

3. The Prologue 1:1-18

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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THE PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN (1:1-18)

John's purpose in writing his Gospel, as stated in John 20:30-31, is to present Jesus to us in order that we might believe in him! His composition has **the characteristics of a story**. It has **players**, historical **setting and/or scenery**, **action**, **dialogue**, and **themes**. Essentially, John paints a portrait of Jesus using words in the place of colors. His portrait consists of: Christological titles, apologetic arguments, stories, the conversations and discourses, and an array of wonderful themes as his colors, and our minds and hearts as the canvas upon which he paints.

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**.² He was with God in the beginning.³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.¹² Yet to all who received him, **to those who believed in his name**, he gave the right to become children of God--¹³ children born not of natural descent [of bloods] nor of human decision or a husband's will, but **born of God**.¹⁴ **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten,***

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵*John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'* " ¹⁶*From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.* ¹⁷*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* ¹⁸*No one has ever seen God, **but God, the Only Begotten**, who is in the Father's bosom, **he has made him known** (John 1:1-18).*

The **players** John brings on stage to introduce his story are: the Word, God, a man named John, all men, everyman, the world, his own people, all who receive him, those who believe, the children of God, we and us, the only begotten, the Father, Moses, Jesus Christ, and the only begotten God. The **setting** is: the beginning (eternity), the darkness, the world, in our midst or among us, and the presence of the Father. The **action** portrayed is: the act of creating, light shining in the darkness, a man being sent from God, a man testifying concerning the light, the true light coming into the world, the world not recognizing the light, someone coming to his own and not being received by them, someone giving someone the right to become the children of God, believing in the name of the one coming into the world, the Word becoming flesh, the Word dwelling among the people, seeing the glory of the one who came into the world, someone coming from the Father, the man named John giving testimony to the identity of the one coming from the Father, the Law given by Moses set in juxtaposition with grace and truth given by Jesus Christ, God being made known (interpreted) by the only begotten God.

The most dominant presence in the prologue is that of the **themes** John presents: the beginning, the Word, the one through whom all things were made, life, light, darkness, understanding, testimony, belief, coming to illuminate, rejection, becoming children of God, new birth, incarnation, dwelling in the midst of, glory, grace, truth, blessings of God, the Law of Moses, seeing God, making God know, the only begotten God.

The most impressive aspect of John's presentation of themes is found in his Christology. This Gospel is constructed so as to inform our faith christologically as we read through it. John packs the prologue with **themes** that appear in the form of descriptive designations and christological titles, then unpacks them throughout the rest of the Gospel, in the unfolding of the Christological picture he paints of Jesus of Nazareth. Here in the first

chapter we have a marvelous collection of descriptive designations and titles used to identify this person who is the main player of John's Gospel. He is called: the life (v 4), the light (i.e., the "*shekinah*" - God's presence in the midst of his people - verses 4, 8, 9), the God who was made flesh/human (v 14), the only begotten Son (v 14), and the only begotten God (v 18).

All these christological titles give us significant insight as to what this writer wants us to see concerning who he believed Jesus to be, in that these titles are, in essence, confessional statements about Jesus. In all of the confessions of Jesus in the New Testament, titles are used in affirming belief in him. See John 1:29, the Son of God (v 34), the Lamb of God (vv 29, 36), a man (v 30), the son of man (v 51), Jesus of Nazareth (v 45), he who comes (vv 15, 27), the Messiah (v 41), the one of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote (v 45), the King of Israel (v 49), the Lord (v 23), and the Son of God (v 49). See also: John 3:2; 4:19, 25-26, 39-42; 6:66-69; 9:35-38; 11:23-27; 20:26-29, 30-31. All of these references contain Christological confessions or confessions of faith/belief in Jesus, using different titles to express their belief. As grand and intriguing as these titles are, the most intriguing and mysterious title used to describe Christ is the title found in the opening lines of this Gospel; "**the Word**," who was God!

THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

The English term "word" hardly expresses the complete meaning of the Greek word *logos*. The nearest English equivalents would be something like: thought, reason, communication, etc. There was a dual sense in which *logos* was understood among the Greeks: (1) there was *logos* within (i.e., reason), and (2) *logos* expressed. The thought, idea or concept held within the mind was as much a part of the meaning of *logos* as the expression or communication of the concept. Words, in the English sense, are sounds (when spoken) or symbols (when written) used to express concepts held within the mind.

