

GOD
WITH US
According to John
ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ
John 1-12

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INTRODUCTION

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

—*John 20:30, 31*

This book is not a commentary; it is not a verse-by-verse study of this fantastic book of the New Testament. Many fine commentaries are available on the Gospel of John. Rather, the purpose of this book is to encourage you into deeper study of the Word of God and in particular, John's Gospel.

In this introduction and in chapter 1, I will provide some background information that could at times be a bit heavy for some. If it moves too slowly for you, just move on to chapter 2 and beyond. I've used a homiletic and practical approach to mine the truths of John as they affect everyday life. But here and there, sprinkling a few historical, theological, or philosophical tidbits may help in our understanding of the text. Don't worry that I will go too deep, since I do better when I can touch bottom myself.

Jesus had the greatest mind of all, able to present the deepest les-

sons in the simplest manner. Of purely human minds, I believe that John ranks right up there with Paul, Plato, Socrates, Philo, and the other great minds.

When you see the picture depicting John in *The Last Supper* painting by Leonardo da Vinci, you see a very delicate, quiet, mystical, smooth-faced, even effeminate person.

But a scriptural look at John shows just the opposite. In Mark 3:17, we see him as one of the “‘Sons of Thunder’”—a child of the storm against Roman occupation, a volatile spirit demonstrated when he joined with his brother James in demanding that Jesus bring “‘fire . . . down from heaven’ ” (Luke 9:54) to destroy those Samaritans who refused them entry into their village.

John was ambitious, as demonstrated when he and James accompanied their mother, Salome, as she made the famous request that her sons be placed one on the right-hand side and the other on the left-hand side—in the highest positions—when Christ would come into His kingdom (see Matthew 20:21).

But God can use a man like that! God would rather have a steamship plowing off course through the ocean at full speed, and then reset it, than a drifting hulk of steel with no direction or purpose or drive!

This fourth Gospel contains profound thoughts in the simplest language. Written originally in the most elementary Greek, John is usually the first or at least second book of the New Testament that students taking biblical Greek learn to read. And it has likely been read by more people than any piece of literature in all history.

The four Gospels are a presentation of the Deity—in Matthew, “Behold the King”; in Mark, “Behold the Servant”; in Luke, “Behold the Man”; and in John, “Behold Your God”! John is the great exponent of the Deity of Jesus Christ. As one man put it, “Looking at this book is like looking into the face of God.”

John 20:31 tells us why it was written, “that you may believe

that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” In this book, the word *believe* appears seventy times, but what does it really mean?

1. It means that you are convinced in your mind that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.
2. It means that you trust in your heart that everything He said is true. God does not lie!
3. It means that you commit your life to those two things in the Person of Christ—the Word, the True Logos.

You see, John was there at the baptism of Jesus. He heard John the Baptist say, “Behold the Lamb” and also heard the Voice from heaven, “This is My Beloved Son.” He was at Cana for the first miracle; witnessed Christ’s early Judean ministry; saw the resurrection of Lazarus; was present at the Lord’s Supper, the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas, and the Crucifixion. And John was the first of the Twelve to believe in the Resurrection. Through John’s eyes we too can “be there.” Through his pages, we can discover beyond any doubt and believe that Jesus is God!



Chapter 1—John 1:1–18

THE ETERNAL CHRIST

This was one of those beautiful California days—a clear, blue sky—and you could actually see the mountains and hills nearby that you had heard were there but were seldom seen.

Camille and I drove up to a neat little house in Glendale that had been the home of Elder and Mrs. H. M. S. Richards Sr. for many years. Here, they had reared their four children. And from here, one of God's great but humble men had walked a mile or so every day to his Voice of Prophecy (VOP) office. He was known for always reading as he walked.

Earlier that day, at the close of a VOP counselor meeting at the media center in Thousand Oaks, he invited us to his home to see his library. He instructed me to follow his car, an ancient Chevy driven by his wife, Mabel. Because of an injury to his eye as a youth, Elder Richards never had adequate vision to drive. However, he had just enough vision to read instead of drive—and this gave him more time to read the ever-present book by his side.

