

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS (1) THE INTRODUCTION

John 1:1-18

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SCRIPTURE

¹In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He existed in the beginning with God. ³ God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. ⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

⁶God sent a man, John the Baptist, ⁷to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. ⁹The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. ¹¹He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹²But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

¹³They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. ¹⁴So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

¹⁵John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'" ¹⁶From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. But the one and only Son is himself God and is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us (John 1:1-18 NLT).

MESSAGE

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1 NLT).

Never did these words seem so profoundly true as when three of us were walking down the Acrocorinth in southern Greece one night. The stars had emerged in breathtaking

beauty and we began to sing the familiar song, "In the Stars His Handiwork I See." And we thought, "What could possibly compare to God's creation of the universe?"

Well. . .there are some people who believe they have discovered something that is every bit as significant as the creation of the world. These people are called Christians (you may have heard of them). A fisherman by the name of John, son of Zebedee, was one of the first. He was confident that the life, death and return from death of a man called Jesus of Nazareth was of such cosmic and eternal significance that it was like a new creation, a new beginning. So when he put down the story of Jesus on parchment he intentionally imitated the opening words of Genesis when he wrote:

In the beginning. . .

More specifically:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him (1:1-3a).

These verses are part of what is referred to as the Prologue to the Gospel of John found in 1:1-18. This may have been an ancient Christian hymn that John adapted in order to summarize the major themes of his book. He begins by introducing Jesus as the *Logos* (LAH-gahs). In John's day, both Jews and non-Jews influenced by Greek culture would have recognized this word. For Jews, Logos meant "Word." It reminded them of how God created all things by his Word.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen 1:3 NLT).

For Greeks, Logos meant "Reason." The universe had a magnificent order to it. What produced this order? The Logos is responsible for the majestic order of the world. The Logos enables human beings to think rationally.

The Greek word *logos* is usually translated as "Word" in most English translations of the New Testament. John uses this term to describe the reality of Jesus to a broad audience, to Jews and Gentiles.

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1).

John identifies Jesus Christ as this Word, as this Logos. And as such John can attribute to

him various divine functions such as creation (vss 3, 10) and the giving of life (vs 4). John intends that the whole of his Gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The actions and words of Jesus are the actions and words of God.

Few would dispute the notion that Jesus has had more influence on the world than any other person in history. Most of what we know about Jesus is found in the four New Testament books known as the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospels are not to be understood as complete biographies but historically based proclamations of the person and work of Jesus.

Our word Gospel is from an Old English word, "Godspell." Many years ago there was a musical on the life of Jesus Christ called, "Godspell." The word means "good news" and is an accurate translation of the word that the New Testament uses – *euaggelion* (yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on), from which we get such English words as evangelism and evangelist.

Now the word *euaggelion* ("gospel") itself was not new. The ancient Greeks used it to describe the report of a significant event such as the birth of a king or a great military victory. John and the other gospel writers knew that the story of Jesus was even more significant. It was not just *a* gospel but *the* gospel, not just *a* report but *the* most important report the world could ever receive.

For nearly nineteen hundred years, Christians have used four symbols to represent and summarize the teachings of the Gospels. These symbols are taken from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel (1:10). The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a heavenly creature with four faces: human, ox, lion, and eagle. The early Christians thought of the message concerning Jesus Christ as a heavenly story with four faces. The human face is for Matthew, the ox symbolizes Luke, the lion represents Mark, and John is represented by the eagle. These four pictures stood for the Gospels and each was recognized by its symbol even by those who could not read. Equally, this imagery was used for summaries of the Gospel message, that Jesus was born as a human being, sacrificed like an ox, rose triumphant like a lion, and ascended like an eagle.

The eagle has two proverbial qualities that make it an ideal symbol for the Gospel of John. The answer of the Lord "out of the whirlwind" to Job notes the eagle's high soaring and far-seeing nature:

"Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?...From there it spies the prey; its eyes see it from far away" (Job 39:27-29).

