

# The Gospel of John

## Session 1

### John 1:1-2:12

#### I. John 1:1-18

1. The Prologue to John's gospel introduces its basic themes and provides the key to interpreting what follows correctly. It states John's basic Christology: Jesus is the incarnation of God's preexistent Word. It is through him that God the Father is revealed, the gift of the Law is perfected, divine adoption effected, and True Life bestowed. All of this has to be spelled out in greater detail and this is the purpose of the gospel's narrative. The Prologue provides the key to interpreting the gospel properly because it enables us to read the narrative as a narrative of the actions of God. Because of the incarnation, the human actions of Jesus are simultaneously the actions of God.
2. **1:1-5:** John deliberately begins his gospel in exactly the same way as the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) text of Genesis 1:1. This alerts us to the fact that John's starting point is before creation. Here, we learn three essential things about the Word. (1) The Word existed before creation. The Bible divides all of reality between Creator and creation and John makes it clear that the Word is on the Creator side of this dividing line. (2) The Word was "with God" (1:1). The Word was dynamically related to God before creation existed. (3) God and the Word share the same nature ("divinity") but they are distinct; the Word is not simply another name for God. To avoid this confusion (the heresy of modalism), 1:14 will employ the terminology of "Father" for "God" and "Son" for "Word". The Word played a crucial role in creation in that "all things" (1:3) were made through him. In Proverbs 8:22-36, Wisdom (personified) plays this role in creation. The Word is the source of creation's fundamental order and structure. All things in the universe have a relationship to the Word who makes each thing what it is. The Word is the source of both Life and Light (and both these words need to be capitalized). Through the Word (incarnate), the Father communicates Life (eternal life) and revelation (Light). 1:5 is a reference to the incarnation. This Light has pierced the darkness in the past (in Christ) and, despite the persistence of sin and evil, the darkness remains pierced. (This is an important theme.)
3. **1:6-14:** With this section we make an abrupt shift from "before creation" to "within history". This shift makes an important point. The narrative we are about to read (or listen to!) is like the Old Testament in that it is a fundamentally historical narrative; it speaks of God's action within history. The Old Testament teaches us to expect this and John will meet this expectation but in a radicalized way (as indicated in 1:14). At this point, John the Baptist enters the picture by way of introduction. In 1:6 he is identified as "a man sent from God". Since Jesus is the only other person in this gospel identified in this way, John is clearly significant. John's role is identified in 1:7. He is a "witness" and his role is to "bear witness" to the Word. Testimony, both human and divine, is important to John. John's role is not to call attention to himself (3:30!). It is made clear that John is not the Light but that he was sent from God to bear witness to the Light (perhaps along the lines suggested by Luke 1:76-79). 1:9 is another reference to the incarnation. Even as John is being sent as a witness, the Light is coming into the world. In 1:10-11 we see the reality of sin. When the Word comes to the world that was made through him, he is unrecognizable to the creatures made in his image. And, more specifically, when he comes to "his own" (Israel) he is not received. John points to the deep effects of sin. Corrupted by it, human beings do not recognize their Creator. Israel, God's covenant people, fails to receive the Word of God. 1:12 indicates that the proper way to receive the Word is to believe. The nature of belief will be spelled out in the narrative. The Word enables human beings to be adopted as God's children. This "birth" is unlike the natural process of birth in that no human will or resources can bring it about. With regard to this

supernatural birth, the human will counts for nothing because it must be “of God”. Only God can bring it about. 1:14 picks up at the point where 1:5 left off. The Word, which preexisted creation and through whom creation was brought about, entered into creation and dwelt among human beings. This recalls two famous acts of dwelling from the Old Testament. There is the dwelling of Wisdom with Israel in Sirach 24:8. Here, a tent is pitched for Wisdom so that she can dwell among Israel. There is the dwelling of God in the tabernacle tent in Exodus 40:35. Now, the dwelling of God takes place in the humanity of Christ and he is the true Temple (2:13-22). Note that this means that eternity and time, God and creation, and God and human beings are not opposites. The Word, who preexisted creation with the Father, now enters into creation by “tabernacling” within it. In this capacity, he reveals God within the human situation and asserts God’s claim over the whole of creation. The Word reveals God’s glory through his incarnation. This is significant since only God can reveal his glory for this is a uniquely divine property. The Son shared in the glory of the Father before time (17:5) and reveals this glory through his incarnation (to the extent that it can be known by human beings). This may be a reference to Exodus 34:6 in which God reveals his graciousness. The Son reveals the graciousness of God which is the Truth about God. (We have to read the whole Gospel to see how this unfolds.)