Nonetheless, Mabel Richards could really drive—and drive she did! I lost her on the freeway; she could easily have been a NASCAR driver! The thought occurred to me that she must be trying to lose us! However, I quickly dismissed that, because she was such a gracious lady!

In time, we arrived and made our way to the backyard building that had been built for Elder Richards by close friends—such as the 1950s King’s Heralds quartet, associate speaker Orville Iversen, and a few others. It was an unassuming place with no air conditioning and only a little space heater to take the chill off during colder weather as needed. As I remember, the desk was an uncomplicated board nailed to the wall with a support. Then there were the books, meticulously organized on simple shelves of unfinished lumber. The books were where his resources were spent—books were his passion.

Elder Richards was a great student of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, and he, like Ellen White, had a large, wide-ranging library including books on theology and many other subjects of interest to him—especially biographies. Elder Richards knew that anyone who read a wide range of literature would find a combination of truth and error. This combination would allow the mining of truth away from the error—if they were properly anchored by the truth of God’s Word and the inspired writings of the Spirit of Prophecy.

Many thoughts, stories, and experiences stand out in my mind from that Sunday afternoon we spent with Elder Richards in his library, but as a result of that visit, one special book of the Bible has through the years consistently influenced my walk with Christ.

Elder Richards grafted that onto my heart that afternoon, when he told me, “Jim, the book of John is where you need to study. The book of John is a good foundation for every sermon you preach.” From that day, I’ve kept that as my focus, and although I’ve only delivered one complete series on the Gospel of John, it soon became the book to which I would return to repeatedly when seeking to share the truths of God’s Word.

John’s Gospel gave me a glimpse of who Jesus is and how to tell others of His love—especially in my most recent pastorate at the Dallas First SDA Church, just before coming to Three Angels

Broadcasting Network (3ABN). So now, as you read this book, I want to offer you some of the same insights I've shared with my beloved congregations and now with 3ABN viewers.

I want to challenge and urge you to dig into the Gospel of John. If you have—or want to get—a good study Bible, you'll be able to easily compare the verse you're studying with others and make notes. You can also expand your study through using the Spirit of Prophecy, as well as a couple of good commentaries.

Now, let's move right into John, chapter 1. These first eighteen verses are—and others agree with me—perhaps some of the greatest, most profound words of literature ever written. And here in these opening verses, John has three things he wanted his readers to notice.

First: Jesus is God in human flesh. The Incarnation says to us that Jesus is not just a reflection of God. He is not just Someone who looks like God. He IS God!

Sometimes people ask, "Are you monotheistic? Do you believe in one God?" Yes, I am—and I do! I am a "monotheist." I believe in one God—yet I believe in the Three, the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One—and yet Three. How can that be?

Well, let me tell you something, I can't explain how that is. Oh, I could give you all the different explanations people usually give—how the Members of the Trinity are One in purpose, for example. But I don't think any of those explanations actually do justice to the reality of who God is. I think for us to really understand it, we would have to *be* God.

So I think we have to be careful in trying to explain the Trinity. Believe it—yes! Fully understand it—no! I don't understand it. There are many things I see and believe but don't understand. I can say the same about many things I see in nature. Only a fool tries to explain everything in nature. So I'll not open my mouth and reveal my lack of knowledge!

God is God! Christ is God! And this is John's message—that God has come in the flesh.

Second: Jesus is not only God but the Savior of the world. He came to earth not just on a divine visit. He came for a purpose. He had an urgent mission—to save those He had created but who now desperately needed a Savior.

Third: The response of men and women to Christ's saving work. Some—perhaps most—rejected it. But some accepted it.

Some writers know just where to start. In writing Genesis, Moses knew where to start. So did John in writing his Gospel. They both began with the same words. Here's how John begins: "In the beginning was the Word," he wrote in verses 1 and 2, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

In the beginning was the . . . *Logos*—the Greek word for "Word." But what is the meaning of *logos*? Why did John start out his Gospel by repeatedly using this word?

