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## Chapter 1

# Reading the Word of God

John 1:1-18

**UNDERSTANDING**

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read John 1:1–18*

## The Big Picture

The Bible is a direct path to hearing God's word.

The Gospel of John begins with one of the most elegant passages of the New Testament. In a poetic fashion, John places each line of Scripture into place with a distinct purpose. These first eighteen verses of John's Gospel provide a table of contents, so to speak, for the themes that will reoccur throughout this book. For our purposes, we are going to examine how these verses relate to our study of God's word. Let's break down some main aspects of these opening lines.

## In the Beginning... (John 1:1–5)

John begins with the line, "In the beginning was the Word." John's original Jewish audience would immediately think of creation and the Book of Genesis, which opens with, "In the beginning." The Gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth, but here John goes back

to the very beginning of time, revealing even more about Jesus' true identity. During creation, it is God's spoken word that brings our world into being (Gen 1:3; Ps 33:6). When God's word goes forth, a specific action immediately follows.

The concept of the word was significant in the Old Testament. Writers link the word of God with the wisdom of God, which was with God from eternity and created everything with Him (Prv 8:23; Wis 7:22). Now this word found in the Old Testament "is not simply audible; not only does it have a voice, now the Word has a face, one which we can see: that of Jesus of Nazareth" (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 12).

In these first five verses, John reveals more about the identity of Jesus. He notes that Jesus:

- is God (Jn 1:1);
- created everything with God (v. 2);
- is the life of men (v. 4); and
- is the light to men in darkness (vv. 4–5).

### **John the Baptist (John 1:6–8)**

John breaks into his poetic stanza to speak about John the Baptist. Like a lawyer in a courtroom, John will use witnesses throughout his Gospel to help support the evidence for Jesus. John the Baptist is a key witness in John's case for Jesus: Among the Gospel's original audience, there was initially some confusion about whether to follow John the Baptist or Jesus (for example, see Acts 19:1–7). John tries to make it clear that John the Baptist was a messenger who testified to Jesus, not the Messiah himself. John the Baptist's purpose was to testify that

Jesus was the true light and that all should believe in Him. Our role as Christians is similar: We must testify to Jesus Christ and the light that He shed on humanity's search for meaning and purpose.

### **Children of God (John 1:9-13)**

John exposes the irony of Jesus' coming: Jesus created the world, and yet the world did not recognize Him (Jn 1:10-11). This reveals the scandal of Jesus' rejection by those who should have accepted Him. However, if one *does* accept Jesus and believe in His name, one becomes a child of God (v. 12). It's easy to get used to this concept, but hopefully it will always be, in some ways, shocking. God, the creator of the universe, chooses to make us His own children. May this always cause awe and thanksgiving in our hearts.

### **Application to Jesus**

John tells us who Jesus is—none other than God Himself manifested in the flesh.

### **The Word Became Flesh (John 1:14-18)**

The previous lines set us up for verse 14—"God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Greek word for "dwelt" literally means "tabernacled," or "pitched his tent." Because we are so used to the message that God loves us and is here with us, we lose sight of how radical this is. The Psalmist is in awe that God would even think of man (Ps 8:4). Rather than being distant like so many of the ancient

gods, Jesus shows that God is willing to live among us, as one of us, to show us truth and to give us grace.

John is not just an abstract storyteller; he saw and experienced Jesus' glory first hand (see also 1 Jn 1:14). We are not reading hearsay or stories passed down through generations but the up-close eyewitness account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

### **The Power of God's Word**

Unlike the author or John the Baptist, we are not direct eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry here on earth. But, through the word of God, we can have a living encounter with Him. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." It is easy to see Scripture as merely lessons in morality or fairy-tale stories, but God's word is so much more. It is alive.

God's word has the ability to shed light into our lives. To give testimonies like John the Baptist or the author John, we need to be in a place where God is continually transforming us. We can then always be ready to share with others what God is doing in our lives.

## How to Pray with Scripture

The Church has a deep reverence for the study of Scripture. The tradition of *lectio divina* in the Church has been a fruitful practice of praying and reading Scripture for centuries. It involves first reading through a passage of Scripture—for instance, a story from the Gospels—and then going through a progression of steps while you read the passage:

Lectio—What does the biblical text say in itself?...

