

The Gospel of John (1); The Prologue (1:1-18) (part 1)

Introduction:

This morning we begin a new study in the Word of God, one which will occupy our time and effort for many months. It is our intention to preach through the Gospel of John. Although in nearly 44 years of ministry there have been many occasions on which I have addressed passages in John's Gospel, I have never produced until now a thorough and complete sermon series on this fourth Gospel of the New Testament.

I had considered doing a more topical series on the person and work of Jesus Christ, which would have occupied us for at least two years of Sundays. And we may yet do so at some time in the future, Lord permitting. But knowing that the primary theme of John's Gospel is Christology (the doctrine of Jesus Christ), I thought it would serve us best by a verse-by-verse study of this book. One wrote of John's emphasis in his Gospel:

The controlling concern of His Gospel is Christology. All other theological concerns, such as salvation, eschatology (the doctrine of the end times), Holy Spirit, church, and world, are related to the one great theme.¹

John's Gospel is probably the book of the Bible that Christians are most familiar, generally speaking. Often times when counsel is given to a new Christian who has asked, "Where should I begin to read the Bible?" The common response is, "Read John's Gospel." This is probably because most Christians know that the Gospel according to John sets forth very clearly and in many ways the deity of Jesus Christ, an essential and foundational doctrine (teaching) which every new Christian must understand and embrace wholly and without reservation.

And yet as familiar as John's Gospel is to the ordinary Christian, I must say that the Gospel of John may be one of the most difficult books of the Bible to teach and preach rightly. There are several reasons for this. *First*, although John's writing style is relatively easy to read, for John wrote in shorter sentences, in which the vocabulary is rather simple and straightforward, there are other aspects of his writing that make a verse-by-verse treatment of the Gospel a challenge. One of the major difficulties is the preeminence of themes that recur and develop through the course of the Gospel. Some of these major themes include prominent and recurring words, or subjects, such as "life" or "eternal life", "light" and "darkness", on having been "sent", the developing theme of the "Spirit", the idea of Jesus being "lifted up." These themes undergo development as the Gospel unfolds as these words or themes reemerge throughout the Gospel. Consequently, when studying this Gospel verse-by-verse, when a major theme is introduced, it is difficult to present it in its full meaning with its implications, for understanding is only gained through the accumulative information through the unfolding of the Gospel. Therefore as we progress through the Gospel, I am concerned that these theological words and themes may seem to be somewhat repetitious to us. We will need patience as we strive to increase our understanding of the nature and dimension of these themes and the implication they have for the Gospel and for the manner in which we live out our Christian lives.

A *second* somewhat related "difficulty" in teaching and preaching through the Gospel of John is the manner in which an orderly and organized outline or presentation of the Gospel is developed and presented. The style of John is not like Paul. Whereas Paul developed his letters in a logical orderly manner, building evidence and argument upon that which went before, John seems to hint in one account what will follow in the next. He hints at what is coming, but it is not real apparent until he treats it. An episode will be

¹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life; Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p. 15.

recounted by John which sets the stage that follows of a lengthy teaching session by the Savior. Consider this evaluation of the issue:

One of the primary reasons why it is difficult to establishing *the* structure of the Gospel of John is because the narrative is crafted with several key themes that are repeatedly handled and developed throughout the progression of the narrative, which makes it possible to suggest all kinds of parallels, connections, and even chiasms.²

There is a *third* matter that makes the interpretation of the Gospel of John difficult. It is commonly recognized that John contains many symbolic words and expressions. But commentators of the Gospel are not agreed to what extent symbolism exists and to what degree symbols are to be detected. For example, there is the matter of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. (1) Some commentators believe that John was not interested at all in the sacraments. They would argue that there is no account of the baptism of Jesus. There is no command in the Gospel to be baptized. There is no institution of the Lord's Supper in the extended exposition of the last night that our Lord spent with His apostles. However, (2) there are other commentators who "see" a great deal of symbolism, who argue that baptism and the Lord's Supper are repeatedly set before the readers of the Fourth Gospel. As one described this understanding,

In contrast to the view that the Fourth Evangelist was not interested in the Christian sacraments, there are those who hold that John was *profoundly* interested in them, and that references to the sacraments are scattered through the whole length of the Gospel... (Oscar) Cullman's examination of the Fourth Gospel led him to the conviction that sacramental allusions partake of the warp and woof of the Gospel chiefly through the evangelists' use of symbolism and double meanings.³

(3) And then there is a third group of commentators who hold a somewhat mediating position between these two.

