

Lesson One

(John 1:1-18)

Background Notes

John the Apostle was the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21). He was a commercial fisherman on the sea of Galilee, along with his father and his brother James. John and James were in a partnership with Simon Peter when Jesus called them all to work with him as fishers of men (Luke 5:1-11). But James was killed during the reign of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2).

John quickly became one of Jesus' most trusted disciples. John was present when Jesus was transfigured (Matt. 17:1-5), when Jesus was crucified (John 19:16-35), and when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost in 30 A.D. (Acts 1 and 2). He and Peter cured a lame man and were thrown into prison by the Jewish authorities (Acts 3 and 4). Later, John went to Samaria to help those whom Phillip the Evangelist had led to the Lord (Acts 8:5-25). And he was present at the special conference at Jerusalem

(Acts 15; Gal. 2:9). Late in life he was exiled to the Island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation.

John's record of the good news about Jesus was a direct result of the Holy Spirit's influence upon him. Jesus himself had promised John and the other apostles, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and make you remember all that I have told you" (John 14:26). So this book or letter was actually composed with the help of the Holy Spirit. It was probably written at Ephesus sometime between 80 and 100 A.D.

The Gospel of John was written as a tool for witnessing, for John says: "Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life" (John 20:30-31). So John's primary concern is not for strict chronological accuracy, but for the impact which each line would have upon his readers.

Like a skillful lawyer, John introduces solid, reliable evidence to show that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. One by one he calls witnesses to the stand. John the Baptist, a man who was loved and admired by the common people, gives his striking testimony about Jesus. A noted Jewish leader admits that the works of Jesus confirm his authority from God. A Samaritan woman meets Jesus and convinces an entire village to come and listen to his teachings. A government official presents evidence that his dying son was healed the exact moment when Jesus pronounced him well. A man who was born blind says that Jesus healed him. 5,000 people express amazement and gratitude for being fed by Jesus.

And then there are those marvelous actions which speak for themselves: his ability to walk upon the raging sea; the raising of Lazarus from the grave; and his own resurrection. No wonder that John had to explain, "Now, there are many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Throughout this Gospel (and also his Epistles), John emphasizes that God sent Jesus Christ — his Son who existed with him always and who is co-equal with him and the Holy Spirit — to live as a human upon the earth for a special purpose. John paints a picture of powerful contrasts: truth (light) verses

falsehood (darkness), the children of God verses the children of Satan, good verses evil. From a human viewpoint, man didn't stand a chance.

But the joyous and hope-building message of this Gospel comes through loud and clear: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16). John, like every faithful preacher and Bible teacher, focuses our attention directly upon Jesus. It is Jesus who brings victory over sin, despair, and death. Praise the Lord!

The Word of Life

(John 1:1-18)

The first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John form an introduction (often called "The Prologue") detailing some essentials of the Christian faith. Carefully notice what John asserts about the background and character of Jesus.

¹Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. ²From the very beginning, the Word was with God. ³Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. ⁴The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out (John 1:1-5).

When Paul visited Athens, he noticed that the people had inscribed one of their many altars "To the Unknown God." So Paul took that concept and used it to reveal the real God to them (Acts 17:23). In a similar way, John uses a popular concept of his day to tell his readers what they needed to know about Jesus Christ.

The Greek term *logos*, here translated as "Word," was commonly used to describe the way or means by which God gave wisdom to people. So John picks the concept up at that point and argues that the Word is not a mystical method, but a man who is also God — Jesus Christ! This approach was especially appropriate for the non-Jewish population, for many of the Jewish ideas (such as the promise of a Messiah and their emphasis upon geneologies) were unfamiliar to the Gentile mind.

So John affirms that the Word, Jesus Christ, was co-equal with God the Father and actually existed with him before anything at all was created. The Old Testament conveys the idea that the

word of God is an expression of God's rational, creative energy (Genesis 1:3,6,11). And John applies that idea to him who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). Jesus was to God what your own thought and word is to you, a medium through which God the Father expressed his personality and revealed his will for mankind.

1:3 stresses the unity of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and their mutual participation in the creation of all things. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end. He reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with his powerful word. After achieving forgiveness for the sins of mankind, he sat down in heaven at the right side of God, the Supreme Power" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

In 1:4-5, John introduces the idea that the life which Jesus offers is the only one that provides eternal safety (John 3:16; 3:36; 6:47). Then he states that just as the morning sunrise chases night's dark shadows away, Jesus dispels spiritual darkness. For Jesus reveals things as they really are. Lust is not normal; it is sinful (Matt. 5:28). Hatred is actually a form of murder (Matt. 5:22). And so by the light of his word, Jesus shows us the right path to follow (John 12:36).

Just as physical light was given to the world (Genesis 1:3), spiritual light came through Jesus Christ and is available to all people (John 8:12; 9:5; 11:10). But those who reject the Light and have fellowship with works of darkness will one day be cast into darkness for eternity (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Make no mistake about it: the darkness of which John speaks was and still is violently opposed to the light. Evil people love to do their wicked deeds by cover of darkness (John 3:19-20). But there is hope! "For the darkness is passing away, and the real light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).

⁶God sent his messenger, a man named John, ⁷who came to tell people about the light, so that all should hear the message and believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came to tell about the light. ⁹This was the real light — the light that comes into the world and shines on all mankind.

