

Message #1

Kurt Hedlund

John

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IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

JOHN 1:1-5

I.

Boris Dotsenko grew up in Siberia in the difficult days before and during World War II. He was a bright kid. So when his family was relocated to the Ukraine at the conclusion of the war, he was able to go to a technical college. One summer he was exploring a barn near his grandfather's home when he discovered part of an old book. On one side of the yellowed pages were words in Old Slavonic script. On the opposite pages, in Russian, was a translation of the text. Boris read, "The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

Fifteen-year-old Boris was frightened. He had been taught that Christianity was a bad thing. He knew that Christian preaching had become a crime and that Christian church buildings had been confiscated by the government. But he did not know why. He was intrigued by his discovery. He hid the book under his shirt and brought it back to his room. There he read the words of John #1 v. 1: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** These words shocked him. They contradicted everything that he had been taught.

In the next two weeks he read more. He learned about Jesus and the commandments about loving God and loving one's neighbor. He read about sin and the miracles of Jesus. Then after two weeks, the Bible disappeared from his room. He never learned what happened to it. But what he read in that book left a mark upon him, especially the words of John 1:1. Those words would stick in his mind for the rest of his life.

We are going to begin a study today of the New Testament Gospel of John. It has been a while since we have studied the life of Jesus. About ten years ago I went through Mark's gospel on Sunday mornings. I thought that perhaps we would now take on John's Gospel.

The Gospel of John is different from the other three gospels. It was written later than the others. It was written by an eyewitness who had several decades to reflect upon his experiences with Jesus. So he not only describes some of his experiences but also describes their significance.

The book is written in simple *koine* Greek. Thus, as is often true of other seminarians, it was the first New Testament book that I studied in Greek in seminary. John 1 v. 1 was the first verse in the Greet text of the New Testament that I memorized.

II.A.

So let's begin with a consideration of THE BACKGROUND OF JOHN'S GOSPEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE BACKGROUND... A. AUTHOR) We will first consider its author. The authors of the four gospels are not specifically identified in the text of the gospels. There are clear hints in John's gospel that the Apostle John is the author. Other apostles are mentioned by name. John's name is never mentioned, which seems odd on one level, given that he was part of the inner circle of the apostles of Jesus. He does speak of John the Baptist. But John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, is never specifically mentioned. The author does speak of "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It is generally recognized that this must be John.

There is also a strong early tradition that it is the Apostle John who was the author of this gospel. John had a disciple named Polycarp. Polycarp had a disciple name Irenaeus. Irenaeus wrote a book that has survived. In *Against Heresies* (AGAINST HERESIES QUOTE) Irenaeus wrote, "**Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did Himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.**" (*Against Heresies* III.1)

In the gospel accounts John is one of the first disciples who is called by Jesus to follow him. John, like most of the apostles, was from Galilee in the north of the Roman province of Judea. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel (MARK 1:16) we read this about his call: "**Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. (MARK 1:17-18) And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (MARK 1:19) And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. (MARK 1:20-21A) And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. And they went into Capernaum...**"

So John and his brother James became part of the twelve apostles. They had a family fishing business. They did well enough to be able to have hired servants. Their home base was Capernaum (CAPERNAUM MAP), which is on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is really a lake, not a sea.

John would spend time with Jesus and the other apostles during most of the Lord's public ministry. It is this John who would also be credited with writing the epistles of 1, 2 and 3 John and the Book of the Revelation. He is believed to be the only one among the Twelve who did not suffer the death of a martyr.

B.

Consider then the ORIGIN AND DATE (II. A. B. ORIGIN AND DATE) of John's gospel. We know from the Book of Revelation that John was exiled to the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea (PATMOS-EPHESUS MAP) toward the end of his life, because the Roman authorities did not like his preaching. In the first chapter of Revelation we are told that John was instructed by Christ to send seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor.

The early tradition, which was quoted in Irenaeus, was that John was based at Ephesus. The church had been established there decades earlier by Paul. Somewhat later John apparently set up residence there. Irenaeus and others claim that it was in Ephesus that John wrote this gospel.

The date is uncertain. It seems to be well after the other three gospels were written. Biblical scholars come up with dates between 75 and 90 AD.

C.

Let's look next at the PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE of the book. (II. A. B. C. PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE) In conservative seminaries students in Bible courses are often asked to state the purpose of a particular book in the Bible. John's gospel is unique in that the author states the purpose for which he wrote the book.

In Chapter 20 vv. 30 and 31 (JOHN 20:30) John writes, **"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; (JOHN 20:31) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."** So John's primary purpose is evangelistic. He wants his readers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is the Son of God. By "signs" John means "miracles." His gospel is oriented around seven miracles that Jesus performed. John also records seven statements where Jesus used the phrase "I am."

