

John 1:1-18

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[0 : 00] Well, do open your Bibles to John 1. It's a new series that hopefully is going to take us through this academic year. John chapter 1. We're looking at the first 18 verses. We could be here until Christmas, at least, in these verses, but I thought it would be good to get a kind of overview and to kind of really get into it.

Last month, there were 55 beached whales on a beach in Scotland. I don't know if you saw that news story. There was one washed up in County Down yesterday afternoon, without wishing to be kind of like news round, but it's a tragedy, isn't it, when whales are washed up on the beach?

Beautiful things that thrive in the depth of the ocean. Magnificent, so powerful beings. And yet on the beach, they're reduced to kind of wheezing, limp, cold, massive, rotting flesh.

A beached whale is a dying and dead whale. A whale thrives in the water, in the deep, but out of its natural environment, it dies.

And as we begin a new series in John's Gospel, John tells us his purpose for writing. His purpose for writing, it's all about life and death. It's all about Jesus' life and his death.

[1 : 34] He doesn't leave you in any doubt as to why he's written his Gospel. John 20, verse 30, listen to what he says. These things are written so that you, you are reading it, you are listening to it preached, may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.

That's John's purpose. Life in Jesus' name. Life, I think, is the major theme of John's Gospel. It comes up 37 times as a word, but many more times as a concept.

And having life is what John's Gospel is all about. And what John shows you and I is that life is not what we often think it's about.

He shows us that life is actually all about knowing God. Just before, in chapter 20, a few chapters before that, John gives to us the words of the Lord Jesus.

In John 17, verse 3, we kind of eavesdrop, listen in on his prayer, and he prays this. He says, this is eternal life, that you may know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

[2 : 53] So back to the whales for a moment. The Bible teaches us, well, life teaches us, that those whales were made for the ocean. And just like the whales, you and I as human beings, we were made for a relationship with God.

You and I were made to know God. Human beings were made, the most important thing we can do in life is to glorify and enjoy God. You were made to know God. You were made to know that purpose that comes from knowing God.

That is the reason for your existence. That's the reason you've been put on this planet. It's the environment for which you were made. Like a whale is made for the ocean, you were made to have a relationship with your maker, to know God.

And that life is not just physical life that lasts in this world. But the life that John's Gospel is offering you through the Lord Jesus is a life that goes on into eternity in relationship with your creator.

The tragedy is this, isn't it? If you're familiar with your Bible, you'll know this. That is not the way life is now. We were made for this relationship, but actually what we've done, every single one of us, is we've turned away from God.

[4 : 16] We thought it was a burst for freedom. We actually thought that to get God out of our lives and for us to take control actually would be a removal of the shackles. But what it actually is, is a beaching of ourselves, apart from God.

The God for whom we were made. And that is our world today. A city that looks so alive and so vibrant in so many ways, in reality is desperate.

Gasping. Gasping and in the throes of death. Isaiah the prophet tells us that we live in a world that is under the shadow of death.

In fact, biblically speaking, we are all, by nature, the moment we are born dead. It's often said, well, like cut flowers.

You know, you get cut flowers. And you give flowers to someone. Outwardly, those cut flowers, they look alive, don't they? They look vibrant. You see the colors, so beautiful.

[5 : 28] Outwardly full of life. But then they begin to droop. They flourish, and then they begin to decay and rot.

And things begin to fall off them. Outwardly full of life. But in reality, they're cut off, aren't they, those flowers, from the source of life. And that's what we're like.

Outwardly full of life. Outwardly flourishing, maybe. Outwardly very beautiful. But the rot has set in. You're about to decay. Things might drop off.

Think about Adam and Eve in the garden. God's curse on them. Do you remember what God said to them? God said to them, on the day that you eat of it, what was forbidden, that fruit, on that day you will surely die.

And they did die as soon as they ate it, but they were alive. Because they died in the fact that they were cut off. They were separate from God.

[6 : 31] They were out of a relationship with God. They didn't know God, and therefore they were alive but dead. Biblically, theologically, truly dead.

And that's our world. That's our city. A city that is beached. A city that was made for something greater.

A city that is gasping for breath. And that's where Jesus Christ comes in. This is the great message of John's Gospel. That Jesus has come into our world to bring us back to life.

