

Studying Johns Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Thomas. And it's wonderful to be back with you. I was away last week speaking at a friend's wedding and then speaking at Bon Accord in the morning service. And it was great to greet them from Carlawy Free Church and bring back their greeting and their best wishes back here. It's wonderful to have that partnership in the Gospel with churches all across Scotland, isn't it? Well, if you'll turn with me to John chapter 1, verses 1 to 18.

This semester we're beginning a new series in the Gospel of John and it's the fourth eyewitness account of Jesus' life written around AD 80 by the apostle John, one of Jesus' close friends and an eyewitness of his life and death and resurrection. So John chapter 1, verses 1 to 18.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness is not overcoming. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all may believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light. The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 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. But 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. 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 bore witness about him and cried out, this was he of whom I said he who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me. For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. Perhaps the most important thing that you need to know about John's Gospel, maybe this is obvious, is that it's all about Jesus. We see that from the very beginning to the very end. And at the very end of John's

Gospel he tells us his purpose is that we know all about Jesus. So in just our first slide there, I just want to point this out to you at the very start. John chapter 20 verse 30 to 31, he tells us why he's writing. He says, now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book, but his purpose. But these are written so that he might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that by believing you may have life in his name. And I read that because I want us to know from the very start that this is a book to help us understand who Jesus truly is, to understand what it really is that Jesus offers.

And what it really means to believe and gain the life that he promises. And that means it's a book for everyone. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, whether you're here in person or listening online, then John is writing to persuade you that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

[3 : 48] He's writing to show you the life that he offers, to urge you to believe in his name. And for those of us who would call ourselves Christians, that doesn't mean it's not a book for us then. John is still encouraging us. He wants to deepen and strengthen our understanding of who Jesus is. He wants to reorient and reassure us of the life that Jesus offers and to bolster our ongoing daily belief. So you might say that John writes so that we'll believe and we'll keep believing. And if you're really interested, he actually uses the Greek word believe in a present continuous way, in that believe and keep believing way. So that's what John wants us to do, believe and keep believing. So this is a gospel we all need. And just a word of warning, because as Thomas said, John's going to pack in loads of stuff in each of his chapters. John doesn't necessarily introduce one topic and then moves on to a different one. His gospel is a bit like a stick of rock, Andy, or maybe I should say like a bolt of tartan. He's got themes that run all the way through it.

And you know, we could try to pick at them all at the very start, but actually we need to work with John and see how he builds up the themes all the way through. And we're going to see that especially in this first chapter here, these first 18 verses. This is like all the threads being pulled together at the start. John's just exploding everything on us as he introduces us to Jesus. But one thing holds them all together. It's all about Jesus so that we might believe.

And so my question at the start is, how would you begin to tell someone about Jesus? If you were John and your aim was to tell people about who Jesus is that we might believe, where would you start? Would you start, I don't know, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, like Mark does, who marks gospel, Jesus comes upon the scene right in the beginning of chapter one saying, the kingdom of God has come. Or would you start at his birth like Luke and Matthew do? Well, John doesn't begin at the stable in Bethlehem. He begins at the beginning. And that's because John wants us to realize from the very start of his gospel that Jesus is bigger than a baby. That's our first point. Jesus is bigger than a baby. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. I like to imagine the apostle John standing on a crate in a marketplace, maybe saying these first words, maybe he, you know, before he'd written it down, he'd said most of this in a, when he's preaching. He says the words in the beginning and you wouldn't need to know much of the Old Testament to hear those words and immediately be transported back to Genesis one in the beginning of creation. In the beginning,

God created the heavens and the earth. But John doesn't start with creation, does he? He doesn't start, he starts before creation, before people are walking around, before the first shoots pushed up through the soil, before the earth heaved and the mountains were formed, before the planets were set spinning around the sun, before the sun was born, before galaxies were created, before anything existed. In the beginning was the word because this word has existed from the beginning. John is telling us that this is the most important thing that you can know about. And this word, who's existed from the beginning, if you're listening and you're thinking, who are you, you're thinking, well, he must either be God or be with God. And John tells us he's both. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the word is then not just simply a force but a person. He's distinct from God. But the word that John uses for with tells us he's in the closest relationship with God. The word is distinct but with God and that fits, well, later see the word being called the son come from the father. There's that intimate, familial language. But that doesn't make him another God, though, or anything less than God.

