

Unit 1 - The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-42

Scripture

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²He was with God in the beginning.

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men.
⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John 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.'" ¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

¹⁹Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

²¹They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."
"Are you the prophet?"
He answered, "No."

²²Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵questioned him, "why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

³²Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

³⁵The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

³⁹"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

Open

This is a chance to get to know the other group members better. (As always, if you don't have an answer, it's perfectly OK to say "I pass!") Go around the group and have everyone introduce themselves; where

they grew up, what kind of work they do, and so on. In addition, have everyone answer this question: "If money were no object, where would you go on vacation and what would you do?"

Discover

1. What facts about the "Word" can you find in verses 1-18?

Example: (vs. 1) He existed in the beginning.

2. Why do you think this gospel begins "in the beginning," instead of at Jesus' birth?

3. What does the title of "the Word" tell us about who Jesus is?

4. What two groups failed to receive Christ? Why? (vv. 10-11; see John 3:19-21)

5. What does it mean to "receive" Christ? What is the result? (v. 12; see John 3:1-6)

6. What does the fact that the Word "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" tell us about Jesus and his work? (vs. 14; see Hebrews 2:14-18)

7. For someone familiar with the Old Testament, the title "lamb of God" brings to mind several parallels. Read the following passages and describe how the role of the "lamb" in each is similar to what Christ did.

Genesis 22:1-19

Exodus 12:1-13

Leviticus 4:32-35

Isaiah 53:7-10

Close

- Which of the characters in this passage can you most easily identify with? John the Baptist? The Pharisees? The disciples?
- Which of the several titles for Jesus in this passage seems most significant to you? Why?

Commentary

vv. 1-18 This section introduces the life and ministry of Jesus Christ differently than the other gospels. Matthew and Luke begin their narratives with the story of Jesus' birth, and Mark begins with Jesus' public ministry. But John begins "in the beginning," revealing Jesus' co-existence with God the Father before the creation of the world. Jesus is the divine Word of God, the One who came into the world to reveal God in all His glory and grace.

This section also introduces other important themes of John's gospel: the conflict between light and darkness, Jesus' rejection by his own people, the necessity of belief in Jesus, and the new birth.

v. 1 **In the beginning was . . .** In contrast to the world which "was made," or came into being at a point in time (vs. 3), Jesus simply "was" in the beginning. He existed before the universe was created.

the Word . . . John refers to Jesus as the *logos*, or "word," emphasizing that He is God's means of self-expression and self-revelation (see vs. 18). This has parallels in Old Testament passages which refer to God acting and revealing Himself through His word (Ps. 33:6; 107:20; Isa. 38:4; 55:11).

the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . "With" implies a personal relationship between the Word and God. It also implies a distinction between the two; they are not identical, even though both are God. However, there are not two gods, but one God. The theological phrase for this relationship is "one essence in two persons." (For more references to Jesus as God, see John 1:18; 10:30; 20:28; Heb. 1:8; Rom. 9:5).

v. 3 **Through him all things were made . . .** The Word was God's agent in all His work of creation (vs. 10; also Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:12).

v. 4 **In him was life . . .** The spiritual life which Jesus gives to others comes from within himself, for he himself is the life (see 1:25; 5:21-26; 14:6). He is also the **light**, God's self-revelation to mankind (see 8:12; 9:5).

v. 5 **The light shines in the darkness . . .** This "darkness" is not merely the absence of good, but active moral evil (see 3:19; also 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-11). Jesus came into a world ruined and dominated by sin; as a result, the world did not **understand** or accept him (vv. 10-11; also 1 Cor. 2:14).

v. 9 **the true light . . .** The light of revelation in Christ is "true," not only in the sense that it is *genuine*, but also in the sense that it is *complete*: In contrast to God's earlier,

partial revelation of himself in the Old Testament, Jesus is the full and ultimate revelation of God to man. In the same way, Jesus speaks of himself as the "true" bread, in contrast to the manna from heaven which God gave the Israelites in the desert (John 6:32-33).

that gives light to every man . . . This could refer to special revelation, or inner "enlightenment." In that case, to be consistent with mankind's rejection of Christ (vv. 10-11), the phrase "every man" would have to be understood as "every man without racial or ethnic distinction" rather than "every man without exception". However, it seems more likely that John is speaking of general revelation, the external light of truth which the message of Jesus Christ brings to all who hear it. Some accept and embrace this light, while others flee from it (see 3:19-21).

v. 10 **the world did not recognize him . . .** The world (sinful mankind) did not acknowledge Jesus as Creator and Lord because they did not recognize, or know him. In contrast, his "sheep" do know him—they recognize his voice and follow him (John 10:2-5, 14).

v. 11 **his own did not receive him . . .** Not only did sinful mankind in general reject Jesus, but his own people, the Jews, rejected him as well.

vv. 12-13 In general, neither the world nor the Jewish people received Jesus. But out of both groups some did in fact receive him through faith. These people received from Jesus a precious gift—the right to enter into a family relationship with God by being "born again" (John 3:1-6). This kind of birth does not depend on human ancestry or ethnic identity, but is the work of God's Spirit (see John 8:31-47; Rom. 8:9-16).

