



Rafiki Bible Study

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John Lesson 1: Jesus, the Word of God

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Doctrinal Focus: *The deity of Christ, the personhood of the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, Christ as God’s revealer, salvation through faith in Christ, and believers as children of God*

Read John 1:1-18.

The Gospel of John is one of the world’s true treasures. It contains many of the sayings most memorable and blessed to God’s people. John is so simple that children memorize their first verses from its pages and so profound that dying adults ask to hear it as they pass from this world.

This Gospel does not specify its author’s name. Nonetheless, we can be sure of its composer, both from internal and external evidence. John claims to be written by an eyewitness and disciple of Jesus (John 21:24). Its author identifies himself as Jesus’ “beloved disciple,” who is the apostle John (John 13:23; 19:26). The early church affirms this view. Irenaeus, the second century bishop who knew people who personally knew John, attests that John “the disciple of the Lord,” wrote this Gospel in Ephesus, and his view is backed up by every ancient document that addresses this subject (Irenaeus, 1999, p. 1:414). Most scholars believe that John wrote perhaps as late as the A.D. 90’s, in order to provide material missing from the other three Gospels and to complement them with a “spiritual gospel” (Eusebius, 1965, p. 192). Moreover, as Christianity spread beyond its original Jewish bounds, John wrote to make the Christian message more accessible to the Greek mind. John himself tells us that his primary purpose was evangelistic: *“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his*

name” (John 20:31).

John’s Gospel begins with a prologue (John 1:1-18) that introduces Jesus as God’s Son and presents the main themes of this book. Like the other Gospel writers, John wants us to understand that Jesus is God made flesh—the very God who became truly man. Matthew and Luke approached this doctrine by explaining the virgin birth. But John gives a theological explanation for Jesus’ coming into the world, beginning with his eternal origin before the creation of all things: *“In the beginning was the Word”* (John 1:1).

John’s prologue begins by declaring Jesus as *the divine Word*. The opening verse mirrors the way the Old Testament began: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”* (Genesis 1:1). John places Jesus where we expect God: *“In the beginning, God;” “In the beginning was the Word.”* By describing Jesus as “the Word,” John emphasizes that Jesus is the one who comes into the world to reveal God. Also, throughout the Bible, God’s Word accomplishes God’s will. In the creation account, God spoke and things came into existence. He said, *“Let there be light”* (Genesis 1:3), and the Word made light. Jesus, then, is the one who comes to do God’s will on earth, just as he did in the original creation. John writes: *“All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made”* (John 1:3).

The reason Jesus can do these things is that he is himself God.

John emphasizes the full deity of Jesus by showing his eternal origin. Beyond his birth in the Bethlehem manger and his miraculous conception in Mary's virgin womb, John gives us a glimpse of Jesus in his eternal existence at the beginning of all things. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (John 1:1). This was a vital statement in the church's fight with false teachers who denied Jesus' full deity. The fourth century heretic Arius, for instance, argued that while Jesus was God-like in many ways, he was still less than God, still a created being. But John tells us, instead, that when creation "was made" and time and matter began, Jesus already "was." In the clearest terms, he states Jesus' deity: "*the Word was God*" (John 1:1).

Some false teachers argue that since John does not include the definite article before the word "God," he only means that Jesus is "a god," that is, a god-like creature. They argue that if John wanted to teach Jesus' deity he would have added "the" before "God." This teaching fails to realize that in the Greek language, a second article "the" is not necessary when it has already occurred in the sentence. By writing, "*the Word was God,*" John was saying that "*the Word was the God.*" Moreover, John does not use the Greek word that means "like God" (*theios*), but rather the word for God himself (*theos*). His meaning is none other than that Jesus, the Word, eternally was and is truly God.

John also emphasizes the distinct personhood of Jesus. He adds, "*the Word was with God*" (John 1:2), that is, he is a distinct person with a relationship to God. The Bible teaches that there is one God in three persons (this is the doctrine of the *Trinity*). Some false teachers state instead that God is only one person, who manifests himself in different ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But John says that the Word was "with God," which means that there are two persons involved (the Bible also shows the Holy Spirit as a third divine person). A single person can be *by* himself, but he is never *with* himself! In this way, John insists that "the Word" is a distinct

divine person: "the Word was *with* God." It is hard to understand how there can be only one God but three distinct persons in that God, but it is verses like this that cause us to believe it. When John speaks of "the Word," he means God the Son, Jesus Christ, who eternally lives in relationship with and does the will of God the Father.