Between the two foregoing positions there is a majority view that the evangelist valued the two sacraments, but as in most other doctrines and elements of the life of the church which he presented, his chief concern was to demonstrate their relation to Christ. In his Gospel, therefore, he introduced them in an indirect manner, but in such a fashion as to highlight their significance for the understanding of Jesus as Redeemer and the believer's total dependence on him for the obtaining of the life to which they bear witness.⁴

One can see by these varied opinions that there must be present a measure of symbolism in the words of this Gospel, but that the identification and explanation of those symbols is difficult. I would tend to identify fewer symbols than others might, knowing of the ease to fall into subjective reading of a meaning into a text instead of discerning the meaning that flows from the text.

Organizing the Gospel of John into a systematic outline is a difficult task. John's style has resulted in many varied attempts to outline or organize the subject matter of John's Gospel for ease of presentation and better understanding by readers. Some have organized the Gospel according to the seven major "signs" that are contained in the Gospel, which set the stage for Jesus' teaching. Others have sought to organize the Gospel according to the major discourses recorded of our Lord Jesus, some of which are extended dialogues and others are lengthy monologues of Jesus. Still others, even the majority of Johannine scholars, are agreed that John's Gospel should be divided into four major sections, which include

- I. The Prologue (1:1-18),
- II. Book of Signs (1:19-12:50)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 86.

⁴ Ibid.

- III. Book of Glory (13:1-20:31)
- IV. Epilogue (21:1-25).

I have not decided yet, but we may follow an outline that is set forth in a good commentary that I obtained, which sets forth the Gospel into ten major sections.⁵ Here they are:

- I. Prologue (1:1-18)
- II. The First Week: An Introduction to the Narrative Proper (1:19-51)
- III. The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry (2:1-4:54)
- IV. The Confession of the Son of God (5:1-8:11)
- V. The Controversy over the Son of God (8:12-10:42)
- VI. The Conclusion of Jesus' Public Ministry (11:1-12:50)
- VII. The Farewell Discourse (13:1-17:26)
- VIII. The Crucifixion (18:1-19:42)
- IX. The Resurrection (20:1-31)
- X. Epilogue (21:1-15)

As we approach our study of the Gospel of John we should be aware of the great difference between it and the other three Gospels of the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, because they generally cover the same events in the same order. The Synoptic Gospels are parallel with one another in many ways. But when John's Gospel is considered alongside the other three, there are striking dissimilarities.

For example, there is a difference in the *geography* between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels present primarily our Lord's ministry in Galilee, John's Gospel is principally concerned with our Lord's ministry Judea, particularly in the city and environs of Jerusalem.

Another point of difference is the presentation of *life*, that is, *eternal life*, which is reflected in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the way it is set forth in John's Gospel. Life as well as time in the Synoptics is set forth as linear in nature. For example, eternal life is set forth as the blessed future existence in the unending Kingdom of God, even unto the ages to come. In the Synoptics, a life of discipleship directs the follower of Christ on a path that leads to and results in eternal life. Time is linear in nature. But in John's Gospel, eternal life is set forth more in terms of the quality of life rather than its unending duration. For John, to know God in Jesus Christ is to have eternal life presently, and that in abundance. For John eternal life is not something to be inherited, but to be experienced and enjoyed presently, through knowing God and His Son whom He has sent. Here is a good description of the distinctive nature of the Gospel of John:

Now there is a major difference between the concept of "life" in the Fourth Gospel and that in the Old Testament, early Jewish literature, and the synoptic Gospels: in all these latter writings "life" or "eternal life" is a future hope, since it is life in the kingdom of God that is to come; in the Fourth Gospel, however, it is characteristically the gift of God given in the present time.⁶

Lastly, when one compares the *content* of the Synoptics with the Gospel of John, it is apparent that John provides a great deal of different and additional information regarding events in the life and experience of our Lord with His disciples. Aside from the accounts of the Passion Week (in which there are differences) the only episode that the four Gospels have in common is the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000. There is a uniqueness to John's Gospel in many points that distinguish it from the Synoptic Gospels.

There may be an explanation why John's Gospel is so different in content from the Synoptics. **Eusebius** (4th c.) in his church history cited Clement of Alexandria, who had wrote of the composition of the Gospels.

⁵ Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 66.

⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life*, p. 3.

5. Again, in the same books, Clement gives the tradition of the earliest presbyters, as to the order of the Gospels, in the following manner: 6. The Gospels containing the genealogies, he says, were written first. The Gospel according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome, and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the Gospel he gave it to those who had requested it. 7. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it. ***But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.***” This is the account of Clement.⁷

There are reasons to read the ecclesiastical history of Eusebius with a measure of caution, but it is an interesting second hand reference to what Clement of Alexander had asserted, who lived in AD 150-215. But what Clement asserted was that John intentionally wrote his Gospel in order to address matters that had not been included by the earlier Gospel writers.

I think what might most interest us in this matter, is the distinct way in which John sets forth the person of Jesus Christ before his readers. Now it is true that each of the four Gospels has as its purpose to set forth the person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Promised Messiah whom God sent into the world in order to save His people from their sins. But there is a distinctiveness of the Gospel of John that we should recognize as we commence our study of this book.

It can be said that the Synoptic Gospels set forth the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth as He was viewed and perceived by His disciples, or apostles. Over the course of time, His closest followers came to understand His deity and the nature of His mission as the Messiah, the promised Son of David, who would initiate and inaugurate the promised Kingdom of God. But the perspective of John’s Gospel is quite different. It is not so much the perspective of the disciple of Jesus who observed and learned from His Master; rather, John’s Gospel is a revelation of the inner life of Christ, of His eternal, divine nature as well as His temporal, human nature. It is a perspective not so much from the viewpoint of the disciples, as it is a self-revelation of the Son of God Himself, even as it is related by the “beloved disciple”—the apostle John.

There was a historian, **R. G. Collingwood**, who explained the unique perspective of John in viewing the person of Jesus set forth in his Gospel:

...I would say that the Synoptists are more concerned with the “outside” of the events they record, even though they record them because they believe that they have a theological or soteriological significance. John, on the other hand, is concerned with the “inside” of the events... The Synoptists see Jesus and his words and actions from the outside through the eyes of the disciples; John “enters sympathetically into the mind” of Jesus, or “puts himself in the shoes of Jesus...”⁸

These comments led another Johannine scholar, **T. E. Pollard**, to say this:

...John portrays Jesus as the one who at every point is conscious of his Messianic function as Son of God, whose every action, thought and word are governed by his consciousness... It is not that Jesus of St. John is any less human than the Jesus of the Synoptics; it is rather that John penetrates with deeper insight into the inner springs of the personality of Jesus. Nor was John’s portrait a more highly developed theological interpretation; rather because of his deeper insight he makes explicit what is implicit, and, for the most part, veiled in the Synoptics.⁹

⁷ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Second Series, vol. 1 (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 261. In Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* these words are from Part VI, chapter 14, paragraph 6.

⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life*, p. x.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Another described John's perspective and perception in this way:

Faced by the life and death of Jesus, in its general or in its particular details, the Fourth Evangelist knows that he is confronted by what is infinite and eternal. He finds himself standing at a point where all things become well-nigh transparent, where he has seen what no eye hath seen.¹⁰

It might be reasoned, therefore, because of the "inside" perspective John presents Jesus Christ to his readers, and through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, we have the opportunity to draw closer and delve deeper in our fellowship with the Son of God through the study of this Gospel. Our knowing Jesus Christ can go beyond only knowing about Him. Our desire and delight should be to truly know Him intimately and personally, as the blessed Holy Spirit reveals Him to us through this Fourth Gospel. But if commit ourselves to this task of study, we must look to the Lord to bless our efforts. We might take to heart the sentiment of the early church father, **Origen**, who was one of the earliest commentators of the Gospel of John, "that nobody could perceive the meaning of the Fourth Gospel who had not leaned on Jesus' breast and taken from Jesus Mary as his own mother."¹¹ What he meant by this is that we must enter the same frame of mind of John the Apostle who had written this Gospel. As one wrote,

That implies the necessity for the discerning reader to enter into the same kind of profound fellowship that the Beloved Disciple (John) experienced with the Son of God, comparable to that which the evangelist had also predicated upon the Son's relationship with the Father (with 13:23; cf. 1:18). It is often thought that the Gospel, along with the other Johannine writings, emanated from "the school of John." It is good to recognize that believers may enroll in that school today!

