



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 1: 1-5

Fall 2021

"Before The Beginning"

TRANSCRIPT

Well good morning. That was a very good text to introduce our passage this morning as we begin this new series; which will go on for some weeks, some months—and maybe a couple of years actually. *(Laughter)* But we're going to begin it with verses 1 through 5 of chapter 1, which begins what's called the prologue of the Book of John.

<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 in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. <sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. <sup>5</sup> The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John 1: 1-5

May the LORD bless the reading of His Word and bless this time of studying it together.

*(Message)* At the beginning of the 20th century, which really is not that long ago, scientists believed two things: That our galaxy, the Milky Way, was the universe; and secondly, it is eternal—without beginning or end. But as they studied the stars, they discovered many of them weren't stars at all, but galaxies—hundreds of billions of galaxies. I think now it's trillions of galaxies. And they were moving away from the earth

at speeds of 100 million miles an hour. The universe is expanding in what seems to be the aftermath of the great explosion known as 'The Big Bang'.

At first scientists like Albert Einstein objected; but evidence accumulated until it became the accepted theory of the origin of the universe—which most believe, of these scientists, occurred 13.7 billion years ago. Now whatever you think about the big bang, one thing it did is forced scientists to acknowledge that there was a beginning. What they won't acknowledge is how it began, what was behind it; really 'Who was behind it? That's really the big question but human reason won't get us to the answer. For those answers, we need revelation.

And we have that. When we turn to John chapter 1, verse 1, we read, "In the beginning was the Word." A simple statement that unlocks the mystery of the universe, and begins a book that answers an even greater question, really the greatest question of life, "How can a man be right with God?"

That's why John wrote the fourth Gospel. He states the reason for the writing of this book at the end of the book in chapter 20, verse 31, 'It was so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, you may have life in His name.' So the Gospel of John is something of a 'Gospel tract'; a long one as well as a brief book. But a book designed to enlighten minds so that people will believe in Christ and be saved—have eternal life.

Certainly that's the purpose of the other three Gospels as well, but as we study through the fourth Gospel we'll see differences from it and those three Gospels. Not in the person of Christ, they all teach the same about the person of Christ, and the work of Christ. But the way they develop the LORD's life and ministry is different. There are no parables, for example, in John's Gospel; no account of the LORD's birth, baptism, or His transfiguration. There's no record of the LORD casting out demons or being tempted by Satan in the desert.

But John includes much not found in the other Gospels. Like the LORD's conversations with Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria; or His instruction to His

disciples in the upper room in chapters 13 through 16; and His high priestly prayer in John 17.

But the most obvious difference is John's starting point. The other three begin at a place and time in history; either with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem or in the Gospel of Mark, at the Jordan River and His baptism. John begins in eternity past with the LORD's eternal relationship with His Father. That's our passage, chapter 1 verses 1 through 5; the first verses of what is known as 'the *prologue* of the fourth Gospel', (which is verses 1 through 18—his introduction to this great fourth Gospel).

Luther called the Gospel of John "The Crown of them all." The Lutheran commentator, Lenski, called the prologue "The Jewel of The Crown." And this jewel of a passage opens with the words, "In the beginning was the Word", an echo of the first words of the Bible; "In the beginning God". It's really impossible to miss the connection.

But John didn't go to *the beginning* to show the origin of all things, as Moses did. He went back to the beginning of time, to the very first nanosecond, to show that at the very first moment, the Word already *was*. Expand your imagination back as far as you can—back 13.7 billion years and look deeply into the endless ages of eternity and you will never find a point when He was not.

The first statement of John not only answers the question that modern science can't solve, it cuts down a host of heresies, both ancient and modern: Heresies from the early *Ebionites* who said that 'Jesus was just a man', to the *Aryans* who said that, 'Jesus was more than a man'; He was great creature though, of God. He was a kind of *demigod* who had a beginning. In fact the story is that Arius, who was a presbyter, a preacher, in Alexandria was having his congregation sing, "There was a time when Christ was not."

Well, there's no such hint of that here. He had no beginning. John said here in the very first verse, his first statement, that, 'there was no time or moment in all eternity when Christ was not'. Before all things; the Word *was*, and always *was*.

