

# LESSON ONE

## *In Him Was Life*

### FOCAL TEXT

John 1:1–18

### BACKGROUND

John 1:1–18

### MAIN IDEA

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is eternal and is the source of eternal life.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

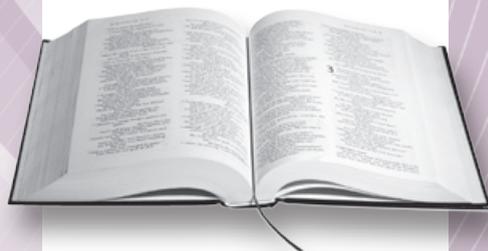
What is Jesus' true identity?

### STUDY AIM

To comprehend Jesus' unique identity and to help others recognize him for whom he truly is

### QUICK READ

This passage, also known as “The Prologue,” is a summary of the entire Gospel of John. It tells us that God became a living, breathing person (Christ) in order to redeem humanity from its sin.



## Introduction

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Have you ever eaten a dessert (or even an entrée) that was so good you were disappointed when it was gone? Perhaps a fancy creation from a restaurant left you longing for more. In a way, today's Scripture will leave you with that same feeling. The opening verses of the Book of John are so rich in theology and meaning. Studying it for only a few moments will merely scratch the surface of this powerful proclamation of the gospel. You will long for more.<sup>1</sup>

### JOHN 1:1–18

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning.

<sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

<sup>6</sup> There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> 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.'" <sup>16</sup> From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

<sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

## The Beginning of It All (1:1–5)

Notice that the first few words in the Gospel of John parallel the opening words of the book of Genesis. While Genesis focuses on God the Father being present before creation, John 1:1 focuses on the Word (which we find out later is Jesus) being present before creation as well. This verse also equates the Word with God. Verse 2 continues the emphasis of Jesus' preexistence with God. This key truth will play an important role later on as Jesus explains that what he says and does comes from God because he is God. This theme of the intimate relationship between God the Father and God the Son continues on throughout the New Testament (especially in the book of John), even though it remains a mystery to us.

In verse 3, John asserted that not only was Jesus present at creation, but that he created all things. This contradicts the teaching of some religious groups and cults that teach that Jesus was not equal with God, but was the first being created by God. Verse 4 indicates that "life" was found in him. This word is most often connected with describing supernatural life as opposed to biological life, although given the reference to creation in the previous verse the meaning could be taken both ways.

Not only is Jesus the source of life, he is life (John 14:6), and is light as well. Verse 5 tells us that Jesus (as the light) shines in the darkness, which can be understood as a reference to Jesus coming to the earth. He is the light of the world (John 8:12) that even the darkness cannot overcome. The word "overcome" can also mean "comprehend." If understood this way, Jesus was the light directing humanity toward God (and Jesus himself), but the world could not understand (or did not comprehend) his radical message of eternal life through faith and trust in him. Nevertheless, without Jesus we are in darkness, and we are lost.

The darkness of the world can be seen most keenly in today's global events. From fighting within nations and between nations to infanticide and suicide, the world indeed lives in darkness and despair. Yet, there is

still hope. Jesus is the same light now as he was then. The Holy Spirit still draws people to Jesus, and we as his followers are charged with the task of being light as well, drawing attention to the ultimate Light (Matthew 5:14–16).

### A Witness to the Light (1:6–9)

In these verses, the focus shifts somewhat from Jesus to the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist. While these verses do not specifically use the term “the Baptist,” other Scriptures fill in the blanks, so to speak, letting the reader know that John the Baptist and the man named John in verse 6 are the same person.

Verses 7–8 describe John’s purpose—to testify about the light (Christ) so that people would believe in him. These verses make it clear that John the Baptist was not the Messiah, but was rather the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23). He understood his role as a herald who was to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, “the true light . . . coming into the world” (1:9).

### THE TENT OF MEETING (THE TABERNACLE)

When the gospel writer John described Jesus as God who “made his dwelling among us,” he was using a term that would have been readily understood by the Jewish people. It was an allusion to the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle depicted in the Book of Exodus. The Tent of Meeting was a portable place for the divine presence of God to dwell with his people (Israel) during their exodus from Egypt through the conquering of the land of Canaan. During the exodus and the years in exile, God’s presence was indicated by a pillar of cloud covering the tent’s entrance (Exodus 33:9). Moses often met with God there, as well as others who would inquire of the Lord. It was a place where God would reveal himself to his people. Once the Israelites took up residence in the Promised Land and constructed a permanent tabernacle, God met his people there. When God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, he was dwelling with his people—not in a place, but in a person.

The distinction of John as the forerunner of the Messiah was an important one to make. John the Baptist was a very respected and prominent man at the time, and many people came to hear him preach. Many of his hearers were content to follow him and might have followed John as the Messiah rather than Jesus. Later on in the same chapter, John made clear his subservient role to Jesus when he said, “He [Jesus] is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (1:27).

While Christians may not be as radical as John the Baptist in their dress or diet today, they continue John’s mission. We, as Jesus’ followers, are charged with the task of telling others what Christ has done for us, and about the eternal life he offers. Our words and actions should point others toward a relationship with Jesus. The Messiah has indeed come, and we are proclaimers of that truth.

