

In the Beginning Study Notes

John 1:1-18.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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. ¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

According to David Ford, the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel are, "perhaps the most influential short passage in the history of Christian Theology".¹ Out of the sixty-six books of the Bible, and only the opening line of Genesis, the famous "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is more well-known.

Right at the beginning John offers us so much. He introduces key themes, images and categories for his Gospel. God, Word, creation, all things, all people, life, light, darkness, believing, the world, the name of Jesus, flesh, glory, father, only son, grace, truth, fullness, law, Moses, Jesus Christ, seeing and the intimacy

¹ David F Ford, *The Gospel of John: A theological Commentary*, page 25.

between Jesus and his father. For John, these are all large containers into which more and more is poured as his Gospel progresses, deepening and expanding their meaning. All aimed at answering one essential question; who is Jesus?

For John, his opening is a way to answer the question who is Jesus? He is the word. What is the “Word”? Let’s look at it again: John says, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1, NIV). Okay – who or what is that? “In the beginning,” which mirrors the opening lines of **Genesis 1: 1-3; In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters and God said, “let there be light,” and there was light.**

John tells us that before time began, before the universe was ever created, before the sun and the moon and the stars were birthed into existence, ...there was the Word. What is the Word? Well, it’s not talking about the words coming out of your mouth. *Jesus is the word. The word is Christ.*

John was doing two things. Firstly, he was taking on Greek thinking, Greek culture, Greek philosophy. The main thinking of his day. He used the Greek word “logos.” For the Greeks, the idea of Word was not simply what you said from your mouth, but it was an idea that represented the mind, or reason. Greeks felt that the originating force, or power, of the universe was the Logos, the Word. It was the Word that governed everything. He’s trying to push back against the prevalent thought of the day. Same word different meaning.

For the Jews, the Word had a name. It was God. So, when they spoke of the Word, the way the Greeks did, it was in reference to God. So here John is beginning in a way that is reaching out to every culture, every listener, every worldview. This would have been considered shocking to the Greeks and the way they viewed the world.

Right at the start John is trying to communicate the most important truth he knows, which he traces to God. At the very heart of God is the relationship of Jesus to his father which is one of mutual indwelling, clearly seen in verse fourteen, **¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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.** They are utterly, inseparably involved with each other, yet can also be distinguished from each other. The use of “Word” captures this communication, identity, intimacy and point of difference.

John wanted to establish who Jesus was right from the start. The Word was God, but also with God. Because the Word was different than God the Father, what's John introducing? Here was God the Son. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God.

Verse three; **³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.** We are reminded that nothing came into being without him. Again, connecting back to Genesis. So, John is not merely stressing who God is but what God does. Therefore, in the Gospel, what Jesus does is divine activity. When he heals or speaks-when he gives eternal life as we read in verse four, **⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.**

Then in verse five we read; **⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** This how Jesus chooses to enter our world (the incarnation) is described as light shining in the darkness. The darkness is hostile. John strongly and soundly suggests that the darkness cannot defeat or overcome the word. One of John's strong themes throughout his Gospel is the struggle between light and darkness.

One other matter deserves mention in verse one. **1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** We are both introduced and welcomed into the deep waters of the trinity. One of the most amazing teachings in the Bible about God is the idea that God is triune. That his very nature is trinity. Three Persons who are one God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The love between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit couldn't be contained. It had to be shared. Haven't you ever seen a picture, watched a sunrise, caught a glimpse of something wonderful, and instantly wanted to grab someone and say, "You've got to come and see this." So, John begins with the idea of the Word, and that the Word was not only God, but with God. So here is God the Son. God will emerge in John's Gospel as the father.

In verse fourteen, the Word Became Flesh **¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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 1: 14.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Two headlines here: First, the Word became flesh. Theologians call this the Incarnation. God became man. Or as John phrased it, became flesh.

God became a human being. It is an astonishing, daring concept. The Word who has already been identified with God who created all things, became flesh. Flesh is an interesting word choice. He could have used the Greek term for “human being.” He didn’t. He could have used the Greek word for “body”. Didn’t do that, either. He used the term *sarx* – flesh - almost a crude term. God really came to earth.

Dorothy Lee puts it like this; “Limitation and susceptibility to pain, sorrow, grief, rejection, oppression and ultimately death”.²Here’s how C.S. Lewis described it: "What God did was this: The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man - a real man of particular height, with hair of a particular colour, speaking a particular language, weighing (a particular amount). "The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a foetus inside a woman's body."

I like how one of the church fathers puts it writing around three hundred years after the death of Christ. **“The one who is becomes. The uncreated is created. The uncontainable is contained through a thinking soul, mediating between the Godhead and the thickness of flesh. What he was, he laid aside. What he was not, he assumed. He takes upon himself the poverty of my flesh so that I may receive the riches of his divinity”.** Gregory Nazianzen.

The Word Dwelt Among Us But that’s only the first headline. Look again at what John writes: **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us John 1:14.** So, not only did the Word become flesh, but He made His dwelling among us. The word “dwelling” literally means “he tabernacled” with us, or “tented” with us. A little background. Way back, actually. When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land, God told them to set up a tent, or tabernacle.

It was called the Tent of Meeting, which God would then fill with His presence. Here’s how the Bible describes it in the book of Exodus: Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted.

² Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 50.

So, the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels (Exodus 40:34-38). From that point forward, the Israelites would march through the desert, and throughout history, with God leading the way. Tenting among them and leading them to the Promised Land. So, what does John say about Jesus? The Word became flesh and tented among us.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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. Verse fourteen also speaks of Glory. This is a strong statement of glory as a father's only son. What does this mean? The answer is found in verse eighteen; **¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.** What an amazing picture. The only son who is close to the father's heart. **This is a relationship of deep and intimate love of the father and son.**

Of course, the most pivotal moment when the glory and love are realised most fully comes with the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus laying down his life is an act of supreme love and glory. Glory and love are seen on the cross. Yet again we are drawn into John's question about Jesus. Who is this person, utterly flesh and utterly divine.

From this question comes a challenge. To believe in him or not to believe in him. John 1: 11-12; **¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God**

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. John 1: 4. Jesus came to bring abundant life. John loves to empathise this abundance pointing to it in many ways. Large quantities of wine, the wind of the spirit blowing freely, water welling up to eternal life, surplus baskets of food, perfume filling a house, a huge catch of fish and others.

"Eternal life" is the most common phrase John uses for it and this is a life of love, beginning now to which community is a must. In verse eighteen, we see the absolute fullest expression of this life; the love between the father and the son into which we are all invited. **¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.** Coping with this abundance of love leaves one breathless.

Jesus is sent out of his father's love for the world; he relates to diverse people from many communities. His love knows bounds as he washes the feet of Judas, the one who will betray him and his death is to draw all people to him. There is so much more to say on these opening eighteen verses. There are whole libraries of writing on it but they do not exhaust what can be written, prayed, sung, preached and talked about.

At the heart of it all, there is a continual engagement and trust with the crucified and risen Jesus, who summons us who believe to love as he loved, to receive the Holy Spirit that he sent and to continue his work until he returns.