

Before Bethlehem
John 1:1-5

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My wife Jamie has been discipling a woman who came to Christ through the biblical counseling ministry. This woman goes to church, but she had very little biblical understanding. Jamie had asked her to read the first few chapters of Matthew. When they were talking afterward, Jamie asked, “Did you see the Christmas story?” The woman replied, “there was a Christmas story in there?” She paused for a moment and then went on, “Ooooh, yea the girl who got pregnant.”

Most of us are familiar with the contours of the Christmas story. We know about the angelic visits to Mary and Joseph. We know about Mary’s miraculous conception. We know about the journey to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census. We know about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and his being laid in a manger. We know about the angelic announcement to the shepherds in the field at night and their visit to see the newborn King. We know about the visit of the magi from the east who worship Jesus and give him their treasures. The gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with these stories about the coming of Jesus – Christmas stories.

But if I asked you if you saw the Christmas story in the first chapter of John, you might reply “there’s a Christmas story in there?” Yes, there is indeed. But this Christmas story begins long before Bethlehem. John tells us that Jesus is the eternal Word who is God. The eternal Word, who is God, became a human being and entered into our world. He came here to reveal God to us and to bring us salvation.

Over the next four weeks we are going to focus on how John explains the meaning of Christmas. In our passage today, we discover that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God. We are going to consider two questions today. First, *Why does John use the title “Word” to describe Jesus?* And second, *“How does Jesus, the Word, reveal God?”*

I. Jesus is the Word who reveals God to us.

A. John uses the Greek term *logos* or Word as a title for Jesus.

1. Though the Greeks used this word to indicate something about the essential principle of reason, the essence of the soul, or the ideal world, this is not John’s background for the word.
2. John is drawing on the Old Testament understanding of the Word of God.

In the Old Testament, the word of God is associated with God’s activity in creation, revelation, and deliverance.

- Creation
 - Genesis 1:3 – God **said**, “Let there be light,” and there was light.
 - Psalm 33:6 – By the **word** of the Lord the heavens were made and by the breath of his mouth all the hosts.
- Revelation
 - God’s revelation to the prophets is often described in terms of the **word** of the Lord coming to them (Jer. 1:4; Isa. 38:4).
 - God says things like “the Lord has sent a **word** against Jacob...” (Isa. 9:8).
- Deliverance

- Psalm 107:20 – He sent out his **word** and healed them and delivered them from their destruction.
- Isaiah 55:11 – so shall be my **word** that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

D.A. Carson comments,

In short, God's 'Word' in the Old Testament is his powerful self-expression in creation, revelation and salvation, and the personification of that 'Word' makes it suitable for John to apply it as a title to God's ultimate self-disclosure, the person of his own Son.

Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (116). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

B. The revealing “Word” is Jesus Christ.

1. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). This refers to Jesus.
2. John spoke about him (the Word who became flesh) and bore witness about him (1:15). This is clearly a reference to Jesus Christ.

By using this title, Logos/Word, John is indicating that he is speaking about someone who reveals God. Consider Hebrews 1:1-3 in connection with the words of John 1:1-5.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

God has spoken finally, definitively, clearly through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus will say to Philip in John 14:9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

II. Jesus the Word is God.

Our passage goes on to make five bold claims about Jesus. Each of these claims tells us something critical about the identity of Jesus. Let's consider these claims in order.

Jesus is eternal (v. 1).

- *In the beginning...* this statement takes us back to Genesis 1:1. This language is intentionally connecting the Word with the God who existed before creation. John has in mind the beginning of the universe when God created all things.
- *In the beginning was the Word...* In the beginning, at the start of history, was the Word. This phrase is telling us that when all things began, the Word already existed. The force of the language indicates the eternal pre-existence of the Word. To say it another way, the Word has always existed and was already present when creation began.
- John will emphasize this again in his gospel. In 8:58 for instance, he will say, “Before Abraham was born, I am.”
- One of the early controversies in the church occurred when Arius, a 4th century deacon, began to say things like “there was a time when he was not.” Athanasius and others resisted this heresy because they understood what John was saying. There was never a time when he was not.

Jesus existed eternally with God (v. 1).

- *and the Word was with God...* This phrase emphasizes two things.
 - First, it tells us that there is a distinction between the Word (Jesus) and God (the Father). The preposition “with” indicates that two persons are in view.
 - Second, it indicates relationship. The Word was with God in the sense of a personal relationship or fellowship. Think of Jesus’s words in John 17:5, 24. Jesus speaks of the glory and love that he shared with the Father before the world began.
- Though the Word is distinct from God as a person, he is also in fellowship with God in personal relationship.

Jesus eternally is God (v. 1).

