

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2018
The Gospel John: John 1
January 17th ~ Svea Merry



The Gospel of John is considered by many to be one of the greatest books in the Bible and I wouldn't be surprised if for many of you, it is your favorite book. It is often recommended to new Christians as the place to start in the Bible because of its beautiful simplicity and clear explanation of who Jesus is. If you are new to Christianity, or wishing for a stronger foundation for what you believe, this is going to be a great study for you. But, at the same time, if you have followed Jesus for decades and you think the biggest challenge that John has to offer you is going to be separating the well-worn, sticky pages of your Bible because you've already read it so many times, I believe you'll be delighted too, because many scholars say the book of John contains the deepest and most profound theology in all of Scripture. I am completely confident that this book will speak to each and every one of us wherever we are on our spiritual journey.

But here's the biggest reason why studying John is so important for us: Our goal in Bible study is not to gain a greater appreciation for the Bible, but for the God revealed in each book of the Bible. And no book reveals who God is better than John.

I once heard this book described as where we find out about the life of Jesus and gain life by finding him. I couldn't remember who said that so I put that phrase into Google and this comic came up as one of the hits: Have you found Jesus yet? If you look closely, he's there waiting to be found. Do you see him? You have to look hard. But we aren't going to have to look hard to find the real Jesus today, I assure you of that.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before we lose ourselves in the wonder of this great book, I'd like to give you some background information that will help you to get even more out of it. John is quite distinct from the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, those three are often referred to collectively as the Synoptic Gospels because together they are a synopsis or a summary of the same thing—the life of Jesus. But John stands on it's own. In fact, about 90 percent of the material in John is unique to John, whereas the other three Gospels overlap quite a bit.

One of the sweet things that gives John a different feel from the other Gospels flows from the pen of the author. The John who wrote this book is the apostle John, the one referred to as "The Beloved Disciple" and one of Jesus's inner circle of three along with Peter and James. It is clear from the Gospels that John was especially close to Jesus, and Jesus must have felt especially close to John too because when he was dying on the cross, Jesus asked John to be the one to care for his mother, Mary. So, in this book we get not only an eyewitness account of Jesus, we get it from the man who was essentially his best earthly friend. Isn't that great?!

Now, for the sake of clarity, there are two prominent Johns in this book, and they both feature prominently in today's chapter. There's the apostle John who wrote this, and then there is John the Baptist. How do we keep them straight and know which John we're talking about? Well the author John solved the problem for us. He never once uses his own name in the whole book. In fact he almost goes out of his way to avoid referring to himself so when it was necessary, he refers to himself in a different way such as "the one whom Jesus loved." Don't

you love that? Don't you want to have a relationship so deep with our Lord that the way you describe yourself would be "one Jesus loved"? So if you see the name John written, it is referring to John the Baptist and not our author the disciple.

A second thing that makes this Gospel distinct is that John wrote this well after Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Most scholars believe it was written sometime in the 80's AD, around 50 years after Jesus lived and died, and so there'd been a lot of time to reflect on the impact of Jesus. Writing a historical biography 50 years after the events happened is a sweet spot because it engages two categories of people. First, some of the original readers would have been alive when these events happened so it assures historical integrity because people would know if it wasn't accurate. But it also explained to the generation of people who made up the very beginning of the Christian church not just what happened when Jesus came but also what it meant.

The third thing which makes John distinct from the Synoptic Gospels is its purpose. We don't have to guess at all about what John wants everyone who reads this book to understand because he himself tells us what his purpose is. He says in chapter 20 verse 31 that he has written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." That is why we titled the study this spring, "So That You May Believe." Notice that John doesn't want us merely to believe that Jesus was a true historical figure, though he was. He wants us to believe in his name. What does that mean? This means that we go beyond just accepting that Jesus lived, this means believing that what he claimed about himself is true. That we can only be saved through him because believing that we are saved through Jesus, the Son of God, is what gives us life.