To give us life, which is a relationship with God that only comes in him and through him. And in him alone. That's what John's Gospel is all about. It's about coming to know the Lord Jesus, the giver of life.

Some of you, I hope, through this series, as we go through it over this winter, will come to know that for the first time. That you will receive the life that you desperately need.

[7 : 39] But for most of us here, who gather Sunday by Sunday, we have this glorious life, isn't it? And what I hope is that John's Gospel will help you and I to understand it more deeply and more profoundly.

And we'll experience more richly what we've been so graciously given by the Lord Jesus Christ that we may have life. That is the purpose of this book.

Life that comes through Jesus Christ. And that is where John begins his account with Jesus. It's an introduction. It's an epic introduction. It's more than that. It's a prologue, but it's greater than that. It's an overture. And it picks up the themes that are touched on at the start of John 1, but will be filled out through the Gospel. So what I want to do is draw that out.

Three headings to help us understand what John is saying about Jesus. First of all, Jesus' identity. The question there is, who is he? His identity, who is he?

[8 : 38] And then there's Jesus' mission. Why has he come? And then thirdly, the response. Our response. How should we receive him? So number one, Jesus' identity.

Who actually is he? Who is this Jesus? And the answer is mind-blowing. It's extraordinary. Look at verse one. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

And the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And if you're into English literature, you will recognize that this is a literary masterpiece in the way that John writes.

Notice Jesus isn't actually named, is he, until verse 17. And so what happens is there's this extraordinary build-up. And finally, there's this unveiling of who the Word is.

This incredible character. And so in the first three verses, so much is packed in. So much of what we know about who Jesus is. Just into a few words, let me point out a few things.

[9 : 47] First of all, we learn that this Word is eternal. He is eternal. He starts off, doesn't he, his Gospel, in the beginning. And that phrase deliberately picks up, it deliberately echoes the first words of the Bible, Genesis 1.1.

In the beginning. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And what John is saying was that in the beginning, the Word, this Word, was there.

In the beginning was the Word. He was in the beginning with God. And so before there was anything, before time itself, before anything came into existence, while there was nothing, God was there.

and so was this Word. This Word is eternal. He doesn't belong in this world.

The Word exists outside and beyond. First, He's eternal. Secondly, He is divine. Look at verse 1.

[10:56] The Word was with God and the Word was God. He's not some lesser being, a kind of few inches below God.

He's not a subservient angel. He's not a divinish creature. creature. He's not a creature made by God to do His bidding, like the cults tell you.

But the Bible is very clear that the Word was God. He's a person distinct from God, yes, but 100% God. An eternal and divine being.

Eternal, divine, but can you see verse 2? He's also the creator. All things were made through Him. As John so often does when we get familiar with the way that he writes as we study his gospel, he cuts off any other possibilities. I love it how John writes. He writes the necessary negatives.

[12:04] It's written for dummies like me. And so if I was going to say to you, I'm going to meet you at the clock at Waterloo, you get to Waterloo, how many clocks are there? There's loads, isn't it? Which clock? I love to say to you, not the clock at Platform 2, not the clock at Platform 21, the clock in the middle of the concourse.

And so you have to know the necessary negatives. And John gives that all the time, we'll see it. People like me need the negative explained to them. You sit here, not there, but here.

Can you see what it says? All things were made through Him and without Him, nothing was made. there was nothing that's been made that has not been made by Him.

Without Him nothing was made. It was the Word who was with God in the beginning, who spoke life into existence. everything from the stars in the sky all the way down to the depths of the ocean.

And so every person in this room, every person who has ever existed, who has ever lived, has come through the creative work of this Word.

[13:22] He is eternal, He is divine, He is the Creator, but He's also, verse 4, the source of all life. Can you see that? In Him was life. And what John is saying is not only did He bring all things into existence, He is the source of all life.

He is the source of all life in the beginning, but He's also the sustaining source of life. He's not like my watch, I've got a wind-up watch, I wind it up in the morning and I don't have to do anything to it. It just ticks again and then I have to wind it up again. God is not like that with our world. It's not that He is the source and then just lets it go. No, He is the sustaining source of our lives. So this says to you, you are, whether you like to admit it or not, a dependent being.

