical birth and also greater than any spiritual distinction conferred by following the Mosaic Law. Neither natural birth (birth "of blood," "of the will of the flesh," or "of the will of man") nor the law that came through Moses can confer divine sonship—only the divine Son himself can do this. As John the Baptist will testify later in the fourth Gospel, Jesus is from above. Even Moses, great as he is, is a mere man. Moses can't give what he doesn't have. Only the Son, the Word who's God and who's with God—who's in the very bosom of the Father—can give the divine sonship that has been his from all eternity.

Catechism Connections

- To learn how Old Testament figures and events serve as types (or prototypes) of the fulfillment of God’s plan in the person of Christ, see *CCC* 128-130.
- For further explanation of the divine economy and its relationship to theology, see *CCC* 236.
- To learn the four reasons why the Word became flesh, as well as for an explanation of divine sonship, see *CCC* 457-460.
- For information about the way Jesus reveals the Fatherhood of God, see *CCC* 151 and *CCC* 2780.
- To learn more about grace as participation in the Blessed Trinity, see *CCC* 1996 and *CCC* 1997.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II wrote much about the completeness of God’s revelation of himself through his Incarnate Word. Here he addresses how knowing the fullness of truth leads to the Church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

In the Gospel of St. John, this salvific universality of Christ embraces all the aspects of his mission of grace, truth and revelation: the Word is “the true light that enlightens every man” (*Jn* 1:9). And again, “no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (*Jn* 1:18 and *Mt* 11:27). God’s revelation becomes definitive and complete through his only-begotten Son: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world” (*Heb* 1:1-2 and *Jn* 14:6). In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. He has revealed to mankind who he is. This definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature. She cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself.

—*Redemptoris Missio*

Summary

In John 1:1-18, we observed that:

1. The prologue to the Gospel of John is like a symphonic overture, sounding the themes of light and life that will be heard throughout the Gospel.
2. The Evangelist roots his Gospel in the testimony of the Old Testament at the very moment he's proclaiming the New Testament revelation of the Blessed Trinity.
3. The Word isn't a creature but the second person of the Blessed Trinity.
4. The Gospel of John uses language with double meanings in order to convey the richness of Divine Revelation.
5. Creation and redemption are seen by the Evangelist as one complete act of the Blessed Trinity.

John Notes

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