John is not going to give us an exhaustive view of everything Jesus said and did. In fact, even if we combined everything Jesus said in this book with everything from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is estimated that it would only take about 3 hours to read through it. Considering that Jesus's ministry alone spanned about 3 years, to say nothing of his life before that, clearly what we have recorded only scratches the surface. John knew he could only give us a snippet of all that Jesus did so he specifically chose material that would help us to understand the nature of Jesus as both fully man and fully God.

Can I be vulnerable with you for a moment? There was a time in my life that I struggled to believe this. Years ago, I went through a scary period of doubt. As we discussed last semester in our study on Job and 1 Peter, many people question God in the face of suffering, but my questions weren't really centered on why God lets bad things happen or His goodness despite the pain in the world. I struggled to understand Jesus for who he is. I was really troubled by things like documentaries on the History Channel that claim that though there was a historical Jesus, he may not have been the Christ of faith taught in the Bible, or arguments presented to me by Jehovah's Witnesses that deny that Jesus is God, and so on.

Friends, that period of doubt was one of the most unsettling and destabilized times in my life. The funny thing is that even while I was doubting, I missed Jesus. I wanted confidence in my faith back. Emerging from that time was a profound experience. It didn't end because I read the right book, heard the right sermon, or said the right prayer. It ended when God revealed Himself to me in a variety of ways. It was like He wanted to prove to me that He is bigger than what I could think or feel. The darkness lifted from me and I could believe again. But after that experience, I wanted to shore up the reasons why I know I can confidently believe that Jesus truly is God, and do you know where I turned? It was the writings of John. It was this book

we're about to study and John's letter that we know as 1 John that helped me more than anything else to know for sure why I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. So, my heart is pounding with both excitement and awe to have the privilege to walk with you through this chapter that I consider to be holy ground.

THE PROLOGUE (1:1–18)

Turn with me to John chapter 1 and let's see God revealed through Jesus whom John here refers to as the Word.

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 was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John is stating right away in verse 1 that Jesus is God. He was with God the Father and Spirit in the beginning, and with them, he is God. Just a quick note about the Jehovah's Witness argument that this should be translated as the Word was a god rather than the Word was God. They'll try to tell you that because the original Greek writing didn't have an article in front of God, by Greek convention, it should be translated as the Word was A god. But this is just not correct. Over the past months, I have been taking Greek courses online from my seminary and I now understand for myself what all Christian scholars say. This verse is correctly translated as the Word was God. If you're deeply interested in this come and talk to me sometime and we'll get into specifics, but for now, be confident that this verse is correct in saying that the Word was God.

Does the phrase "In the beginning" remind you of something? It's supposed to. "In the beginning" are the very first words in the entire Bible. In Genesis 1:1 we learn that God created everything, and it's no coincidence that John used those same three words here because he's telling us that Jesus was there with God when it happened. But not only was he there with God, he as God the Son was the specific person of God who did the Creating. Isn't that incredible? It gets even better. There's a masterful use of words here. John calls Jesus the Word. Think back to Creation. How does Genesis tell us the universe came into existence? Through words! The Son of God said "Let there be light!" and there was. See a connection with Genesis 1 and John 1?

In this paragraph, John establishes some extremely important facts about Christ to ground our theology, and I want to take just a minute to show how this addresses some common misconceptions about Christ because if I can spare even one of you from doubting that Jesus is God, every minute I put into this lecture will be worth it.

First, the first paragraph of John proves Jesus the Word, as the Son of God, is the second person of the Trinity. Don't let anyone ever tell you that a Trinitarian understanding of God, in other words the truth that our one God exists simultaneously as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit was an invention of Christians long after Jesus lived. These people will point out that the word trinity doesn't exist in the Bible. While that is true, that's because the word trinity is a Latin word and the Bible was written in Greek, and term was coined because a word was needed to describe what is seen all throughout Scripture, that our God is one but that He exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. A Trinitarian view of God is the only way that Jesus can both be with God and be God at the same time.