But why 'The Word'? What kind of name is that? It's the Greek word, *logos*, which was very important—a very important term to the philosophers. It was used of

the 'rational principle' by which everything exists, the 'controlling principle' that gave order to the universe; the *logos*, (the word). Some think John was writing to the Greeks and he used a term that would be widely recognized by them; and would help them understand Christ is the real organizer of the universe: The *logos* of the universe.

And no doubt the opening words here would have had a very familiar ring to the Greeks, but John was not a Greek. John was a Jew who grew up in the synagogue and was familiar with Moses; not with the speculations of Plato.

And it is in Moses and the prophets, all of the Old Testament, that God's Word, the spoken Word, is very important. In Genesis 1 God said, "Let there be ... and there was..." His Word is creative. It doesn't hang idly in the air. God's Word does things. It creates. And that's all through the Old Testament. The psalmist wrote, in Psalm 33, verse 6, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made..." —God speaks and things become. God speaks and His Word creates; or it reveals; or it heals. It's John's way of describing Christ as the creator, the revealer, the healer. His way of describing Christ as the Savior.

So to insure we understand that *The Word* is a person, not simply a principle, but a person—and a divine person, John explains where He was and what He was doing before "The beginning", when He began creating the universe. He wrote, "...the Word was with God..." (vs1b). Later in verse 18, John develops that; he wrote, He was "in the bosom of the Father..." in an eternal, personal father/son relationship. Here (in verse 1), it can be translated, (this is the literal rendering), "The Word was to God," or, "The Word was toward God." William Hendriksen translated it, "The Word was face to face with God." *The Word* is a person—He was "with God". The great Princeton theologian, Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield wrote, "He has been from all eternity, God's fellow." I like that statement; "God's fellow".

And God's equal because John wrote next, "...and the Word was God." (vs1c). Well, this is one of the clearest statements in the Bible affirming the deity of Christ. Notice John didn't say 'the Word was a god', as though one of many gods or a 'god-like'

being. And he didn't say the Word was **The** God, as though He is the whole of God and the only divine being. That would exclude the Father and the Holy Spirit from the Godhead. And it would be impossible, since John just wrote that He, the Word, "...was with God." No, instead John simply said, "The Word was God," meaning the Word shared the divine nature, the very being of God. Everything that can be said about God the Father can be said about the Word, can be said about the Son. He is fully God. He is God the Son.

This verse is basic to the doctrine of the Trinity and it is fundamental for our understanding of everything in this fourth Gospel. In fact, the British commentator, C. K. Barrett wrote, "John intends that the whole of his Gospel shall be read in light of this verse." Now that's quite a statement: Everything that we read in this Gospel must be understood in light of verse 1 of chapter 1. So John intends that the whole of his Gospel shall be read in light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God. If this is not true, the book is blasphemous.

Well, that's quite a statement, but that is true. It has been said that probably more than any other book of the Bible, the Gospel of John has been used by Christians of every age. Children memorize chapters from it and sing choruses based upon it. I don't know about you, but the first verse that I was taught when I was a child was John 3:16. Elderly Christians ask for passages from it to be read to them on their death bed. John Knox, the great reformer of Scotland had John 17 read to him continually as he lay dying.

But if verse 1 isn't true, the whole Gospel is false and blasphemous.—**But** it's not false! John wrote of 'the one he knew', and he wrote of 'the one who knew him'. John is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (Jn 21:20). And in verse 1, John has stated three truths about Him. First, that the Word is the Son; and He is eternal. So first, the Word, the Son, is eternal. And second, He is in close communion with the Father. He's a person in communion with the Father, His "fellow". And third, He possesses deity—He is fully God.

And to reinforce what he just said, to make sure that his description of the deity of Christ is clear to everyone who reads this, John repeats himself in verse 2, "He was in the beginning with God." Again the verb *was*, means go back as far as you can, go back to the beginning, go back to that first nanosecond—and He *was*! Go back beyond that. Go back into eternity, billions and billions and trillions of years, if you can measure eternity in those ways, and the Word *was*; always *was*! Always distinct from the Father personally but never separate from the Father. Again, He is always God's "fellow".