While John 1:1-3 provides an important statement of Jesus' deity, the Bible's teaching of this doctrine does not rely only on these verses. In John 1:18, the apostle states this truth again, describing Jesus as "*the only God who is at the Father's side.*" At the end of the Gospel, John explained what we must believe about Jesus to be saved: "*that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*" (John 20:31). Christians must believe in the full deity of Jesus. Thus when Thomas stopped doubting and believed in Jesus after his resurrection, Thomas said to him, "*My Lord and my God!*" (John 20:28). This is the Christian confession, which John wants to make clear at the very beginning of his Gospel. Jesus is not merely God-like, but he is God the Son, eternally blessed in fellowship with God the Father. Martin Luther therefore wrote of John 1:1-3: "This text is a strong and valid attestation of the divinity of Christ. . . Everything depends on this doctrine. It serves to maintain and support all other doctrines of our Christian faith. Therefore the devil assailed it very early in the history of Christendom, and he continues to do so in our day" (Luther, 1957, p. 19).

Since Jesus is the divine Word, John also emphasizes that he is *the revealing Word*. John said, "*In him was life, and the life was the light of men*" (John 1:4). Light serves to reveal, especially when things have been hidden in darkness. John 1:5 says of Jesus, "*The light shines in the darkness.*" This means that Jesus came to reveal God to a world that did not know him. Before Christ came, the world was in darkness, not knowing God or his salvation. But Jesus came as a light, to give mankind the knowledge of the glory of God. Because only Jesus comes from heaven, he is the only true and perfect revelation of God; "*No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father's*

side, he has made him known” (John 1:18).

Jesus came to reveal God by living among us as a man. This is John’s emphasis in saying, “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory*” (John 1:14). This refers to the incarnation of Christ. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in the stable at Bethlehem. But he did not come into existence then, having always been the divine Word with the Father. Rather, in Jesus’ virgin birth, the eternal Son of God took up a true human nature. Christ’s incarnation means that God the Son added a human nature to himself without losing any of his deity. Paul says, “*In him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily*” (Colossians 2:9). It was therefore as a man, in the flesh, that Jesus revealed God by living among mankind. When John says that Jesus “dwelt among us,” he uses a word that referred to the tabernacle in the Old Testament. This was the tent in which God dwelt among Israel during the exodus and where he revealed his Word to Moses. Just as God showed his glory to Israel by dwelling among them in the tabernacle, Jesus reveals God’s glory to the entire world by taking up the human nature as a tent or dwelling and then by actually living in our world. This is the marvel that Christians declare: God has become man! The tabernacle in the exodus revealed God’s glory with a cloud of fire and smoke, but Jesus reveals God’s glory in his perfect character, his wonderful teaching, and his mighty acts of healing and saving grace. Later in the Gospel, Jesus says, “*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9). Because he *is* God, Jesus reveals God. Moreover, Jesus possesses the power of God’s grace actually to enable sinners to believe. This is why John says, “*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14), and “*the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (John 1:17). Jesus not only provides us with information about God, but he grants grace, through faith, to know God and be saved.

John further emphasizes that Jesus revealed God to the entire world. He says that Jesus is the light that “*enlightens everyone*” (John 1:9). This does not mean, however, that everyone is

saved simply because Jesus has come into the world. Sadly, the record of this Gospel will show that many people, even among Jesus’ fellow Jews, who possessed the Old Testament and its pictures of Jesus, actually rejected him. Nonetheless, Jesus really did come to reveal the Father to the whole world. John means by this that Jesus brings the message of salvation to every kind of person, without distinction on the basis of race, language, gender, or social status. Jesus is God’s Word for the educated and uneducated, both of which will appear in John’s Gospel. Jesus came to show God to the rich and to the poor, to the powerful and to the weak, and to both the Jews and to the Gentiles. This says that it does not matter who you are or what your background is, Jesus is the light who came into the darkness of this world to shine the saving truth about God to you.