Second, God has always existed as three persons in one. Jesus the Word has been with God from the beginning. This addresses a couple of common heresies that existed in John's day and some that persist today. Jehovah's Witnesses say that Jesus is a creation of God, but this verse is clearly stating that Jesus was there in the beginning. There never was a time when the Word was not with God. And another common heresy that this refutes is called modalism. This is the idea that there is one God but that He expresses Himself through different ways at different times. For example, He appears one way as the God of the Old Testament, and then He came to earth as Jesus, and now He lives in us as the Holy Spirit. That is also completely untrue. Jesus couldn't be both with God and be God if there wasn't another person of God to be with. We know from Scripture that all three persons of God appear separately and simultaneously. In fact even in this chapter, the baptism of Jesus is referenced at which the Father speaks as the Son is being baptized and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. Lest you think this is just a New Testament idea, the Trinitarian nature of God is visible all the way back to the creation account as the Son of God speaks life into existence with the Spirit hovering over the waters, and when God says He will make mankind, He says, "Let US make man in OUR image." And don't let anyone tell you that God is speaking to angels here because the angels neither participated with God in the act of Creation, nor are we created in the image of angels.

Third, the first paragraph of John establishes that God, which John analogizes here as light, is more powerful than evil or the darkness. The idea that Jesus is the light and more powerful than the darkness is going to reappear over and over in this book. This was important to John because it was common in Greek thought to think there was an equal and opposite battle of good and evil in the supernatural realm. John is saying that while there is a battle of good and evil or light and darkness, it is anything but equal and opposite. What happens to a room filled with darkness when you turn on a light? The light eliminates the darkness. Can it work the other way around? Can you have a room filled with light become dark if there is still light? No of course not. The only way to do that is to obscure the light in some way, but that light is shining and there is not darkness anywhere where light is shining. So it is with Jesus the light. No darkness of evil can overcome him. Darkness may try to obscure itself from the light and hide from it, but it cannot do anything to overpower the light. We saw this concept last fall when we talked about God and Satan in the book of Job. Do you remember how it was clearly seen that Satan was inferior to God and that he was only permitted to do what God said he could and not a bit more? Light will always triumph over darkness.

In the next paragraph we are introduced to the other John, John the Baptist. Remember, if you see the name John in this book, it is John the Baptist and not our author the disciple. He is declared a witness to the light, one who would tell others about the light so that all would believe. John affirms that he was not the light himself, but that he bears witness to the light. John is kind of like the moon. The moon has absolutely no light within itself, but it reflects to us the light of what, of the Son. Pun very much intended.

But next we begin to see some problems revealed. ⁹*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.* ¹⁰*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.* ¹¹*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*

This is really sad. Think about it. Jesus created this world, and he created it for us. He created us because God's love was overflowing and had more than enough love to invite us to be

part of that love. So He made us this beautiful home, and then when He entered into His own creation to more clearly invite us into fellowship with Him, His chosen people rejected Him. In fact they didn't only reject Him, they killed Him.

But John gives hope in the next verses:

12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Isn't that amazing? God doesn't just give us the right to continue living in His beautiful creation, though even that is gracious, when we believe in the name of Jesus, when we recognize our need to be saved through him and make him the Lord of our life, God adopts us as His own children.

John says in verse 14 that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" that's great unto itself, but here's the amazing part: the word "dwelt" if translated literally actually means he lived in a tent among us, or specifically, he tabernacled with us. Do you remember the tabernacle from when we studied the book of Numbers last year? The tabernacle was where God dwelled with his people as they wandered through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. God's glory was with His people in the tabernacle ages before, and now as verse 14 says, we have seen the glory of Jesus dwelling with his people again.

