

## John 1:3-5

### Introduction

In these opening verses of the fourth Gospel (often called the prologue), John is giving us the context in which the rest of this Gospel must be read. We could say that this is the “doorway” or the “portal” that ushers us into John’s Gospel. It’s the laser focused light that reveals in just a few verses what is about to be diffused in variegated, multifaceted hues and colors over the next twenty-one chapters. So John begins his Gospel with these words:

#### **“In the beginning was the Word...”**

Genesis starts with “in the beginning” and then moves forward into time and history. John starts with this *same* beginning, but then he moves backward – not forward into time and history (*not yet*), but backward into eternity “past.” “In the beginning, the Word *was*.” “Was,” here, is a word of existence or “being,” and used absolutely, like this, it’s a word of absolute self-existence. There never was a time when the Word was not. The existence of the Word is from all eternity past. So think about this: There is some wonderful sense in which that living and active and powerful word that God spoke in creation—or that God “sent out” in creation (cf. Ps. 147:15-18)—was but a “visible” expression of that eternal Word that already was from all eternity past.

#### **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God...”**

Do you see here, in these words, the foundation and the wellspring of our salvation?

There has never been a time from all eternity past when God was “alone.” This is because the *Word* was *with* God. Since God is a *personal* being, therefore, the Word that was “*with*” *Him* must also be a personal and relational being. That the Word was *with* God signifies the closest and most intimate relationship possible; an intimacy of relationship, and even of oneness, of a kind that is inconceivable to us. I want to quote, again, from Lenski: “The [Word], then, is not an attribute inhering in God, or a power emanating from him, but a person in the presence of God and turned in loving, inseparable communion toward God, and God turned equally toward him.” Can we ever begin to comprehend the depth of love that was expressed for us and the depth of suffering on the cross when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Now we know that if the Word was “*with*” God, then the Word must be “personally” *distinguished from* God. There is a distinction here between the Word and God that God very carefully reveals to us and that we must therefore be very careful to believe. Here in this distinction is the foundation and the wellspring of our salvation. And yet immediately after saying that the Word was with God, in the very same breath John can also say that the Word *was* God.

#### **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God.”**

There is no contradiction here. In the first instance, John speaks of God as a “person” or personally (“the Word was *with the* God” [the Father]). In the second place, John speaks of God

in terms of His “substance” or “being” (“and **God** [no ‘the’] the Word **was**). The Word partakes *fully of all* that the one and only undivided God *is* (therefore, the Word *was* God), and yet at the same time God is not “exhausted” simply by the Word (therefore it can also be said truly that the Word *was with* God). This is a wonderful mystery. God is not divided in His *being*. The Word is not “part” of God. God *is* ONE. And yet *in this indivisible oneness* of the absolute, simple *being* of God, there is a plurality of “persons” – not persons as in “individuals” like we are individuals, but “persons” in the sense that there is relationship and mutual, reciprocal love and fellowship within the Godhead. God is not *only* the Word. God is *more* than the Word because “the Word *was with God.*” And yet the Word partakes *fully of all* that the one-and-only, indivisible God *is* because “**God** [**ALL** that God *is* in His undivided being] the Word *was.*” *Here* is the foundation and the wellspring of our salvation. In verse two John gathers up everything he’s just said in these three short sentences and condenses it into a single sentence:

**“This one [this very Word who was God] was in the beginning with [the] God.”**

Not only are these words a summation of all that’s been said so far, they’re also a preparation for what comes next. They bring us back, as it were, from the immeasurable timelessness of eternity “past”—back to the “*beginning*” – the same “beginning” that we read about in Genesis one when God created the heavens and the earth. We read in verse three:

**I. John 1:3** — All things came into being through him [through the Word], and without him not a single thing came into being that has come into being.

And so here *we* all are; and here all of *this* is.

We may not know or be able to comprehend in what sense the Word was the *Word* in eternity past, but we can know in what sense the Word was the Word *in the beginning*. In the beginning, it was through the Word that the God who is an *invisible Spirit revealed* Himself in the creation of the *physical* universe. This really is an amazing thing. Calvin writes: “No sooner was the world created than *the [Word]* of God came forth into *external* operation; ... having formerly been incomprehensible in his essence, he then became publicly known by the effect of his power.” Can we ever comprehend the magnitude of this moment “in the beginning”? In the creation of the world by the Word, the eternal, invisible God became in some sense visible, as it were—and therefore *knowable* by *creatures* who are “other” than Himself. Isn’t this what matters most to us? Throughout all eternity only God could know Himself, but in the creation of the world *by the Word* it becomes possible for *others* to know God – never in the absolute sense that God knows Himself, but still to know Him truly. God knows and comprehends his own infinite being and essence. That’s why I say that we can never know God as God knows Himself. But we *can* still know God truly. Do you see the miracle that this is? Are you seeing the full magnitude of this “beginning” when God created the heavens and the earth?

