

-Gospel of John  
Lesson 2

## Review

John begins his gospel by contending that the “word” was with God and was God when nothing but God existed, and that God worked through and with the “word” to create everything that has been created. These verses are a linchpin of the Christian view of God as a triune being. As FEFC’s statement of faith puts it: “We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

## John’s prologue continued

- “In him was life” Commentators aren’t sure whether John is thinking of (1) how the word is self-existent and able to give life to creation as described in Genesis 1 and John 1:1-3; (2) how Jesus/the word has eternal life within himself and is able to provide that life to those who believe, as emphasized in the rest of the gospel (John 5:26, 14:6); or (3) some combination of both. I lean toward both. It seems natural to view the word’s participation in the perfect creation described by Genesis 1 as evidence that the word has the ability to grant undefeatable life within himself.
- “that life was the light of men” The OT associates the eternal life available from God with light. Job 33:28-30; Psalm 36:9; 49:19; Isaiah 53:11. John does as well. (John 8:12.) Light often refers to revelation from God but the comparison between light and life and these OT references suggest that John is portraying light as the realm where humans find true life and asserting that realm of light stems from the word’s lifeforce.
- “the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not [overcome] it” The NIV has “understood” in the text and “overcome” as an alternate possibility in a footnote. The ESV has “overcome.” The NASB has “grasp” in the text and “overpower” as a footnote. I like “overcome” or “overpower.” In John’s writings, darkness is not just a scientific concept, i.e., the absence of light, but a realm characterized by resistance to God. (John 12:35, 46; 1 John 2:9-11.) That resistance is not a failure to understand the light, but rather a preference for darkness/evil that results in active resistance to God. (John 3:19-21.) The word’s light shone into this realm of darkness, and John contends that darkness did not overcome it. Under this view, verse 5 foreshadows the gospel’s theme of conflict between light and darkness, but has a hopeful tone.
- John transitions from discussing the word itself to John the Baptist. John contends that John the Baptist was sent by God, i.e., was specially commissioned to serve as a witness concerning the light “so that through him all men might believe.” Commentators agree this describes the purpose of John’s testimony concerning the light, but they struggle defining that purpose. No one thinks that John tried to speak to every human, much less that he convinced every person to believe in Jesus. To the contrary, he went into the wilderness and crowds went to hear him. Luke 3:2-3. Nor is John the Baptist

portrayed as making an effort to reach gentiles, so it does not make sense to say his goal was to reach all types of people. Like most OT prophets, John called all who heard him to repentance, but his warnings imply that John the Baptist knew many who heard him would not repent and would experience judgment. Matt. 3:10-12. So perhaps “might believe” means the purpose of John the Baptist’s testimony was to testify to all he encountered thereby providing them with the opportunity to believe. The OT teaches that God desires all people to experience repentance. (Isa. 65:1-3; Eze. 18:23, 31-32; Jonah 4:10-11.) More than any other gospel, John emphasizes God’s concern for all of humanity.

- John stresses that John the Baptist was not “the light” but merely a witness to the light. Even a specially commissioned prophet does not belong in the same category as the word/light/Jesus.
- John contends in verse 9 that the true light appeared in the world in accordance with John the Baptist’s testimony. In this verse, “light” seems to refer to accurate revelation concerning God. Jesus is source of the true information about God, implying there are others sources that provide false information. Most commentators think John is claiming that, in some sense, Jesus provides this type of light to all humans. The next three verses show that many people reject the light they receive. Perhaps this suggests that the incarnation has multiple purposes. One purpose is to make light and salvation available to the whole world; another purpose is to actually redeem the elect/those who believe in Jesus. (Compare John 1:29; 3:17; 8:12; 12:32, 47 with John 10:27-30; 15:19; 17:2, 6-9.) John 1:9 suggests that, when facing divine judgment, unbelievers cannot complain that God failed to provide them with sufficient truth to choose between light and darkness. Unfortunately, for unbelievers, the provision of light to them provides a basis for condemnation. (John 3:18; 15:22; see also Rom. 1:18-20.)
- In verse 10, John says that even though the word/Jesus created the world, the world did not recognize him as its creator and source of true information about God. In John, the “world” is a nuanced term. It can refer to the planet earth, but often means the collective realm of humanity, including its governments and power structures, which are currently fallen, subject to Satan’s influence, and in opposition to God. John is saying these governments and power structures, which were in gentile hands during the first century, rejected Jesus.
- In verse 11, John narrows the focus to Jesus’s “own,” meaning his own people group, the Jews. The first century emphasized the importance of showing hospitality to one’s own clan. John claims that Jesus’s own people group rejected him even though he was not only their creator but also part of the same people group.
- But there were some people who received Jesus. The distinguishing mark of this group is that they believed “in his name,” i.e. they accepted Jesus’s claim to authority. In return, Jesus gave them something amazing, even miraculous: the right to become the children of God. John carefully explains that this is not a physical, biological birth process, but rather a spiritual birth provided by God Himself that makes these people part of God’s spiritual family. John thus introduces the idea that spiritual family relationships are more significant than biological family trees or worldly social status. The greater relative importance of spiritual aspects of life (which are eternal), and the

