

The Eternal Word: John 1:1-5
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This morning we begin an exposition of the Gospel of John, the fourth Gospel, the fourth book found in the New Testament of the Bible. If you're new to Three Rivers Grace, this is a good time to jump in and begin learning with us. This is a good starting point. I'm excited for all of us to embark on this new journey of meditating on this very powerful look at the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John is both simple and very profound. It portrays for us very simply and straightforwardly the truth about who Jesus is and what He has accomplished for sinners – for you and for me. But simple doesn't mean simplistic or superficial. These simple truths of Jesus' deity, His death and resurrection, what it means to be a disciple of His, these are very weighty, very deep matters for us to consider.

You can think of the Gospel of John like a body of water in which a toddler can wade, and a massive whale can swim. So if you think of yourself as a toddler believer, a baby believer, there is much that you'll be able to glean from the Gospel of John that will help you to grow in your relationship with Jesus.

In fact, even if you're not yet a believer, if you're interested in learning a bit more about Christianity, this is a great book of the Bible to begin studying. Here you can come right up close to the Person of Jesus Christ, and we'll learn about the things He said, the things He did, who He claimed to be, what He claimed to accomplish, and what all of that might mean for your life. I hope unbelievers will be part of this study with us, learning about Jesus. And I pray that unbelievers will come to know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior through this study. If you have unbelieving friends or family members who might consider coming with you on a Sunday, or might consider listening to a sermon online, I hope this sermon series will be useful in that way—not only for edifying believers, but also for sharing with unbelievers about our amazing Savior. So invite people to come with you. And share these messages with others who might download them and listen to them from our church website.

This is a book of the Bible that unbelievers or very young believers can learn from. A toddler can wade into these waters and find much that will encourage them and help them grow.

The Gospel of John is also a book that a massive whale can swim around in, plunging down to great depths. Maybe you've been a Christian for a long time and you've read the Bible through many times. Maybe you've walked through significant trials,

drawing very close to Jesus in the process. Maybe you've read commentaries and theology books and had many long discussions with other believers about the Trinity, about God's sovereignty in salvation, about the role of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you've debated Jehovah's Witnesses about the deity of Christ, you've debated people about Jesus being the only way of salvation, you've engaged in those kinds of discussions . . . Well, there's plenty in the Gospel of John that is very important on those levels also. There's plenty here for any person, for every one of us in this room, to learn about this Person – Jesus Christ.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in the story of Prince Caspian, there's an interesting conversation between Lucy and Aslan (Aslan being the Christ figure, the lion who is the King of Narnia). It's when Lucy returns to the land of Narnia and sees Aslan again, she has this conversation with him:

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you're bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are bigger?”

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

That's how Jesus Christ is. As we grow in our knowledge of Him, as we walk with Him through the next trial, the next temptation, the next blessing, as we delve into the depths of what God's Word reveals about Him, we will find Him bigger and bigger and bigger and more powerful and more worthy of our praise. It's not that He actually is any bigger. But as we grow we're able to see more and more of how big He has always been.

He's not like the childhood playground that you go back to as an adult and say, “I remember it being a lot bigger than this. Now that I've grown it seems so small.” No, Jesus Christ is the opposite. The more we know of Him, the more we experience of Him, the bigger we will see Him to be. And even at the end of this life we will not know the fullness of His glory. We'll just be scratching the surface. And that's why we look forward to an eternity of knowing Him better and better and better, seeing Him as bigger and bigger and bigger.

I hope our study of John will bring us along several steps in this journey of seeing more of our Savior's greatness.

Very near the end of this Gospel, John tells us clearly why he wrote this all down for us. John 20:30-31. Here's the purpose of the whole book. “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30–31, ESV)

That's the purpose of the Gospel of John, and that's the purpose in this sermon series, that all of us here would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him, trusting in Him and what He's done for us, that we would have eternal abundant life in Him. If you're an unbeliever, that's what I hope and pray will happen to you even this morning. If you're already a believer, I hope and pray that we will grow much deeper in our understanding of Jesus' identity and what He achieved for our salvation. I pray that we will love Him more and more and more as we plunge the depths of these vast waters.

John the Author

Let me tell you a little bit about this man John, the writer of this book. And then we'll look at some things in the first 5 verses.

One of the things that makes this Gospel particularly exciting to study is the fact that John, the writer, was so very close to Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. This was John the son of Zebedee, one of the 12 disciples. And not only that, he was part of an "inner circle" even within the 12. There were the 12. But within that 12, a subset of the 12, were the 3 – Peter, James and John. These were among the very first disciples Jesus called to follow Him. The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark both record this. Jesus called Peter and Andrew, who were brothers. And then Jesus called James and John, who were brothers, the sons of Zebedee.