Part of the reason, at least, is that like all good writers, John knew that he should write with his main audience in mind. And for John, that meant mostly Greek converts to Christianity. Other Gospel writers spoke more directly to the Jews.

By the time John wrote, there were perhaps a thousand Greeks who accepted Christ for every Jew who did. So John may have thought to himself, *Well, look—why should my Greek readers have to understand the Messianic ideas of the Jews? Why should they have to understand Jesus and come to Him through Jewish Messianic philosophy?*

No, John chose to present Jesus in terms familiar to the Greeks. They were familiar with the concept of the *Logos*. They were familiar with the idea of a God who had always been. So John set his pen to the parchment and began, "In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*] . . ."

Every Greek would read that and say, "I know exactly what he's talking about—the *Logos*, the Power of the universe—God." They would say, "This is amazing!"

This brings me to Heraclitus—a Greek philosopher born in

535 B.C. who lived in Ephesus. He's the one who said that if you stepped into a river, stepped back out, and then stepped back in again, it wasn't the same river. The river had already passed by—and it was constantly changing.

Now, to a degree that's true. I mean, some things are always the same. I go out and get into my car. I've been getting into that car for a long time, and it hasn't changed. After 150,000 miles, it's still the same car.

But since so much in this universe—like the river he mentioned—does change, Heraclitus thought the universe would be nothing but chaos unless something was in control. And for Heraclitus, that power in control was the Logos—the Word. The concept of the Logos came to pervade Greek thought—and John knew it was an idea with which his readers would be immediately familiar.

Now quite a bit later, a Jewish philosopher came along named Philo (born in 20 B.C.)—and he worked to harmonize Greek and Jewish philosophies. Probably few men of his time understood the Hebrew Bible as fully as Philo did. Also, few understood Greek philosophy as Philo did.

And as Philo looked at Greek philosophy, he said, “This Logos, this idea of the Word, is talking about God. It is Yahweh—He is the Logos.” So because of Philo's efforts to bring Greek and Jewish ideas together, when Jesus came, even the Jews were at least somewhat familiar with the idea of the Logos.

Now, as we take time to study John's Gospel (and by the way, when we study the Word of God, we really do need to just slow down and take our time), we find certain ideas that come through “loud and clear” right at the beginning.

One of those ideas is that Jesus didn't “begin” when He first arrived here on earth. He existed before that. In fact, John makes it clear that Jesus had *always* existed. Everything and everyone we know in this life has a beginning and an end. But that's not the case with God—He has always been, with no beginning. And

Jesus, therefore, also had no beginning, because, as John emphasized, Jesus is God.

So the preexistence of Jesus is one point John doesn't want his readers to miss. Another truth John doesn't want anyone to miss is that Jesus, the Word, was not only God, He was *with* God. The only way that could be true is if God was more than one person. And of course, if we let the Bible speak to us from cover to cover, that's exactly what we find—a God composed of Three Persons. Three Persons totally unified in thought, in character, and in purpose.

So totally in harmony are the Persons of the Trinity that no one can tell us more about God than Christ can. People may ask, "What is God like?" I'll tell you what God is like—He's like Christ. Somebody may protest, "But wait a minute, what about the God of the Old Testament?"

A little girl reading in the Old Testament one time found stories of all the battles and blood and said, "Well, you see, that was before God became a Christian."

We may laugh, but when you look at Christ, you understand God. God hasn't changed! But our comprehension of Him—our understanding of Him—changes when we see God as Jesus reveals Him to us.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is God. He was there from the beginning. So how do I know what God is like? Because of what Jesus reveals Him to be—that's how I know what God is like. The Word, John says, *was* God.

Now, if one of John's burdens was to be sure his readers knew that Jesus is God, he also wanted them not to miss that Jesus is also the Creator of the universe.

"All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:3).

That's good enough to settle it for me. John spent all that time with Jesus, and he knew that he was spending time with the Cre-

ator of the universe. John was with Jesus, and he said (notice verse 3), “without Him nothing was made that was made.” Do I believe that? Yes, I do—with all my heart I believe that!