May our Lord grant each of us the blessing of illumination of the Holy Spirit that we might perceive the reality of the person of Christ, the implications of that reality, and the blessing of knowing Him in whom alone is true, everlasting life. And so, let us now begin to consider...

I. The Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18)

The opening verses of John's Gospel is the prologue to his Gospel. It is set forth in the first 18 verses of this first chapter. It would be good for us to read the entire prologue before we consider its details.

In 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 nothing was made that was made. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. ⁹That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. ¹²But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"

¹⁰ This is a quote of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns in Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life*, p. xi.

¹¹ Ibid, p. x. John, of course, was the disciple that Jesus had loved, had leaned on his breast at the Last Supper, and it was to John that the Lord Jesus entrusted the care of His mother, even while He was on the cross about to die.

¹⁶And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

The translation we just read was the New King James Version. We could have read the passage from another English translation, such as the English Standard Version (ESV) or the newer Christian Standard Version (CSV), but I chose to read the NKJV even though we may encounter some variations in readings here and there that we will need to identify and address. There are two reasons for our use of the NKJV. First, I much prefer the capitalization of pronouns that refer to deity. I realize that it has become an accepted and customary practice to use pronouns of deity which begin with a lower case letter, but I find it troubling. Certainly we can better glorify God at least through capitalization of His name and of pronouns that refer to Him, rather than following customary practice of many today. But I also chose the NKJV because I prefer its sentence structure, which more closely follows the order and pattern of the Greek text than do many of the more modern English translations. Whereas the actual Greek text used by the newer translations may be more precise and closer to the original writings of Scripture--the variants which we will address as they arise in the text-- I prefer the sentence style and structure of the NKJV, which follow the original Greek documents better than do the newer English translations.

We may break down this prologue into smaller units. We will address today the first five verses may be termed,

A. The Introduction of the Word (1:1-5)

Let us read these verses once again:

In 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 nothing was made that was made. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

1. "In the beginning" (1:1)

John opened his Gospel with the words, "in the beginning." This is a unique opening of this Gospel when the other three Gospels are considered. The Synoptic Gospels open with either an announcement of the birth of the promised Messiah, such as in Matthew and Luke, or as in Mark, in which we first read of the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, the promised forerunner of the Messiah. But John's Gospel begins "in the beginning."

The words that John chose and his placement of them in the first position of his sentence, draws the reader to consider the opening words of Genesis, which read, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). John declares that the Word of God was "in the beginning." These words serve to place the gospel of Jesus Christ within the Biblical, historical, and theological context of the Holy Scriptures.

In stating the connection of the Word in the opening of his Gospel with the opening of the Old Testament, John was not only showing the continuity of God at work through Jesus, but He was also declaring that the Lord Jesus Christ, which he later identifies as the Word become flesh, is the realization, even the fulfillment of the trajectory of the Old Testament story. But further, the Word that was in the beginning, was signaling a new beginning. Just as Genesis 1:1 signaled the onset of the old creation, so the Word of God in the beginning of John's Gospel signals the onset of the new creation in Christ Jesus. As **F. F. Bruce** wrote,

It is not by accident that the Gospel begins with the same phrase as the book of Genesis. In Genesis 1:1 ‘In the beginning’ introduces the story of the old creation; here it introduces the story of the new creation. In both works of creation the agent is the Word of God.¹²

The words, “in the beginning”, do not so much speak of the temporal *beginning* of all things in His creation, as it speaks of the *origin* of all things. “The term, therefore, is not referring to the first point in a temporal sequence but to that which lies beyond time.”¹³ The “beginning” was before creation, and the Word was there in the beginning.

John’s use of the verb, “was”, is also significant. He wrote, “In the beginning *was* the Word.” Here the verb does not speak of the origin of the Word in the beginning, for it is a verb that conveys continuance. In the beginning the “Word” did not become, but “was.” The Word “was” existing before “the beginning.” “‘The Word’ has no origin, for its (His) existence is beyond time and history.”¹⁴

And so, here we have the eternal nature of the Word of God set before us. Here the preincarnate Christ is identified as the “Word.” The Greek word that John used was *ὁ λόγος* (“the *logos*”). Although some have tried to provide understanding of this term in the context of Hellenistic (Greek) philosophical thought, the meaning of “the Word” should be drawn from its Old Testament background rather than the Greek philosophical world.

