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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Come and See

John 1:1–18

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series: Come and See

Today we're starting a new series on the first 12 chapters of the Gospel of John. We've called this series "Come and See" because that's what Jesus said to a couple of prospective disciples as his ministry was just getting started. One of them was Andrew and the other was probably the apostle John who wrote this book. They'd been disciples of John the Baptist but then John the Baptist pointed them to Jesus. When Jesus saw they were following him he turned around and asked them, "*What do you want?*" They responded, "*Teacher, where are you staying?*" They didn't really answer his question but he played along and said, "*Come and you will see.*" That really describes what this book is about. "Come and see! Come and see what I'm all about. Come and see who I am and why I came. Come and see that I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

John had a goal in mind when he wrote this. He doesn't explicitly tell us what it is until the very end of the book. If you skip ahead to chapter 20, verses 30–31, he says:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The Gospel of John was written for people to "come and see" who Jesus was, through the signs which he performed, in order to bring people to faith in him as the Son of God, and through that to give them the very life of God. That's what we all want, isn't it? We want life, real life. In John 10:10 Jesus said, "*I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.*" Life is more than just existing; it's more than just breathing. Jesus came that through him we might have life to the full; abundant life. When we talk about "eternal life," we're not just talking about what we experience when we die. The eternal life Jesus came to bring is something we begin to experience now as we invite him, the very source of life, to come into our hearts. In one of his letters, John wrote, "*Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*" (1 John 5:12).

Today we're going to look at what scholars calls the Prologue to John's gospel found in 1:1–18. These opening verses are so beautifully constructed that many believe it was an early Christian hymn that believers sang as they gathered to worship as we do here.

To understand how this prologue works in relationship to the rest of the book, think of being given an address to the home of an old friend. You've never been to his house so you have no idea where you're going. You're driving along and you find the street and then after a while you see his street number and last name nailed to a tree at the start of a driveway. You turn in and find this is a long, gravel driveway that stretches out before you and then winds around. As you're driving along, you haven't even seen the house yet, but the driveway is lined with beautiful flowers and carefully manicured bushes. You're thinking, this must be some house! Finally, you come around the final bend, and gasp. There in front of you is this magnificent house, and you see your friend walking towards you from the front porch. He's come to greet you.

Approaching John's gospel is like arriving at a magnificent house. It's rather imposing, really. There's a depth of meaning inside this book that surpasses any of the other gospels. Someone once said this book is like a pool that's safe enough for a child to paddle in, but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. Yet, as imposing as it might seem, there's a friend who emerges from that house to welcome us, and that's Jesus Christ himself. He's the One we meet in this book.

Like many great houses this book has a long and windy driveway. The Prologue is like a driveway that prepares you for what's to come; many of the major themes of this gospel show up right here in the Prologue by way of introduction. Most of all, the Prologue introduces us to the person of Jesus Christ, the purpose for which he came, and the response he invoked. In this Prologue, the force of what John is trying to communicate is so staggering that the words almost seem to bend under the weight they're meant to bear.

To simplify the Prologue, we're going to divide it up into three sections. Each section can be summarized with a key word that describes something of the person of Jesus and the nature of his mission: First, in verses 1–3—The Word. Second, in verses 4–13—The Light. Third, in verses 14–18—The Glory.

The Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (verses 1–3).

The other Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark and Luke) begin the story of Jesus with either his birth or the start of his ministry. But John goes back further. Using the language of Genesis, he reaches back into eternity and says, *“In the beginning was the Word.”*

The key term here describing Jesus is “the Word.” Why does John call Jesus the Word? There’ve been entire books devoted to that question, but let me try to simplify it. When I speak a word, there’s a sense in which it’s a part of me. It comes out of my breath, my throat, my mouth and my tongue. It’s an expression of who I am. In the same way, Jesus is the expression of God; the communication of God.

But that’s not all. Those words that come out of me also have an impact on others. They have a life of their own. When people hear our words, those words change the way others think and live. Think of words like “I love you” or “I’m leaving” or “You’re fired.” Those words create new situations. In the Old Testament, God’s word creates new situations. He regularly acts by means of his word. Like in Genesis, he speaks and creation happens. Psalm 33:6 says, *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made...”* God’s word is powerful; it accomplishes things. In Isaiah 55:10–11 God says, *“My word...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* God’s word even brings healing and salvation. Psalm 107:20 says, *“He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.”*

Now what John wants us to know is this Word isn’t some kind of impersonal force but is a person. Down in verse 14 he says, *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”* That’s talking about Jesus. He’s the self expression of God who acts powerfully in creation and salvation. He even mentions creation right here: *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”* As Creator of all things he was eternally preexistent. There never was a time when Jesus didn’t exist. He was also eternally in relationship. He says, *“the Word was with God.”* That little word “with” has the idea of nearness to God. There’s a strong hint here that Jesus has always existed in equality and intimacy with God the Father. But the final phrase of verse 1 caps it all off: *“the Word was God.”* That means he was God in every way, though he was separate from God the Father in personhood, he was also one with him in essence and in character.