Meditatio—What does the biblical text say to us?...

Oratio—What do we say to the Lord in response to His Word?...

Contemplatio—What conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?...

Actio—Making a resolution to make his our lives a gift for others in charity.

- Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 87

### Application to Our Lives

We can encounter God through His living word that is able to speak into our lives.



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*John 1:1–18*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

If you had one question you could ask God, what would you ask Him?

## **STEP 2: BACKDROP**

The Gospel of John begins with one of the most elegant passages of the New Testament. In a poetic fashion, John places each line of Scripture into place with a distinct purpose. These first eighteen verses of John's Gospel provide a table of contents, so to speak, for the themes found in the Gospel of John. For our purposes, we are going to examine how these verses relate to our study of God's Word. Let's break down some of the main aspects of these poetic lines.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read John 1:1–18.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



**1. Both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels begin by describing Jesus' birth. How does John open his Gospel in verse 1?**

*Answer: John starts by not focusing on Jesus' human birth but by showing how Jesus was present at the beginning of time.*

**2. Why do you think it is so crucial for John to focus on this beginning and the beginning of Jesus' earthly life?**

*Answer: John wants to reveal more about Jesus' true identity: Jesus is God and was with God during creation.*

**3. What else does John reveal about Jesus in verses 1–5?**

*Answer: John notes that Jesus is the Word (Jn 1:1), the life of men (v. 4), and light to men in darkness (vv. 4–5).*

**4. Why is this so radical to our world today?**

*Answer: It is easy to accept that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but if Jesus is God, His moral teaching takes on a much greater gravity. It would mean that we must accept Him entirely.*

**5. Read Genesis 1:3 and 1:6. What does the relationship between God's word and the created order say about God's word?**

*Answer: The relationship between God's word and what is created shows the direct connection between the two. It reveals how powerful God's word is—the same word that we find in the Bible.*

**6. Who is John the Baptist? What did he do?**

*Answer: John the Baptist was a prophet who testified to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the new Jewish king who would “take away the sins of the world” (for more, see Jn 1:19–34).*

**7. Why do you think John uses John the Baptist’s testimony?**

*Answer: John’s audience most likely would have known John the Baptist and respected him as a true prophet.*

**8. How does the testimony of others have an effect on us?**

*Answer: A testimony demonstrates the power of how a person has been changed. It is a tangible witness to the power of what is being described. Testimonies are hard to argue with because they reflect a personal experience.*

**9. Read 1 John 1:1–5. (Note: Be sure to read from John’s letter and not his Gospel.) What does this tell us about the testimony of John, the author of this Gospel? How does this change how we view his Gospel?**

*Answer: John tells us that he witnessed Jesus’ glory. We can trust that his Gospel is not just made up of fables or legends but comes from someone who saw Jesus himself.*

**10. How can we build a more powerful testimony to share with others?**

*Answer: See “The Power of God’s Word” in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”*

**11. In verses 10–11, the world does not accept Jesus. What is ironic about this situation?**

*Answer: The irony is that Jesus made the world, and yet the world did not recognize its creator.*

**12. In light of what we have learned about God’s word, why is it significant that this word takes flesh in verse 14?**

*Answer: The Word created the universe and is God Himself. This Word humbles Himself to become a mere man and dwell among us.*

**13. The word “dwelt” in Greek means “tabernacled,” or “pitched his tent.” Traditionally, this concept has been called the Incarnation, when God takes on our very flesh. How can this change our view of God?**

*Answer: God doesn’t seem so far away but someone who is truly with us.*

**14. Read Hebrews 4:14–16. What does Jesus’ Incarnation allow us to do?**

*Answer: We realize that God relates to all of the difficulties we have in life. He allows us to draw near to Him to receive His grace.*

**15. Read Hebrews 4:12. How is reading God’s word different from reading any other book?**

*Answer: God’s word is “living and active.” Just like the power of God’s word in creation, God’s word has the power to change our lives.*