In John's choice of the Greek *logos* as a designation for Christ, he is trying to help us see that Jesus was both the concept of God (cf. John 14:6ff) and he was that which expressed or communicated the very concept of God (cf. John 1:18). In John 14:7 he makes the astonishing claim: "If you had known me, you would have known my Father; henceforth you know him and have seen him." Then, in v 8-9, when Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus replies, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not

know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father." In John 1:18, when John tells us that Jesus makes God known to us, the Greek word he uses is *exegeomai*, the word from which we get the word "exegesis" - Jesus exegetes God for us, he came to give us an understanding and/or interpretation of God.

THE WORD OF GOD

There is, perhaps, a better illustration as to why John calls Jesus the *logos*. This is the term found in the expression "*ho logos tou theou*" - the word of God! The word of God in ancient Israel was contained in the Scriptures - the old Hebrew scrolls of the law, the prophets, and the writings. Scripture to the Jew was revelation from God and carried the same weight as God himself. This may be seen in the way these old scrolls of parchment were revered in the assemblies of the Jews. In the synagogue there existed a large chest called an ark; within the ark were kept the scrolls. At an appointed time during the synagogue service the doors of the chest of the scrolls were thrown open and the Scriptures were brought into the presence of the people - to speak to the people. These scrolls represented the covenant, and the ark of the scrolls was obviously a substitute for the Ark of the Covenant, which represented in ancient Israel the very presence of God. To John, Jesus obviously represented the very presence of God and was, in this sense, the word of God.

Here a significant parallel may be drawn: as the Scriptures were the word of God in that they were the thoughts of God, as given to us by God, clothed in ink and parchment and set forth in the form of a book or ancient scrolls; so also Jesus was the word of God in that he was the thought or idea of God, as given to us by God, only he was clothed in human flesh and set forth in the form of a human being!

Jesus was the revelation of God given in the form of a man (a human being) rather than in the form of a book or parchment scrolls. In view of this read again John 1:1 and 14, and see what it says to you:

*In the beginning was the Word (**the logos**), and the Word (**the logos**) was with God, and the Word (**the logos**) was God . . . (14) And the Word (**the logos**) became flesh (**human**) and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father (John 1:1, 14).*

WE HAVE BEHELD HIS GLORY

Another expression of significance is found here in v 14, “and we have beheld his glory.” God has tried, again, again, and again, to show us something of himself, in a variety of ways. He has revealed something of himself in us. In Gen 1:26-27, we are told that God created man in his own image, after his own likeness. He instilled something of himself within man, but man distorted that image. God has revealed himself in his creation (the universe). In Rom 1:18-23, Paul makes it clear that from observation of the creation one may learn of its creator. But man has tenaciously denied that revelation. God has revealed himself in his word (Scripture). But man has distorted that revelation, denied it, perverted it, misinterpreted it, and in the time of Christ, had turned it into an enslaving collection of codes and condemnations.

Finally, God has revealed himself in person, or, more specifically, in "a person," or in "the person" of Jesus of Nazareth. If we are ever to see God, we must see him where he is most truly revealed - in Jesus! And that is what John is so intent on showing us in his Gospel. John beheld his glory, and invites his readers to share that vision with him. Max Lucado, in his excellent book, *God Came Near*, challenges his readers to a vision of the God who became human:

Have you caught a glimpse of His Majesty? A word is placed in a receptive crevice of your heart that causes you, ever so briefly, to see his face. Someone touches your painful spirit as only one sent from him could do . . . and there he is. Jesus. The man. The bronzed Galilean who spoke with such thunderous authority and loved with such childlike humility. The God. The one who claimed to be older than time and greater than death. Gone is the pomp of religion; dissipated is the fog of theology. Momentarily lifted is the opaque curtain of controversy and opinion. Erased are our own blinding errors and egotism. And there he stands . . . All the splendor of heaven revealed in human body. For a period ever so brief, the doors to the throne room were open and God came near. (Max Lucado, *God Came Near*. Multnoma Press, 1987, pp. 14-15.)

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