

**John 1:1-18**  
**Light in a Dark World**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**  
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When John wrote the pamphlet that we call John's Gospel the Roman Empire was at its zenith. In an age of unparalleled wealth, the empire was home to as many as 100 million people – perhaps half the population of the entire world at that time. Never before had there been public baths, well maintained roads or such huge scale engineering works – from Hadrian's wall in the empire's far north to the astonishing 250,000 seat Circus Maximus in Rome itself.

More plays, poetry and philosophy were being published than ever before – manuscripts being turned out by hand at a phenomenal rate.

But for many people, then, just as today, those things, exciting and wonderful though they were, were not enough.

The thoughtful people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD wanted to know if there was anything – a principle, an idea, a concept – that held it all together.

Something that could explain the human spirit, the urge to build and create, the existence of the physical universe and the origin of wisdom. The Greek philosopher Plato and those who followed him had some ideas about that. They believed that behind the world that we can see and feel and touch lay another world. A kind of template of the world.

The world we live in, they said, is, essentially, a copy of that world, a flawed reproduction from the perfect original which doesn't exist other than in the mind of the universe itself.

This mind, this wisdom, that pervades the universe needed a name. And the ancient philosophers found one for it – Logos. The word.

For the ancient Greeks and Romans the Word, the Logos, was a principle, an idea, a divine spirit at the heart of the universe.

By contrast for the Jews God's Word was no impersonal principle. It was the instrument he, the living, personal God, Yahweh, used in creation, in revealing himself to the world and in delivering his people from evil and harm.

According to the Old Testament it was God's Word that created the stars and planets, the seas and the land, the caterpillars and the cheetahs. It

was God's Word that proclaimed God's nature as a god of grace and truth. And it was God's Word that parted the Red Sea as he led his people, the Israelites, away from terrible slavery in Egypt.

But God's Word had not been spoken in Israel for 400 years.

Most first century Jews were scattered hundreds of miles from their ancestral homes around Jerusalem where, in any case, the great temple that was the meeting place between earth and heaven had been destroyed in 70AD by the Emperor Vespasian.

The first century world, one of dizzying progress and religious pluralism, was, just like our world, one in need of answers to some of the most basic questions of life.

And, just like our philosophers, the wise men of the day had no real and persuasive explanation of how the universe came to be here and why the world is the way it is – so beautiful and yet so flawed.

This is the world into which John wrote his gospel, a book that has been profoundly important for most of the next 2,000 years.

This gospel contains the most famous verse in the book that has been the most copied, purchased and read in the world for around 1,500 years – John 3:16. If you don't know that verse by its reference look it up at the end and you'll almost certainly find you do know it!

John's gospel was at the centre of the most significant theological debates for the first 400 years of the history of the Christian Church.

John's gospel is the most preached on book of the Bible and it contains some of the most famous statements and stories of the Bible. The miracle of Jesus turning water into wine is part of most wedding services. And the declaration of Jesus that "I am the resurrection and the life" is part of almost everyone's funerals.

It is a book that has been set to many different uses. But it is a book with one, single, simple purpose. A purpose that John sets out for us right at the end in chapter 20 verses 30 and 31:

*"Jesus did many other miraculous signs which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you*

*may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

This is a book written for people who are not, when they start to read it, Christians. If you believe, in any meaningful way at all, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, then you are a Christian. So a book written "that you may believe" those things is, obviously, a book for a non-Christian.

Particularly this book was written for Jewish people who were not yet Christians. The Jews were expecting a Christ to come.

Christ is simply another word for Messiah or Anointed One. They all mean the same thing. The Jews were expecting a Messiah, an anointed King who would rescue them. This book is written to persuade Jewish people that Jesus IS that King or Messiah.

So if you are here this morning and you are ethnically Jewish and not yet a Christian this book is for YOU! I hope you enjoy looking at it.

If you are here this morning and you are not Jewish but you're not a Christian either – that is you are not persuaded that Jesus is God's King for the world – then this book is for you too.

You might have to work a bit harder to understand the cultural background because this book is set 2,000 years ago and all the action takes place in the Jewish nation and is based around the life of the Jews – the temple, the Passover feast, the various festivals, Sabbaths, councils and so on.

But, whatever your cultural background, this book is for you if you are open to the possibility that Jesus, the most important person in human history, is not merely the most influential man who ever lived, but actually God's own son, his King for the world come to rescue people from sin and darkness and death.

So I really hope, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, that, despite the fact that we're all really weird and talk about Jesus all the time and do stuff like singing and praying that you'll keep coming back Sunday after Sunday because this book we're looking at every week is for you!

If you're here this morning and you are a Christian then I hope you'll really enjoy reminding yourself about why it is you came to believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's King, in the first place. And I hope you'll find out some things you didn't know before that make you more than ever convinced that following Jesus and believing in him is absolutely the

most right and good and best thing you can do with your whole life.

But the best thing we can all do this term to let John's gospel really serve the purpose for which John wrote it is to bring to church loads and loads of people who don't yet believe that Jesus is the Christ and let them meet him in the pages of this book.