Since John has an evangelistic purpose, he is designing his book for a wide audience. Asia Minor was primarily a Gentile area. So he writes with an awareness that Gentiles will read this book. Thus, as we go through the Gospel of John, we will occasionally find "asides," where John will briefly explain a Jewish custom.

D.

John's gospel also has a DISTINCTIVE NATURE. (II. A. B. C. D. DISTINCTIVE NATURE) John wrote with an awareness of the other three gospels that had been written about Jesus. So he describes only two miracles that are recorded in the other gospels. He also omits the birth story, Jesus' baptism, His temptation, His parables, the transfiguration, exorcisms of demons, and discussion of the kingdom of God. In fact the scholars estimate that 93% of the material in John's gospel is not contained in the other three gospels.

The Greek verb for "believe" appears 98 times in this account. That is because John's concern is that his readers have a deep faith in Jesus. Other religions are based upon philosophical teaching and religious ideas. Christianity is unique in that it is based upon a person, the God-man Jesus Christ. So hopefully our faith will grow as we study this gospel about Jesus.

III.

We are going to start in then with the text of the gospel. In vv. 1 & 2 we are told that THE WORD IS GOD. (III. THE WORD IS GOD.) **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."**

In the beginning of what? John is making an intentional reference to Genesis 1:1 (GENESIS 1:1): **"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."** In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was around in the time of Jesus, the first words are exactly the same: *en arche*, in the beginning.

So the reference is to the beginning of the created universe. At the start of all that we see and observe, the Word was present. There is an indication that this Word is eternal. It, or He, is before time and the universe began. (PROJECTOR OFF)

"The Word," as many of you know, is *logos* in Greek. Our words "logic" and "logical" come from it. In Greek the term had a wide range of meaning. It could mean word, message, subject, reason, motive, account, respect, computation, and reckoning. The Greek philosophers used it to refer to the organizing principle of the universe. Generally it was regarded as impersonal. An early philosopher by the name of Heraclitus said that "the Word" was **"the divine idea that held the universe together."** For some of the Greek thinkers "the Word" was perhaps similar to the idea of "the Force" in the Star Wars movies. (PROJECTOR ON--- MORRIS QUOTATION) A scholarly commentator by the name of Leon Morris says, **"When John used the term logos, he used a term that would be widely recognized among the Greeks. The average man would not know its precise significance to the philosophers. But he would know that it meant something very important."** (Morris, *John*, p. 116)

"The Word" would also have special meaning to Jewish people. In Genesis #1 God speaks things into existence. Later in the Prophets we frequently come across the statement "**and the word of the Lord came to.....**" In Psalm 33 v. 6 (PSALM 33:6) the psalmist writes, "**By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.**"

Later in this chapter John will make it clear that the Word is the Son of God who became a human being. The implication is that this Son of God was around before the creation of the universe. He must therefore be God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the early 300s AD church leaders were still trying to figure out who Jesus Christ was and is. Is He fully divine? Is He fully human? How does that work? A priest in Egypt by the name of Arius had a problem in understanding the full deity of Christ. Arius famously declared of Jesus: "**There was a time when He was not.**" Arius was opposed by another scholar by the name of Athanasius. At the Council of Nicea in 325 Athanasius won out. The council recognized the full deity and humanity of Christ. The Nicene Creed came out of that conference.

Our verse 1 supports that conclusion. The Son of God who later became a human being was present before the creation of the universe. This verse is a dividing line for other sects and groups. One of the sacred doctrines of the LDS church is the *Doctrines and Covenants*. (PROJECTOR ON--- DOCTRINES QUOTATION) In section 93 that book declares, "**Man was also in the beginning with God.**" No. Man is a created being. Verse 3 of our passage declares that all created things were the product of the Word. In Genesis #1 we are told that human beings were created on the sixth day.

(PROJECTOR OFF) We evangelical Christians also have difficulty in accepting the truth of John #1 v. 1. Lifeway, a Southern Baptist publishing house, sponsored a survey in 2016. The survey analyzed a group of American adults who said that the Bible was their highest authority, that personal evangelism was an important responsibility, that Jesus Christ's death cancelled the penalty of sin and that trusting in Jesus was the only way that a person could have eternal life. Yet of this group the survey found that 71% responded positively to a statement that Jesus Christ is the first and highest being created by God. No! No! No! This is a denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is a denial of the deity of Christ. This is a denial of the argument of John in our passage. The Word was present in the beginning. He is eternal. He is not a created being.

