

LESSON ONE
In Him Was Life

FOCAL TEXT

John 1:1–18

BACKGROUND

John 1:1–18

MAIN IDEA

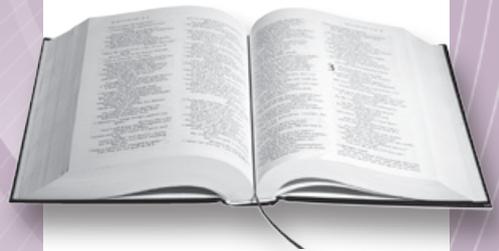
Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is eternal and is the source of eternal life.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What is Jesus' true identity?

TEACHING AIM

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



UNIT ONE

**Jesus' Public Ministry
(3+ Years)**

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The overture of a great symphony or opera often presents musical themes that appear later in the work. The overture of the Gospel of John is the focal text of this lesson. The Gospel begins on a grand, eternal scale, presenting theological themes that appear later in the book. They include the Son's eternal existence before creation (1:1–2; 17:5), his incarnation (1:14; 3:16), his functions as the light and life of the world (1:4; 8:12; 11:25), his glory (1:14; 2:11), the world's unbelief (1:10; 12:41; 16:8–11), and the faith of those who follow him (1:12–13; 6:67–69; 12:31–32; 17:16–19). These themes comprise the theological framework of John's Gospel.

The lyrical quality of this overture, or prologue, suggests to some scholars that it may have been the words to an early Christian hymn. These scholars also suggest that if it wasn't a hymn, it was based on one. This suggestion comes from the fact that the greatest attribute of ancient Semitic poetry was parallelism, and in this introductory passage we find parallels in the way the Gospel uses the terms "word" (verse 1), and "life," "light," and "darkness" (verses 4–5).

Another important attribute of the prologue is that terms like "Word" (*logos*), "light" (*phos*), and "life" (*zoe*) had universal appeal. As John wrote this Gospel, it appears he had in mind the various meanings these words had to Jews, Christians, and pagans. This is appropriate for a book that emphasizes God's love for everyone in the world (John 3:14–16).

This prologue naturally divides into four sections: The Word and Creation (verses 1–5); John the Baptist's Witness to the Word (verses 6–9); the World's Reaction to the Word (verses 10–13); and the Church's Confession of the Word (verses 14–18).

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Word and Creation (1:1–5)

1:1–2. The first words in the Greek text of John are *en arche*, “In the beginning.” They echo the first words of the Greek translation of Genesis 1:1. The Hebrew text uses one word, *bereshith*, to say the same thing. By starting his Gospel with the words *en arche*, John referred his readers to Genesis 1:1. This verse speaks of the eternal past before creation, the “time” before time began.

The Greek term translated “Word” is *logos*. For Jews, God’s word was the expression of his revelation and power. Genesis 1:3 and following show that God created the universe by his word. The Greeks used *logos* to refer to the organizing principle of the universe. John primarily had in mind the Old Testament idea of the *logos* as the expression of God’s revelation and power, but he augmented it with the complementary idea of the *logos* as the organizing principle of the universe.

John says that the Word was “with” God, meaning that he was in perfect communion with God, in equality and intimacy.

In verse 1, John makes three profound claims: *When* God was, the Word was; *where* God was, the Word was; and *who* God was, the Word was. Verse 2 repeats the claim of verse 1, as if the words were too staggering to absorb all at once!

1:3. Some religious groups teach that Christ was God’s first created being. But this verse asserts that God didn’t create the Word. Instead he used the Word as his agent in his work of creation (see Hebrews 1:2 and Colossians 1:16 for similar statements).

In these few verses, John put aside at least three heresies: That matter is eternal, that Jesus was God’s first creation, and that angels or other lesser divine beings participated in creation.

1:4. The Word is the power that creates and sustains life. The word John uses for “life” is *zoe*. Most often in this Gospel, this word refers to spiritual life. *Bios* was the more general word for life. Here, *zoe* seems to capture something of both these words, as the Word has spiritual life and gives life to all creation.

1:5. The Greek text says, “The light keeps on giving light.” “Darkness” introduces the problem of evil.

Some translations of this verse use the word “understood,” while others use “overcome.” The darkness has either not understood the light or hasn’t overcome the light. The verb in the Greek text means to “lay hold of,” “seize,” or “overtake.” The phrase conveys the meaning that the darkness has not overcome or overtaken the shining light of the Word.

John the Baptist’s Witness to the Word (1:6–9)

1:6–9. John the Baptist had many disciples, and some of them may have claimed that John was the light. Here, the Gospel makes it clear that John the Baptist was only a witness to the light. The Greek words for “witness” and “testify” come from the same root. This Greek root, in turn, is the root for our word “martyr.” Early believers became martyrs because of their testimony about Christ. John pointed to the light and reflected the light, but he didn’t produce light. God and the Word did that.

Believers today have much the same role as John the Baptist. We point to Christ, bearing testimony about who he is and what he’s done in our lives.

