

Bible Study Guide: Week of 12-28-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 1:1-18

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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

The phrase "in the beginning" brings to mind the creation account in Genesis 1:1. Jewish people reading or hearing this gospel would immediately have recognized this introduction as similar to the start of Genesis. Right away, they would have recognized that a creation story was about to unfold. Likewise, John's choice of the Greek word *logos* (word) would have had deep meaning for both Jews and gentiles. Greek stoic philosophers used the term *logos* to speak about the governing rational principle of the universe—what we might call natural law. Jewish writers, on the other hand, used the term *logos* to speak about God's creative plan that governs the world. John is taking familiar concepts and reapplying them to interpret the meaning of Jesus.

The term "Word of God" is a bit like our phrase "Body of Christ" in that when we use these phrases we are really speaking about three different things. With Body of Christ, we might mean Jesus' physical body that was born in Bethlehem and crucified outside Jerusalem and raised on the third day. We might mean Jesus' body given for us in the communion meal. Or we might mean the church—the Body of Christ made up of many members as Paul describes in his letters. All three of these are distinct, yet interrelated. The same goes for "Word of God." We might mean the words God spoke at creation, the words spoken through the prophets or to Moses and others. We might mean the written Word of God; that is, Scripture. Or we might be referring to Jesus as the incarnate Word of God—the Word made flesh, as John says. These are three distinct, yet intimately interrelated things. That is important to keep in mind as we talk about "the Word."

³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The end of v. 3 ("What has come into being") is a phrase that is ambiguous in terms of whether it belongs with the rest of v. 3 or with v. 4. The NRSV renders it with v. 4 as you see above. The NIV, however, renders it with the rest of v. 3: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Using the same translation as the NRSV, we might render this as: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. In him was life..." This doesn't substantially change the meaning of this passage, but it is interesting to note that there are a couple of possibilities for how to render this passage.

Already we are seeing themes that will become major set pieces in the Gospel of John: imagery of life and death; light and darkness.

The word in v. 5 translated as “overcome” (*katalambano*) can also mean “understand.” Like the use of the Greek word *palin* in John 3:3ff, which can mean either “from above” as Jesus uses it or “again/a second time” as Nicodemus understands it, John is intentionally playing on this double meaning of *katalambano*. The darkness neither understood nor overcame the light of God which still shines. This wordplay is mostly lost in English, but there are a couple of words we could substitute that might capture the double meaning here. I would suggest translating *katalambano* either as “grasp” or “master.” The sentence would then read: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not master it” or “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it.” Both of these English words capture both senses of *katalambano*.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Whereas verses 1-5, 10-14, and 16-18 probably take source material from a hymn or other writing familiar to John and his community, the source material for vs. 6-9 and 15 seems to be a tradition about John the Baptist’s role in the story of Jesus. As we discussed in earlier weeks, John’s version of John the Baptist seems different from the version we see in the synoptic gospels. In fact, John the Baptist is never called that in John’s gospel. He is merely “John.” He serves as witness to Jesus, the true light.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

The sad irony of this story is that the Word—the one who made all things and gave life and light to all people—came into the world, yet the world at large failed to recognize his presence. V. 11 has a double meaning: on one level, “what was his own” refers generally to all people, since “without him no one thing came into being” (v. 3). People in general largely failed to accept Jesus. At a more specific level, however, “what was his own” refers to the Jewish leaders and people of Jesus’ time. This theme of rejection and antagonism between Jesus and the Jewish leadership is a prominent theme in John’s gospel. This verse foreshadows this aspect of the gospel.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

The good news, however, is that some people did receive him and believe in his name. To these ones, he confers the status and rights of being children of God. This childhood of God is contrasted in v. 13 with several other ways children are ordinarily conceived—of blood (this could refer to both “blood relations” as used to refer to families and also to the bloody process through which children are brought into this world from the womb). Also, not “of the will of the flesh”—that is, carnal desire. And further, not “of the will of man.” This word for “man” is *andros*, specifically meaning a human male or, sometimes meaning husband. This is different from the Greek word *anthropos* which is sometimes translated “man” but means “humankind” more generally. Rather, this word refers to the role of a man in the reproductive process. In John’s day and culture, it was the man who was believed to be the carrier of new life. In that culture mens’ wills carried more weight than womens’ wills. What John is saying here is that becoming a child of God is not dependent on these normal human categories that people often use to talk about having children.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

Here, the Word comes up by name again for the first time since v. 1. Now, however, the verb used about this Word changes from being to becoming. The Word is moving from the eternal word that always was and is and will be to the Word made flesh which lived among us. The eternal Word which dwelled with God is now the Word made flesh which dwells with humankind. The verb here for “lived” has its root in the noun “tent” or “tabernacle.” It brings to mind God’s dwelling with the people in the tabernacle in the Exodus. The mention of seeing his glory also brings to mind Moses’ and the Israelites’ experiences with God in the Sinai wilderness.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”)

As I mentioned above, v. 15 once again interrupts the flow of the otherwise cohesive passage. Note the presence of language about grace and truth in v. 14 and in vv. 16-17. Even though this passage seems like a bit of an interruption, John the Baptist’s testimony fits perfectly here since the preceding passage about the Word that was in the beginning with God becoming flesh and coming to live among the people is further interpreted by John the Baptist with his little riddle “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”

¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Once again we see the connection with Moses and the Exodus in this passage. The idea of “grace upon grace” makes it clear that John is not disparaging Moses or the previous grace/gift of the Law; rather, he is pointing out that Jesus is a new and greater gift. If Moses and the law are the cake, Jesus is the icing and the cherry on top. The sense here is that God has lavished grace and gifts upon human kind throughout the ages and that Jesus is the culmination of that grace.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. How does John's “nativity story” here in this passage compare or contrast with the stories from Luke and Matthew with which we are more familiar?**
- 2. John describes some people as having rejected the Word, while others accepted the Word. Why do you think some people fail to recognize the Word? Why do you think some people do believe and accept the Word?**
- 3. Can you think of a way or a time that you have felt God's presence with you in the same way described in v. 14: “The Word became flesh and lived among us”?**