"**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.**" The original Greek word translated as "with" is used in the New Testament only in situations where a person is with another person--- usually in close relationship. But the word "with" also implies a distinction. This Word is eternal, but He is somehow distinct from God, at least, from God the Father.

Then John declares, "**...and the Word was God.**" Here is the claim of deity for the Word. The Jehovah's Witnesses in their New World Translation have here: "**...and the Word was a God.**" They rightly point out that there is no "the," no article before "God" in the Greek text. In the Greek text "God" appears first, then "was," then "the Word." But the rule of Greek grammar is that when a noun without the article appears before a "to be" verb, it is usually definite in meaning. That is what we have here.

There is another example of this construction later in the chapter. In v. 49 Nathaniel is impressed when Jesus tells Nathaniel what he was doing in a place where Jesus was not present. At the end of the verse Nathaniel declares, "**You are the King of Israel!**" This is the same Greek construction. "King" appears without the article "the" before a linking verb, a "to be" verb. Clearly Nathaniel is not declaring that Jesus is "a" king of Israel. He is saying that Jesus is "the" King of Israel.

If John had put the article "the" before "God" in our verse 1, he would have been conveying a wrong theological truth. He would have been saying that the Word was "the God," implying that the Word and God the Father were the same being. But John is making a distinction within the Godhead. The Word is not God the Father. He is distinct. If the Word is "a" god, then we have polytheism. If the Word is the God, the God the Father, then there is no distinction in the Godhead.

Verse 2 reaffirms, "**He was in the beginning with God.**" The Word is eternal. He is God, but yet He is distinct from God the Father. He was with God in the beginning.

IV.

We come then to v. 3, which tells us that THE WORD IS THE CREATOR. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE WORD IS THE CREATOR) "**All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**" We have introduced here a pattern that John will use quite often. He declares a positive statement that is followed up by a negative clarification. All things were made by the Word. There was nothing that was not made by the Word. In v. 7 he will say that John the Baptist came to bear witness to the light. In v. 8 he will say that John the Baptist was not the light.

In the Greek world there were different ideas among the philosophers about how the world came into existence. John was immediately making a claim that the Word was the agent of the creation of the world. Still today this is an important philosophical question. Why is there something rather than nothing? How is it that we have human beings and other life on this planet in this solar system in this galaxy in this vast universe?

In our culture the predominant answer of the cultural elites is materialistic evolution. Time plus chance plus immutable physical laws of the universe have produced what we see around us. Professor Richard

Dawkins (RICHARD DAWKINS) in his book, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*, assures us, "**The evidence for evolution grows by the day, and has never been stronger.**" He also asserts, "**Evolution is a fact. Beyond reasonable doubt, beyond serious doubt, beyond sane, informed, intelligent doubt, beyond doubt evolution is a fact.**"

Over the years I have read various books and articles on the subject. For evolution being a fact, it has amazed me how much evolutionists disagree with each other about how evolution has accomplished what we see around us. (CHART--- EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES) The original view espoused by Charles Darwin was gradualism. This is the idea that over long periods of time there were slight changes in biological life that produced favorable improvements over the course of millions of years. One of the problems that Darwin recognized was the absence of intermediate forms in the fossil record, missing links.

With the continuing absence of missing links, another theory that came along was something called "Punctuated Equilibrium." This has been promoted by Professor Stephen Jay Gould from Harvard University and Niles Eldredge from the Museum of Natural History in New York. They argued that the lack of transitional forms in the fossil record, missing links, means that biological changes must have happened suddenly in the distant past. At least some geneticists have been critical, because they do not understand how this could happen genetically.

Then there was a guy by the name of Richard Goldshmidt from the University of California- Berkeley, who promoted the "Hopeful Monster" theory. He claimed that there must have been huge leaps between species involving large evolutionary changes. But then geneticists argue that huge genetic changes would tend to lead to the death of the critters involved.

So then we are back to Richard Dawkins, who has theorized that life on earth is the result of alien seeding. Aliens from somewhere in the universe planted the seeds, or forms, of life on our planet which have led to our present situation. So all of this in his mind makes evolution a fact, although there is no agreement about the specific method about how this has all come to pass. None of this is reproducible, which is usually required by the scientific method in order to prove that something is true.

Dr. James Tour (JAMES TOUR) is a professor at Rice University. He has been recognized as one of "The 50 Most Influential Scientists in the World Today." He says, "**I will tell you as a scientist and a synthetic chemist, if anybody should be able to understand evolution, it is me, because I make molecules for a living, and I don't just buy a kit, and mix this and mix this, and get that. I understand a lot about making molecules; I don't understand evolution.**"

He goes on to add, **"Let me tell you what goes on in the back rooms of science--- with National Academy members, with Nobel Prize winners. I have sat with them, and when I get them alone, I say, 'Do you understand all of this, where all of this came from, and how this happens?'"** The answer that he says that he invariably receives is "no."

