

See This Thing

"In the Beginning"

John 1:1-5

Mark Vroegop

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1-5).

The word "advent" means "coming" or "arrival." As it relates to the church calendar, Advent is a series of Sundays leading up to the celebration of Christmas. It is supposed to be a time of preparation, a time of consideration, and time of reflection in anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. Now that might strike you as strange because Lent is characterized by fasting, personal deprivation, and consecration. The weeks leading up to Christmas are anything but that. This is not typically a time for significant reflection and especially not a season for fasting. Can you imagine telling your Mom that when walk in the door for the holidays?! However, Advent used to be a time rather similar to Lent.

Advent likely began during the first or second century, and it fundamentally changed after Constantine built the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the mid-300's, declaring Jesus' birthday to be a national holiday, and when Julius, the bishop of Rome, picked December 25 as the official day of the Christmas Feast.¹ You might find it interesting to know that Julius picked that date in order to combat a pagan feast which was celebrated every year on December 25.² The pagan feast celebrated the winter solstice (a funny thing to celebrate if you ask me!), and the church offered an alternative, even adopting some of the symbols (i.e., a Christmas tree, holly, and mistletoe) into their Christian celebrations.

The Gravity of Christmas

Over time, Advent changed from a time of reflection, preparation, and deprivation to a time of celebration. Now there is nothing wrong with that per se, but it seems like this could easily be a time of year where the gravitational pull of our culture is toward celebration, consumption, and excess. I, like some of you, found myself in Walmart store at 9:30 p.m. on Thanksgiving Night. It was a surreal experience to see thousands of people packed into a store, standing in cue lines

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2004/advent.html>.

² T.J. German, "The Christian Year" in Walter Elwell, *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 1984), 219.

waiting for their special deals. Equally remarkable was what happened when 10 p.m. struck and the clerk said, "Go!" I've always said, "Scratch an adult and you'll find a Jr. Higher." A Wal-mart store filled with a thousand people who want to save money on gifts is a great place to see this lived out. People jockeyed for position, elbowed each other for the best position, pushed their way through the aisles, and had little regard for how they treated anyone. The sales start earlier, the pace gets faster, the commercials are louder. There is a gravitational pull to this season.

Our hope is pull you back a bit from this cultural and spiritual cliff and remind you what this season is all about. We're making the family devotional available to you so that you can maximize this time of year, and we'll be looking at John 1 to discover John's view of the advent of Jesus Christ.

The Advent According to John

The aim of John's gospel is found in 20:31: "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 everything about this book serves this purpose – to show people that Jesus really is the Son of God so that they can believe in him and have life through him.

John opens his account of Jesus' life with one of the most famous and theologically rich introductions in the Bible. Matthew leads with a genealogy, Luke with the stories surrounding his birth, and Mark with the launch of his ministry. John is philosophical, theological, metaphorical, and cosmological. He extends the introduction well beyond the immediate to the very beginning ("...in the beginning was the Word" - v 1) and brings the reader up to the entrance of Jesus into the world ("the Word became flesh" - v 14).

The shepherds wanted to "see this thing" that the angels had announced (Luke 2:15), and John gives us his perspective as to what we should see. Over the next three weeks we'll be looking at three key phrases:

- "In the beginning" – John 1:1-5
- "The light of the World" – John 1:9-13
- "The Word became flesh" – John 1:14-18

And my aim is to help us celebrate this season in a way that is more theologically robust and personally reflective. Through these sermons, our time of corporate worship, and the family devotional guide, I hope to be able to fight against the gravitational pull of our culture – to recapture the essence and significance of Advent.

Six Foundational Truths about Jesus

John 1 is a foundational chapter, and it contains fundamental truths about who Jesus is. Verses 1-5 contain six important truths about Jesus. Let's look at them and then examine some implications.

1. Jesus is self-existent (v 1)

John begins his explanation of who Jesus is by starting at the very beginning. Verse 1 says, "In the beginning was the Word." His aim is to push the reader's understanding back as far as possible – to the very beginning of time.

The word "beginning" means primacy of time, of place, or of rank. It can mean that something happened before something else, that is the starting point of other things, or as something which is superior. In this case, the word is used to describe Jesus' essence and existence before all time and creation. It is pointing to the place of prominence and authority that Jesus possesses. He is "first of all." John uses this word to mean more than just time or location. "In the beginning" carries an emotional power to it.

You could think of this phrase in the way that we use the word "huge." The word can mean many things. It can refer to size: "This meal is huge." It can refer to weight: "That snowball was huge!" But it can also refer to something significant: "That statement was huge."