So Jesus is the Word made flesh; the communication of God. This is what we call “the incarnation.” I suppose Rob and I could have just had a conference call with those pastors in Haiti. We could have communicated all the information they needed. But there’s something about being there that makes a difference. When truth is incarnated in flesh and blood, that can be a powerful thing. God’s Word, Jesus Christ, became incarnate in the

person of Jesus. Someone said, “The Word didn’t become a philosophy to be discussed, a theory to be debated, a concept to be pondered. The Word became a person to be followed, enjoyed and loved.”

The Light

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God (verses 4–13).

The second key word that John uses to introduce us to Jesus is “light.” John says in Jesus was *“life and that life was the light of all mankind.”* What did John mean by calling Jesus the light? On one level, he’s still talking about light in a physical sense. Remember creation? What were the first words God spoke in Genesis? *“Let there be light.”* John is saying the source of creation’s light and life was the Word, and the Word is a person—Jesus. In him was life and that life brought light into the world for all to see. But this is about more than just physical light. Light brings illumination. Light reveals what is true and real. Light even has moral overtones. Light represents what is good and true and righteous. Darkness, of course, represents what is evil.

John wants us to know several things about this light. First, this light had a witness. His name was John. We know him as John the Baptist. Some people mistook him for the light, but he wasn’t the light. His job was to be a witness. He was sent from God to point people to the true light so they’d believe in him. We use witnesses in the courtroom to establish what’s true. The fact that Jesus had a witness who was sent from God establishes the truth that he was indeed the true light.

Second, this light came into the world and shines in the darkness. In verse 4 Jesus is called *“the light of all mankind”* who shines in the darkness. In verse 9 he says the true light that was coming into the world *“gives light to everyone.”* So it’s like everyone has an opportunity to see this light. As we’ll see in a moment, not everyone wants that. The world is a very dark place. There are some who prefer the darkness to light. Like the old Simon and Garfunkel song, *The Sounds of Silence*. Remember those words, “Hello darkness, my old friend, I’ve come to talk with you again.” That’s how many people feel today—they’re living in darkness

and they don't even recognize what's wrong. John knew that. We know that. The world isn't neutral; the world is dark and the darkness doesn't like the light. But John wants us to know the darkness can't overcome the light. No matter how powerful the darkness seems, it can't extinguish the light.

There are so many examples of that. I think of China, which became a Communist country in 1949. All the missionaries were forced to leave. Christianity was essentially outlawed. At the time there about 700,000 Christians in China. But the light of Christ continued to shine and China has had phenomenal church growth since then. Today, it's estimated that there's somewhere between 50 to 80 million believers in China. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

This leads to the third thing about the light. The light was rejected by some and received by others. John says even though he made the world, the world didn't recognize him. Even though he came to his own (the Jewish people), his own didn't receive him. That's true today. His light still shines in the darkness, but like bugs under a rock that scamper away when the rock is turned over and they're exposed to the light, many people prefer to stay in the darkness. Many reject him.

But here's the hope. He says those who do receive him and believe in his name become children of God. How can this be? How can people who love the darkness become people who love the light? John is very clear how it does **not** happen. He says it's *"not by natural descent."* That means, not by inheritance or human ancestry. You can't get into the family of God by being raised in a Christian family. You can grow up in a Christian home, attend a Christian school, spend all your life in church, but that won't do it. Then he says, *"nor of human decision."* It's not by determining to be a Christian that you become a child of God. You can't make yourself one. You can't study Christians, act like them, join their church and sing their songs and become a Christian. Nor is it *"a husband's will."* In other words, it's not the normal way children are made. It's not by human procreation.

What is it then? It's what happens **to you** that makes you a Christian. It's something God does: *"born of God."* It's beyond any human effort. Our part is simply to *"receive him"* and *"believe in his name."* Many people say, "I believe in Christ. But when you receive him, you yield to him, you come to the end of yourself and surrender to his Lordship. If you do that, something happens to you; a transformation occurs. Later in John, Jesus talked about that. He said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (Jn 8:12). That's change. That's transformation.

The Glory

The final key word of this Prologue explains something of the principle by which all this can happen. Let's read the last few verses of this Prologue.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.') Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (verses 14–18).