The word was God. And just so it clear that means that everything that the father is, the son is as well. We see that in the following verses, even if you just look down with me in verses two to five, do you notice twice, John tells us that he is from the beginning, he is eternal. There was never a when when the word was not or verse three, he's the creator. He was not created. The John tells us the same thing positively and negatively, doesn't he? All things were made through him positively. Without him, there was nothing that was not made. Or verse four, like God, he has life in and of himself. Jesus doesn't give it away. Word doesn't derive his life from any other source. Later on in John chapter five, he'll say as the father has life in himself, so he's granted the son to have life in himself. He has life and he's the life giver. That's why we hear in him was life and that life was the light of men. And this isn't just life at creation. As we work through John's gospel, we see that this isn't even just life after death. John's the words, the word is able to provide more than that. He's able to provide restored relationship with God, the life that was lost, Eden restored, true life, full life, living water. All these images will be brought in in John's gospel to help us understand what this life is that Jesus offers. And we can be sure that he can do it because he's God himself. That's the point that these first few verses. And just so we see, and just the first few, just a few verses, John's just laid out the doctrine of the Trinity. He's doggedly monotheistic. There is one God, but he insists that God exists in three distinct persons. We'll have to wait till verse 32 and chapter one to meet the third person.

[9 : 55] But they're equally majestic, equally eternal, equally uncreated. The word was with God, the word was God. And we might feel there's a tension there. How can the word be with God and was God? But John just tells us as fact, this is what you have to know. It's the most important thing to begin with. And again, you can imagine, imagine John reading this out, saying this in a marketplace. And we know who John's talking about, but they wouldn't necessarily, and you can imagine, I don't know, they would be saying, who is this? Or if they did have any idea, they'd say prove it.

And John's gonna prove it. But right now he's keeping his cards close to his chest. He's dangling out these monumental claims about this word person. But we're hooked. In the first 30 seconds, John's only shown us, you know, the first part of the trailer, but we've already bought tickets.

And John's gonna prove it, of course, if you, if you don't want to wait for a year of service to see how John proves it, you'll just have to read through John's gospel yourself. You can just take one of the Bibles with you as you leave. Or we've got copies of John's gospel as well.

And but most of us do know that John is talking about Jesus, right? And many of his readers would have known that. So why does John start like this? Why all the mystery? Well, over the following pages, we're gonna meet a real man walking and talking and stopping by a well because he's thirsty, weeping by a tomb because his friend just died, dying of multiple organ failure and suffocation, and then frying fish on a beach. And he's a remarkable man. But if we're tempted to forget, John says, just remember who he is. John says, just remember, it took me three years to work it out. I want you to know from the very start that this Jesus from history, who is none other than God himself, he didn't come on the scene at three BC. He was there from the beginning.

In fact, he made the beginning begin. And those claims that he made, Jesus, we can know from the start that Jesus isn't blaspheming because he really is God, we can know he's not mad because he really can do the things he claims. We can actually be assured that the life he is going to start promising he can give because he is life in himself. Jesus is the real deal. He's bigger than a baby in the shed. He's the Lord God himself. There's one question I have been carefully avoiding though. If John is talking about Jesus, then why does he call him the word?

[12 : 36] And if you are, you know, again, a Greek speaker at the marketplace and you heard that, well, you might think, okay, you know, I've heard that expression a number of times, some philosophers have banded it around, but, you know, most people wouldn't have really that clear an understanding, you know, it's the word means kind of speech or expression.

But John is when he's taking this Greek word, John is actually shaping it and he's defining it for himself. John is actually drawing much more an Old Testament imagery. You see, the Bible from beginning to end is a book about a God who speaks is a book about a God who speaks out everything. We just had that in the psalm before the sermon by the word of God, the heavens were made by the breath of his mouth. God acts through his word. He expresses himself by his word.

God lifts the curtains and reveals himself by speaking. He says, let there be light and there is light. His word is powerful. It is life giving.

God rescues by his word is Psalm 107 verse 20. He says he sent out his word and he healed them and delivered them from destruction. God is never separate from his word. His word is even personified like in that verse I just read. And you'll find as you read through the Old Testament that, you know, actually rejecting God's word is the same as rejecting God himself. So in short, God's word is his powerful self expression in creation, revelation and rescue or salvation, which makes it entirely appropriate and a prime, entirely appropriate term for John to use to describe Jesus. For John to use to describe the one who is God and who reveals God to us and the one who goes forth with the power of God and gives life as God. It makes sense that God calls him the word. But the other key reason that John uses the term the word that all these kind of come together is that the word reveals who God is. Just as God reveals himself through his speech, through his through his word. So Jesus as the word now is the supreme revelation of God. He shows God like never before. And that's our second point. Jesus, the supreme revelation. See, I was going to call this point the great reveal, but that makes it sound like, you know, we've never really known God before and then ta-da, the blanket comes off and suddenly we see God. But that's not the point. The point is that as Jesus as the word is the climactic revelation of God. This is God as you've never seen him before. God seen more clearly than ever before. Perhaps the best illustration I've heard of this is imagine that you're in a big, a big stately home. The Old Testament is like walking through that stately home with all the curtains down and it's dark inside and you can, you know, run your hands over the furniture and feel the outline. Maybe if there's even a bit of crack of light coming through the curtains, you can make out of egg shapes in the room.