A few years ago Tour joined nearly 900 other scientists in signing "A Scientific Dissent From Darwinism," which states, **"We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged."** When Tour was asked how life did originate, he said that the most reasonable answer is simple. **"I believe fundamentally that God created us all."** (*Christian News*, 10/13/2014) (PROJECTOR OFF)

"All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Boris Dotsenko became academically successful. After technical college he went to the University of Kiev in the Ukraine. He says, **"One of the fundamental laws of nature that interested me was the Law of Entropy, which is concerned with the probable behavior of subatomic particles in any physical system. Put simply, this law says that left to itself, any physical system will decay with time. Matter tends to become increasingly disorganized."**

"One of the implications of this law is that the whole material world should have turned into a cloud of chaotic dust a long, long time ago! As I thought about that, it dawned on me that there must be a very powerful organizing force counteracting this disorganizing tendency, keeping the universe controlled and in order. This force must be nonmaterial; otherwise it, too, would become disordered."

"I concluded that this power must be both omnipotent and omniscient: there must be a God--- one God--- controlling everything! I realized also that even the most brilliant scientists in the best equipped laboratories are still incapable of copying even the simplest living cell: God must be the Creator of life on earth." "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."

V.

In vv. 4 & 5 we find that THE WORD IS LIFE AND LIGHT. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. THE WORD IS LIFE AND LIGHT.) **"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** "Life" is a term that occurs 36 times in this book. It is another term capable of different meanings. Later in the gospel "life" will primarily describe spiritual life, which includes eternity. But here John is describing life that is the result of creation. The Word is responsible for life that is created upon this planet. Many terms in John's gospel may have a double meaning. Perhaps John wants his readers to think about both physical life and spiritual life.

"Light" also has great symbolic meaning. In the Bible it is often associated with God. In the Old Testament there are Messianic prophecies that speak about the coming of a future light. In Isaiah #9 v. 2 (ISAIAH 9:2) the prophet writes, **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone."** In both of these passages there is a contrast between light and darkness. In our passage in John we again see a positive statement that is followed up by a negative clarification. **"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** (PROJECTOR OFF)

John in his gospel will connect light to Jesus. He will associate darkness with opposition to Jesus and evil behavior. Jesus will heal a blind man who lives in darkness. One of the "I am" statements that we will find is the declaration of Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem "I am the light of the world."

Some of your translations may have the verb "comprehend" in v. 5 instead of "overcome." Both meanings for this word are found in the New Testament. But it doesn't seem to me that "comprehend" relates to darkness as well as "overcome" does. We don't usually think of darkness comprehending anything. But we may think of darkness overcoming light or light overcoming darkness.

The only other use of the Greek word in John's gospel is in #12 v. 35. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 12:35) Jesus says to the crowd gathered in the temple in Jerusalem, **"Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you."** The story in John's gospel is that in the end, light does overcome darkness. In becoming a human being, the Word, the Son of God, brings light to dark and dying and sinful humanity. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus Christ dies on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. He rises from the dead to prove that He is God. He offers life to all who will respond in faith, to all who will put their trust in Him. Believing in Jesus is the response that John desires from his readers. A deep and abiding faith is what God wants from us.

Boris Dotsenko continued to excel in his academic career. He was sent to Moscow State University, where he obtained his PhD in physical and mathematical sciences. In 1954 he was assigned to work in the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. His faith in people was shattered when he discovered that his father and wife were reporting to the KGB about his activities and beliefs.

In 1966 he was appointed to be head of his laboratory. Shortly afterward he was called to Moscow to talk to representatives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He was told that he was being sent to Canada and after that, to Vienna, where he would be a senior member of the International

Atomic Energy Agency. There he would be expected to send back information about the achievements of nuclear researchers from throughout the world.

Two days later Boris was at the University of Alberta, in Canada. As he unpacked his luggage in his hotel room in Edmonton, he found a Gideon Bible. He writes, "**My hands trembled as I lifted the Bible. It opened to John 1:1, and I read again that verse which had struck me so forcibly 22 years before in that Ukraine barn--- *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* After that, I spent every available moment absorbing the Word of God. Did I now accept what I read? I swallowed it all! I became a Christian, and was soon baptized by a minister in Edmonton.**"

Boris Dotsenko defected to Canada and spent the rest of his life teaching in various colleges there. His life was transformed by the passage before us. "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**" May John's gospel in coming weeks have a transformative effect upon us.