By the way, John had spent time and energy fighting some heresies that arose in his time. One of those was Gnosticism. This philosophy taught the idea that matter and spirit were separate and in conflict. Gnostics taught that God was a spirit and that He was in conflict with matter. Their whole concept was that the creator of the physical world (matter) was therefore in conflict with the spirit realm which God ruled. So therefore, the creator they believed in could not be God.

But John said, “No—this is not true! The Creator and God are in harmony. In fact, they are one and the same. Jesus Himself is not only the Creator, He is God.”

John has nailed down some vital points about Jesus in the first three verses of his Gospel:

- Jesus is the Word.
- Jesus has no beginning.
- Jesus is God.
- Jesus is also *with* God—a Member of the Trinity.
- Jesus is the Creator.

Next (see verse 4), John describes Jesus the Word in terms of life and light.

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (verses 4, 5).

Have you ever been somewhere dark? I mean *really* dark. Suddenly, somebody lights a match. Does anybody in the room need to tell you where the light is? They comprehend it—there’s light over there someplace, and they see it. So how is it that the Light came into the world, and men didn’t comprehend it? Doesn’t it seem that if a light begins to shine in darkness, everybody would see it?

I once heard a story that took place during World War II. During the war, sometimes whole cities would be blacked out so enemy planes couldn't see them easily from the air and drop their bombs. During one of those blackouts, a preacher said, "The blackout isn't going to stop our prayer meeting. We'll hold the service even in the dark."

But as the preacher spoke, someone in the totally dark room flipped on a light switch—and the preacher stopped preaching.

One man asked, "Why did he stop preaching?"

You see, that man was blind. He had no comprehension of light whatsoever. He didn't know that the lights had just come on. He was blind, just as the world to which Jesus came was spiritually blind. People were so blinded by legalism and rituals that they could not see Jesus. They could not comprehend Him. They were in the darkness—and when the light came, they did not comprehend it.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe" (verses 6, 7).

The "John" introduced here is not the John writing the Gospel but another John who also had known Jesus. In fact, Jesus was his Cousin. And this John—who came to be known as "John the Baptist"—was not the Light but was sent to bear witness of the Light.

John the disciple found it necessary to make this statement about John the Baptist. Why? Because too many had come to elevate John the Baptist to be equal, or nearly so, with the Messiah whose coming John announced.

Now, the Bible tells us that, among those born of women, none was greater than John the Baptist. He was as great as David, as great as Moses, as great as any of the prophets. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. Quite a man, John. Yet John was just a man.

When you read the Gospel of John, it can almost seem that

John the disciple went out of his way to minimize the importance of John the Baptist. Why? Because people were elevating John the Baptist to a position virtually equal with Jesus. And he wasn't equal—not at all. Christ was the Word. He was the Savior. He was the Messiah. John was just the one chosen to herald the Messiah's coming—to usher Him in.

What a great responsibility! And to announce the Messiahship of His Son, God chose John. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit was in John even in his mother's womb. So John was indeed special.

But you know how it is. Some people began worshiping the proclaimer instead of the Messiah he came to announce. It's a human trait to begin giving allegiance to leaders we like. But John the disciple said, "Don't do it—he's just a man. There's no comparison."

And by the way, this was the message of John the Baptist himself. He kept saying, "Don't look at me. Don't follow me. Jesus must increase—and I must decrease." Notice what John the Baptist said about Jesus, beginning at verse 19:

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said: "I am

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
"Make straight the way of the LORD," "

as the prophet Isaiah said." Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying,

“Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.” These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing (John 1:19–28).

The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, “Here’s the Testimony—here’s the Witness.”

The witness of John the Baptist

In the Gospel of John, eight witnesses can be found concerning the Messiah. The first is the witness of John the Baptist.

“Behold!” John preached,

“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” (verses 29–34).

So the first witness is John the Baptist. And John the disciple says, “Yes, you love John the Baptist, but John the Baptist loves Jesus, because Jesus is the Messiah. Don’t follow John—don’t worship John. And follow John only if he leads you to Jesus.”

