

# John's Gospel - Who Is Jesus Anyway?

by John Vissers

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*Jesus Christ is the eternal word of God, who became flesh and lived among us, giving meaning to all of life and bringing light into darkness and life into death.*

**Duration:** 37:55

**Scripture:** John 1:1-12, John 1:14-18

**Topics:** "Jesus"

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## Description

In his acceptance speech for the Broadcaster of the Year Award in 1986, Ted Cople emphasizes the importance of context and truth in today's society. He highlights the need to go beyond mere facts and connect with the truth that can be found in Jesus. Cople discusses the prologue of the Gospel of John, which emphasizes the excellence and uniqueness of Jesus. He quotes John's statement that Jesus must increase and he must decrease, highlighting the transformative power of Jesus' word. Cople concludes by stating that the purpose of the Gospel of John is to introduce readers to Jesus in a way that will change their lives and bring them eternal life.

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## Transcript

In the rack in front of you to the first chapter of the Gospel of John where we want to read the first 18 verses as we launch in this evening to this study of John's gospel together. So reading in John chapter 1 starting at verse 1 through to the end of verse 18. And that life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God. His name was John.

He came as a witness to testify concerning that light so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God. The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. 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.

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. No one has ever seen God but God the only Son who is at the Father's side has made him known.

Amen and may God bless to us tonight this reading and these wonderful words which come from the opening chapter of John's Gospel. Let's pray together shall we? God our Father tonight we bow before you and acknowledge that this is your word and we pray that as we study it together that by your Holy Spirit you would speak to us, speak to our hearts and to our minds, to our lives that the truths uncovered here may indeed make a difference in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

It's wonderful really to come to the Gospel of John and to have this opportunity to study it together and I'm looking forward to working through these studies with you as we look at the Gospel of John together. The Gospel of John is one of those books in the Bible that has been used to bring many people to faith in Jesus Christ throughout the years and used by God to help many many people grow in their life of discipleship. In fact it's played a central role really in the life of the Christian Church throughout much of its history, so much so that Martin Luther, the great reformer, when commenting about the significance of this book, and you have to take Luther's words sometimes with a grain of salt because he has a tendency to make his point by exaggerating, but this is what he said about the Gospel of John.

He says this is the unique, tender, genuine chief gospel. Should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a single copy of the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to John escape him, Christianity would be saved. Well of course the Epistle to the Romans was Luther's favorite book but the Gospel of John ranked right up there with it in his own mind in thinking about its significance for teaching the central truths of the Christian faith.

And fortunately of course we don't have the problem which Luther describes because we have all of the scriptures and we don't need to make the kind of choice that he's talking about here. But nevertheless the Gospel of John has found a special place in the lives of many believers. New Christians are often challenged by its truths, by the essential tenets of the Gospel that are found there.

They are encouraged to study the Gospel of John and yet mature believers in Jesus Christ can also find deep truth here. Truth that applies to our lives, that applies to our hearts, to our minds as we seek to be the disciples of Jesus in our world today. And of course from the Gospel of John come many of the great greatest and most well known texts.

John 3 16 of course is the most obvious. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. But think also of John 11 25.

I am the resurrection and the life. Or think of John chapter 14 and verse 6. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

And so there are these many great texts, these verses as well in the Gospel of John. Someone has written this about the Gospel of John, that it has often been compared to a pool in which a child could wade safely and yet an elephant could also swim. It is both simple and yet it is also profound.

It is for the beginner in the faith and it is for the mature in Christ. And it's for this reason that as I was thinking and praying over these summer months about what we should do together on Sunday evenings that my mind kept coming back to the Gospel of John. I wasn't first inclined in this direction but it seems to me that here is a book that speaks to new believers, to young Christians, to those who are on the pathway of discipleship, as well as to those who have been Christians for many many years.

Now as we think into the Gospel of John the thing that we need to understand is that fundamentally it is a portrait of Jesus Christ. It is a portrait of Jesus Christ. One of the commentators describes John's Gospel in this way, it is the intimate journal of a man who knew Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospel was written by John, one of the disciples of Jesus, the brother of James. You'll remember James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also known as the sons of thunder. John was a disciple of Jesus, likely very young when he took up and left his nets to follow Jesus.