constant tendency of humans to focus on the temporary, and less important, material things, is a major theme of this gospel.

- Verse 14 states the doctrine of the incarnation as plainly as possible. The “word” became “flesh.” The idea of Greco-Roman gods disguising themselves to appear on earth and interact with humans was discussed in myths. Greco-Roman philosophers, however, believed there was a strong separation between the ideal spiritual realm and this world, so the idea of an all-powerful divine being entering this fallen world and taking on actual mortal flesh would be shocking to Greeks. It probably shocked Jews as well. In the OT, God occasionally manifests His presence, including (1) the cloud/consuming fire on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:15-17); and (2) the pillar of cloud above the tent of meeting (Ex. 33:9-11) and tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38). The Israelites were warned, however, not to make idols representing God in human form. (Deut. 4:15-16.) Moreover, fallen flesh was weak and short-lived. (Psalm 78:39.) First century Jews had no expectation that the infinite creator God would appear on earth as a human being capable of dying. It is ironic that the word had to leave heaven and become flesh so that those made of flesh could be born from heaven.
- “made his dwelling among us and we have seen his glory” This is likely an illusion to tent of meeting in Ex. 33:9-11 and the tabernacle, Ex. 25:8 and 40:34-35, both places where God manifested his glory and dwelled among the Israelites. (See also Lev. 26:11-12.) Although first-century Jews were not expecting God to become human, the idea that God would dwell among them is present in the OT. John says, however, that Jesus manifested God’s glory. John describes Jesus’s glory as that of “the one and only” or, in older translations, the “only begotten.” This a figure of speech indicating that the glory God the Father bestowed on Jesus was unique in the fashion that a human father might bestow unique blessing on his sole heir. Manifestations of God’s glorious presence in the OT often involve awe-inspiring natural phenomena like the cloud of fire on Mount Sinai. The gospels contain nothing indicating that Jesus’s appearance was awe-inspiring or even out of the ordinary. Jesus manifested God’s glory not in his appearance but by displaying “grace and truth” in his actions and words. The incarnation, including Jesus’s sacrificial death, is the ultimate demonstration that the Lord is a “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” Ex. 34:6-7.
- Verse 15 returns to the testimony provided by John the Baptist: “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.” In first-century thinking, that which comes first in time must be superior to everything that follows, so John the Baptist’s statement is a paradox or riddle. The trinity and incarnation solve that riddle. Jesus pre-existed John the Baptist because the incarnation is not when Jesus began to exist, it is merely when he took on human flesh.
- The NIV says we have received “one blessing after another.” Some translations say “grace upon grace.” But the phrase probably means grace that replaces another grace, and indicates that the grace and truth about God provided by Jesus is superior to the grace in the law provided through Moses.
- Verse 18 cites the generally accepted OT principle that fallen humans could not bear to see the Lord’s full presence. (Ex. 33:20-23.) John contends, however, Jesus makes God

the Father known to humanity, and supports that claim by stacking three titles for Jesus (1) God; (2) the “one and only”; and (3) who is at the Father’s side. These titles show Jesus is uniquely qualified to make God the Father known. First, Jesus is God and shares the divine nature. Second, as “one and only,” Jesus has received unique status from God the Father. Third, Jesus has been and is once again at the Father’s side, and thus closer to God the Father than any other human. John begins and ends his prologue with a strongly trinitarian statement.