Verse 7 is the first time the verb “believe” (*pisteuo*) appears in John. It’s one of John’s favorite words, appearing about 100 times in his book. It comes from the same Greek root as the noun “faith.” We don’t say that we “faith” in someone or something, but that’s essentially the meaning of the Greek word.

The World’s Reaction to the Word (1:10–13)

1:10. The Greek word for “world” is *cosmos*. This term can be confusing because the New Testament employs it in at least two different ways. John uses it in two ways in this one verse! When he says that the Word was “in the world” and that “world was made by him,” he applies the word in the neutral sense of the physical universe that included humanity. When he says that “the world did not recognize him,” he was speaking of humanity in its sinful and broken state.

1:11. “His own” probably referred first to the Jews, but included all humanity.

1:12. Yet not all humanity rejected Jesus. The Greek word here for “become” (*genesthai*) refers to something that changes to something else. God transformed some humans into his children.

The Apostle Paul used the expression “sons (*huiioi*) of God” (Romans 8:14), while John always says “children (*tekna*) of God.” John reserves the word “son” for Christ alone. Though all people are God’s children in an ultimate sense, only those who receive the Word in faith are his children in a spiritual sense.

1:13. People create physical children through sexual desire and intercourse. But God makes his children by spiritual generation.

The Church’s Confession of the Word (1:14–18)

1:14. The eternal Word became flesh! The word “became” implies that he was transformed into something that he wasn’t before. The word “flesh” implies that he took on human weakness. He became one of us!

John’s statement in this verse counters Greek philosophical ideas (see Plato) that physical things were evil and beneath the divine. It also offsets the ideas that Jesus was a spirit who only appeared to be a physical being (Docetism) and that he was a lesser divine being (Gnosticism).

The expression “made his dwelling among us” comes from a Greek word that means “to pitch a tent.” It refers to the Word dwelling in a tabernacle of flesh among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

When John referenced seeing God’s glory in the Son, he echoed Old Testament passages that refer to God’s bright, shining glory. Jews and Christians refer to this as the *Shekinah* glory of God. Though the word *Shekinah* doesn’t appear in the Old Testament, it’s an appropriate term for describing the nature of the glory God showed in Jesus.

English translations of John use the words “One and Only” and “Only Begotten” to translate the Greek word *monogenous*. The word also appears in John 3:16. In other Greek texts, it refers to the only son of a father. Here it means that Jesus was God’s “uniquely born” or “one of a kind” Son. It distinguishes between the eternal Word and humans born of God.

1:15. The verb used for “crying” is in the present dramatic tense. It’s as if John can still hear the strong words of the Baptist ringing in his ears!

1:16. Grace takes the place of grace in an inexhaustible supply.

1:17. John clearly links the eternal Word to Jesus Christ. This is no attack on Moses or the law. The law was God’s gift. It showed people how he wanted them to live.

1:18. No one has seen God with physical eyes. Moses, who could only see God’s back, (Exodus 33:18–23) revealed God’s law. Jesus (who is God and uniquely born), revealed God as his exact representation. He’s qualified to reveal God because he’s close to him, sitting by his side.

Focusing on the Meaning

John began his Gospel by exploring the meaning of the universe and our lives. Recently, a television network produced an updated version of the late Carl Sagan’s series *Cosmos*. The host for this version was astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson. The content of the series shows the scope of our universe. While some believers find this scope disturbing, they shouldn’t. The concept of God in the Scriptures is vast enough to encompass it!

Science can reveal the scope and operations of the universe, but it can’t reveal its meaning. The first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John reveal its meaning, as they say that God created it through his Word, the Christ, who was with him in the eternal past. Incredibly, this Word, who was as vast as the God who created the universe, became a real human being and lived among us. When the Word came to the world he had made, it rejected him. He sought to bring God’s light to the world, but the world’s darkness sought to extinguish it. The darkness failed!

When the Word became flesh, he provided the greatest revelation of God we’ve ever received. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. As we read the chapters that follow, and learn what Jesus did and said, we learn what the Father is like. Later (John 14:8), Philip will ask Jesus to show the disciples the Father. Jesus will respond, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

When we put our faith in this eternal Word who became flesh, we receive God's grace and become God's children. All human beings are God's children in the sense that they come from him. But only those who put their faith in the Word are God's spiritual children, heirs of God's eternal kingdom. In the chapters that follow, John invites us to see the Word in action, hear his words, believe in him, and receive eternal life.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Prior to the class, hang a large sheet of paper in a prominent place in the classroom. As adults arrive, instruct them to write on the paper the names of epic poems or stories they remember from high school or college (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Shakespeare plays, *Canterbury Tales*, etc.). Review their lists, reminiscing about the difficulty of understanding these texts from long ago. Then explain that this week, you will begin the study of John with one of the most rich and poetic portions of Scripture.

Guide Bible Study

2. Group the class into teams of two or three. Direct the teams to read John 1:1–4 and discuss among themselves their understanding of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.) Encourage them to use any analogies they may have heard (an egg, water existing in three forms—solid, liquid, gas, etc.) After a few minutes allow groups to share their insights and analogies. Point out that analogies always fall short of fully explaining the Trinity because it is a mystery. Also point out that while we may not completely comprehend it, we can still believe it.