And John's purpose in this Gospel is to introduce us to the Jesus who changed his life. And his purpose is to introduce us to the Jesus who changed his life so that that Jesus may change and transform our lives as well. He writes from first-hand experience.

He's not a distant observer of the events about which he writes. He's someone who has encountered Jesus. He's someone who has been touched by Jesus and who himself has touched Jesus.

He's someone who loves Jesus and who himself experienced the love of Jesus in his life. Someone who changed his life dramatically. If you think of his words in one of his letters later in the New Testament, 1st John chapter 1 and verse 1 and then verse 3, this is what John says later, So John is writing from his heart here.

He's writing from experience. He's writing from the depths of his encounter with Jesus Christ. And so we're not talking here about a cold, distant, biographical account of Jesus.

We're not talking about a newspaper reporter reporting on the events of the day. We're not even talking about a historian, although John is recording history. But we are talking about someone whose life has been changed by Christ and who wants to communicate the reality of the Jesus that he met.

Now why does John want to do this? Well, he gives us a clue later in chapter 20 in verse 31. He says, You see, John wants to introduce us to Jesus in a way that will be transformative. In a way that will change our lives.

In a way that will make a difference to us. And so the gospel, as we think into it, needs to be understood from this perspective. And that purpose, which is not explicitly stated until near the end of the Gospel, at the end of the next to the last chapter, that purpose is already very explicitly at work, clearly at work in the beginning of the Gospel.

And that's the passage that we've read this evening. The opening 18 verses of the Gospel are usually referred to as the prologue. I like to think of them more as an overture.

These are really, this is really the overture to the Gospel of John. Those of you who go to the symphony or those of you who have gone to some musical productions will know that an overture introduces all of the themes which are to be developed in the course of the presentation. Themes are introduced, touched upon, and then later they are further developed and fully developed in the musical score.

Well that's what's going on here in John's Gospel. That's what's going on in this prologue. John introduces us to Jesus by saying things that are very important but also saying things that are going to be touched on again and again and again throughout the course of his writing, throughout the course of this Gospel.

Themes like belief. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Things like light, that Jesus is the light of the world. Things like life, that we may have life in his name.

The theme of love that keeps emerging again and again throughout the Gospel. And so these themes are introduced in this overture in a very striking fashion because this Gospel really stands out in terms of the way that it begins from the other Gospels that we find in the New Testament. When we think about Matthew and we think about Luke, we look there in the opening chapters and what we discover is that the writers there introduce us to Jesus by tracing the genealogy of Jesus, his family background, his lineage, and then introducing us to the story of his birth.

If you go to Mark's Gospel, Mark launches right into the baptism of Jesus, John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, then the baptism, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, the calling of the disciples, and then out into the ministry of Jesus. But here, John begins the story of Jesus in a very strange place. In the far reaches of eternity.

Who is Jesus anyway, John wants to ask. And the answer he gives us is that he is the eternal word of God, the word who became flesh and dwelt for a while among us, the word whose uniqueness and excellence cannot be surpassed. And so that's the portrait of Jesus that is introduced to us in this prologue, in this overture, and we want to just hit the notes of this overture, the main notes or themes that are introduced in this prologue in answer to the question, who is Jesus anyway, as we think together into this portrait of Jesus given to us in John's Gospel.

Now the first thing I want us to notice here comes to us in the opening verses, in verses one to nine, really, which are the verses I'm going to group together. But here we discover that according to John, Jesus Christ is the eternal word of God. Now those who first received this Gospel would have read the opening words, and they would have found those words very startling, in the beginning.

And as they read those words, immediately in their minds, they would realize that John is beginning his Gospel with the same words with which the Old Testament begins, in the beginning. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning, God.