We've got some particular guest services where you can do that over the course of the term but I promise you that any week you bring a friend to come along to church we will be talking about Jesus and introducing his amazing life and works to everyone who is here.

Because all of the leaders of this church believe, just like John did, that whatever unanswered questions we have about life, love, meaning and purpose are answered by Jesus. We are convinced that the overarching principle that holds the universe together is not an impersonal force but a personal God who we can personally know. And he is the one who is introduced to us in a massive and awesome way in the first 18 verses of John's gospel.

## **I The Word is the Creator (v1-5)**

Opening lines of books can be amazingly powerful in a culture.

If you are from an English speaking country and I was to say to you: "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*"

You would probably instantly think that I was to launch into an extended quotation from Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" or that I was using that quotation to get your attention so I could make some other point.

The same is true of... "*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a ...[wife.]*" ...from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and many more.

Any Christian who had already read Mark's gospel, his account of Jesus' life, that had been written some 20 years before John, with its striking opening "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ" would have been instantly struck by John's opening line here: "in the beginning."

Listen, John is saying, my colleague Mark has told you about the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, but I want to take you back further, right back, before creation itself existed.

And any Jew reading John's book would instantly have recognised the words as exactly the same as

those that opened Genesis 1, the very first words of the Bible.

There: “in the beginning God.”

Here: “in the beginning was... the Word.”

John’s answer to life’s big questions, the Word – not in the sense of a few letters on a piece of paper but “word” meaning “message” – was there right at the start.

From before history started God has been a communicator.

Time after time, thousands of times, the Old Testament, the Bible Jesus read, “Thus says the Lord.” The God of the Bible speaks. And it is his Word that makes things happen.

When God said, “let there be light”, there was light.

Think of the astonishing power that means his Word has. If I go over to that light switch and say to it “light” nothing will happen. If I spent hundreds of pounds and got the school to install a fancy computer system I could probably make the 20 or so fluorescent tubes in the ceiling come on by speaking the right word. But God’s Word can create all light. In a universe that had never known light before suddenly there were photons bouncing around like nobody’s business.

The Word does not exhaust God – he is not all there is to God because he is **with** God. But he is not merely an agent or intermediary. Some lesser being who does God’s bidding – like a very powerful angel. Because, v1, the Word **WAS** God.

And it was because of the Word that the universe exists. He was involved in the creation of absolutely everything that exists in the universe. And he is the giver of life to men – his creation pulses with life and light.

Through all the billions of years of the history of the universe, that life has never been extinguished.

V5 contains a deliberately ambiguous word. It could be translated “overcome” – as it is if you have an ESV. John is saying there that the darkness of chaos has, and will, never overcome light and life in God’s universe.

But there is another possible meaning to that word that is important as we on and look at the next few verses of John’s opening...

## **2 The Word is light and life (v 6-13)**

In creation the light and life that the Word brought has never been overcome. When you think about

all the things – internal meltdown, meteor strike, climate alteration – that could have destroyed the life of men over the millennia – it’s utterly remarkable, that we are still here, that, because of the work of the Word, the darkness has not overcome the light.

But, as anyone who has to live in this world knows, not all is well here.

The light of God’s creation, the kindness, goodness and mercy of God in making this world and making us to live in it, able to know him, is not universally accepted. The darkness, the ignorance of men’s hearts has not, v5, “understood” the light.

We don’t comprehend God’s wonder as we should. The amazing light of God’s creation is not sufficient for human beings in our messed up state. So God sent a witness. One who would come and declare in plain words the truth about the God who made the universe, about the Word.

We know him, of course, as John the Baptist. You might wonder, of course, why this astonishing Word, the one who made the universe, the one who spoke elementary particles and galaxies into being, would need a bloke called John as a witness.

Well the answer is not because of him – but because of us.

Even with the clear and powerful words of John the Baptist, one of the greatest preachers of all time, speaking powerful words of truth to a people who said they really wanted to know about God and his Word, what happened?

V10 – though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

Even his own people, v11, not just the human race in general but the people who had claimed to be God’s people for thousands of years, did not accept the Word, God when he came.

Just think for a moment how shocking that is. Like Gordon Brown pitching up at the Labour party conference in two weeks time and everybody going – so what’s your name? What are you doing here this week?

Or imagine a sergeant major walking into a barracks full of trainee recruits and them all just looking over, noting the stripes, and carrying on playing cards on their bunks.

If I went home this afternoon and my wife and my two children just completely blanked me, carried on with whatever they were doing as if I didn’t

exist, or worse, actually tried to argue that they weren't related to me in any way at all.

That is how the people of the world, and, especially, those who claim to be religious people, God's people, have treated the Word, the God who made everything, when he came amongst us. We have ignored him in the street. Cut him dead.

Despite the fact that every human being on the face of the planet has been enlightened, v9, the human race, as we will see much more later in John's gospel, has tried to run at full speed into the darkest corner we can find to hide from God's Word.