The true background to John’s thought and language is found not in Greek philosophy but in Hebrew revelation. The ‘word of God’ in the Old Testament denotes God in action, especially in creation, revelation, and deliverance.¹⁵

In the Jewish worldview the Word of God was the action of the Creator to bring all things into existence. **Psalm 33:6** reads

By *the word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.

Later in the Prologue we read that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” This teaches us that the Word of God is the means by which God discloses Himself to His creatures. God desires and has purposed to reveal Himself to His people. The Word of God that was in the beginning with God, who was God, reveals God to His people.

We next read in *verse 1b*, “*and the Word was with God.*” In order to understand what John was precisely saying, let us again read this clause in context:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,

The verb “was” in the second line actually conveys a different nuance than the “was” in the first line. The first “was”—“In the beginning was the Word”—conveys the idea of *existence*; the Word existed with God. The second “was”—“and the Word was with God”—conveys His *presence*. The Word was present with God, as well as existing with God.

The final phrase of verse 1c declares that the Word that existed in the beginning, who was with God, was indeed God. John wrote,

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John; Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 28f.

¹³ Klink, *John*, p. 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁵ Bruce, p. 29.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

This third clause in the Greek text reads differently in the order of the words in our English translation. In Greek the clause reads, “καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος”, or literally in English, “and God was the Word.” Now if you look closely, you will see the single letter, ὁ (*ho*), in front of the word λόγος (*logos*). ὁ is the Greek word for the definite article, “the”, and so, John wrote “the word.” Take note of the second word in that clause, θεὸς (*theos*), which is the Greek word for “God.” The Greek word, ὁ λόγος (*ho logos*), because it has the definite article, is actually the subject of the clause, even though it lies at the end of the Greek sentence. “God” without the definite article is the predicate word, even though it is placed before the subject in the order of the words. John gave this order of words for emphasis: “God was the Word.” The Word contains all of the qualities and attributes of God, because He is God.

Here is a statement that draws together these three clauses of verse 1:

John 1:1 is clearly triadic, with each of the three clauses having the same subject, “the Word” (ὁ λόγος), and the same verb, “was” (ἦν). The three statements taken together are the foundation upon which the message of the Gospel rests. Ever since Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407) commentators have discussed the three affirmations each clause makes. We have argued that the Word is described in three related ways: the *preexistence* of the Word (1:1a), the *presence* of the Word (1:1b), and the *person* of the Word (1:1c). The three clauses move progressively to define the Word in relation to God, with the third clause providing a climatic and qualified statement of the Word’s participation in/as God. “God must be understood from the outset as the ‘one who speaks,’ the God who reveals himself.” In a real way, then, the Gospel of John begins: “Thus saith the Lord...” Every word from God, starting from the “beginning” (Gen. 1:1), has culminated in the definitive word (Heb. 1:1-2), the Word of God.¹⁶

2. “He was in the beginning” (1:2)

We now come to **verse 2**, which reads, “**He was in the beginning with God.**” At a casual look at this verse, one might conclude that it is only repeats what John had already stated in verse 1. But actually, where as in verse 1 John wrote of the “Word” that John had implied was a person, here in verse 2 John stated the matter forthrightly, “**He was in the beginning with God.**” The Greek pronoun translated as “He” is a demonstrative pronoun. There is emphasis here—**He**, the Word, was God. We also may conclude from these verses that there are at least two persons in the godhead. They are distinguished here as “God” and the “Word.” Elsewhere, of course, the persons are distinguished as Father and Son.

3. He was the Creator of all things (1:3)

Verse 3 states, “**All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.**” This verse asserts in two clauses the same truth, that the Word was the agent through which all things were created. What John was asserting was that God was the Creator, but that His Word was the agent through which He created all things.

The first clause is stated positively, “**All things were made through Him.**” The second clause is stated negatively, “**and without Him nothing was made that was made.**” The first clause emphasizes that all things, everything that exists, came into existence through the creative power of the Word of God. The second clause emphasizes that nothing can exist apart from the power of the Word of God that brought it into existence.

The Greek verb that John used, which is in English the word “made”, is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) in many places in Genesis 1.¹⁷ This word, “made”, is used by John repeatedly

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁷ The verb in the LXX of Genesis 1 is used in verses 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 23, 24, 30, 31.

in John 1.¹⁸ What John was doing through the use of this verb was to link the Person of the Word of God with the transformative power of the Lord Jesus that will be manifested throughout this Gospel. The Word of God who is with God and is God will bring a new creation into existence. This Gospel records that God causes life to spring forth through Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, just as all living things have come forth through Him.