As you go back to Genesis chapter one, one of the things you discover is that nowhere in the Bible does the Bible seek to prove the existence of God. Nowhere is there an argument for God's existence. The Bible just launches out into this account, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

It simply assumes that God is, that God always has been, and that God forever will be. And the Bible has no other language, and we as human beings really have no other language than to describe this by saying, in the beginning, to relate it somehow to our time. But what's really being described here is the time before time.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. At our beginning, God already was. God was there before our beginning.

There never was a time that God did not exist. Notice now our finite minds have a difficult time wrapping around that concept. But that's what the words, in the beginning, would conjure up in the minds of the

readers of this gospel who first read it, received it, and heard it.

But notice then that John says, in the beginning was the word. He doesn't go on in the same way as Genesis 1 says, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, but he says, in the beginning was the word. And he is talking about the word here.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God in the beginning, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Now we come across now this term, word.

I want to use, say, we come across this word, word, but that gets a little confusing. We come across this term, word, and we need to understand that when John uses this term, word, he has much more in mind than a series of letters strung together to communicate a concept. That's what we think about when we think about the term, word, a series of letters put together in our language which is used to communicate a concept, or a series of words then put together in a sentence.

Something which is written or spoken intended to communicate something. And certainly that concept is in the background, and certainly that concept is at work, and John really does want us to understand that Jesus is a word of communication to us. But to John's readers, the idea of the word has a much deeper meaning.

For in the Old Testament, the idea of the word in Hebrew, Devar, is that through which God created all things. It is the means through which God created the heavens and the earth. Again, if you go back to Genesis chapter 1, how does God create? God said, let there be light, and there was light.

God said, and it was done, and again and again throughout Genesis chapter 1, it is the word of God which is the agent or the means of creation. It is the word of God which brings light into the world. It is the word of God which creates life itself.

It is God's speech. God simply speaks, and it is done. And throughout the Old Testament, the concept of the word of God carries with it this idea that when God speaks, it is done, and God's word is not something out there, separate from God, but it is God speaking and active, and when he speaks, he acts, and when he acts, it is done.

And so as Jewish Christians or Jewish readers of this gospel would have received it, in the beginning was the word, all of that would have come into their minds, but John was also writing to Greeks, and when they heard this term, they thought about something else. They thought about the idea in Greek of logos, the Greek word for word, logos, and to the Greek mind, the logos was the creating and guiding power of the universe. The logos was the reason within the universe and that which was behind everything that exists.

It is the idea of the explanation, the reason behind everything that is, the rationale behind human life. The word is the way, the Greeks believed, through which we find meaning in life. And so, as John says, in the beginning was the word, you have all of these notes from the Old Testament resonating in the background.

You have all of these notes from the Greek culture in which the early church lived resonating and echoing in the ears and in the minds of the readers and hearers of this gospel. And what John is saying, what he has the audacity to suggest to Jews and to Greeks alike, which is why Paul can later say that the gospel is a scandal, an offense to the Greek mind and to the Jewish mind alike, is that Jesus Christ is this word. He is the word that has always existed.

He is the word who has been in eternal communion with God. He is the word who is himself God, identified with God, the creator of all things. He stands behind the universe and gives meaning to all of life.

Light shines because of Jesus. Life is lived because of Jesus. There never was a time when the Son of God did not exist.

And the last of the prophets, John the Baptist, John the gospel writer says, came as a witness to testify concerning him. What a marvelous portrait of Jesus. What a marvelous picture of his majesty, of his glory, of his pre-existence before the foundation of the world.

In the beginning was the word. And of course, these words are echoed again by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1, verse 15, he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

Who is Jesus anyway? He is the eternal word of God, the word which has spoken, been spoken from all eternity. The eternal Son of God. You know, we live at a time when we like to take Jesus and kind of fit him in to our own finite understanding or fit him into our own religious system or fit him into the context with which we can identify so that we can understand him and put him in his place.

But we need to understand that Jesus is not someone that we can take and sort of line him up amongst other philosophies or other ideologies or other religions, but Jesus himself is the big picture. He is the macro view. He is the one who stands behind the universe.