You can see that all around you in our country, and indeed in any country in the world. Whether it's the country that insists on its right to behead those who convert from Islam or a country that insists on its right to have a porn shops on the corner next to one of its thousands of churches, we live in a world where we blank God.

But, fortunately for us, and for the plot of John's biography, that is not all there is to it.

Because, miraculously, despite the rejection of God by his world, some do believe in the Word and, astonishingly, become children of God.

The usual name for those who trust and follow God in our country is "Christian". And that's a good name. But it's a name that only appears twice in the Bible.

A far, far more common way of describing people who long to hear God speak and live in his ways is "children of God".  
Imagine yourself saying that.

Not, "I am a Christian" – familiar, a label.

But "I am a child of God." Something that defines you in terms of a relationship with the creator of the universe himself. An invitation to become a Christian could be misunderstood as simply asking someone to change their label. To move from one world-view to another – atheist to Christian, agnostic to Christian. Or it could be misunderstood as asking you to change from one culture to another – Muslim to Christian.

But I do not want anyone to think as we look at John's good news over the next weeks that anybody is being asked merely to change their world-view or to reject their cultural heritage. Rather this book is going to be an invitation to become a child of God by received the Word and believing in him.

If you've never done that ponder over these weeks what an amazing invitation that is. To be part of the biggest family in the world, with the best, richest, kindest, fairest Dad in the world. A child of God.

If you have done that perhaps you need to start thinking about it more. I am a child of God. Not as a source of pride – for nobody chooses their parents. But as a source of comfort. Whatever anybody says to you or does to you, if you are a child of God the most important security in your life can never be taken away from you. If you are a child of God that identity defines you so that the ebb and flow and joy and tragedy in life will leave you...

delighting in creation but not pursuing materialism  
pursuing friendship but not obsessed with what others think  
sorrowing in loss, but not sliding into despair

The word is light and life. And finally, as John has built us up over verse after verse to his great crescendo...

### **3 The Word is Jesus Christ who graciously makes God known (v14-18)**

If I had the inclination, the time or the money, which I don't. But if I did I could hop on the train this afternoon and travel through the channel tunnel to France and, with a bit of luck, get to Paris for 4pm tomorrow with a ticket for South Africa against Samoa in the Rugby World Cup.

On the way I could pick up a South Africa rugby jersey (I don't think I'd ever pass for a Samoan) and join the thousands of fans in green and gold cheering for their team.

But I would not have become South African. I could come home, take my rugby jersey off and I would be just what I'd always been – an English bloke who has always lived in England and speaks with an English accent and, a few days later, would be cheering on the England rugby team against those same South Africans.

But the Word is not like that. He BECAME flesh. The Word became the historical person of Jesus Christ, v17. He dwelt among us. His humanness was as real as yours or mine. And yet he retained the very glory of the eternal God.

His achievement is utterly remarkable. If we want to know what God is like. More than that if we want to know God personally, we do not have to study the great sunsets of the world for inspiration. We do not have to discover a particular format of

meditation or prayer. We do not have to journey to the depths of the sea, the edge of space or a near death experience.

We simply have read the accounts that are written of Jesus' life. No one has ever seen God, v18, but God the one and only who is at the Father's side has made him known. These things are written so that... by believing you may have life in Jesus Christ's name.

Jesus makes God know and Jesus, because he makes those who trust him children of God, makes God knowable.

For me this passage is a huge encouragement as I try and share the good news about Jesus Christ with my friends and my family. Because it means I don't have to do anything clever to get them to be Christians. The only that that is needed for my mum and dad, who I was chatting to yesterday, for our friends Nikki and Jon up the road, for people from the local pre-school, for people I meet at church, for anyone who is not a child of God to become part of the best family in the world is for them to be introduced to Jesus.

All I have to do is present Jesus to them. And I don't have to make it up or do loads of research because all they need to know about Jesus is written down in this book for me to talk about.

Isn't that brilliant. No study course required. No deep philosophical training. Just presenting Jesus.

My friends have all sorts of questions. Sometimes they need some deep thought. They can get a bit aggressive and sometimes it's a bit scary. But what they need is simply to hear about Jesus.

And if you are here this morning and you are not a child of God, not believing in Jesus, not a Christian, this passage is great news for you too. Because it means you don't have to survey all the religions of the world, compare every philosophy and idea and travel to all the so called holy places (most of which are in fairly dangerous parts of the world!) to find the answer to life's big questions.

It might be interesting to do those things. But it would also be beyond most of us – and very expensive as well.

All you need to do, however, to know the God who is really there as your loving parent, as your Father, to be a child of God, is to read, believe and respond to John's account of Jesus' life. Read John's words, inspired by the Word to know God.

If you'd like to do that but don't have a Bible please feel free to take one of ours! Or, if you think whole thing feels a bit intimidating take **Life** book from info table – John's gospel in funky format. Come to Christianity Explored.

Whatever you do don't miss out on the answers to all of life's most important questions. They are to be found by knowing Jesus Christ.