But everything is just still silhouettes and shapes. Well, Jesus coming on the scene is like that light turning on. Everything is suddenly seen. You know, he's the light who reveals God in a way like never before. And it's not a perfect illustration, but the reason I think it helps is it helps us to remember that God hasn't changed. The furniture has always been there. The difference is what we're able to see. The difference is what God shows us about himself. Jesus, what the Old Testament, what we saw in the Old Testament, it only kind of shadowed outline. Jesus now shows us in Technicolor. And John's going to show us that throughout the Gospel. If you listen out throughout the Gospel, you'll see Jesus constantly fulfilling things in the Old Testament. You'll see constant references back to the Old Testament. All the threads being pulled together in Jesus.

[16 : 32] And John starts to show us that in verses 14 to 18 verse 14, the word became flesh. Now, if it isn't well and controversial enough to say the word was God, now Jesus tells us that the eternal word who is at the Father's side has become human. And he doesn't kind of skirt around the language, say he looked human or adopted a form of the body. He just says he became flesh.

Less than a minute on us landed on our plate, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the incarnation, all these weighty mysteries that we're yet to kind of still understand more and more. But the word fully God is now fully man. One person, two natures without any kind of confusion, without separation. And one of the great controversies of the church was just trying to work out how do we explain that? But John isn't launching into a theological lecture. He tells us why this matters.

Why does it matter the word became flesh, the word became flesh to reveal God? You know, that verse that that Thomas read out to the kids that the true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. Well, Jesus is described as the light because he reveals God, the lights come on. God became flesh to turn on the lights for us to see him. It's the difference between like, I don't know, seeing a newborn baby on zoom and then seeing them in person for the first time. That's the difference that Jesus makes. That's the difference God becoming flesh makes. The word became flesh and dwelt among us literally tabernacled. When God first promised the people of Israel that he would dwell with them, he gave them instructions and designs to build this tent, this portable temple that would go with them and God would in a cloud of his glory dwell with them in that temple until the people, well, until the temple was made permanent and then until the people were taken into exile and God's glory left. So just think what the Jewish reader would have heard reading verse 14, that the Lord God of Israel has come back to be with his people, come at last to be with his people, not in a temporary inaccessible tent, but in the permanent physical touchable body of Christ. And in case we're still struggling to make that connection, John adds, we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth, glory not in a cloud, but in the life and supremely death of Jesus. If you wait, Jesus will be saying, my hour is not yet come, my hour is not yet come, you're still waiting, you know, the glory, the hour of glory comes when Jesus dies on the cross. I'm giving away the story, but follow that, follow that trajectory as we read. And again, just in case we haven't made the link, he's the only son from the father, he's truly God, and he's full of grace and truth, which is probably an echo of when God revealed his glory to Moses, saying the Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding instead, fast love and faithfulness. He's the same God, revealing himself like never before. If you were to take all the themes and threads running through the

Old Testament, you'd find that they all lead to Jesus. They're all fulfilled in him and his person, in his work. And this means that Jesus is coming, leads to a whole new chapter. All the threads come to him, all the threads lead out from here. And if we're going to talk about light, he's the prism, all the light comes into the prism here, and it comes out that end. And that's what we see in the next few verses, so verses 16 and 17. John says, from his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace, or grace instead of grace. If the Old Testament reveals God like a flower in bud, well, in Jesus, that flower blooms, it blossoms. John gives the example of the Lord just to show us that in verse 17. God revealed something of his character in the law, something of how he wanted his people to live and how they might come to live in a relationship with him. But the law was always the babysitter, it wasn't the parent. The law was a shadowy outline of the character of God.