Creation *is* revelation. Creation *is* God’s own self-revelation. Why is the Word called the Word? Because by the activity of the Word in creation, the *invisible* and *eternal* God has *revealed* Himself in the context of *time* and *history so that others*—so that even creatures like us—might *know* Him. We read in Psalm chapter nineteen:

- Psalm 19:1–4 — The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the light of these words of the psalmist, listen to what Calvin writes in his Institutes:

[God has] *revealed himself* and *daily discloses himself* in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory... (Institutes; I. v. i.)

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter one:

- Romans 1:19–20 — What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

In light of these words of Paul, listen to what another commentator writes: “Every creature is a kind of professor that reads man a lecture concerning God, of His wisdom, and power, and goodness” (Arrowsmith; quoted in Ryle).

What does John say? “*All things came into being* through him [through the Word], and without him [without the Word] *not a single thing came into being that has come into being.*” Therefore, the very fact of this creation not only reveals God to us but also *reveals* God’s *desire* that we should know Him. The very fact of our existence as creatures in God’s world is a constant invitation to know Him who created this world and all that is in it through the eternal *Word*. We are surrounded, and immersed in, and even borne up by the self-revelation in time and in space of the eternal and invisible God. We are, as it were, living *in* a miracle – not just the “miracle” of creation, but the “miracle” of revelation. Therefore, we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to see Him. We can’t even exist without being daily confronted with the reality that He desires that we should know Him. Stop for a moment and think about this. So what should be the greatest, most pre-eminent desire of our hearts? What should be the highest goal of our lives? Shouldn’t it be to *know God*?

Now even if the answer is already obvious to us all, we could still ask the question: Why should we want to know God who reveals Himself through the Word? John continues in verse four:

**II. John 1:4** — In him was *life*, and the life was the *light* of *men*.

Who are we, apart from Him? What would we be, apart from Him? What do we have, apart from Him? “*In Him was life.*”

This life that was in Him was not physical life like animals have and like all human beings have. God isn’t “alive” like we are as creatures. This “life” that was in the Word is all the true bliss and

fullness of joy that is in God simply because of who God is. Do you want to know what life is? The existence of God in all His perfections of holiness, and truth, and love, and omnipotence, and sovereignty (cf. Hendriksen) is the very definition of “life.” He *is* life, so that apart from *Him* and outside of *Him* and without *Him* there can be no true joy or happiness – no true “*life*” anywhere else, ever, at all. In Him, then, (in the Word) was this life, and the life (this life that He *is*) was the light of men.

Why does God want us to know Him? So that we might have life – the true eternal life that brings us joy and true happiness and glorifies Him. Why should *we* desire above all else to know God? For all the same reasons! So that we might have life – the true eternal life that brings us joy and true happiness and glorifies God. And yet so often we settle for that which isn’t “life” at all – though we tell ourselves it is, and though the world tells us it is. So often we don’t desire above all else to *know God* because we’re convinced we can find life elsewhere. But set against this lie is this wonderful statement of the truth: “*In Him* was life, and the life [this life that He is] was the light of men.”

If we read these words in the light of what verse three says about the physical creation, we can be reminded here that the Word is the source of even our physical life as human beings. We read in Genesis 2:7 that “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of *life*, and the man became a *living creature*.” Paul can say of God:

- Acts 17:25, 28a — He himself gives to all mankind *life* and *breath* and everything... In him *we live* and *move* and have our *being*.

Paul says of the Son (or the “Word”) that “in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). And the writer of Hebrews says that “He upholds the universe by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). In this sense the same thing is true of the animals as is true of us. The Psalmist writes:

- Psalm 104:27–30 — These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit [your breath], they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

We are totally dependent upon God even for the beating of our hearts and each breath that we take.