### Belonging by Belief, Not Blood (1:10–13)

These verses shift back to a focus on Jesus. Verse 10 repeats verse 3, but then adds an important note: Although Jesus came into the very world he created, the world—specifically the people in the world—did not recognize or acknowledge Jesus. They could not accept him as the promised Messiah. The rejection was not universal, however, because John went on to talk about those who would turn to Christ and receive him. They would become the children of God. This standing as God’s beloved would cause conflict with the religious Jews who claimed to be God’s favored ones (namely, the religious leaders).

In verse 12, the word “believe” means more than mental assent or acknowledgement. It is not a detached stoicism. Rather, to believe is an act of faith and trust that Jesus is all that he claimed he was, and to turn one’s life over to him in submission and obedience. To believe is to put the full weight of your hope and trust in him, not in yourself or anyone else. Verse 13 makes clear that it is through trusting in Christ alone that a person is saved. It is not based on genealogical heritage, which was the prevailing Jewish thought. The real children of God are born of faith, not of blood relationship.

The Jewish people believed they were God’s beloved people by virtue of being descendants of Abraham. They believed this so strongly that

when Jesus came as the true Messiah, they couldn't accept him. His teachings about the need to trust in him offended them, especially when Jesus said he was greater than Moses or Abraham and equated himself with God. Jesus didn't match their preconceived notions of a Messiah, so they rejected him.

Unfortunately, many people today suffer from the same disbelief. Some hold so tightly to their religious upbringing and family history that they think those things are enough to merit their salvation. Others cannot reconcile their preconceived ideas about Jesus with the reality of who he is, so they reject him based on their own ideas about him.

### God Wrapped in Human Flesh (1:14–18)

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Verse 14 is perhaps one of the most famous in the entire book of John because it summarizes the miracle of the incarnation—that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, wrapped himself in human skin and confined himself inside a frail, human body. God made his home among us, pitched his tent with us, and moved into our neighborhood. Fully divine and fully human, Jesus became both visible and tangible. He became one of us in order to redeem us out of our sinful state. It is a mystery that can never be fully explained.

Because Jesus' incarnation is such a mystery, human beings have tried to explain away one aspect of his being in favor of another. For instance, people called Gnostics believe that Jesus was not really human because human flesh was sinful. Muslims today believe that Jesus was not God incarnate, but rather a servant and messenger from God. Jews equate the worship of Jesus as God to idolatry. Obviously, what one believes about Jesus will shape one's entire belief system.

In verse 15, the gospel writer circled back to the testimony of John the Baptist to confirm Jesus' divinity and humanity. Without fully understanding the implications of his words, John proclaimed that Jesus was greater than he was because Jesus existed before him. Those who knew John and his family history would have known that he and Jesus were cousins, and that he (John) had been physically born *before* Jesus. The only way Jesus could have existed before John would be in his pre-incarnational state as the invisible God.

## APPLY THE TRUTH:

To apply the truths of this passage:

- Meditate on ways Jesus' character reflects the character of God.
- Notice how current culture tries to find life outside of Jesus.
- Thank God for the gift of being called a child of God because you believe in Jesus.
- Ask God to show you how to testify to others that Jesus is the light that will pierce the darkness in their lives.
- Watch for ways that Jesus reveals himself to you this week through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who resides in you as a believer.

The mystery of the incarnation will never fully be understood this side of heaven. However, such limited knowledge should not keep us from believing its reality. Believing in something you cannot completely understand is not so difficult—it happens all the time. I cannot explain nor understand astrophysics, but I can still affirm its reality. I can't explain how gasoline makes an engine run (and I certainly can't explain the inner workings of that engine), but I drive my car almost daily.

Verses 16–17 reiterate the introduction of grace through the incarnation of Christ. Christ was “full of grace and truth” (1:14) and “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). Moses brought the Law. Jesus embodied grace and truth that would not only fulfill the law but would also make the law no longer necessary in order for someone to enjoy a relationship with God. Through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection, the sacrificial system in the Old Testament Law would no longer be needed.

Verse 18 closes out this ancient prologue by reminding readers that no one has seen God—not even Moses himself (1:17). Moses could see only a portion of God (Exodus 33:23), lest he die. Yet, in Jesus, the fullness of God is revealed. To know Jesus is to know God. While on earth, Jesus fully embodied the character of God.

## Implications and Actions

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Recognizing Jesus as God in the flesh, the only One in whom you can trust for salvation, is the most critical decision you will ever make. To believe in him as the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world will change not only your eternal destiny (heaven or hell), but it will also change the trajectory of your life every day. His Spirit will live within you, transforming you into his character as you surrender to him. You will discover that life is indeed found in him alone. The question is whether you will choose to trust in Jesus or if you will try to find life apart from him.

## QUESTIONS

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1. How have you tried to wrap your mind around the concept of the Trinity, which is alluded to in these opening verses of John? How can God and Jesus be equal, yet different?



5. How did Jesus demonstrate both grace and truth? Which one do you lean towards as you relate to others?

6. What mysteries of the Christian faith do you accept and trust, even though you cannot understand them?

## NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–6, 10–12, and the Christmas lesson are from the New International Version (1984 edition).