

RC SPROUL

IN THE BEGINNING WAS

THE WORD

AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD

AND THE WORD

WAS GOD

JOHN



ST ANDREW'S EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

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# JOHN

R. C. SPROUL



*Reformation Trust*

P U B L I S H I N G

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*John*

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## PREFACE

When I was a sophomore in college, I signed up to take a course on the Gospel of John. Just before that course started, the professor who was to teach it became very ill and was forced to undergo major surgery. To replace him for that semester, the college summoned a man who was internationally known for his theological contributions. He was in his late eighties, but he came out of retirement to teach this course. Because I was receiving instruction from this man of international acclaim, at the end of that course I thought I knew everything there was to know about the Gospel of John.

Also while I was in college, when I took Greek, we translated from the Gospel of John for three years. Then I went to seminary and took three more years of Greek, and we translated the entire Gospel of John once more. So when I finished those courses, I was confident that I had a pretty good sense both of what was in the book and John's intended meaning.

However, when I spent nearly two years preaching through the Gospel of John from the pulpit of St. Andrew's in Sanford, Florida, I discovered that I knew nothing about this Gospel. I learned that until you begin to dig into a book for the purpose of preaching it each week, you don't really know it.

It is customary in New Testament studies to distinguish between the Gospel of John and the other three Gospels. The books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels for the simple reason that they give us synopses of the life of Jesus—overviews of His ministry on this earth. It's not as if John was not interested in giving us biographical details about the life of Jesus and samples of His teaching, but he proceeded in quite a different style. His is the most theological of the four Gospels in the New Testament, and he devoted

almost two-thirds of his written account to the last week of Jesus' life. John, as it were, wanted to put a spotlight on the critically important redemptive-historical activity that Jesus performed during His stay on earth.

This means we find many unique features in John's Gospel that do not appear in the other records of Jesus' life. For instance, John's Gospel gives us the most extensive revelation from the lips of Jesus of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, information that is found in the upper room discourse that took place on Maundy Thursday, the day before Jesus' crucifixion.

It is my hope that as you read through the chapters of this book, which were adapted from my sermons at St. Andrew's, that you will discover the treasures of the Gospel of John as never before, just as I did. However, I am not referring here to mere facts about Palestine, about the Jews, or even about Jesus himself. My prayer is that you will grow in your knowledge of—and love for—the supreme treasure, Jesus the Redeemer, the One whom John the Baptist hailed as “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29b).

# 1

## THE PROLOGUE

*John 1:1–18*



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 nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 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 beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’” And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law

was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

**T**he first eighteen verses of John's Gospel are commonly known as the prologue. No portion of the New Testament captured the imagination and the attention of the Christian intellectual community for the first three centuries more than this brief section of John's Gospel. In attempting to understand the person of Christ, the early church became virtually preoccupied with the high view of Christ that is expressed in the prologue. From this foundation, those early believers developed what was called the "*Logos* Christology," or the understanding of Christ as **the Word**, who is introduced here in the opening words of John's Gospel.

We have to ask: Why does John begin his Gospel with this prologue? Why doesn't he simply start as Matthew and Luke do, by telling us about the circumstances of the conception of Jesus and His birth to a peasant girl? In a strikingly different approach, John begins his Gospel with Jesus already as an adult. The only material that precedes the launch of Jesus' ministry is this prologue of eighteen verses.

I believe the inclusion of the prologue has to do with John's overriding goal, throughout his Gospel, of making a case for the identity of Christ. John says later that he wrote what he did "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31). Simply put, John is not interested in being a detached observer and chronicler of the life of Jesus. He is trying to persuade his readers of the truth of Christ so that they might become His disciples. Therefore, before he enters into an overview of Jesus' life and ministry, he composes a quick look at Jesus' ultimate credentials.

In the prologue, John answers one of the main questions that we often ask when we meet people for the first time. We ask such questions as, "What's your name?" and "What do you do?" And, of course, we love to ask, "Where are you from?" Here in his prologue, John answers this question with respect to Jesus. John tells us where Jesus was from.

The New Testament uses many titles for Jesus. The one that occurs most frequently is *Christos*, or "Christ," which is the New Testament word for "Messiah." It is used so often that many people assume that it is Jesus' last name, that He is *named* Jesus Christ. Actually, His name is Jesus, but His title is Christ. Thus, "Jesus Christ" is an affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah. The

second-most-frequent title given to Jesus is “Lord,” and this title is at the heart of the earliest Christian creed: “Jesus is Lord.” The next-most-used title, far behind “Christ” and “Lord” in terms of its frequency of appearance in the New Testament, is “Son of Man.” This title is used roughly eighty times in the New Testament, but even though it comes in third in usage by those who wrote about Jesus, it was far and away Jesus’ favorite self-designation. If we were to ask Jesus, “Who are you?” He most likely would answer, “I am the Son of Man.”

When we hear Jesus call Himself the “Son of Man,” we tend to see it as an expression of His humility, for we understand Him to be identifying with our humanity. This title does involve Jesus’ identification and corporate solidarity with our humanity, but that is not its primary emphasis. When Jesus called Himself the Son of Man in front of Jewish people of the first century, they understood that He was identifying Himself with that person who was defined and described in the Old Testament book of Daniel as a heavenly being who comes from the very throne of God on a mission to judge the world (Dan. 7:13ff.). So when Jesus called Himself the Son of Man, He was describing Himself not only in terms of His activity but of His origin. He was telling His hearers where He had come from.