We have a quick interjection from John the Baptist in verse 15 affirming that Jesus is the same as the Word that the author is writing about, in case there is any doubt, and then it says we have received grace upon grace from the fullness of God. Don't be confused in 17 when he says that we received the Law through Moses and grace and truth through Jesus. He's not saying Jesus canceled out the Law like that was bad and now he's good. That line about receiving grace upon grace is saying that both were forms of God's grace rolling in over us like waves of the ocean.

But oh the last verse of this section, verse 18. This one is the launchpad for the whole rest of the book. It starts with a problem: No one has ever seen God. But then it gives the solution: the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Let the implications of that verse sink in for minute. It is literally saying that no one has yet seen God for who He truly is, not just the incomplete appearances from the Old Testament, but in a complete and relatable way. But by seeing the God, don't miss that, the God at the Father's side, He is made known. Later in chapter 14 we'll see Jesus say that "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." And again, just to be clear, this is not because they are one and the same. Jesus says next that he will soon go to the Father proving that they are distinct persons, but that by knowing the character of God the Son, we know the character of God the Father too. The original Greek language says that Jesus is the exegesis of God. He explains and interprets the Father to us.

These first 18 verses are often referred to as the prologue of John. It sets up the entire book. Everything after this first section is an example from Jesus's life of why these first 18 verses are true. You know how most shows begin with a theme song before the episode unfolds? Some of the most famous theme songs incorporate a summary of what the show is about, like "Here's a story of a man named Brady..." or how about "Space, the final frontier." Those opening words get you in the right frame of mind for what to expect from each and every

episode. This first section of John is like its theme song, and every chapter that follows are the “episodes” about Jesus, the one who was with God, who is God, and who makes him known.

JOHN THE BAPTIST PROCLAIMS THE ARRIVAL OF CHRIST (1:19–34)

So what is the first thing that John tells us about God in the flesh? We'll see how a man, John the Baptist, was used to introduce Jesus to the world. Now, isn't this interesting? Your small groups may want to consider why God chose to do things this way rather than just having Jesus exclaim, “Listen up, God is here and I am He!” I hope you enjoy pondering that together.

But let's consider this man, John the Baptist. He was mentioned already to us in the first section as one who reflects the light and that through his witness all may believe, but what else do we know about him? First, a quick point of clarification, he's called the Baptist not because he was a Baptist as opposed to Lutheran or Methodist (church denominations didn't exist then), he is called John the Baptist because he was known for baptizing people. Second, we know from the other Gospels that he was related to Jesus. It says in Luke 1 that John's mother Elizabeth was a relative of Jesus's mother Mary, and if you remember the story of when the young pregnant Mary went to visit the older pregnant Elizabeth, this man was once the baby who leapt in Elizabeth's belly when she saw Mary. Third, we know from Luke that God chose John for this role of being the one who would announce Jesus Christ to the world even before he was born.

So, in verses 19–28 John the Baptist is questioned by Jewish priests and Levites because word was getting out around town that he was preaching the imminent arrival of the Christ. He starts off by clarifying that he is not the Christ, and so they ask him if he is Elijah. Now, before you wonder where in the world they're coming from with that question, it was actually a very relevant question. And John's answer sets up one of my favorite things about him. You see, if you remember your Old Testament history, Elijah was one of the great prophets and bears the distinction of not dying but being taken directly to heaven, and on the very last page of the Old Testament, which of course was the whole Bible at that time, Malachi wrote that God would send Elijah the prophet right before the Lord comes. Now here's a really interesting thing. John says he's not Elijah or the representation of this great prophet, but guess what, the other Gospels say that John was. John's father, Zechariah had been told by the angel that John would proclaim Christ in the spirit of Elijah, and Jesus himself confirmed that John had performed this role. And yet, John claims not to be the representation of Elijah. This is absolutely not a discrepancy in Scripture, but rather, it's a prime example of the humility of John the Baptist. He consistently made less of himself in order to make more of Jesus. So even though other places in Scripture confirm that he played this highly esteemed role, he couldn't quite bring himself to identify that way. Isn't that interesting? The last thing they ask John the Baptist is if he is “the Prophet.” What they are referring to is from Deuteronomy 18 in which Moses promised that one day God would raise up a mighty prophet like himself which we know now was fulfilled through Jesus, so it is appropriate that John denies this role as well.