It is a great tragedy when people reject the light of Jesus, but John tells us that this happened in the past and will continue to happen now: “*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*” (John 1:10-11). Notice that the reason people “did not know” Jesus is that they “did not receive him.” The problem of unbelief is a willful rejection of God’s light because of the darkness of sinful desires. John’s Gospel will show that the opposition to Jesus was so intense that the religious leaders of his day did everything they could to keep that light from shining. Finally, they crucified Jesus in order to put out his light. But because of his deity, this failed. John says, “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*” (John 1:5). John’s Gospel teaches that nothing is more revealing about this world than how it responded to Jesus. But the same is true of each individual. If we read John’s Gospel and do not receive Jesus in faith, this only shows how great is the darkness within us! What could be more condemning than to hate and reject the light that God has shined into our world? To reject Jesus is to reject God, and therefore to come under God’s judgment for rebellious unbelief.

John’s prologue introduces Jesus as the divine Word, the revealing Word, and finally as *the*

saving Word. John says that “*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*” (John 20:31). *Christ* means *Messiah*, or *Savior*. Jesus the divine and revealing Word, also came into the world to be the saving Word.

One way in which John’s prologue presents Jesus as the Savior has to do with the significance of the “the Word” to John’s original readers, most of whom were Greek. We have seen how his statement that Jesus is “the Word” points back to his presence with God at the creation of all things. But the word that John uses, *Logos*, was also one of the most important words in Greek philosophy. To John’s Greek-speaking readers, *Logos* meant not only “the Word” but also “the reason” for why things are and “the solution” to our problems. Greek philosophers asked what is the reason why the stars follow their course in the sky? What mind controls the seasons? What is the purpose or design to the world and human events? Their word for this reason was *Logos*, which our English Bibles translate as “the Word.” The Greeks asked what is the order, design, or reason for all things. Plato answered, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, a *Logos*, who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain.” John seized on this idea and said to his readers: “The very thing that has most occupied your philosophers and which you have sought—the *Logos* of God—has come to earth as a man, and we have seen him” (Boice, 1999, p. 1:35). John’s point is one that we need to hear today. Life does not make sense until we meet Jesus. Peter realized this, saying, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (John 6:68).

An illustration shows what it means for Jesus to be the *Logos* as the Savior whom God has sent to the world. The famous automobile-maker Henry Ford once had a breakdown on his assembly line that no one could fix. In desperation he called the man who had designed and built the factory, Charlie Steinmetz. Steinmetz showed up, tinkered for just a few minutes, threw the switch, and everything started running again. Days later Ford received a bill for \$10,000, an exorbitant sum in those days. He wrote back, “Charlie, don’t you think your bill is a little high

for just a little tinkering!” So Steinmetz sent back a revised bill: “Tinkering – \$10. Knowing where to tinker – \$9, 990” (Hughes, 1999, p. 18).

In that same way, Jesus came into the world knowing how to fix it, for the simple reason that he made it. But Jesus came not just to do a little tinkering. Jesus fixed the world by shedding his own blood for our sins. And instead of presenting us a bill, he offers us the free gift of eternal life through faith in him. This is God’s Word—God’s answer and reason—that is revealed through Jesus Christ. This is why John celebrates the wonder of the Word that came as a light into the world’s darkness: “*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). To believe in Jesus is to receive “*his fullness*,” including “*grace upon grace*” (John 1:16). All the truth and grace that we will ever need in order to be saved is found in Jesus Christ. He is the saving Word whom God sent into the world to be our light.

This opening prologue not only presents Jesus as the divine, revealing, and saving Word, but also emphasizes two of the most important themes that will recur in John’s Gospel. One of them is the importance of the Christian witness to Christ and his gospel. If Jesus is the saving Word, then his light must shine today and that happens through the testimony of believers. John notes the example of John the Baptist: “*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light*” (John 1:6-8). Part of what made John so great was that he knew that he was not himself the Savior, but merely one who could point others to Jesus. He did not tell people about himself but rather about who Jesus is and how Jesus saves by dying for our sins on the cross. This is what it means to be a witness for Jesus: to tell others what the Bible says about Jesus, with the aim that they will believe in him and be saved.