¹⁰The Word was in the world, and through God made the world

through him, yet the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. ¹²Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children. ¹³They did not become God's children by natural means, that is, by being born as the children of a human father; God himself was their Father (John 1:6-13).

The apostle's purpose here is not to degrade the faithful service of John the Baptist, but to make sure that his status is kept in perspective. The Baptist's own ministry was as spectacular as a fireworks display, but it was only a prelude to the miraculous works of Jesus. For the light of Jesus shined upon all men through the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his own testimony (John 8:14,18), the witness of God the Father (John 5:37), the witness of his actions (John 5:36; 10:25), the witness of the Old Testament scriptures (John 5:39,46), the witness of God the Holy Spirit (John 15:26), and the witness of all those whose lives he touched.

It is sobering to realize that the Greek noun *marturia*, often translated as "witness," is closely related to another Greek noun, *martur*. It is from *martur* that we get our English word, "martyr," signifying one who bears testimony through his death. When one remembers that John the Baptist, Stephen, James, and countless others have died for Jesus, there is an awakening to the truth that to become a witness for Jesus often results in becoming a martyr for him as well.

In 1:9 John speaks of each person as potentially, rather than actually, having this spiritual enlightenment. Contrary to the subjective and passive "Inner Light" theory of the Society of Friends (Quakers), no person is every enlightened against his will. Jesus came to illuminate the minds of those who are open and honest with great truths which have been hidden since before the world itself began (Eph. 1:7-10).

In 1:11-13 we are reminded that the events recorded in the Old Testament should have acted as a "school of hard knocks" to bring the Jewish people to their knees before the Son of God (Gal. 3:24). But by and large they were more interested in having a great military commander or an aggressive king to lead them. That is why Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem, knowing that they would pay a terrible price for rejecting his authority over them (Luke 19:41).

But then, as today, there were some among the Jews who loved and accepted Jesus as their Messiah or Christ. And when they did

so, God welcomed them as his children. "See how much the Father has loved us! His love is so great that we are called God's children — and so, in fact, we are" (1 John 3:1).

However, as 1:13 and 3:1-15 point out, the New Birth does not depend upon being in the right line of genealogy, a concept in which the Jews placed much hope. Jesus told his apostles to tell others about him, to immerse those who believed in him and repented of their sins, and to give each convert further instructions on how to live the Christian life (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). It was no accident, then, that in Acts 2 the apostles preached the Word of God, immersed those who believed and repented, and taught them further. That is also the work of every Christian today!

¹⁴The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son.

¹⁵John spoke about him. He cried out, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.'"

¹⁶Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another. ¹⁷God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:14-18).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote as much as 35 years before John did, and they thoroughly discussed the birth and genealogy of Jesus. So John chooses simply to affirm that the Divine became human and lived upon the earth for a time. In his later writings, the apostle warns that there are false teachers who actually deny that God would do such a thing (1 John 4:2-3).

John asserts that it was not only Jesus' teachings that gave men a glimpse of God, but also his own character and life style. "We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes, we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3).

There is a story about a Chinese youth who wanted to become an authority on jade jewelry. So he became an apprentice under

an elderly man who was recognized as an expert in the field. The old gentleman began by putting a piece of jade into the young man's hands and telling him to hold it tight. Then he began to casually talk about the rice crops, the weather, philosophy, and anything else that wandered across his mind. After an hour of this activity, he took the jade stone back and sent the young man home for the day.

The next morning the young man came back to the old man's shop, eager to actually begin learning about jade. To his amazement the same thing happened again. And after this procedure was repeated daily for several weeks, the young man was tempted to interrupt his venerable teacher and ask when he was really going to learn about jade. But one day as the teacher put a stone into his hands, the young man perceptively objected, "Sir, that's not jade!"

So it was that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, became a man and lived upon the earth. And those who study his life can clearly see that he is Divine. It was because of Jesus' unique relationship with God the Father that John uses the Greek adjective *monogenes* (one of a kind; unique) five times in reference to him in this book.

Paul Butler notes that "John uses an interesting word in the Greek for 'declared'. He uses *exegesato*, from which we get our English words exegesis and exegetical, meaning literally to lead out, or interpret. In other words, Christ, through His incarnation, has interpreted God for us" (*The Gospel of John*, I, 34).

Thought Stimulators on John 1:1-18

1. Why did John write this gospel?
2. Define "Logos" in your own words.
3. What characteristics do you see in John the Baptist that Christians today should imitate?
4. List what John 1:1-18 tells you about Jesus.
5. Strengthen your own faith this week by sharing what Jesus has done in your own life. Either write a letter to a non-Christian friend, or strike up a spiritual conversation with a stranger. (NOTE: Don't merely invite the person to church; tell him what Jesus has done for you.) Report your own feelings about your experience to your teacher.
6. Tell what you know about the apostle John.
7. Who helped John to write this gospel?
8. When was this gospel written?
9. Does John record all of the miracles which Jesus performed?

10. Through whom was the world created?
11. Where will those people who reject the Light be spending eternity?
12. How does a person become a child of God?
13. Explain the statement that "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18).
14. Why does John the Baptist say that Jesus "is greater than I am"?