### **Outline of Prologue**

1:1-3: The word was with God and is God and helped create the world.

1:4-5: The word has the life force that shines in the darkness and gives light to humanity.

1:6-8: John the Baptist testified about the light so that people might believe.

1:9-10: The light came to and was rejected by the world.

1:11: The light came to and was rejected by his own people.

1:12-13: But some believed in the word/light’s name and became children of God.

1:14: The word became human and dwelled among us, displaying his unique relationship with God the Father as well as grace and truth.

1:15 John the Baptist testified to the incarnate word’s pre-existence and surpassing status.

1:16 The word/Jesus provided grace and truth superior to the grace provided by the OT law because Jesus, as a member of the trinity, is uniquely qualified to make God the Father known to humanity.

### **Central Ideas**

John’s prologue explains what he wants his readers to do: believe Jesus’s claims and gain the right to become children of God. It also explains the basis for Jesus’s ability to provide that blessing: Jesus is not just human, but fully divine.

John will spend the rest of the gospel providing “signs” or evidence in support of the prologue’s claims. In some ways, it’s a very modern structure: (1) tell them what you’re going to tell them (introduction); (2) tell it to them (body); (3) then tell them what you told them (conclusion)

### **Comparing Gospel Introductions**

Mark begins by emphasizing John the Baptist’s declaration that someone greater would appear who would baptize repentant people with the Holy Spirit. Mark does not discuss Jesus’s childhood or pre-existence. Mark 1:1-8.

Matthew begins by declaring that Jesus is the messiah, a son of David and of Abraham, and recounts Mary’s miraculous pregnancy, the magis’ visit, deliverance from Herod’s threat, sojourn in Egypt, and return to Nazareth. Matt. 1:1-2:23. Matthew describes John the Baptist’s testimony. Matt. 3:1-17.

Luke begins by recounting the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, the miraculous birth of Jesus, various messianic statements, presentation of baby Jesus at the temple, going to the temple as a youth, John the Baptist's ministry, and Jesus's connection to David, Abraham, Adam, and "son of God." Luke 1:1-3:37.

John begins by discussing Jesus' divine nature and pre-existence, his incarnation and rejection, his gift to believers of becoming children of God, and John the Baptist's testimony. John 1:1-18. John has no discussion of Jesus's birth or childhood. John is the only gospel writer who expressly asserts Jesus's pre-existence and foretells his gospel's ending—that many will reject Jesus, but those who believe become children of God.

The attention Matthew and Luke devote to Jesus' ancestry, birth, and childhood in their introductions serves their emphasis on Jesus' status as Messiah—the human heir of David, Abraham, and Adam—who is appointed by God to have authority over humanity.

John's prologue serves his emphasis on Jesus's relationship with God the Father as part of the trinity, and the role of that divine relationship and status in Jesus's identity and mission.

### **Definition of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)**

Chalcedon was a town on the coast of Turkey near Constantinople (n/k/a Istanbul). The Emperor Marcian convened the council to resolve a controversy caused by a priest named Dioscuros who was promoting the idea that, following his birth, Jesus had one nature that was a combination or fusion of divine and human, a view called a monophysite view or Eutychianism (because a priest named Eutyches had also promoted it).

The Council of Chalcedon began in October of A.D. 451 and included over 500 bishops or representatives from churches in all the major areas of the Roman Empire. The Council issued a definition that is one of the most important documents in church history and affirms that Jesus is part of the trinity and has both a divine and human nature, despite the difficulty of explaining how those things can be so. It was intended to affirm the Creed from the Council of Nicaea, and John's prologue is clearly another key source:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and also in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we are ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us on behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ—Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting the one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function.

The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one “person” and in one hypostasis. They are not divided or cut into two prosopa, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus himself taught us; thus the Symbol of the Fathers has handed down to us.

The Definition of Chalcedon in *Creeds of the Churches* (Ed. John Leith 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1982) at p. 35-36.

First Ev. Free Church’s statement of faith boils this down to:

“We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures.”