You actually know that. You cannot exist in and of yourself. We depend on others to keep us going, but ultimately we are a dependent creature because we've been made by the God who is the source of all things.

you and I are dependent creatures, but not so this word. This word of John 1, He is self-sustaining.

[14:42] He doesn't need you to exist. He doesn't depend on us or anything else. All physical life, all spiritual life comes from Him. He is eternal, He is divine, He is the creator, He is the source of all life.

And did you see verse 4, He is the source of all light. Verse 4, in Him was life and the life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

He is getting light. I noticed this morning sunrise at 6.15am. It's pitch black. And then you look out, don't you, and you see the sun just peeping its head over the horizon.

And then very quickly the darkness is dispelled, it is overcome, and the light triumphs. Here we get in John's Gospel, the first hint that everything is not right with our world.

This theme comes up again and again and again in John's Gospel. It is this theme that the world is in darkness. Light and darkness.

[15:58] And the darkness here speaks of evil and of ignorance. Just flick over the page with me to John 3 in verse 19. So what John writes, this is the judgment that light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their words, because their deeds are evil.

Their works were evil. And so here's the truth, the world is not neutral when it comes to God. It's a world that has many, many good things but the characteristic of this world is that it is evil.

It's a world that is deliberately and culpably ignorant. But then comes the word, the word that opposes the darkness. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, not smothered it.

Well, these are epic verses, aren't they? Who is he? And the answer is he is the word, but so much is packed into that. He is the eternal divine creator, the source of all life and the source of all light. But did you see verse 14? It's not just that he's the eternal word, he is, verse 14, the word made flesh. The word became flesh.

[17 : 27] John's gospel is divided in two, it's a bit of a rough division really, but if you think of John's gospel in verses, chapter 1 verses 1 to 18, you've got the introduction.

And then from then on to chapter 10, you've got God the Son coming all the way down, he is the word from the Father. And then from chapter 11 to chapter 20, it's the return of the Son to the Father, with chapter 21 as the conclusion.

And so that first movement, which we're going to see this term, is all about his coming into the world and becoming flesh. John, the writer, introduces John the Baptist to us in verse 6.

Did you see him? We'll find out more about him next week. But in introducing John the Baptist to us, Jesus' cousin, John, the author, begins to take us from eternity past, and he brings us right into time, into space, and this world.

And that movement into our world is picked up on in verse 9, who was coming into the world. And then verse 10, he was in the world. Verse 11, he came to his own people.

[18 : 40] And then this epic statement that John zeroes in on, in verse 14. This word, this eternal, divine, supreme being, is the one who became flesh.

I need to dwell to man. He dwelt among us. And we, that's the eyewitnesses, have seen his glory, glory as the only son from the father full of grace and truth.

And in those few words, John is summarizing the stupendous truth of the incarnation, that God became man, that the word took on flesh.

The word became flesh. What John is saying to you there is that he took on a human nature. He became one of us. The eternal, divine, the creator of all things, the one who flung stars into space, came down, down, down, down, down into our world.

And so at one point he is the size of a tiny seed in his mother's womb. At another point he is the size for strawberry that you'll eat for dessert.

[19 : 56] At another point you could have held the eternal word in your arms if he'd been there. Let me read to you these incredible words from Thomas Watson.

He was poor that he might make us rich. He was born of a virgin that we might be born of God. He took our flesh that he might give us his spirit.

He lay in the manger that we may lay in paradise. He came down from heaven that he might bring us to heaven that the ancient of days should be born that he who thunders in the heavens should cry in the cradle that he who rules the stars should suck the breast that a virgin should conceive that Christ should be made of a woman and of that woman which he himself made that the branch should bear the vine that the mother should be younger than the child she bore and the child in the womb bigger than the mother but the human nature should not be God yet one with God.

The miracle that the word became flesh. It's not that there was like a divine mixture. It's not like when you kind of mix water and flour and it becomes I think the technical word is sludge but this baby is 100% man and 100% God at the same time.

The Athanasian creed says that our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God is God and man God of the substance of the Father begotten before the worlds and man of the substance of his mother born in the world completely God completely man.