Even more important to the Gospel of John is the theme of faith in Jesus. The key to receiving

the salvation he brought into the world is to believe the Bible's testimony about Jesus and then personally to trust in him. There is no greater tragedy than what is recorded in John 1:10-11, that the very world that was made by Jesus was unable to recognize him because of sin. The Savior came, but the darkened world rejected and refused to receive him. But Christ nonetheless saves his people, as his truth enables them to believe by the power of God's grace. John therefore gives the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus: "*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*" (John 1:12-13).

John says that those who believe the message about Jesus, receiving him as Son of God

and Savior, are born again. This means they have received a new nature that enables them to believe. This new nature comes not from natural birth ("not of blood") or by the exercise of our own wills ("nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man"), but as the free gift of God's grace. Believing enables us to know God through Jesus Christ, to live in the light of Jesus' truth and grace, and to come into our own relationship with God as beloved children. Therefore, from this start of his Gospel, John summons you not only to read and learn about Jesus. You must also receive him as God's Son and as the "Word" who brings forgiveness and new life. John shows us our great need: to know God and become his children through the grace of Jesus Christ. All this will be yours as we study John's Gospel, if you receive him in faith, believing in God's Word.

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Sample



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John Lesson 1: Jesus, the Word of God

Questions based on John 1:1-18.

1. Psalm 33:6 says, “*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.*” How did God’s Word create the heavens and the earth? When John describes Jesus as “the Word,” what does this say about Jesus’ role in accomplishing God’s will? How did Jesus accomplish God’s will when he came to earth? Read Psalm 107:20. How does God’s Word not only bring creation but also salvation?
2. What are some of the ways in which John teaches the deity of Jesus in this prologue? Why is it so necessary to believe that Jesus is truly God? Have you encountered teaching that opposes Jesus’ deity? If so, how does this passage show the truth that Jesus is God’s true Son? What other proofs can you find from the Bible to show that Jesus is truly God?
3. John says that he saw “*the glory of God*” in Jesus (John 1:14). This can be seen as a working definition of a Christian. How have you seen God’s glory in the Bible’s teaching of Jesus? When John says “*we have seen his glory,*” he uses a word that means personal contact and interaction. He did not see Christ’s glory from afar but close up as a disciple. How has this been your experience as a follower of Jesus? What can you do to know Christ better and more clearly see his glory?
4. As “*the Word,*” Jesus reveals God to the world. When we consider the way that Jesus lived, the way he treated people, and his reverence for his heavenly Father, what does this show us about God? How might you use the life and work of Jesus to help other people know what God is like?

5. John the Baptist was “*a witness about the light*” (John 1:7) who was sent by God. Who does God send today to witness about Jesus? What is the role of the church in giving a testimony to Jesus? How do individual Christians follow John’s example in shining Christ’s light into the dark world. How does John’s example teach us about witnessing to Jesus (see John 1:7-8, 15)?

6. Why did the Jewish people reject Jesus? What is it about darkness that hates and seeks to oppose God’s light? Do you have experience of people rejecting Jesus, despite a clear and persuasive witness? John said, “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*” (John 1:5). Why does the world’s opposition not succeed in putting out Christ’s light?

7. If John’s description of Jesus as “*the Word*” means that he brings God’s reason and solution to the world, what solution does Jesus bring? How does believing Jesus and studying his Word help us to understand all of life better? What is God’s message to a world darkened in unbelief and

8. Define the word “faith.” Are there truths that we must believe in order to have saving faith? What is our heart’s attitude to Jesus if we believe in him? In John 1:11-12, faith is described in terms of “receiving” Jesus. What does this mean? Have you received Jesus? How did that happen? John says that faith results not “of blood” or of “the will of man,” but “of God.” How is faith given by God? What is the role of God’s Word in bringing faith to life?

9. John states that by receiving Jesus in faith, we become “children of God” (John 1:12). If we were not children of God before believing in Jesus, what was our relationship with God? What blessings does a good Father provide to his children? How is this different from the way that other religions teach people to think of God? What has it meant to you to be a child of God through faith in Jesus?