- *and the Word was God.* The grammar indicates that the Word “participates in the reality called God” or “the Word shares the essence of the Father” as some writers have said it.
- Keep in mind what this phrase does not mean.
 - It does not mean that Jesus simply possesses some divine attributes or a vague sense of divinity. There is a perfectly good word in Greek to say that. John does not use that language here.
 - It does not mean that Jesus is “a god” as some have suggested (Arius, JW today). This views Jesus as more than a man but less than God.
 - It does not mean that the Word (Jesus) contains the entirety of the Godhead “as if no divine being could exist apart from the Word (Carson).”
 - The grammar John uses is very precise. He does not say that the Word and God are the same person (the Word was with God). He does not say that the Word is god-like or a god in a lesser sense than God. He says that Jesus and the Father share the same essence (along with the Holy Spirit) as God.
- These verses are key to our understanding of the Triune nature of God as One God existing eternally in three persons of equal status and glory.
- This understanding of Jesus is affirmed by other passages such as Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:2-3.

Jesus created all things (v. 3).

- *All things were made through him, and without was not anything made that was made.* This tells us in no uncertain terms that Jesus was the agent of God in the creation of all things. Notice how the term “made” is used three times to emphasize that nothing came into existence without the agency of Jesus. Out of nothing, the Word created everything.
- This word is used to describe God’s creative action in the Greek version of the Old Testament in the Book of Genesis.
- Other passages confirm this understanding of the role of Jesus in creation. Col. 1:16-17 and Heb. 1:2 tell us that Jesus was involved in the creation of all things.

Jesus is the source of life and light (v. 4).

- Life and light connect us to the Genesis account of creation where God creates both life and light. Jesus is again connected with these two powerful concepts of creation.
- In addition, John is fond of using the pairs of opposites in his gospel to refer to spiritual realities – life/death and light/darkness. The sinful world under the control of Satan is

characterized by death and darkness. Jesus comes to bring life and light to those who believe in Him. Only Jesus can bring life where there is death and light where there is darkness. Those who refuse to believe in Jesus remain in death and darkness.

- The light of Jesus shines into the dark and fallen world. Some translations state that the darkness did not overcome the light or it did not comprehend the light. Both are accurate in relation to Jesus. The fallen world does not understand the light, neither can it overcome the light.
- John builds on this description of Jesus later in his gospel. Jesus says in 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He says in 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

So What? Why Did John Write This?

So John has insisted that Jesus is the Word who reveals God to us. He has also insisted that Jesus is God. But why? Why does John begin his gospel in this way? What is his purpose? He does not leave us guessing. He tells us precisely why he has written these things. In John 20:30-31 he writes:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are 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.

John’s purpose in writing this gospel is to convince us to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing we will have life in his name. He is writing to persuade us of the identity of Jesus Christ, who he is, so that we will trust in him and receive the gift of life in his name.

When we think of the Christmas story, have a tendency to sentimentalize it. The manger, the magi, the shepherds, the star – these have become culturally sentimental symbols of a nice holiday. But John tells us things about Jesus that we cannot walk away from and just say “isn’t that nice.” He is telling us that Jesus Christ is the clear and definitive revelation of the eternal God. He is telling us that Jesus is God. He is telling us that Jesus created everything. He is telling us that Jesus is the source of life and light. These are truths that don’t go away when the decorations are finally put up, the leftovers are eaten, and the lights are taken down. This is truth that must be reckoned with.

But neither is John writing like a professor in a classroom. He is writing like an evangelist. He is not writing to impress people with lofty intellectual concepts to dazzle their minds and fuel their pointless speculations. To be sure, the things he tells us here about Jesus have been pondered by the brightest minds. These are mysteries that defy complete explanation. They are truths that demand close thinking and precise statement. But remember that John is writing to convince us with essential spiritual truth about Jesus Christ so that we will trust in him and have the gift of eternal life.

Conclusion

What John has told us in vv. 1-5 is what makes v. 14 so remarkable. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory. This Word – who existed eternally in fellowship with God, who is God, who created all things, who is the source of life and light – this Word became flesh. It is breathtaking.

In the 12th century, Buddhist poet Saigyō Hoshi wrote this poem after visiting a grand temple.

*Gods here?
Who can know?
Not I.
Yet I sigh
and tears flow
tear on tear.*

We yearn to experience God's presence. But we often look in places that leave us unsure and even sorrowful. We sigh and we cry.

But God is not playing hide-and-seek with us. He wants to be known. That is why he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ, the eternal Word. Jesus the eternal Word came to this earth and died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. He rose from the dead. The darkness did not overcome the light. Jesus now offers light and life to everyone who will trust in him.

What about you? Have you trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? Turn to the one who is the source of life and light.