[21 : 40] And though he is God and man he is not two but he is one Christ. And if you're sitting here scratching your head you're doing the right thing because it is beyond our human understanding.

our small little creaturely minds cannot comprehend it but it is true and it is glorious and we will see it on the pages of John's Gospel.

One who has the almighty power of God who can turn water into wine as we'll see in a couple of chapters who is able to be raised from the dead and yet at the same time a man who suffers and bleeds and dies for his people.

The eternal word taking on flesh. Flesh is a word that speaks of his humanity but also in John's Gospel it's got echoes of something more humble than that.

It's kind of got connotations of him stooping down to our level taking on our weak and fragile humanity becoming one with us.

[22 : 58] I've told you this before but in 1863 the Catholic priest Father Joseph Damien he was inspired by the example of the Lord Jesus to go and help lepers in a leper colony on one of the islands of Hawaii.

The story is that these lepers they'd been banished from the main island and the community because of their condition. no one would help them but Father Damien came to live with them. He buried their dead he helped cleanse their water system he built them homes he set up a school and a hospital and two churches. And after 22 years of working amongst those people in 1885 one morning the lepers were stunned as he stood up to begin his sermon and he said we lepers because he too had become one of them.

he'd stooped down he'd stooped so low that he became one of them. The word became flesh the one who made everything came into our broken world and he took on our weak human flesh and he was able and he is able to say to us now enthroned in heaven this morning we humans the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us literally the word is tabernacled and so if you're familiar with the old testament there's echoes aren't there here in exodus 29 God promised to come and tabernacle to be with his people to come and dwell among his people it's what happened all those years ago but if you get to the end of exodus it's a distant impersonal way he dwelt with his people from a tent but now it's more profound and close and personal and intimate he came to us and he dwelt with us and think about it for a moment the man who wrote this gospel

John he was an eyewitness and he says in verse 14 we've seen his glory I saw with my own eyes and the disciples and many many others saw the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us and verse 14 we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth he's describing the brilliance of God Moses he asked to see God's glory didn't he in Exodus 33 do you remember God put Moses in the cleft of a rock and he passed by him so that Moses could only see the back of God because nobody can see God's face and live and as he passed by God spoke to him and he spoke about his character and he revealed it to Moses and he said the Lord the Lord a God merciful and gracious slow to anger abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness it's a glory which speaks of the godness of God of his brilliance his majesty as a creator his power above all powers but even

[26 : 10] Moses wasn't permitted to see him otherwise he would die but at the same time it speaks of his goodness that his character is one that is full of grace and truth and he's abounding in steadfast love and that glory the godness of god the goodness of god is seen in that one person Jesus Christ and that's who we have the glory of the only son from the father who for the first time in history could be seen the light who came into the world lit up the darkness the character of god who is overflowing with grace and overflowing with truth in a world of lies and John has seen his glory and his aim in writing this book is so that you would see it I think John's intention is to blow us away really with these themes and ideas that in this chapter they come to us with such an impact that they'll have to be expanded through the rest of the book but the first application is this isn't it we need to step back and be in awe of who

Jesus is if you've been a Christian like I have for some time there is a risk isn't it that you like I have become far too over familiar with him but here John begins his gospel and he stops us and he slows you down and he says do you realise do you quite realise who you have in Jesus that this is not just Jesus meek and mild he's not Jesus the swear word he is Jesus the eternal word who became flesh and so be in awe the identity of Jesus who he is he's the word made flesh but secondly what's his mission the last two points are quick what is his mission why did he come all the way from the glory of heaven into our world well John 20 verse 31 gives us that clue doesn't it and we've been saying that right from the beginning so that by believing you might have life in his name and that makes sense doesn't it because look at verse 4 in him was life he's the source of life he's come to give life he gives us life a relationship with

God and in verse 12 to 13 we get a little bit more colour of what that means but to all who did receive him who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God what is his mission so that we might enter the family of God you might have seen the famous photograph of JFK Jr if you haven't seen it's a total waste of time telling this story but anyway I should have put the

photograph here but JFK Jr he's the son of President JF Kennedy JF Kennedy is in the Oval Office the office of the President of the USA it's the most important room isn't it in terms of politics and power in the world certainly at that time and JFK is sitting behind his desk as the President of the US but at his feet underneath the desk is a little boy cheekily playing and messing around under his father's desk he's the