The key word here in v. 14 is "glory." What John says about glory hearkens back to the Old Testament. In fact, in this whole section John has in mind an Old Testament story about Moses. When he says the Word *"made his dwelling among us"* he's thinking back to God's dwelling in the tabernacle. There Moses met with God and the glory of the Lord descended on that meeting place. John says that Jesus, the one and only Son of God, in his earthly life has tabernacled among us and we've seen his glory. John says, "We didn't just meet with him once-in-a-while like Moses, but for three-and-a-half years we lived in the presence of that glory!"

Now when we think of glory we think of something amazing. It kind of sounds like Jesus walked around Galilee with an aura or glow or at least a bright halo that marked him out as no ordinary mortal. But as you read John's gospel you see that the glory of Jesus wasn't like that. First of all, not everyone recognized it. Many people just thought he was another religious nut. Not only that, the revelation of Jesus' glory was tied to the cross. How could there be glory in a crucifixion?

But John alludes to that when he says the glory that we saw in him was full of grace and truth. Grace and truth. He's again thinking back to Moses. In Exodus 33 Moses begs God, *"Show me your glory."* The Lord replies, "I can't do that because you can't handle it. Here's what I'll do. I'll cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim my name in your presence" (Ex 33:19a). So Moses stands on Mt. Sinai and the Lord comes down in a cloud and passes in front of him, proclaiming, *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..."* (Ex 34:5-7).

Notice those two words: *"love and faithfulness."* Those two words are akin to the two words John uses to explain the glory they saw in Jesus: grace and truth. The Hebrew word for love is *hesed*. It means God's steadfast, loyal, covenant love. It's a word exploding with grace. It's not a love we earn or deserve; it's a love that comes purely out of the graciousness of God. The second word is "faithfulness" and it's akin to the word "truth." It means he's One who keeps his word. He's faithful and true. John is saying, "Listen, the glory we saw in Jesus was the same glory

Moses saw on Mt. Sinai. We just got to see more of it. In Jesus, we got to see the fullness of it.”

In verses 16–17 he explains that further, focusing on the idea of grace. He says, *“Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.”* What’s the grace already given? Verse 17 explains: *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* The law was a display of God’s grace. We don’t normally see it that way, but the Jewish people to whom it was given certainly did. Before the Ten Commandments were even given, God showed his grace by delivering them from slavery in Egypt. They didn’t deserve that or earn that. Then he gave them the law because they were his special, chosen people. They’d have never known who God was or what he was like apart from the law. The law was a grace. But in Jesus we have *“grace in place of grace.”* We have a new kind of grace. We have the fullness of grace.

We talked a moment ago about transformation. How will our lives be transformed? It’s by grace. We saw so many examples of that this past week. I think of William. He was a witch doctor. Some of his stories will make your skin crawl. But someone came to Haiti and shared the gospel with him and his life was transformed. Now he’s a pastor and his son is too. I also think of Moises. He was born in the Dominican Republic and then immigrated to the States as a boy. He got hooked on drugs and eventually found himself in prison. Then he got deported! He’s not even allowed in the U.S. But in the D.R. he came to Christ. He wants to be a pastor but for now he just serves behind the scenes and does whatever he can to help the ministry.

That’s God’s grace. We can be transformed by grace. Maybe you still need to let him do that. You cannot earn this; all you can do is receive it as a gift. Grace is what Jesus is all about. The eternal Word made flesh, the light of the world, manifested his glory by serving us and dying for us while we were in rebellion against

him and totally unworthy of his love. Why wouldn’t you want to offer yourself to someone like that?

John concludes with another allusion to Exodus. *“No one has seen God at any time...”* Remember, Moses wasn’t allowed to see God. But Jesus, God’s one and only Son, who himself is God and near to God, he has made him known to us. In other words, we’ve seen him; we’ve seen his glory. Later, Jesus will even say to his disciples, *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”* (Jn 14:6). In essence what John says here is this: If you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.

Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh; the powerful, life changing communication of God. He’s the light of the world, sent into the world to dispel the darkness. He’s the glorious tabernacle of God, manifesting the full measure of God’s grace.

I hope this Prologue has stretched your imagination a bit. It’s like Lucy’s experience with Aslan the lion in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan, of course, was to be a picture of Christ. Lucy gazes into Aslan’s wise, large face and she hears him speak.

“Welcome, Child,” he says.

Lucy responds, “Aslan, you’re bigger.”

Aslan says, “That is because you’re older, little one.”

“Not because you are?” Lucy asks.

“I am not. But every year you grow, you’ll find me bigger.”

And that is true of us. Every year **we** grow, we’ll find him bigger. And that’s the invitation given in the Prologue, this long driveway leading up to this great Gospel. My hope is that as we uncover the wonders of this Gospel we will find him bigger and bigger.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.