And then we see 3 of these men—Peter, James, and John—being included in some very significant events. Most notably, the Transfiguration when Jesus' "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" and Moses and Elijah appeared with Him (Mt 17:1–2; Mk 9:2; Lk 9:28–29). Also when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, He took just these three into the house with Him (Mk 5:37; Lk 8:51). And in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus took Peter, James and John to pray with Him (Mt 26:37; Mk 14:33). Of course, they fell asleep. But still, they had the privilege of being extra close to Jesus.

The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

And we see this in some places in the Gospel of John as well. Although in the Gospel of John, John doesn't refer to himself directly anywhere in the whole book. In the few places where he does include himself, he speaks of "the disciple whom Jesus loved." What a wonderful way to think of oneself. He's not saying it in a prideful way at all, as though he deserved Jesus' love. Nor is he saying it in an exclusive way, as though he's the only disciple Jesus loved. John wants to include these important details

of the story, but doesn't want to call attention to himself. He's not publishing this to make a name for himself. So he uses this simple, but profound, description—"the disciple whom Jesus loved." And if you're a believer in Christ, if you are united to Christ by faith, then you can think of yourself in that very same way. You are a disciple whom Jesus loves very much. It's not because you are particularly lovable or because you are especially dedicated and faithful. But therein lies the wonder of the Gospel! He loves you! He loves me! In spite of ourselves. He has called us to Himself. He has made us His disciples. And He has a deep and abiding love for us. That is so encouraging to reflect on, and we should reflect on it often. You can reflect on it as you think about your identity in Christ as a disciple whom Jesus loves.

In John 13, when Jesus is eating the Passover meal with His disciples, we read this: "After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, *whom Jesus loved*, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot." (**John 13:21–26**)

There was John, not mentioning himself by name, but sharing an eye-witness account, indeed a very up close and personal account, of an emotionally-charged, eternally-significant moment in the events leading up to Jesus' death on the cross.

And then, when we come to the account of Jesus on the cross, we read this: "standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and *the disciple whom he loved* standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home." (**John 19:25–27**)

Here's another interaction that shows us how close John was to Jesus. So close that Jesus would give John the assignment of caring for His own mother, Mary.

And then John was one of the first eye-witnesses of the empty tomb. We read in chapter 20: "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, *the one whom Jesus loved*, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." **(John 20:1–9)**

There's John, at the empty tomb, seeing and believing.

Then in the last chapter of the Gospel of John, we read of Jesus appearing to some of the disciples as they were fishing: "Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. *That disciple whom Jesus loved* therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" **(John 21:4–7)**

And then, at the very end of this Gospel, there is one more reference to the disciple whom Jesus loved. "Peter turned and saw *the disciple whom Jesus loved* following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" *This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things*, and we know that his testimony is true." **(John 21:20–24)**

So this is the man we're hearing from in this book. This is the eye-witness, the close disciple, whom Jesus loved, whom God ordained to write this account, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we would have this very up close and personal narrative of Jesus' life and teaching.

Early Church Leader

John then went on to be one of the leaders of the early church. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, refers to Peter, James and John as "pillars" of the church **(Galatians 2:9)**.

This John, son of Zebedee, disciple of Jesus, apostle, was not only the writer of the fourth Gospel but also the writer of three

letters in the New Testament, which we know as **1, 2, and 3 John**. And also the last book of the New Testament, which we call **Revelation**. A great deal of divine truth was revealed to this man and through this man.

So I hope you can see it's a great privilege we have to study these writings. It's a great blessing that we have these things preserved for us in God's Word to benefit us today.

Let's begin then in the first chapter and the first five verses of the Gospel of John.

Read John 1:1-5

The Eternal Word

Earlier I read John's purpose statement near the end of the book, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Well, John is certainly pursuing that purpose right from the very first words of this Gospel. In the very first verse John is already directly asserting the eternality of Jesus Christ, whom he here is calling the Word.

What does that first phrase make you think of? "In the beginning . . ." If you're very familiar with the Bible, it will remind you of the very first words of the Bible, the first words of the very first book in the first major section of the Bible which we call the Old Testament. The book of Genesis, which is the first book of the Bible, begins with these words, "**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**" (**Genesis 1:1**)

John is intentionally taking us back to the moment of creation. In fact, John is wanting to make a point that goes back even further, before creation. He's making a point here about the eternality of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Word, is eternal. He was there even before the world was created. In the beginning, when there was nothing but God, the Word existed.