John is using a phrase that has emotional power connected with it. After all do you remember where else this phrase is used? Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The book of Genesis records these words to introduce the creation of the world; that there was a time before time ever was, and in that moment God created. John captures the weight of this statement to indicate that new creation is coming. There is a new "in the beginning" that is taking place. What happened through Jesus is as significant, as cosmologically altering, as important as the creation of the world.

"In the beginning was the Word." Jesus, the son of God, the one who walked the face of the earth, the one who John and others saw, was there in the beginning. He never had a beginning, was never dependent upon time, and never had an antecedent to himself. And this is the one who enters our broken world. This is Jesus who is first in rank, authority, honor, power, and time. He was "in the beginning." Look how John picks this up in 1 John 1:1: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life."* He is self-existent.

2. Jesus is the revelation of God (v 1)

The second really important thing that we find in John 1:1 is title that John gives Jesus. "In the beginning was the Word." He calls Jesus "the Word." Why not just say "In the beginning was Jesus." Or "In the beginning was the Son of God." This title is an intentionally loaded concept, and it requires that you understand the background of this word.

The Greek word here is *logos*, and our English translations render it as "word." That is not a bad translation, but it doesn't carry the full weight of what this word would have meant during John's day. *Logos* was a familiar concept in Greek philosophy, and it denoted the principle of reason or order in the universe. *Logos* was something that imposed form on the material world and

constituted the soul of man.³ It was the outward form by which the inward thought was expressed or made known. The idea is more than just a word in a grammatical sense. It meant something official, something significant, and something important. A good comparison is how we might use the word “oracle.” Its basic definition could mean an utterance or a saying. It can also mean a spiritually significant statement. But the word can also be used to describe someone who seems to have unusual wisdom or insight. For example, Warren Buffett, who is world-renowned for his values-based investing, frugal lifestyle, and immense wealth has often been called “The Oracle of Omaha.” In other words, he embodies the wisdom of sound investing. That is how logos is used here.

There is further meaning when you consider the Old Testament background and the importance of “The word of the Lord.” The Old Testament repeatedly identifies that “the word of the Lord” is far more than what God simply says. There is power in the word of God. Consider the following:

- Genesis 1:3 – the method of creation is the word of God
- Psalm 33:6 – “by the word of the Lord the heavens were made”
- Isaiah 38:4 – the word of the Lord comes to the Prophet Isaiah
- Psalm 107:20 – “he sent out his word and healed them”

And consider the promise in Isaiah 55:10-11:

10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

When you put all of this together, you get a clear sense that the Word is the central to God’s relationship to this world. The word of God created the universe, it reveals what God is like, and it is the means by which God accomplishes his purposes. But there’s more. The word of God represented the very presence of God. When God spoke, his people knew that he was real and that he was personal. So this one concept is much more than God disseminating information to his people about himself; this is the combination of revelation, power and personal relationship.

Now you can probably understand why John would call Jesus “the Word,” and why it would be so significant to the people to whom he was writing. Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God to mankind. And in that revelation he shows people what God is like but he also was the “Word of God” in all of its sense – full of power and personal intimacy. It is no wonder that John and the writer of Hebrews were enamored with this concept.

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:1-3).

³ F.F. Bruce, The Gospel of John, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 29.

3. Jesus is fully God (vv 1,2)

The third thing that John identifies here is that Jesus is fully God. Not only is he self-existent and the full disclosure of God to mankind, he is completely divine. Verse 1 says, “the Word was with God and the Word was God.” John repeats the statement again in verse 2:

To say that the Word was with God means two things.⁴ First, it means accompaniment. Jesus, as the Son of God, was intimately and closely connected to the Father. “With” doesn’t just mean nearby; it means closeness and oneness. Secondly, to say that he was “with God” means relationship. Their oneness and closeness is expressed in relationship, one that is central to Jesus’ mission on the earth.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one (John 10:27-30).

The Word was connected to God by virtue of his presence and relationship, but there’s more. He is absolutely and completely, 100% divine. “The Word was God.” The structure in the Greek is really important. Logos has the article “the” in front of it while there is no article in front of the word for God. This is important because if an article would have been present for both it would change the meaning to say that the Word was identical to God (i.e., the Word was the God). But then how could the Word be “with God” while being “the God.” The absence of the article before God makes the passage say that Jesus was fully God; he shared the nature and being of God.⁵ This has led some newer translations to render this passage with the phrase “what God was, the Word was.”⁶

John wants us to understand that Jesus was and is fully God.

4. Jesus is the creator (v 3)

The next foundational truth that we learn about is Jesus’ relationship to creation. In verse one, we learned that he is beginning – without reference of time or dependency. In verse three, we now see that John wants us to know that Jesus was the active agent of creation. In other words, Jesus was the creator.