Two major ideas are conveyed in this verse. First, the Word of God, in other words, Jesus Christ, was not created. Second, all things owe their existence to His creative work.

4. In Him was life (1:3)

We then read **verse 4**, “*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*” John used a past tense verb to express this truth. “In Him *was* life, and the life *was* the light of men.”

The clause “in him was life” means that *from all eternity and throughout the entire old dispensation* life resided in the Word.”¹⁹

Now here in 1:4 we see the first occurrence of the word, “life.” This is one of those words that we spoke of earlier that recurs throughout the Gospel of John. In fact, if one includes the First Epistle of John along with the Gospel, the word “life” occurs 54 times. There are occasions when this word is interchanged with the expression, “eternal life.”²⁰ Here John stated, “*In Him was life.*”

That true life is in Jesus Christ is stated elsewhere in the Gospel. We read in John 5:26, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself...” The point of affirming this common life of the Son with the Father, is that the Son is able to impart the life of God, from God, to His people.

In John 1 the emphasis is on the “life” that was in the Word, which also gave “light” to mankind. What John was conveying is that only the Word of God can provide the “light” of understanding to man regarding the truth about God and the truth of man’s need due to his sin. “But what the Evangelist has in mind here is the spiritual illumination that dispels the darkness of sin and unbelief.”²¹

When we consider the use of this frequently found word in John’s writings, we may conclude that it is a reference not merely to physical life, but rather, it speaks of spiritual life, life from and before God.

From all this it would seem to be evident that basically the term refers to the fulness of God’s essence, his glorious attributes: holiness, truth (knowledge, wisdom, veracity), love, omnipotence, sovereignty. This full, blessed life of God is said to have been present in the Word, and this from all eternity and throughout the entire old dispensation: “In him was life.”

However, even though the “life” that is in the Word is spiritual in nature, it, nevertheless, is the source of all life that exists, including all physical life. The eternal Word of God is the giver and sustainer of all life everywhere in God’s creation. This is the same idea expressed by the apostle Paul in **Colossians 1:15-17**:

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. *All things were created through Him and for Him.* ¹⁷And He is before all things, *and in Him all things consist.*

¹⁸ The verb is used in John 1 in verses 3, 6, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18.

¹⁹ William Henriksen, *John*. New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 71.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 72.

²¹ Bruce, p. 33.

We read in the second clause of verse 4, “*the life was the light of men.*” “When life is *manifested*, it is called *light*.”²² Here John declared that throughout history God had manifested through His Word what true life is and how it is to be experienced and enjoyed. That is, the true life of God has shown forth as light shines forth, to all mankind everywhere. In the next verse we read that fallen man did not comprehend the light that God has revealed to them. But here John is declaring that the fault of man’s ignorance is not because God had failed to reveal Himself. Something more is needed, however, than God simply illuminating sinful people to the truth of who He is. As John will later set forth, there is the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit before illumination can bring forth spiritual life in a sinner who abides in darkness.

5. Although the Light shines forth, the fallen world does not know Him (1:3)

The last verse in this introduction to the prologue is **verse 5** reads, “*And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*” John changed the tense of the verb from past tense²³ in verse 4 to the present tense in verse 5—“the light shines.”

Not only *was* the light shining throughout the old dispensation; it *is* shining still, for it is the very characteristic of light to shine.²⁴

“The darkness” refers to unconverted fallen mankind. Although the life of God in the Word has been manifested to the fallen world—the light has shined upon them—the world remained unaffected, for it did not comprehend the “light.” This verse suggests several spiritual realities to us. First, although God has clearly manifested Himself, the life in His name, mankind remains lost and unaffected, oblivious to the light that has shown upon them.

This sentence (v. 5) means that the spiritual light which Christ, the source of life, offers to man, has always been neglected since the fall, and is still neglected by unregenerate men.²⁵

Second, fallen man is incapable of seeing the true God and the life that emanates from Him. Sin has blinded him so that he cannot perceive the light of God’s glory that would transform him if he saw it clearly and fully.