The next two statements, simple as they are, convey the majesty and mystery of our God. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. The statement "the Word was with God" tells us that the Word is distinct from God. The statement "the Word was God" tells us that the Word is one with God.

R.C. Sproul says of John 1:1, "**This sentence in and of itself was enough to keep theologians busy for hundreds of years because, on the one hand, the Word (Jesus) is distinguished from God, but from a different perspective, the Word is identified with God. This sentence, more than any other passage in Scripture, is foundational for the church's confession of the doctrine of the Trinity, the belief that God is one in three persons.**" (Sproul, John, pages 3-4)

Can you sense the depth of what is being revealed here? How can Jesus (the Word) be God and with God at the same time? Well, when we put this together with many other verses in Scripture a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith emerges. And that is the doctrine of the Trinity. The God revealed in Scripture is a God who is simultaneously One and Three. One God in Three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

John here is pointing to the fact that the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, is very God of very God and has been with God the Father from even before the creation of the world. Indeed, the Word has been with God the Father from eternity past, forever and ever. There never was a time when the Word did not exist.

How do we know that? Because of verse 3. Verse 3 is very emphatic. John states this so absolutely so as to avoid any misunderstanding. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Which is to say, the Word was involved in creating everything that is, everything created by God. Nothing whatsoever has been made except what Jesus Christ has participated in making. And that rules out the possibility of Jesus Christ being made.

Some have claimed—like Arius in the early church and the Jehovah’s Witnesses today—that there was a time when Jesus Christ did not exist, that He was the first thing God created, and therefore He’s not eternally God. He’s divine in some sense, but not on par with God the Father. One of the reasons that doesn’t hold water is because of what verse 3 so clearly and emphatically states. Everything that has been made was made through the Son, the Word.

Just last week we were walking through a farmer’s market in a little town in Michigan, near Lake Huron. There were fruits and vegetables and baked goods and kettle corn and paintings and country crafts—a little bit of everything. And as we were leaving, a little stand caught my eye. It said something like, “Do you want to know the real meaning the Bible?” A friendly lady was sitting there in a chair, and she said hello. And I noticed the publication they had displayed on the stand was the Watchtower, which is the magazine of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. That was a reminder to me that when we’re talking about the eternal Word, we’re not only talking about a debate from the 200s and 300s A.D. and the heresy of Arianism that was condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. We’re also talking about a heresy that continues to be perpetuated today, in farmer’s markets and from door to door. It’s important that we understand what the Bible really teaches, so that false teachers won’t persuade us otherwise.

And what’s so important about this point anyway? Why is it

significant that Jesus, the Word, is eternal? Well, if you deny that Jesus is eternal you deny that He is fully God. And if Jesus is not fully God then He cannot fully save sinners. Which then leaves you with a religion based on your own works. Because only God can fully save. Anyone less than God might be able to be a good example for us, or a good teacher, but he cannot fully atone for our sin if he's less than fully God.

Why is that so? Because our sin is an infinite offense against God. You can't quantify the damage your sin has caused, not only to other individuals, but most significantly the degradation and dishonor that has been heaped upon Almighty God. It is an infinite offense, because He is infinitely holy. And therefore, considering the gravity of our sinfulness, we understand that it took the God-Man, Himself an infinite Being, to fully pay the penalty for our sin.

This is crucial to the Good News being truly Good News. It's only the Eternal Word that is really and truly a Good Word to sinful humanity. Anything less becomes something of a self-help religion. But this is different. Jesus doesn't just give us some good tips for making ourselves better. Instead, He lives a perfect life in our place and then goes to the cross in our place, bearing the infinite wrath of God against sin. He is the only real Savior. Eternally God, and then taking on flesh and becoming one of us.

Here's how our Statement of Faith puts it. This is from the 1689 London Baptist Confession, from the chapter on "Christ Our Mediator."

"Paragraph 2. The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God, the brightness of the Father's glory, of one substance and equal with Him who made the world, who upholds and governs all things He has made, did, when the fullness of time was complete, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities of it, yet without sin; being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit coming down upon her: and the power of the Most High overshadowing her; and so was made of a woman of the tribe of Judah, of the seed of Abraham and David according to the Scriptures; so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man."