And God's agent as well. The One who carried out the work of creation. John wrote in verse 3, "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." Now that's Genesis 1, again, where everything that came into being came into being because of God's spoken Word. And here the preexisting Christ, the Word, the *Logos* is the agent of creation. He did it.

Now this verse that identifies Christ as the creator is not an isolated verse. There are other verses that make the same point; other passages teach this by other writers. For example, in Colossians 1, verse 15 Paul states that Christ "is the image of the invisible God..." Then in verses 16 and 17 he wrote, "By Him all things were created..." —Everything! So Christ can't be a created being because He is the one who created everything that's created, "...*both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." (vs16-17). So He is the creator of all things. He's the sustainer of all things. That's who Christ is.

Or the author of Hebrews: in Hebrews chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, "God...has spoken to us in His Son...", (*the Word*), "...whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." (vs1-2). He also "...upholds all things by the word of His power." (vs3b). He's carrying everything along, Christ is. He's moving history in the direction that God has set for it.

All of that could have been written by the apostle John. It wasn't. It was written by different writers of the New Testament. So various writers make the same point that John is making here. But ultimately, all of this comes from the same author—and that is the divine author, the Holy Spirit; the One who inspired, or “breathed out”, the Scriptures according to 2 Timothy 3:16.

The Scriptures are consistent: Christ is the creator, and the sustainer of all things. That's John, “All things came into being through Him.” (vs3). And John chose his words carefully here. The creation isn't from Him, it's from the Father—but it is “*through Him*.” The Father is the source of all that is. Christ is the *mediator*. He is the *agent*. He is the one who carried out the plan and the design of creation. He is the *master workman*.

The Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, illustrated the relationship between the Father and the Son in the work of creation by comparing it to a king building his palace. The king supplies the materials and the plans for the palace, but a contractor does the actual building. —But both built the palace. And the creation, in that work, it's the Father and the Son that did it. The Father is the source of all things, the Son is the master workman who built the materials into the universe.

It wasn't a coincidence that Jesus was a carpenter. He had experience building things long before he was born. Paul put it in words that are similar to John's in 1 Corinthians chapter 8, verse 6, “...there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things...” The work of creation is the work of the Godhead—the work of the Father and the Son—and Genesis chapter 1, verse 2 includes the Holy Spirit. And their combined work is suggested in Genesis chapter 1, verse 26 when God said, “Let *Us* make.”

Arthur Pink wrote, “Man, with all his boasting, is unable to bring into existence a single blade of grass.” That's true. That's humbling; that's true, though. For all of man's scientific and technological achievements, he cannot create life in its simplest forms. Now we can reproduce life by God's grace. And scientists have lately, dangerously, cloned animals—but we cannot create an animal—or even a bug. That's God's work—and the Word shares in it.

But not only does He share in God's work, He shares in God's attributes, in God's nature. We read that in verse 4, "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." We see a progression in John's elaboration of the Word; his explanation of the Word. He moves from Christ's relationship to eternity, to His relationship with God, to His relationship with the creation. And now, His relationship with men.

Things steadily narrow to the main focus of the Gospel. And that main focus is God's relationship to mankind. And here John introduces two great themes of his Gospel; Life and Light. Throughout, Christ is the One who brings life, and He's the One who bears Light. He is the Life bringer, and Light bearer. In chapter 8, (verse 12), the Lord says, "I am the light of the world." And then in chapter 9, he heals the blind man, and Light enters his eyes and his mind. In chapter 10, (verse 10b) the Lord said, "I came that they might have life, and might have *it* abundantly." And then in chapter 11, he raises Lazarus from the dead. In chapter 14, (verse 6), Jesus declares that He is, "...the way, and the truth, and the life...". Truth and life. Light and life.

And here in verse 4 John introduces those great themes of his Gospel. "In Him was life," John wrote. It's always "in Him". Life didn't *begin* in Him, didn't *become* in Him. He has the self-existing life of God—divine life—always. And He dispenses that life here on this blue planet. At creation He did that. He dispensed the life. He continues to do that, as the One who sustains this world and this universe. This is the only planet we know of that has life in all of this vast universe. And this place is literally burgeoning with life.