4. **1:15-18:** 1:15 refers back to John the Baptist’s witness. While John’s appearance comes before Christ’s chronologically, he makes it clear that in an absolute sense Christ precedes him (in the sense indicated by 1:1). If one does not grasp the priority of Christ, one will fail to understand him. 1:16 makes an important claim: in Christ we receive a gift which perfects all of God’s other gifts. As Exodus 34:6 indicates, the Son does not mark the first appearance of grace within the relationship between God and creation (for creation is itself a work of grace). What appears in the Son (Truth) perfects all that came before him. For this reason, 1:17 should not be read as a derogatory remark about Moses/Law. John is not contrasting “grace upon grace” with “Moses” but, rather, saying that Jesus Christ perfects the gift of the Law. (Again, we have to read the whole Gospel to discover how this is so.) What is revealed in the Son should not be defined in opposition to the Law. 1:18 is a definitive statement. Since no human being has ever seen God (not even Moses in Exodus 34!), on the Son can make God known and has made him known.
5. **Summary:** The Prologue sets forth the major themes which the Gospel will develop. The first theme is the preexistence of the Word and his role in creation. Because this is the case, the Word can bestow Life and Light since he, along with the Father and the Spirit, is the Source of both. This means that thinking of Jesus Christ as the Messiah is completely inadequate (and it will be presented as such). The Word will bring to perfection the gift of the Law and we are not to understand Law and grace as being in tension. The Son will bring about a new kind of obedience/faithfulness to God. Just as God’s glory was revealed on Mt. Sinai in a definitive way, so the divine glory will be revealed in the Word in a way that will be final.
6. **For Reflection: John 1:14:** St. Augustine offers a profound reflection on this verse. He notes that in the Person of the Word, God was born of a human being (Mary) that we might be born of God. Through the Word, we are reborn or refashioned as children of grace. The Word become flesh, Augustine says, so that we might come to see his majesty through his humility. In becoming incarnate, the Word humbled himself to our weakness, made himself available to our weakened spiritual sight. He works to heal our spiritual sight so that we might come to see his glory. To the degree that we are impaired by sin, we cannot see his glory; only when our sight is healed may we see him truly. “The Son of God by nature became the Son of man by mercy for the sake of human children...Surely, then, how much easier is it to believe that human children by nature can become children of God by grace, and dwell in God? For it is in him alone and thanks to him alone that they can be happy, by sharing his immortality...” (*On the Trinity*, 13.12).

## II. John 1:19-51

1. This section is divided up into four days and then 2:1 reports about what happened "on the third day". This may seem odd at first, as if John failed to realize that the fourth day (1:45-51) should be followed by a fifth day. We need to realize that the "third day" is the day of the revelation of the divine glory on Mt. Sinai in Exodus. God tells Moses that "on the third day" he will descend upon Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:11). Significantly, Jesus' glory is revealed "on the third day" (2:1) as well (note 2:11). We are being told that what happens in 2:1-11 is Mt. Sinai moment with Christ himself being Sinai. In Jesus' day, four days of preparation for the Feast of Pentecost were added to the biblical three days. John is letting us know that 1:19-51 is preparation for a new Pentecost, the revelation of the divine glory in Jesus.
2. **Day 1 (1:19-28):** This day develops 1:6-8 and emphasizes the testimony or witness of John the Baptist. In this Gospel, "the Jews" (1:19) refers to official Judaism (the priests, Levites and their representatives). They ask the central question of the Gospel: "Who are you?" John bears witness to Christ by confessing that he is not the Christ (1:20). He is then asked if he is one of the figures thought to precede the Messiah (Elijah or the Prophet) and vigorously denies even having this status. If John the Baptist is neither the Messiah nor the precursor of the Messiah, then who is he? (1:22). To answer this question, John cites Isaiah 40:3 and this points us in the right direction. He is preparing the way for "the Lord". The origins of baptism are obscure. It does not seem to have been connected with messianic expectation. It may be connected with the Qumran community. Those questioning John want to keep matters within the horizons of their expectations, but he points out that "among you stands one you do not know" (1:26). Those who demand that Christ conform to their criteria will be prevented from knowing him.
3. **Day 2 (1:29-34):** Here John offers testimony (to an unidentified audience) to Christ. He is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world, who preexisted John in both time and rank and the one upon whom the Spirit descended and remained. Note that Jesus' baptism is not described but only indirectly mentioned. John baptized as a witness to Christ so that he might be revealed to Israel (1:31). Apparently, at Jesus' baptism the Father identified the Son to him by sending the Holy Spirit. This is probably a reference to Isaiah 11:2. Once again, we see that all messianic expectations are transcended. The Son comes from the Father and the Spirit remains upon him such that he will play a role in imparting the Spirit to human beings. The Son is also the Lamb of God who removes the sin of the world and, thus, makes reconciliation with the Father possible.
4. **Day 3 (1:35-42):** John repeats his testimony that Christ is the Lamb of God and we now see a movement of two of John's disciples from to Christ. Christ asks them the key question in 1:38: "What are you seeking?" Their reply indicates that they do not sufficiently understand Christ yet (they refer to him as "Teacher"). They assume that Jesus is a rabbi who gathers his students in a particular place, and they want to know where this is (1:38-39). In 1:40 one of these disciples is identified as Andrew, Peter's brother. Andrew then finds Peter and announces that "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). Strictly speaking, this is not a true statement for John identified Jesus to Andrew and he is not simply the Messiah. In 1:42 Christ gives Peter the name Cephas and this seems to imply that Andrew and Peter will have to learn that their messianic expectations are not simply being fulfilled.
5. **Day 4 (1:43-51):** Here Jesus calls Philip to discipleship and then Philip finds Nathanael, telling him that Jesus of Nazareth is the one spoken of by Moses and the prophets (1:45). This confession is inadequate as the Prologue has made clear. Nathanael's response that as long as one thinks only of Jesus' physical origin, one will fail to understand him and his confession in 1:49 is inadequate. 1:51 refers to Genesis 28:12, 16-17. Jesus now identifies himself as the gate of heaven, the "place" where heaven and earth intersect. This prepares us for what happens in 2:1-12.
6. **For Reflection: John 1:29:** Cyril of Alexandria identifies the Lamb of God with the lamb of Isaiah 53:7. This lamb, through whom God's people are cleansed, prefigures Christ. Christ takes away the sin of the world by dying for all and, in so doing, he abolishes death. This means that Christ is the "second Adam" (1