The theme of the perpetual conflict between darkness and light is found throughout it (John’s Gospel). It is men’s condemnation that they loved darkness rather than light (3:19). Jesus calls on men to follow Him so that they do not walk in darkness (8:12). They are to walk while they have the light, lest darkness “overtake” or “overcome” them (12:35, the same verb as here). He came “a light in the world” so that whoever believes on Him “may not abide in darkness” (12:46). Jesus’ whole mission was a conflict between light and the darkness.²⁶

We might say that this spiritual darkness and incapability of perceiving the light of God is in contrast to the first creation recorded in Genesis 1. We read in Genesis 1:1 and 2, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; *and darkness was on the face of the deep.*” But then God said, “*Let there be light; and there was light.*” But in contrast, even though the light of the Word of God shines in the darkness of this fallen world, the darkness does not comprehend it. Why is this, that the natural darkness was dispelled by God creating light, but the spiritual darkness does not comprehend the spiritual light of the Word of God? The answer may be in what we see in Genesis 1:3. Just before the

²² Ibid.

²³ The “was” in verse 4 is actually an imperfect tense verb, which conveys here continuous action in past time.

²⁴ Hendricksen, p. 73.

²⁵ J. C. Ryle, *John*, vol. 1, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 12.

²⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 85f.

darkness was dispelled by God's Word calling forth light to shine, we read, "***And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters***" (Gen. 1:2b). Only as the Word of God illuminates darkness through the work of the Holy Spirit, is spiritual darkness dispelled by the light of the Word of God, even the life that is in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul said it this way:

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. ⁵For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:3-6)

Now with the introducing of the terms, "light" and "darkness", we recognize that they are terms that are found in later places of John's Gospel. And although a reader of the Gospel for the first time would not detect much from the use of these words in these few verses in John 1, he would not need to read far in the Gospel to conclude that the "darkness" of the fallen world is not just an absence of light or a failure to understand truth, but darkness conveys the idea of antipathy, hostility, and rejection of the truth that is in Jesus Christ. "The 'darkness' in John is not only absence of light, but positive evil."²⁷ Fallen man is not only incapable of seeing the light, he hates the light, for his deeds are evil (Cf. John 3:20). Natural man, fallen man, does not want to see the light of God's knowledge in Jesus Christ. When it comes to man in his natural fallen state, he rejects it, turning from it.

A few Concluding Thoughts

1. The passage that we have just considered underscores the heart of true Christianity. ***True life, spiritual life, eternal life, is in the Son of God.*** "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." This may seem like a given, but it is a truth that is elusive, even impossible to comprehend and experience apart from the grace of God wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit. The natural state of man apart from an inward work of God's grace, will not see this spiritual reality. Life before God will be seen and assumed to be mediated by God through other means apart from the Son of God.

I fear there are many who profess to know Christ as Lord and Savior, but they are not looking to Christ alone for life and therefore they are not experiencing and enjoying the true life that only comes through Him. They may look to the Holy Scriptures as their authority. They may order their lives according to principles they find in the Word of God. They may believe themselves to be quite right with God and in blessed communion with God, but if it is not Jesus Christ alone to whom they look for the source of blessing of God's grace, they will be spiritually impoverished, weak in their ability to live in righteousness, and frustrated with their absence of peace and joy that they know should characterize His people.

Paul expressed his great desire in terms that we are stressing. He wrote,

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰***that I may know Him*** and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8-10)

²⁷ Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Inter-Varsity Press, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 119. To see the evil of "darkness", consider 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; 1 John 1:5, 6; 2:8, 9, 11.

Every blessing, yes, all blessings of God are mediated by God to us through Jesus Christ alone. May we desire to know Him, purpose to seek Him, and not be content until we enjoy the riches of close fellowship with Him.

2. How dependent are we on the sovereign grace of God to reveal Christ to us! Only the Holy Spirit can reveal Christ to us in the manner that we have been addressing. We must own our spiritual poverty and our helplessness to acquire anything from Him apart from His promises to us in Christ, which will only be experienced by us through the Holy Spirit who alone can reveal Christ to us. Let us ask the Lord to give us the Holy Spirit afresh and in great measure that we may receive the things that He has promised His people (Cf. Luke 11:13).

3. Let us look to the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, with the chief desire and delight in finding Christ in its pages. Our Lord Jesus rebuked some who studied the Bible without looking for Him. He said, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39). Then He said to them, "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:40). Apart from seeing Christ in the Holy Scriptures, the letter of the Scriptures is a killing letter (2 Cor. 3:6). Christ alone is the source of life. The Scriptures are necessary, for they reveal Christ to us. May He bless us in our pursuit of Christ.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ²Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col. 3:1-3)