The only time any of us should follow any preacher is when he's leading us to Jesus. If he's leading any other way, we should back away from him as far as we can, no matter how magnetic or entertaining he might be.

The witness of the Father

Then, John brings to view the witness of the Father. Jesus said, “ ‘And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me’ ” (John 5:37). And again in John 8:18, “ ‘the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.’ ”

The witness of Jesus Himself

Next, there's the witness of Jesus Himself. “ ‘Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true’ ” (verse 14). And He said, “ ‘I am One who bears witness of Myself’ ” (verse 18).

The witness of Jesus' works

And then there's the witness of Christ's works. He said, “ ‘the works which the Father has given Me to finish . . . bear witness of Me’ ” (John 5:36). And many other verses speak of the works Jesus performed.

The witness of the Scriptures

The Scriptures, too, witness of Jesus: “ ‘Search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me’ ” (verse 39).

The witness of those who met Jesus

Those who met Jesus were also witnesses to Him. These included people such as the woman of Samaria, the woman at the well, the man who was born blind—and countless others.

The witness of the disciples

Among the most effective and credible witnesses to Jesus were

the men who walked by His side through His ministry—His own disciples. “ ‘You also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning’ ” (John 15:27).

The witness of the Holy Spirit

Finally, the Holy Spirit—the Third Member of the Godhead—testified as a witness to Jesus: “ ‘When the Helper comes, . . . the Spirit of truth . . . , He will testify of Me’ ” (verse 26).

Eight witnesses or groups of witnesses. Anyone going to trial with that many witnesses would be at a great advantage.

Jesus didn't just show up on earth, claim to be the Messiah, and expect that His own claim would settle it for everyone. No, He had all these eight witnesses who joined as in one voice to support His claim to be the world's Messiah and Savior.

We've looked so far in this chapter at Jesus as the eternal Christ—the Word or Logos who had no beginning and will have no end. But in the first eighteen verses of John's first chapter, John also introduces us to other descriptions of Jesus Christ. In addition to being *the eternal Christ*, Jesus was also . . .

The unrecognized Christ: “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9–11).

God chose the Jews as His people. He chose Abraham and said that from him, He would bring not only a great multitude but also the Messiah. So every Jewish mother wondered, as she gave birth to a male child, whether hers might be the promised Savior.

For centuries, the Jewish people looked for the Messiah. They talked about Him and studied about Him. Then, the Messiah came—and they didn't recognize Him! They didn't know Him. He came to them—and even His own did not receive Him.

The omnipotent Christ: “But as many as received Him, to them

He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (verse 12, 13).

The glorious Christ: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ ’ And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (verses 14–18).

No, we haven’t seen God the Father, but we’ve seen Jesus—and because we’ve seen Him, we know what God is like.

When Moses talked with God, the Bible tells us he was talking with Christ. Christ was the One in the cloud that went before Israel. Christ was the One in the pillar of fire by night. And as Moses spoke with Him, he asked to see God’s glory. But God said No. “You can’t look on Me in My present form,” He told Moses. “It would destroy you.”

But God told Moses that He would hide him in the cleft of a rock and show him just a glimpse of His glory. So Moses stepped into the cleft of the rock, and God shielded Moses as He passed by and gave Moses a brief glimpse of His glory. And the Bible says that even that brief glimpse caused Moses’ face to shine as he descended from the mountain.

That same glorious God wants to have a personal friendship with you—a growing, real, deepening relationship. That same God is the One who came to this earth and became flesh—one of us in form.

And as you get to know Jesus, like Moses, you’ll want to see more of Him. You’ll want to see more of His glory—His character of love. And in His Word, He will reveal Himself to you.

It's likely that no one on earth came to know Jesus as well as did the disciple John. Since that's true, who else but Christ's closest human friend could be better able to tell us what Jesus is really like?

As Pastor Richards said to me, "The book of John—that's where you need to study." So join me as we spend time learning from John in the chapters ahead.