The only way he is willing to identify himself is as the one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” The priests and Levites ask why he's baptizing people if he's not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, and John says he's simply baptizing people with water, but that one is here, even though they don't recognize him, that John considers himself unworthy even to untie his sandals. Here's John's deep humility again. Remember, Jesus is his younger cousin, but John considers himself after him or in other words beneath him, and not even worthy of performing a menial task that typically only the lowest of servants would perform.

In the next section, John the Baptist reveals how he came to know that Jesus was the Son of God. The story of Jesus's baptism is one of the few things found in all four of the Gospels. This book does not give us the whole story, maybe John figured everyone could read it in the other three, but instead we're given a glimpse at it from John the Baptist's perspective. He reveals that God the Father had directed him to this ministry of baptism and told him that he would know who the Messiah was when the Holy Spirit descended and remained on Him when He was baptized. And that is exactly what happened when John baptized Jesus. Can you just imagine what John must have been thinking? Can you imagine getting to participate in this experience of the Father speaking over the Son as the Spirit comes to Him? I think this helps to explain why John had such humility towards Jesus. Just think of what he'd witnessed.

THE FIRST DISCIPLES (1:35–51)

Well, in these final two sections of chapter 1, we see how the first disciples came to Jesus. And these stories, I think, are even more touching in John's Gospel than depicted elsewhere. What I want to focus on is on is how each of these men responded to finding Jesus, and how Jesus responded to them.

Starting in verse 35 we have something that sounds almost comical to me. It says, "The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The way this reads, don't you wonder if John was a bit overeager in his job of announcing Christ's arrival? Did he yell this every time he saw Jesus? There he is. "Behold the Lamb of God!"? Don't you wonder what Jesus's face looked like when John said this? Did he smile, did he look noble, did he give an, "Ah shucks" kinda smirk. I don't know - it doesn't tell us. But next comes something that I find quite moving: these two disciples of John's who were with him, left John to follow Christ. All along John has been preparing people to meet Christ, and here, the very first people recorded to do so in this Gospel are his own followers. And as yet another sign of John's humility, there is nothing to lead us to believe that he was anything but pleased to watch them transfer their loyalty to Christ.

Notice how Jesus and the two men first respond to each other. Jesus asks them what they are seeking. And they seem a bit tentative at first as they call him Teacher and ask where he's staying. We know for a fact that they've just heard their leader John the Baptist proclaim him to be the Lamb of God, but they want to investigate this for themselves a bit before they go all in. And I love this, Jesus seems completely understanding of that reaction. He invites them to come and see, or in other words, come and spend some time with me. The text says it was the 10th hour which would have been 4 in the afternoon, and they stayed with him.

Now we get some more specifics about who these guys are which is pretty great. One of them is Andrew who is referred to as Simon Peter's brother. Don't you just love it when you're identified as the relative of your more popular family member? But remember that when John wrote this, Peter was the head of the early Christian church and would have been very well known to the original readers. So it's actually kind of great that John adds this backstory detail that Andrew followed Jesus first, and then as it says in verse 41, found his brother Simon Peter and told him they'd found the Messiah and brought him to Jesus. Here's a wonderful thing about Andrew: in every case where something is said about him in this book, he is bringing someone to Christ. What a great legacy.