In 1986, Ted Koppel, who used to be the host of the program Nightline, was given the Broadcaster of the Year award and in his acceptance speech he made these comments. He said, what is largely missing in life today is a sense of context, of saying or doing anything that is intended or even expected to live beyond the moment. We have become so obsessed with facts that we have lost all touch with truth.

Consider this paradox, he says, almost everything that is publicly said these days is recorded, but almost nothing of what is said is worth remembering. And you see, we live at a time when words come and go very quickly. And they really come in no context whatsoever, but we need to understand that Jesus here is described as a word worth knowing, a word that we need to come to understand, a word that gives meaning beyond the present moment, a word that brings light into darkness, life into death, a word worth remembering, a word that can transform our lives.

But then very quickly we need to move on because notice then that Jesus in John's Gospel in this overture here is described in a second way, or there's a second note or a second theme in this overture which is struck, which is going to be emphasized again and again throughout the Gospel, and that is that he is the incarnate word of God. John's introduction, as we've just seen, begins in the far reaches of an eternity past, but it quickly comes down and touches ground in our space and in our time, in our history. The eternal word of God becomes flesh.

The word became flesh, verse 14 it says, and dwelt or lived for a while among us. Now I don't know whether you've ever thought about the Christian faith in this way, but it seems to me very significant that this eternal word of God, who is himself God, this eternal word of God from the far reaches of eternity did not simply become manifested in a philosophy to be discussed or a theory to be debated or a concept to

be pondered, but the Bible says that the word became a person. The word became flesh, a person to be known, a person to be followed, a person to be encountered, a person to be loved, a person to be enjoyed.

The word became flesh and lived for a while among us. And that's simply what the word incarnation means. It's a big word that we use in the Christian faith, but it simply means become flesh.

The word became flesh and lived for a while among us. It means that the eternal word of God stepped out of the infinite reaches of eternity into our space and into our time, into our human history. That the eternal word of God became a genuine human being, lived a genuine human life, in all ways lived as we did, even tempted as we are, as the writer to the Hebrew says, yet was without sin.

Now, the picture that you need to develop in your mind here is really quite a dramatic one because the word that's used here in verse 14 is literally the idea that God pitched his tent in our midst. The word became flesh, God pitched his tent in our midst, and it's the idea of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. You'll remember as the people of Israel traveled to the promised land, as they made their journey through the wilderness, they carried the tabernacle with them.

What was the tabernacle? It was a kind of tent, it was a kind of thing that they had built, and it represented the presence of God. It housed, as it were, the glory of God. It was where they offered sacrifices.

It was where God's glory dwelt with them for a while. This was where they worshiped God as they journeyed, as they traveled. And John says that all of the presence of God that was experienced by the people of Israel in the Old Testament, as they traveled through the wilderness in the tabernacle, all of God's presence, that glory now is manifested in Jesus Christ.

I've told this story before, but I think it's a wonderful illustration, really, of what's going on in the Incarnation. The story is told about a boy who greatly admired his father, and who missed him immensely as his father was away in Europe fighting in the Second World War. And one day he stood for a long time simply gazing at a portrait, at a picture of his father on the mantle.

And as his mother came into the room, he said to his mother, Mother, do you know what I wish could happen? Do you know what I wish from the depths of my heart and my soul would happen? I wish that my father could step out of that picture frame and be real to me here and now. And you see, that's what the Incarnation is all about. It is the eternal word of God stepping out, as it were, of the frame of eternity into human history, into our midst, to become real to us here and now.

But notice that John says, not everyone who encountered Jesus recognized him. He came to his own, but they did not receive him. The darkness did not comprehend it.

The darkness here represents sin, the darkness of the human soul apart from God, apart from the light that shone in the darkness, but the darkness, John says, has not understood it. But then notice what he says in verse 12, but to those who did receive him, to those who do believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God. Children who are born again by the Spirit of God.

Born not of flesh, but by the Spirit of God. And so there is a movement, God steps in the person of his Son into our history. There is a rejection, yes, but those who receive him enter into the family of God, co-heirs with Jesus of the kingdom.