As for its vision, biologists tell us that the proportion of an eagle's brain devoted to sight is seven times greater than that in human beings. To put it simply, an eagle sees what others cannot. This is also true of John. Like a sharp-eyed eagle, John sees deeply into the heart of Jesus. He is known as the beloved disciple who was especially close to Jesus (John 13:23). And whereas the other three Gospels give us a kind of "photograph" of Jesus, John paints an intimate portrait.

The eagle is also thought of as soaring to the greatest heights. This, too, is a good description of John. In the other Gospels, Jesus' story takes place in the horizontal dimensions of the geography and history of Israel; John brings in the vertical and gives us a cosmic perspective.

But this story does not just have cosmic significance, it also has personal significance. People like John are convinced that because of Jesus, people like you and me can begin again: begin again in our relationship with God, begin again in our relationships with each other, begin again to live a life that really matters. John explains it this way near the end of his book:

³⁰The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name ((John 20:30-31 NLT).

The signs of Jesus are important for John. In fact, the first twelve chapters (minus the Prologue) are often referred to by scholars as the "Book of Signs." Contrary to what you may have heard, the Book of Signs is not a compendium of secret symbols from the Middle Ages.

[++ Picture of symbols of middle ages book ++]

Nor is it a collection of unusual things along the side of the road.

[++ Picture of penguin crossing sign ++]

Rather, John writes about seven significant miracles performed by Jesus that John calls "signs." This forms the backbone of this gospel and is our key for exploring the beloved book. The seven signs include:

THE WEDDING AT CANA	2:1-11
THE HEALING OF THE OFFICIAL'S SON	4:46-54

THE HEALING ON THE SABBATH	5:1-18
THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND	6:1-15
THE MAN WHO WALKS ON WATER	6:16-21
THE HEALING OF A SOMEONE BORN BLIND	9:1-34
THE RAISING OF LAZARUS	11:1-44

Being familiar with the seven signs will help us appreciate the remainder of the book including:

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY	12:12-19
THE RESURRECTION	21:1-14
THE FATE OF PETER	21:15-19
THE BELOVED DISCIPLE	21:20-25

In John's day there was a complex of religious movements that would later be called Gnosticism. We need to have at least a little understanding about Gnosticism or will we miss both the greatness of John and much of the aim of his book. The name is from the Greek word for "knowledge." Gnostics believed that the physical world is evil and only the spiritual world is good. In order to escape the physical world and enter the spiritual world you had to have special knowledge.

Gnosticism was an insidious rival to Christianity in the early centuries and often used Christian images to represent their mystic beliefs. For Gnostics, Jesus could neither be God nor Man. God is spirit and would have nothing to do with the physical universe. In fact, God, the real God, did not even create the universe. It was created instead by an ignorant emanation far distant from God.

On the other hand, if Jesus was good, as many Gnostics held, he could not have been a man. A man is a physical and thus an evil thing. Jesus couldn't have had a human form as that would mean he was evil. So for Gnostics, Jesus was this strange in-between creature/spirit who was neither divine nor a flesh and blood person.

In contrast to this we have John's ringing statement about Jesus:

³God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him (1:3).

And then later:

¹⁴So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of

unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son (1:14).

This conflict with the Gnostics helps to explain the almost paradoxical double emphasis in John's Gospel. There is no other gospel that so emphatically stresses the real humanity of Jesus. John tells us that Jesus was angry, tired, hungry, knew grief, wept tears, and while dying on the cross cried out, "I am thirsty."

There is no other gospel that so emphatically stresses the real divinity of Jesus. John saw in Jesus one who had always been even before the world began. Again and again he speaks of his coming down from heaven (6:33-38). He talks of the glory which he had with the Father before the *cosmos* existed. He is Yahweh in human flesh.

⁵⁸Jesus [said], "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM"
(John 8:58 NLT).

To meet the challenge of the Gnostics and their peculiar beliefs, John presents us with a Jesus who was undeniably human and undeniably God. And it is this Jesus who can give us real life.

Life. Real life. The word "life" is found twice as often in John as in the other three gospels combined. According to John, we can find new life in Christ.

If you have ever longed for a new beginning or a fresh start, ever desired to overcome the regrets and mistakes of the past, ever hoped you could face the future with joyful expectation then this story, John's story, is for you!