But that is only part of John's meaning here; and it's really not the greater part of his meaning. His main interest is *spiritual life*—it is *eternal life*. And that's what was 'in the Word'; that's what was in the Christ, in the Son—the life of God. That "Life", John says, "...was the Light of men." (vs4b). So, He's not only God the creator, He's God the revealer. He has revealed God in general revelation. He's the one who has brought it all into being. He's the master workman who brought this whole material universe into

being. And in that creation we have what's called 'general revelation'; you see the evidence of God. The Scriptures speak of that, Psalm 19, verse 1, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." No one has an excuse not to believe in the existence of God. The universe declares it. The world around us declares it as well.

But that's general (*revelation*); that gives us the knowledge that there is a creator. But things get more specific in 'special revelation', which is Scripture, which is the Word of God. And there He has revealed Himself; Christ has revealed Himself and spoken to men in the Law and in the types and shadows of the Law of Moses. You have that in all of the ceremonies; the altar and the lambs in the sacrifices and all numerous kinds of types and pictures throughout the Old Testament. They give revelation of Himself. And through the prophets. Isaiah 53 is one of the great ones that reveals the person and work of Christ.

But that revelation that we find in the Old Covenant in the Old Testament came in its fullness in the incarnation when He became a man. When as (John), verse 14 says, "The Word became flesh," (*incarnate*), "and dwelt among us..." That was when the One who knows God the Father made the Father known to man. That's what Jesus said later, in John 14, verse 9b, "...He who has seen me has seen the Father;"

So we can only know God through Christ. He's the One who explains God. If you want to know who God is, study Christ; study His power; study His character; His compassion; His love; His profound wisdom. —Study Him to know who God is. We learn of the Father through the Son, who is "the Light of the world" (Jn 9:5), and "the Light of men". (vs4).

But over against the Light, stands the darkness—and the two cannot coexist. That's what we read next, verse 5, "The Light shines in the darkness," John says, "and the darkness did not comprehend it", (or 'did not overcome it.') That statement again takes our thoughts back to Genesis 1 and the creation, when the world was covered in

darkness. And "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." (vs3). The darkness could not resist; it had to give way to the light.

And John used that first scene of the world's material condition, 'shrouded in darkness', literally, "material darkness", to illustrate the spiritual condition of the world into which Christ came, the world of men.

Light and darkness in John have a very significant meaning, moral and spiritual meaning. Darkness is not only the absence of light; it is positive evil. And Light is more than knowledge; it is revelation, the revelation of God—the revelation of salvation. Christ brought that revelation into the world that was in darkness—which suggests conflict. And we read about conflict all through this Gospel; rebellion.

And it points to the hostility of men which we see Christ facing all through the fourth Gospel—all through all of the Gospels. He's perfect. His words are truth. They expose men's imperfections. And they saw how far short of righteousness they fell, how unclean they were—and they reacted. But John wrote, "The darkness did not comprehend it", (or 'overcome it'). This word could be either one of those meanings. In fact, some suggest that it is intended to be taken in both ways; "...did not comprehend it", because men did not comprehend who He was—and "did not overcome it". So they may have both senses about it.

But I think that if we're going to look for a single meaning, to my mind at least, of the two, *overcome*, best fits the context. The world tried to overcome Him. It killed Him. It put Him to death. But He overcame that darkness. He overcame it by destroying sin for His people. And then overcoming death itself in the resurrection to shine out even brighter today than He shone in His own day.

So He overcame the world, overcame the darkness. It could not overcome Him. So in John's prologue he gives a preview of what will unfold throughout this fourth Gospel. Conflict—but ultimately victory over darkness.

This word, *darkness*, is very significant to this 'Jewel', as the prologue has been called. It is like the black velvet that a jeweler would use to highlight the beauty of a sparkling diamond. He sets it on the black velvet, and it shows all the more the beauty of that jewel—that gem. Well darkness is the background of the prologue to exhibit the grace that shines forth from it.

Why would God bother with the creation that He made perfect but then, that creation fell, fell into darkness and into rebellion against Him? Why not just sweep it all away? He had no need of it; God is self-existent. That's one of His attributes revealed here, His *aseity*; He has life in Himself. He is independent and has fellowship in Himself. He doesn't need man; doesn't need angels. —He's self-sufficient. That's clear from verses 1 and 2 where we read what God was doing before the beginning, before there was a cosmos, before there were angels or humankind—when there was nothing.