3. Prior to the lesson, find different pictures of John the Baptist. Create a short slide presentation containing these paintings and drawings. Call on the class to describe John the Baptist from their previous knowledge and study. Write these descriptions on a large sheet of paper. Then enlist a class member to read John 1:6–9. Play the presentation of pictures. Ask the class to choose the picture that seems to represent John the Baptist most accurately. Ask, *Based on these verses, what words would you use to describe John's character, not his physical appearance? How is John's subjection of himself so refreshing in today's culture?* (because today's culture focuses on self so extensively)
4. Call on a class member to read John 1:10–13. Ask, *According to these verses, how did the world respond to Jesus' coming into the world?* (they did not recognize him). Ask, *According to verse 12, how do people become children of God?* (by belief or trust). Ask, *Why do you think the writer emphasized inclusion by faith rather than blood or lineage?* Point out the information in the *Study Guide* about the Jewish people (“Belonging by Belief, Not Blood”) who believed they were God's children because of their lineage to Abraham and other patriarchs of the faith. Ask, *Do you think some people still think they are believers because of their relationship to someone?* Discuss this together, emphasizing the importance of a personal faith experience.
5. Prior to the class, set up in a prominent spot a tent used for camping. Call on a class member to read John 1:14–18. Point out that verse 14 describes the incarnation. Explain the terms “dwelled” or “took up residence” can be translated as “pitched his tent” and refers to the mystery of God becoming a human and living among humanity. Ask, *Why is the incarnation so important for us as believers? What does the incarnation demonstrate?* (the lengths to which God went in order to save sinful humanity).

Encourage Application

6. Distribute notecards and pens. Direct class members to complete this statement: Because Jesus became flesh and lived among humanity, I _____ . Direct the class to complete the sentence

and write their answers on the notecards. Challenge the class to reflect on the significance of the incarnation for their own lives. For example, you might write, “Because Jesus became flesh, I know that he loves me because he gave up so much to come to earth.” Explain to the class that they will lay these cards at the entrance to the tent as a way to thank God for the mystery of the incarnation.

7. Point to the section “Apply the Truth” in the *Study Guide*. Encourage class members to complete the application points this week. Close in prayer, thanking Jesus for pitching his tent among us, becoming like us in order to redeem us. Direct class members to leave their notecards at the base of the tent as they leave.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask the class to recall some of their favorite meals. Ask the class to describe how they felt when the meal was over (richly satisfied, longing for more, etc.). Explain that today’s focal Scripture is such a rich portion of Scripture that looking at it for a few minutes will leave them longing for more. It is so rich in meaning and significance that they can return to it again and again and still hunger for more.

Guide Bible Study

2. Display a poster with the following outline of the lesson:
 - A. The Beginning of It All (John 1:1–5)
 - B. A Witness to the Light (John 1:6–9)
 - C. Belonging By Belief, Not Blood (John 1:10–13)
 - D. God Wrapped in Human Flesh (John 1:14–18)
3. Enlist a volunteer to read John 1:1–5. Draw the parallel between Genesis 1 and John 1 in terms of God as the author of creation. Also stress the significance of Jesus being present at creation and creating all things (1:2–3). Ask, *How does this truth go against what some*

cults and religious sects say about Jesus' immortality? (some claim Jesus was not immortal, but was created by God first). Describe the mystery of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and that we as human beings will never fully understand it.

4. Refer to the second point on the outline. Make four small posters with one of the following statements on each: (A copy of these posters is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)
 - John came to testify about the coming of the Messiah into the world.
 - John wasn't worried about getting glory for himself, but instead pointed people to the Messiah.
 - Our mission is similar to John's mission—to use our words and actions to point people to Jesus instead of glorifying ourselves.

Display the posters on a focal wall. Review each of the points. Ask the class, *How was John's attitude toward himself different than the attitude of many people today?* (John wasn't worried about praise or recognition). Ask, *Who is someone you know who seeks to point people toward Jesus instead of themselves?*

5. Call on a volunteer to read John 1:14–18. Using the information from article “The Tent of Meeting” in the *Study Guide*, explain the importance of the term “made his dwelling among us” and its reference to the Tabernacle in the Old Testament. Explain to the class that the incarnation is a deep mystery that will never be fully understood here on earth. Then ask, *How was Jesus described in both verse 14 and verse 17? What is the significance of these two words being used together?* (Truth without grace is judgment; grace without truth is immorality). Point out that Jesus proclaimed himself as the Truth and yet he also demonstrated grace.

Encourage Application

6. Refer members to the questions in the *Study Guide*. As a class, read and answer the questions as time allows. If you run out of time, consider emailing these questions to your class members this week and

challenge them to use the questions to reflect further on this rich portion of God's word.

7. Provide a few minutes of silence for class members to reflect on the mystery of the Word who became flesh because of love. Encourage them to offer up their thanks to God for such an indescribable gift. Close in prayer.