Sometimes Jesus stated His origins very explicitly. For instance, He said on one occasion, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). Likewise, in a discussion about the Jewish patriarch Abraham, Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58). The Jews immediately picked up stones to put him to death because they understood His message—Jesus was equating Himself with God, who had revealed Himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). Again, when He told a paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven, He then healed the man so that, in His words, those who were there would “know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:6). These were not statements of humility. These were statements by which Jesus openly declared that He had come from heaven. John’s prologue was intended to accomplish much the same goal—before John gave us his record of the earthly visitation of Jesus, he told us where Jesus was from.

### ***An Echo of Genesis***

John begins by declaring that the Word was **in the beginning, was with God, and was God** (v. 1). Here John echoes the opening words of the Old Testament: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This sentence in and of itself was enough to keep theologians busy for hundreds

of years because, on the one hand, the Word (Jesus) is distinguished *from* God, but from a different perspective, the Word is identified *with* God. This sentence, more than any other passage in Scripture, is foundational for the church's confession of the doctrine of the Trinity, the belief that God is one in three persons.

John goes on to write that **all things were made through Him** (v. 3). Jesus is now identified as the incarnation of that member of the Trinity for whom, by whom, and in whom all things were made. In this extraordinary statement, John says: "The One I'm going to tell you about, the One in whom there is life, the One in whom I want you to believe, is the One who created you in the first place. Nothing was made apart from Him."

As we make our way through John's Gospel, we will see two words appear again and again. Those words are *life* and *light*, and we encounter them here in the prologue. John says **in Him was life, and the life was the light of men** (v. 4). The Scriptures often use the antonyms of these words to describe the natural fallen condition of this world, speaking of it in terms of *death* and *darkness*. Recently, when I read this verse, which I have read countless times before, I was prompted to think back over my lifetime and rehearse the meaningful moments of my personal experience, and clearly the most defining moment in my life was my conversion to Christ. Sometimes people speak mockingly of those who are converted, saying they have "seen the light," but they're closer to the truth than they realize. For me, conversion was the point when "the lights went on"; I understood things I had not grasped before. I saw that there was life in Christ, that He gives eternal life. Conversely, of course, outside of Christ there may be biological life, but there is no ultimate life—there is only spiritual death.

Later in the prologue, John writes that **we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth** (v. 14). John is surely speaking here of Jesus' transfiguration, that moment when, atop the mountain, His heavenly glory was made manifest and the three disciples accompanying Him were dazzled. At that time, Jesus' light was real and visible, but the light of truth that He brought was displayed throughout His ministry.

In the second century, when the Christian philosophers and apologists sought to define the Christian faith over against the pagan world and to answer the critics from Greek philosophy, Justin Martyr argued that geniuses such as Plato and Aristotle did not discover any great truths by their own power. Whatever light these pagan philosophers found was borrowed from the light

that comes into the world. All light finds its origin in Jesus Christ, who is the fountain of all truth. That is the point John is making here.

In verses 6–8, John introduced John the Baptist: **There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.** John the Baptist was sent by God as Jesus’ forerunner, to point Him out. We’re told in verse 15 that John fulfilled his mission; he cried out, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’” Later, he pointed to Jesus with those stirring words, “Behold! The Lamb of God” (v. 29b).

The prologue also contains an awful word of judgment: **He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him** (vv. 10–11). Jesus Himself spoke of this rejection He experienced, saying, “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (3:19). Many years ago, I was interviewed by Dr. James Montgomery Boice for his radio program, and I had occasion to quote this verse. I attempted to quote the King James Version, which says, “Their deeds were evil,” but instead I said, “Their eeds were deevil.” That was the end of that interview, and as a result of it, even though it was long ago, I can hardly read that text without flinching. But we ought to flinch even when we read the words properly, for this verse tells us the world is exposed to the condemnation of God because people prefer the darkness to the light. They do not want to come to the light, Jesus Christ, because their evil deeds will be exposed.

### *Good News of Hope*

But John’s prologue also gives very good news: **But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name**” (v. 12). This is the good news of the gospel, the great hope that John wants his readers to know. John longs for them to believe in Jesus as the Christ.

I can’t possibly know the state of the soul of anyone reading this book. We judge on outward appearances; only God can look at the heart. But if we go by the odds, the probabilities are extremely high that many of those reading this book do not know Christ and are still living in darkness, for the darkness covers their hearts and their souls, and they’ve never experienced the life that only He can give. It is my earnest prayer that as we look through the pages

and the chapters of this Gospel, that God the Holy Spirit will make you see that light so clearly that you will be like those who did receive Jesus, to whom God gave the right to be called His children. My prayer is that through this Word, by which faith comes, you will come to know that light and that life. If you already have His life in you, and you already have seen the beauty of that life and have been rescued from darkness, I pray that you will move from light to light, from life to life, from faith to faith, and from grace to grace as we learn of Him.