People have asked that question. You've probably wondered yourself. "Well, what was God doing before He created the universe?" Well, John answers that here. The Triune God; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Three-in-one, was in perfect fellowship. God was complete. He is complete. He is content. He is self-existent. He's self-sufficient. He is fully satisfied. And yet, He not only created this vast, glorious universe, that really, for all of its many, many galaxies and light years of distance, is really no more than a speck of dust to Him. Nevertheless, nevertheless He chose to redeem it in its fallen condition, in its ruined estate.

Why? Well, that's grace. That's unmerited favor. That's undeserved blessing; grace. And we experience that grace when He redeemed us; when the light of Christ shone into the darkness of our hearts to give us understanding and new birth—and make us light bearers in this dark world. That's what we are; and so that's what we are to be. That's how we are to function.

And that light is certainly needed in our age. Well, it's been needed in every age, from the beginning; since the fall of mankind. But ours is a difficult age, isn't it? It's a

secular age, which is non spiritual, naturalistic, materialistic, atheistic, selfish, and cruel.—And it appeals to science for its authority.

Now, Christians value science: We have a great interest in understanding our world and our universe, and discovering all of its treasures, so many treasures of life that have been locked up in this universe that scientists are able to unlock. And we're blessed by that. And what a blessing to simply know what God has done—and the greatness of it. It brings blessing to mankind; it brings glory to God—so praise God for science.

But science is always changing. It's not a certain discipline. It's always being corrected and correcting itself. And it can't answer the greatest questions. Those of man's origin and man's destiny: Who am I? What am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Science doesn't answer those questions. Robert Jastrow admitted that. He was a physicist, worked for NASA, wrote a book, a very interesting book, back in the early '90s that he titled, *God and the Astronomers*. It's somewhat dated now, but still a very helpful book. He was an agnostic, but interested in the first cause of the universe. He ended his book in a way that I think many scientists wouldn't. He wrote, "At this moment, it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; and as he pulls himself over the final rock, he's greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries." And I would add, 'Those theologians would say to the scientist, "In the beginning was the Word." ' That truth unlocks the mysteries that scientists and their theories will never explain. What this 'Jewel of a prologue' reveals is life did not originate by chance; it's not, only material, it's not, meaningless.

We are all creatures of the creator who is pure and good; who is the source of all life and truth. People, men and women, will only be frustrated in life striving for more

and more—but finding less and less; living with uncertainty, living without peace, living, as the author of Hebrews said, as slaves to the “fear of death”, (Heb 2:15), until they bow to the truth of this Book; of this prologue; of these first five verses.

Augustin put it well in that famous prayer on the first page of his *Confessions*:  
"You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You."

You who have found rest in Him are really the most blessed people in the universe. You have made that void empty through coming to Christ. He has done that. He's come to you. That's grace. He's shone His Light into the darkness of your heart so that you have found rest in Him. That is blessing. And it's eternal blessing. You know the one true God who is Light; and who gives understanding; and gives us wisdom on how to live every day of our life; and for what reason to live.

Well, the more we draw near to Him through His Word and through prayer, the more we will enjoy His life and the more we will live to His glory. —And really, that is the purpose of it all. That's why we're here. As the catechism put it; “Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” May God help us to do that.

And you who have not come to Him, may God open your eyes to the truth—the reality that this universe is not impersonal; it's God's creation. He rules it and the darkness cannot overcome Him. Come out of darkness. Come to the Light. Come to Christ. Trust in Him. Trust in His death on the cross that cleanses us from all our sin and guilt; that pays our debt in full; and has gained forgiveness for us; and life—eternal life. May God help you to do that.

And may we all live to the glory of our Savior. Let's pray,

Father, what a great hope that is. And it's our real hope, because Light and Life are in Him—and we are in Him through faith. And we have His life. We have forgiveness, we have redemption—and someday we'll have the resurrection. And when He comes,

everything will be put right. That's our glorious hope. We have it because of Your grace. Thank You for your Son, for sending Him into this world. Thank You for the blessings we have in Him.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen

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