There's a lot we could unpack there, which I'm not going to do this morning. But I want you to feel the weight and the importance of this teaching about the eternal Word. Jesus Christ is distinct from God the Father and equal to God the Father, which is

a mystery at the very center of the Christian faith. If you have questions about this, please talk to me after this worship service. Or if this is something you want to delve into and study further, let us connect you with a more mature believer you could spend some time discussing this with you.

There are 2 more things I want to say about this passage, 2 facets of the eternal Word that I want to highlight. Creation and Revelation.

Creation

I already said some things about verse 3, about the Son's role in the creation of all things. But have you reflected on this before? Have you considered this fact that the Son was involved in the creation of all things? This is mentioned in other places as well.

Speaking of the Son, it says in Colossians 1:15-17, **“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”**

Hebrews 1 affirms this as well¹: **“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”** (Hebrews 1:1-3) Through Him the world was created, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.

Think about this as you enjoy creation and as you marvel at the complexities of this universe in which we live. On our vacation we were enjoying the beauty of the lake and trees and sunsets. One evening I was sitting outside supervising the grill as the coals were heating up. We've gone to this same place for several summers now. It's about a mile away from Lake Huron, and it's in a secluded spot in the woods. And I was just sitting there looking into the trees, taking in the wonder of green leaves

¹ See also 1 Cor 8:6, *“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”*

almost surrounding me, like a canopy around me, layered from ground to about as high as I could see, and from 5 feet in front of me to as far as I could see in the distance. And to hear the gentle sound of the wind blowing those leaves, slightly bending those branches, to see the chipmunks scurrying around playing tag, or whatever it is they do. And then to hear a mosquito buzzing in my ear, reminding me of the Fall.

We know that the world is not as it should be. It is now a Fallen world we live in. But we still see the marks of an infinitely creative intelligent personal God who made all of this, and His Son, Jesus Christ, through whom all of this was made and who upholds it all by the word of His power. Think of that as you're enjoying a sunset or as you're pointing out to your child the bird landing on the tree branch or the tomato plant growing in the garden.

I remember years ago when I took a trip to Liberia to minister with Aaron and Aimee Ashoff who were members of this church and who serve with an organization called Samaritan's Purse. And I remember one day Aaron and I were walking along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, just a hundred yards or so from where they lived. And Aaron reminded me of a quote by Clyde Kilby, who had been a literature professor at Wheaton College. He once gave a lecture on mental health and offered some resolutions, some helpful practices, for pursuing mental health in our lives. The first was this: "At least once every day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet traveling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above and about me."²

And then another went like this. This is the one Aaron mentioned as we were looking up at a tree that was growing there by the ocean. Kilby resolved,

"I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are."

I encourage us to do the same. Just consider the amazing things you've seen in creation . . . the things you've seen with your own eyes, in your own backyard, or on walks in the park, or places you've traveled, or pictures or videos you've seen of other places. This is an amazing world we live in, in some respects. Sure, we

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/10-resolutions-for-mental-health>

know that sin has distorted and deformed so much. But there is still much evidence of God's infinite wisdom and creativity. And here we're told of Christ's involvement in the amazing feat of creating all of this, and His ongoing role in sustaining it all. So our appreciation of the beauties and complexities of the created universe should fuel our worship of the eternal Word.

Revelation

Finally, and I'll close with this, think of God's revelation of Himself to us, and what these verses teach us in this regard. Why do you think John refers to Jesus as the Word? Think of all the places the Bible mentions "the word of the Lord" or "the word of God." The point is, our God is a God who speaks. He reveals Himself. He is not silent. He communicates personally with His people, instructing us, rebuking us, making known His promises and warnings.

And think back to the very passage of Scripture we've already given some thought to, the very first verses in the Bible. Think about Genesis 1. How did God create everything? One of the repeated phrases as you read through Genesis 1 is, "And God said . . ."

"And God said, "Let there be light . . ."

"And God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters . . .'"

"And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens . . .'"

God created by His Word, as we've already seen. And then the Father sent His Word into the world as a human being. What a gift! We now have the unspeakable blessing of **the written Word of God** in the Bible and **the incarnate Word of God** in the Person of Jesus Christ. This is how fully God has disclosed Himself to us.

He has spoken . . . in many powerful and penetrating and personal words, and also in the power and Person of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word.

And so we begin this study of the Gospel of John, which will be an extended study of this Person, the Eternal Word, the revelation of God Himself. It's my prayer that we will know Him better and better as we study the Word, and that we'll see Him as bigger and bigger as we grow in our knowledge of what He's revealed about Himself.