Corinthians 15:47). The first Adam was from the earth (Genesis 2:7) but the “last Adam” is from heaven (1 Corinthians 15:46-47). In him, human nature is begun anew. As the Lamb of God, Christ has “died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:15) that all might live in him. Because of the Lamb of God, it is now possible to taunt death: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). Death, as it existed for Adam no longer exists for those who are in Christ. (*Commentary on John*)

### III. John 2:1-12

1. **2:1-2:** 2:1 signals that a moment of revelation is approaching. This is the “third day” of Exodus 19:16 when God descends upon Mt. Sinai. The fact that we are told that a wedding is about to take place is also significant. Marriage feasts suggest the arrival of the messianic time (Isaiah 25:6-8). Already, two important Old Testament “markers” indicate that something of great importance is about to happen.
2. **2:3-5:** Mary, identified as “the mother of Jesus” (2:1) initiates the action when the wine for the wedding feast runs out (a major disaster). She tells her son “They have no wine” (2:3), apparently inviting him to take action. Jesus’ response is something of a rebuke; at the very least he puts some distance between her and himself by referring to her as “woman”. Jesus’ declaration that his “hour” has not yet come signals that he is moving toward an “hour” but that it has not yet arrived. This is one of the major themes of the Gospel. At this point, of course, we do not know what this “hour” is. Mary’s response to this distancing is surprising. She instructs the servants to do “whatever he tells you” (2:5). Without knowing what he will say, she tells them to do whatever Jesus will command. Thus far, we have seen inadequate confessions of faith. Now, we have an adequate one. Mary embodies the correct response to Jesus, that of complete trust. Genuine faith has the quality of complete trust.
3. **2:6-12:** The focus now shifts to six large stone jars which normally contain water for the Jewish rites of purification. (It is important to note that these rites had nothing to do with hygiene but with purity before God.) Jesus has the servants fill these jars with water. (Note that Mary’s instruction to them have been followed.) Jesus instructs them to draw some of the water out and to take it to the steward of the feast. Notice that no description of the wine being transformed into water is supplied; this fact is simply reported (2:9). The steward then calls the bridegroom (cf. 3:29) and remarks that the good wine has been held in reserve until now. 2:11 then identifies this action as a “sign” which manifests Jesus’ “glory”. Some may think that the “good wine” was Moses and that anyone coming after him must be of an inferior quality. John signals (cf. 1:17) that God has saved the best for last and that this is what appears in the Son. While the Son appears temporally after Moses, he actually preceded him in the order of creation and, therefore, in the order of glory. If we understand Isaiah 62:1-5 as a promise that Israel will finally be truly married to God, we may understand this sign to point to the fact that this is what the Son has come to bring about. The fact that Jesus’ action results in a super-abundance of wine should not be overlooked. The Word has entered into the world and this transformation is a sign of things to come.
4. **For Reflection: John 2:9:** Jesus’ signs can be understood at various different levels. Reflecting on this verse, St. Augustine notes that wine is latent in water. In transforming water for the rites of purification into wine, Jesus helps us to see that Christ is latent in the Old Testament. Apart from Christ, however, the Old Testament is “water”. When we see Christ in it, however, it not only tastes good, it “inebriates” (Augustine refers to 2 Corinthians 3:14-16). Christ could have directly produced wine from nothing due to his omnipotence but did not do this. In changing water into wine “he showed us that the ancient Scripture was also from him; for the jars were filled at his command. Indeed, although the ancient Scripture is also from the Lord, it has not taste if Christ is not discerned in it.” (*Tractate on John*)