v. 14 **The Word became flesh . . .** the ancient heresy of *docetism* taught that Christ was not actually a flesh-and-blood man, but only appeared to be one. John clearly denies this, both here and in his letters (see 1 John 1:1; 4:2; 2 John 7). In fact, the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus' incarnation (literally, "enfleshment") was an essential part of his identification with mankind and victory over sin (Heb. 2:14).

and made his dwelling among us . . . This phrase "made his dwelling" could be translated "tabernacled". It is an allusion to the tent, or tabernacle, in which God traveled with Israel from the time of the Exodus to the time of king Solomon (Ex. 40:1-38; 2 Sam. 7:5-6). Just as God lived among his people in the Old Testament tabernacle, Jesus lived among his people in a "tabernacle" of flesh.

We have seen his glory . . . Just as Old Testament worshipers could see the glory of God revealed in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-35), those who lived with Jesus could see his glory revealed in miracles and in his death and resurrection (John 2:11; 11:4, 40; 12:23-28).

- v. 15 The "John" referred to here is John the Baptist, not the apostle John who is the author of this book.
- vv. 16-17 **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ** . . . Verse 16 could be translated "one blessing after another" (as in the NIV), or it could be translated "one blessing instead of [or replacing] another." In the first case, John would be referring to the fact that the grace we receive from Christ is superabundant, thus emphasizing the "fullness" of Christ's grace (see vs. 15). In the second case, John would be saying that the grace we receive in Christ replaces and supersedes the grace which came before, the grace which came through the law.
- Verse 17 can also be viewed in two ways. It could be interpreted as a *contrast* between law and grace. This would imply that there was no grace and truth in the law, that law and grace are opposites. Or it could be interpreted as a *comparison*. In this case, John would be saying that the grace we receive from Christ is superior to the grace revealed in the law, because the law was a partial revelation of God's grace while Christ is the full and complete revelation of His grace (see Rom. 7:12; 10:4; Gal. 3:24; Heb. 9).
- In both verses, the first interpretation emphasizes the radical *newness* of what Christ did; the second interpretation emphasizes the *continuity* between Christ's work and what God was doing in the Old Testament.
- v. 18 For additional references to Christ as the revelation of God, see John 12:45; 14:9; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3)
- vv. 19-28 This section contains a dialogue between John the Baptist and the Jewish leaders who came to question him about his identity. Their main concern was one of authority; what gave him the right to baptize? He responded by identifying himself as a prophet. His authority came not from himself, but from the One of whom he prophesied.
- vv. 20-21 The Christ (or "Messiah"), Elijah, and the Prophet were characters whose appearance the Jews expected would signify the coming of the end times (see

Mal. 4:5; Dt. 18:15-18). In fact, Jesus stated that John the Baptist was the promised "Elijah," even though he himself apparently did not realize this (see Matt. 12:13-14; 17:11-12; Lk. 1:17).

- v. 23 **I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'** . . . John the Baptist applies to himself the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3. As Isaiah foretold that God would come and bring His people home from their captivity in Babylon, so here John the Baptist announces that the Lord, Jesus Christ, is coming to draw his people to himself.
- vv. 24-26 One of the most significant things about John's baptism is that it emphasized the necessity of *personal* repentance, rather than a reliance upon one's race or ancestry, for forgiveness of sins (see Lk. 3:1-14).
- v. 29 **the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!** . . . The title "lamb of God" has deep significance. It brings to mind the ram which God provided for Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac; the blood of the passover lamb which protected the people of Israel from death; the Old Testament system of animal sacrifices; and Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant (Gen. 22; Ex. 12; Lev. 4:32-35; Isa. 53:7-10).
- These passages share a common theme of substitution, or one dying in place of another, which is what Jesus did. He died on the cross as a substitute, in order to take away "the sin of the world"; not the world without *exception*, i.e. every person, but the world without *distinction*, i.e. people from every ethnic group, rather than Jews alone. (For a discussion of the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice over the Old Testament sacrificial system, see Heb. 10:1-18.)
- vv. 32-33 The sign of the Spirit descending and remaining on Christ identifies him as the one of whom Isaiah spoke: the promised king from David's line, the righteous Servant, and the anointed one of God (Is. 11:1-5; 42:1; 61:1-3; see Lk. 4:18-21).
- v. 41 **We have found the Messiah** . . . In the language of the Old Testament (Hebrew), "Messiah" literally means "anointed one". Anointing with oil was used throughout the Old Testament to set apart those who were chosen by God for special service, such as kings, priests, and prophets. Christ was each of these things, but the title here probably refers to his identity as the promised king from David's line whose reign would never end (Is. 11:1-5; Luke 1:32). This reign of Christ began with his resurrection and ascension into heaven (Acts 2:29-36), and will be consummated when he returns to earth at the end of the present age.

© Alan Perkins 1993, 1995
All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the
HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®.
NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.