But now let's consider Simon Peter. I'm really excited about this point, because there is something here which touched my heart deeply as I studied this chapter. Verse 42 says that Andrew brought Simon to Jesus and Jesus looked at him and gave him a new name. That name was Cephas which was the Aramaic word we translate as Peter and it means rock. Now, isn't it kind of odd that Jesus renames this guy right as they've first met? What do you think Simon Peter thought about that? But here's what I love about this. For Simon, this was the first time he laid eyes on Jesus, but for Jesus when he looked at Simon, he didn't see the guy that we know from the Gospels was often a little too eager and impulsive. No, Jesus saw the man that Peter would become after a lifetime of following him. He already knew that Simon Peter would become the rock on which he'd build the church. Peter would become the wise and godly man who wrote the incredible letter we studied last fall about suffering as a Christian. He saw Peter for who he would shape him to be and gave him that name even before he grew into it. Isn't that beautiful? Friends, God sees you for all that you will be. This is why you don't have to run and hide from him when you feel like you've blown it. He doesn't judge you on today. He sees you for who He can make you to be over a lifetime. Aren't you just dying to know what name Jesus could give to you?

Well, if Andrew was one of the two men who left John the Baptist to follow Jesus, any guess as to who the second guy was? He's not specifically named, but that's actually why scholars believe they know who it is. The other man was likely our John who wrote this book. Like I said earlier, John never refers to himself by name and so this coupled with what we know from the other Gospels that John was a fellow fisherman with Andrew and Peter, is why this is thought to be when the beloved disciple John first followed Christ as well.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, we meet Philip and Nathanael. Philip has my favorite story of all the ways Jesus's disciples came to follow him. What does verse 43 say? Jesus found Philip! Isn't that lovely? If I were walking around Galilee in the first century, I'd want my story to be "Jesus came and found me." Well, like Andrew, Philip was so excited by this that he ran and told his brother, Nathanael, about Jesus. It's really interesting how Philip describes Jesus. At the end of verse 45 he is really concrete about his earthly identity as Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, but prior to that he calls him the one who Moses and the prophets had written about. It's pretty amazing that Philip understood that about Jesus so quickly. But Nathanael wasn't quite there yet. He got stuck on the idea that Jesus came from Nazareth. You may have heard before that Nazareth had quite the reputation as a backwards little hick town unlikely to produce anything of value. Philip hasn't got time for that though, he just says, "Come and see." Well, Jesus is about to do something amazing. This chapter began declaring that Jesus is God, and it ends with him demonstrating something that only God could do. Look at this. Jesus sees Nathanael coming and proclaims, "Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit!" You just kinda wanna say, "Huh, Jesus? You invited Andrew and John to dinner, you gave Peter his new name, you found Philip, but this is how you greet Nathanael??" Jesus was up to something and Nathanael bites. "How do you know me?" and Jesus says that he "saw" Nathanael sitting under a fig tree even before Philip went to get him. Now, here's where the commentaries help to give us some context. In their culture, sitting under a fig tree was often a place where one might go to spend some time studying the Scriptures. Maybe the first century equivalent of studying at a coffee shop. Scholars infer that because of Jesus's choice of words and Nathanael's reaction, it was likely that before Philip ran to tell Nathanael that he had found the one promised in the Old Testament Scriptures, Nathanael had been sitting there studying the story of Jacob, whose name means, one full of deceit. So when Jesus called Nathanael an Israelite who had no deceit, it must have triggered an odd feeling of coincidence in his mind, and then when Jesus said, "I saw

you under that fig tree," Philip is flooded with shock and awe to recognize this supernatural man in front of him. He gets it right, but Jesus plays with him a bit more. Verse 50, "Because I said to you 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." AKA, "You ain't seen nothing yet!" And Jesus reveals himself to be the heart of the famous story about Jacob and his dream of the ladder to heaven that Nathanael had probably just been studying and says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is saying poetically now what he will say explicitly in later chapters that he is our ladder to heaven.

Friends, over the next several weeks, this beautiful book of John is going to show us, as Jesus said, even greater things than these. Over and over we'll see that Jesus is our way to heaven, he is the way we can come to know the Father, He is the life, He is the light of the world, He is the Christ. I cannot wait to see God revealed to us through Jesus so that we may believe.

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