And we see that supremely displayed in Jesus. The law, the law's commands told us, showed humanity their sin, but it didn't tell them how to fix that. We have to wait for Jesus to see how we can, how we can be freed from that problem. There's so much, as I said, that John touches on that we can't go into detail. But don't worry, we're going to pick these themes up as we go through the next 20 chapters. These are just meant to wet our appetite, to make us look, to make us realize the climax as come. I want to keep reading. Verse 18 summarizes it in many ways, no one has ever seen God, that is God the Father, but the only God, that is Jesus, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. Jesus, the Word, become flesh, has truly and finally made God known. Which in many ways makes it all the more shocking how people respond. And that's our third point, the light that divides. You'll notice that, I mean, I kind of jumped, the passage begins with the Word and it ends talking about the Word. But in the middle, John talks about how the

[22 : 04] Word's received, how people respond. Verse nine, the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. We had some health illustrations of light from Thomas, but when a light shines, when the sun rises, what happens? Well, it's all the creatures who are out at night, they scurry back away into their burrows and everyone who actually wants to be in the light, they come out and enjoy the light. It's the light produces two responses, it divides and we see the exact same thing here. He was in the world, verse 10, 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. There's a massive irony here, isn't there? The Creator comes to his creation, but his creations say, nah, we don't want anything to do with the Creator. And if that wasn't enough, he comes to his own people, he comes to the Jewish nation, the ones who had heard all those promises, the ones who had seen those threads, but are now refusing to look at where they lead to and they reject him. They don't receive him, they don't embrace him, they cast him out. And if that isn't shocking enough, then he's the true light. He's the one who shows God, but he's also the true light that gives life, the genuine, only, ultimate source of life. He's able to fix everything that's gone wrong.

Rejecting him is like being offered the only drug that will cure you and saying, chucking out the window, throwing it in the bin. He's the only one that can save your life and yet they throw away. It's irrational.

And it's not for lack of knowing, verses 8 to 9. John the Baptist was even stood there 23 times, we're told he bore witness. John the Baptist standing there saying, this is the light, this is the light, this is the light that gives life, listen to him. And then they still reject the light. It's shocking, but we're told this in the prologue so that we're prepared. We're prepared for this theme that we're going to see throughout the gospel. We're prepared to prepare for this theme because we're going to see it throughout human history we do. And we're going to see it throughout our lives in this world. The word became flesh and graciously held out life, but is rejected again and again and again. And John uses that term world deliberately. It's not a neutral term. The world is all human society set up, except against God. And that's what we're all part of by nature. The world that irrationally rejects the light, the world that scurries back into darkness. But Jesus came to change that. We've got verse 12 and 13, don't we? For while many rejected some received verse 12, 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. The mission of the word become fleshed and end in rejection, but in regeneration, in new life. I think we can sometimes complicate the gospel when we try to ask what makes someone a Christian. What does John say? They believed and he gave them the right to become children of God. It's as simple as that. What does belief mean? Well, John's going to give us lots of illustrations over the coming weeks. He's going to shape it for us. He's going to entice us in, but here it just tells us it's literally just receiving Jesus to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, literally received, literally embraced him, take hold of him.

Those who realize that Jesus is the life and the life who takes hold of him, who stand in that light, he says, become children of God. So can I ask, have you done that? Have you received Jesus?

I think it's helpful that John spells out so clearly that there's only two ways to respond. You either receive him or you reject him. There's no sitting on the fence. You're either drawn to the light or you hide from it. There's no in between. It's also worth saying though that some people have a moment where all this changes, where they're standing in the dark and then they realize who Jesus is and come into the life and receive him. But I think many, many people, many people who embrace Jesus, who come to trust in him, they don't know that moment, what that moment when they step from darkness into light. If you ask me, I can't think of a time when I started believing. I just know that I am believing Jesus now. I know that I am receiving him now. And that's the important thing. That's the important thing, John says, that if we're receiving Jesus right now, then we're children of God. If that's you too, if you are embracing the light of life, then the promise of verse 12 is for you. You have the right to call yourself a child of God. You are part of his family. And verse 13 tells us that's not something that happens naturally.

[27 : 33] A person isn't born into as a child of God because they come from a Christian family. Doesn't just happen when they reach a certain age or where they're from a certain place or if they spend a certain amount of time in church. Membership into God's family is dependent on God.

And that's why the word had to become flesh. There will be no membership into the family of God if the word hadn't become flesh and hadn't revealed God to us, hadn't shined into the darkness and brought people from death to life. That's why this is the climax of history. That's why Jesus had to come. In Jesus, God has made himself known that we might know him, that we might believe, and we might be called children of God. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have not left us in darkness scratching our heads, wondering who you are and how we might know you. Lord, we thank you that you have made yourself known in your Son Jesus Christ so that we might believe. Thank you that you have shone light into our hearts, bringing us from death to life. So Lord, you pray that we would believe, we would keep on believing. We pray that as we look at this, at this Gospel of John, that you would strengthen us and give us confidence in who Jesus is, that we might all lay hold of him now and for the rest of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.