Who is Jesus anyway? He is someone to be known, someone to be encountered, someone to be experienced, someone to let into our lives. And then finally, and we're moving quickly here because time is pretty well gone, but notice that the prologue, the overture concludes in verses 15-18 by striking the notes of Christ's all-surpassing excellence. John here strikes the notes of Christ's uniqueness.

He emphasizes the supremacy of Jesus. He emphasizes the excellence of Jesus. Jesus is greater than John the Baptist and all of the prophets.

There is later in John's gospel a wonderful word that is found on the lips of John himself, a word that all Christians would do well to say again and again. As he thinks about Jesus, as he makes his witness to Jesus, he says, He must increase and I must decrease. He must increase and I must decrease.

John understood himself as a witness to Jesus Christ. And so John, the gospel writer, says he is greater than the greatest of the prophets, even John the Baptist. He says the fullness of grace is poured out in Christ, the grace of God that's already been revealed in the Old Testament, in the covenants which God made with his people.

Now that grace is fully poured out, fully revealed, blessing upon blessing, experienced by the people who will receive him. And then notice that he says Jesus is greater than Moses, through whom the law came. Grace and truth, he says, comes through Jesus Christ.

And then John concludes on this note in this overture, he says, If you want to know God the Father, and this is a very striking and poignant conclusion to this overture, if you want to know God the Father, you should take a long, hard look at the Son. Do you remember later in John's gospel in chapter 14, Jesus says to his disciples that he's going to die, that he's going to prepare a place for them? And some of them don't understand. Thomas is confused by this, and he says to Jesus, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we possibly know the way? We really don't know what you're talking about.

And Jesus answers with those famous words, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. And then he says this, he says, If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.

And still not satisfied, Thomas says, Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us. In other words, show us God, and that will really be enough for us. Isn't that what most of us want? We want some demonstration, some proof in order to really believe.

But hear what Jesus said to Thomas. Don't you know me, Philip? Even after I have been among you such a long time, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not my own, rather it is the Father living in me, doing his work.

Believe me when I say this, that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. You see, the disciples of Jesus, even after living with Jesus, being encountered by him and encountering him, had to learn the reality of this truth, which John the Gospel writer introduces in this opening prologue, that in the person of Jesus Christ we have to do with God. We have to do with God the Father.

We have to do with God himself, revealed in the person of his Son. Many of you know that my grandfather passed away in August, and I had a wonderful opportunity to spend some time with him before he died. My grandfather came from a very strict Dutch Calvinist background, where there was so much emphasis

on the doctrine of predestination that it sort of undercut the assurance of salvation.

It sort of undercut the reality of hope that you could know whether you really belonged to the Lord or not. And on the day before he died, he and I over the years have had many conversations, and he was a believer, and I believe in my own heart that he trusted in Christ, and he made explicit confession of that. But he had this struggle, because he had this idea that yes, there was Jesus, but then behind Jesus there was this awful God who was sort of pulling the strings of history and pulling the strings of his life.

And as I spent time with him just the night before he died, one of the things I said to him as we read scripture together and as we prayed together was simply this, Opa, when you look into the face of Jesus, you have to do with God himself. You have to do with God himself. All that God wants to reveal about who he is is revealed in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is our hope as Christians. That is our faith. That is who Jesus is.

Who do you think Jesus is tonight? Who is Jesus anyway for you? And how do you respond to this portrait, to this overture which the Gospel writer gives to us? Let us pray. Lord, we thank you tonight for these truths which are so deep and yet so real, and we thank you tonight for the fact that we have been confronted again with the reality of who our Lord Jesus Christ really is. We pray, Lord, that you would teach us increasingly what it is to believe in him, what it is to receive him, what it is to walk in his way, what it is to trust in him fully and completely with every ounce of our being.

Lord, some of us here tonight probably have doubts about Jesus. We're not sure who he is. And even when we look at texts like these in John's Gospel, we still wonder about his identity.

By your Spirit, Lord, would you speak to our hearts and our minds and confirm to us your word, for in the name of Jesus we ask it. Amen.

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