Notice how verse three first makes a positive statement only to turn right around restate it negatively: “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made”(John 1:3). Everything that exists owes its life and existence to Jesus. There is nothing in the world that is outside of his creative authority. Nothing exists apart from him. Nothing.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 76.

⁵ Bruce, 31.

⁶ Bruce, 31.

This is not the only place where the creative power of Jesus is identified.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him (Col. 1:16).

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb. 1:2).

Why is it important for John's readers to know that Jesus is agent of creation? There two reasons: treason and worship. First, in a few verses (1:14) John will say that Jesus was rejected by his own people. And it isn't just that human beings rebuffed him. It is the tragedy and the irony of the fact that human beings rejected and killed the one who created them. Sin is so bad that it would cause the creatures to commit treason against the one who gave them life!

The second reason relates to worship. The Godhead designed the plan of redemption such that creator of the world would be rejected by mankind and in so doing redeem mankind. And the result would be incredible worship. Just listen to what John writes in Revelation 4:11:

"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

John wants us to see what Jesus as creator says about God and us.

5. Jesus is the Savior of mankind (v 4)

John is still not done! Jesus is self-existent, the revelation of the triune God, fully divine, and the creator of the world. But the reason that John writes all of this is to set up what comes next. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (v 4). Jesus, as the self-existent, God-revealing, fully-divine, universe creating Son of God, is also the one who provides life to sinful people. It is unbelievable!

Life and light are two concepts that John loves to use in reference to Jesus. Again, notice how prominent they are in 1 John 1:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us (1 John 1:1-2).

Now we will fully unpack this next week when we look at verses 9-13. But John simply wants to introduce the idea that Jesus is invading the great darkness of our human existence. He is coming to rescued sinful people. He is both light and life at the same time! The light that shines from God to man is Jesus, and this light can produce spiritual life.

6. Jesus is the conqueror of sinful unbelief (v 5)

The final statement is equally as compelling and meaningful. It shows us the transforming power that Jesus is. John has switched metaphors. He has moved from "the word" which communicated God's intervention through revelation. Then he moved to "life" which shows us what Jesus offers. The last metaphor that he uses, beginning in verse 4, is light.

In similar fashion to Genesis 1 where God creates light, dispelling the darkness, John pictures Jesus as an equally transforming light. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). Mankind is shrouded in darkness until God intervenes and shines the light of the gospel upon them through Jesus. Paul links creation and the light of Jesus in 2 Corinthians 4.

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

But what does it mean that the darkness has not overcome it? Darkness and light are opposites but they are not equal. Darkness is penetrated by a small amount of light. Darkness is dispelled by the presence of light.

What is the metaphor of darkness that John is referring to? John 12:46 says, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." So the contrast between darkness and light is the contrast between unbelief and belief. And the beautiful thing that John says here is that "the darkness (unbelief) has not overcome it (the light)." Jesus enters the world to conquer unbelief, and he wins.

The message of John's gospel and the entire Advent season is that a self-existent, revelation of the triune God, fully divine, creator and savior of the world has come to conquer the darkness of unbelief. John's aim is to link the advent of Jesus Christ to the ultimate purpose of his gospel and life of Jesus: **belief**.

The reason for this season, the purpose of the gospel of John, and the reason that College Park exists is to call you to believe.

What Should You Believe?

This passage is in the Bible in order to call us toward belief. But what does that belief look like? What should you believe? What do you have to believe?

God is your creator. This passage unequivocally tells us that everything that you see and what you are is only here because of God made it. And if God made it, then we are accountable to him. Everything owes its life and allegiance to God.

We naturally live the darkness of unbelief. Due to the fall of Adam and Eve, sin entered the world and ruined everything. Our individual sins are the expression of this darkness that pervades the universe.

The light of Jesus can dispel the darkness. The rest of John's gospel shows us how Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for people to be forgiven of their sin and made right with God. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Jesus makes everything new. As transforming as the first creation, Jesus can and will renew everything. Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Jesus has come not just to save people from their sins; that is just the starting point. Jesus has come to recreate people such that everything in them and through them is transformed.

So if you've never received Christ, let today be that day. And if you know and love this first chapter of John, then let it be the mantra of your life and heart, especially during this time of year.

The season of Christmas is not just the celebration of the birthday of Jesus; it is the triumphant declaration that the light has shone into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Jesus, the self-existent, revelation of the triune God, fully divine creator and savior of the world has come. And he has conquered the darkness of unbelief.

In the beginning was the Word!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

Scriptural Citations: Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.