President of the USA the most important man in the world in many ways but his son is at his feet messing about under the desk because as the son of the President as the son of the father he had a right to be there didn't he he had an authority to be there no one else could have been messing about under the desk of the President but JFK Jr.

could be relaxed because he was secure in the love and acceptance of his father who was the President do you see what John is saying here John is saying that this is what Jesus has come to bring he's come to bring life which means being a child of God that you can come to the eternal God and call him our father in heaven you can live in his presence with the assurance of his love knowing that you have been accepted as his child and you don't have the right to do that and neither do I by nature Jesus is the only natural son of God isn't it we become sons and daughters of God through adoption through his death which we'll learn more about in these pages to come and that is something that happens to us rather than something that we achieve for ourselves did you see that in verse 13 it comes through birth or rebirth You can't give yourself to it you can't try and force yourself into God's family it's impossible and that's what's being said in those verses it's not of born of blood which means not becoming a child of

[31 : 31] God because you belong to a certain race of people in this case the Jewish people not because of the will of the flesh it's not something to do with your own strength and ability as a human being not by the will of man it's not something that other people can do for you I can't do it for you but it's from God life that comes from God not from the ground up but from God and his grace coming down and giving you the life that you need we touch on the identity of Jesus who he is he's the word made flesh we've we've touched on his mission that he came to give you life and relationship with God to become a child of God and finally he shows you the right response and interestingly again John shows you the right response by showing you the wrong response look at verse 10 he was in the world and the world was made through him and yet the world did not know him I wonder if you know the story of Jesse

Owens Jesse Owens was the star of the 1936 Berlin Olympics history records that he embarrassed Hitler he beat all Hitler's athletes in the long jump and the sprints much to Hitler's disappointment there's a reel that you can see on the internet of Hitler storming out of the stadium when Jesse Owens won one of the sprints in disgust in disgust that Jesse Owens had become so prolific that a black man could beat Hitler's athletes Jesse Owens after the Olympics went back to Atlanta in the deep south to his hometown and there was a huge civic dinner that was put on in his honour all the good and the great of Atlanta Georgia were there in their white ties and at that dinner Jesse Owens was presented with his award he was given a standing ovation by a huge crowd but as soon as the formalities were over Jesse Owens was sent out of the room he was made to eat dinner out of the room on his own in the cold because the officials did not want to be seen eating dinner with a black man the man who was the reason for the whole thing was shunned by those who should have received him as we read that it makes us sad it makes us angry doesn't it that's such a tragedy but it's a far greater tragedy that the one who made all things who came into this world instead of being received was rejected and that's what's meant by John here he says he came into his own into the world but the world did not know him it's not a neutral ignorance and what

John is saying is the world did not want to know him did not want to have a relationship with him the one who is the reason for everything is sent out of the room in fact far worse he's killed our world did not know him he came to his own people the Jewish people and one of the great tragedies is that his own people did not receive him and so as we close this morning right at the beginning of the gospel can you see the right response there in verse 12 but to all who did receive him who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God that's the right response it's not a doing it's not a trying hard eye it's not gritting your teeth it's not doing your best it's receiving isn't it it's what you do with a gift receiving welcoming believing it's not difficult it's entrusting our life into his hands if you're caught in a fire in your house or your school you don't just believe that a fireman is there in theory you don't just believe that the fireman who's turned up well he's a good guy thank you for coming what you're doing is really helpful

I can see that there's a fire and then you sit down and carry on with your dinner you don't do that it's one type of belief isn't it I suppose it's theoretical but the kind of belief that John is speaking about is receiving it is putting your life into the fireman's hands into the rescuer's hands and that's what John will expand on in this gospel the right response the coming of the source of all life it's to embrace him and receive him and to give your whole life and put it into his hands and there's so much more to see even in these verses that we've not touched on but to know Jesus Christ to know that those who believe him and receive him and enjoy you what he has come to bring and so my prayer that this series will mean that we are more compelled by him that we as a congregation would be more enamoured and amazed by him and that we would receive him and make him known let's pray