But the life that God created us for is more than just the life of the animals – it’s the eternal life of true happiness and joy that comes from knowing Him (cf. Gen. 1:28). And so we remember not only that God breathed into man’s nostrils the *breath* of *life*, but also that God planted in the garden the *Tree of Life* which symbolized to Adam and Eve the true “life” that He had created them for (Gen. 2:9)—and that He created *us* for. So the psalmist writes:

- Psalm 36:9 — ***With you*** is the fountain of **life**; in your **light** do we see **light**.
- Psalm 56:13 (cf. Job 33:29-30; Ps. 16:11) — You have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk ***before God*** in the **light** of **life**.

- Psalm 133:3 — *There* [on the mountains of Zion where the presence of the Lord is] the LORD has commanded the blessing, **life forevermore**.

It's this life that is the true light of men that comes to us only in and through the Word—who was *with* God and who *was* God, and who reveals God and makes Him *known* to us. And now we read in verse five:

**III. John 1:5** — The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not\* overcome it.

Ever since those words, “in the beginning,” these verses have been full of the language of creation. And so there's a sense in which so far these verses have been nothing more than an inspired “commentary” on the first two chapters of Genesis. Creation *is* revelation. Creation *is* God's own *self*-revelation. This is the true “miracle” of creation: By the activity of the *Word* in creation, the *invisible* and *eternal* God has *revealed* Himself in *time* and *history so that others*—so that even creatures like us—*might know Him*. This is where we begin to comprehend the full magnitude of those words, “In the beginning.” The very fact of creation is not only constantly revealing God to us but is also constantly revealing God's desire that we should know Him. This is the reality in which we live, and move, and exist as creatures. But if this is so, then why don't we all know God? Why don't we all love and worship Him? Why don't we all have that eternal life of true happiness and joy that's found only in Him?

Here in verse five, we still hear as clearly as ever the echoes of Genesis chapter one: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Aren't you reminded right away of that first day of creation?

- Genesis 1:1–5 (cf. 1:14–18) — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and **darkness** was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “**Let there be light,**” and **there was light**. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the **light** from the **darkness**. God called the **light** Day, and the **darkness** he called Night.

It's obvious that John is still borrowing from the language of Genesis even as he's been doing from the very start. And yet now there's also a major difference. In Genesis, there isn't any conflict between the light and the darkness. In Genesis, darkness is not the enemy of the light. But what does John say here?—“The light shines *in* the darkness, and the darkness did not *overcome* it.” Do you see how John takes the original language of creation and repurposes it to describe something new?

The *same Word* who is active in creation is also the **Word** who is active in our redemption. *Therefore* the goal of redemption is ultimately the same as that of creation – that we should know God, and that in truly and really knowing Him we should have the light of life. If this creation is the “miracle” of the self-revelation of *God*, then how much more must this be true of our redemption? It's in our redemption in *time* and in *space* that the *eternal* and *invisible* God has

---

\* John moves from a “timeless” present tense (“the light shines”) to a punctiliar aorist (past) tense. The juxtaposition of the two tenses seems to require this understanding. If this understanding is correct, we should translate “did not” rather than “has not” (cf. NASB vs. ESV).

revealed Himself supremely to us *so that* we might know Him as we could never have known Him in any other way. Redemption *is* God's own self-revelation.

Why don't all men know God and have the eternal life that is in Him? John answers: Because "people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (Jn. 3:19). And yet even in the midst of this darkness that's all around us, the light shines and has always been shining ever since the beginning. Lenski writes:

We see its shining in the first promise of the seed of the woman in Eden; we see its broadening, intensified radiance throughout Old Testament times; we see some of its scattered rays striking even into the dark Gentile world with which Israel came into contact; and then we see the wonderful shining like the sun in its zenith when [the light came into this world; 1:9; 3:19] [and] the gospel was carried to the ends of the earth; even so it is shining now. What a wonderful fact, "And the light shines in the darkness."

We can go one step further and say that this fact is just as wonderful: "And the darkness did not overcome it." How can John speak in the past tense, here, as though the triumph of the light was already complete? Because the triumph of the light *is* already complete in and through the coming of this light *into* the world (cf. 1:9; 3:19). That's what this Gospel is about to show us.

## Conclusion

What do we learn in these opening verses of John's Gospel? The *same Word* who is active in creation is also the *Word* who is active in our redemption. Creation *is* God's own self-revelation. Redemption *is* God's own self-revelation. Therefore the goal of creation and redemption is the same – that we should know God, and that in truly and really knowing Him we should have the light of life. We're not talking about any kind of "mysticism" here, but we are talking about a "religion of the heart" – a true knowing God in relationship and fellowship with Him on the grounds of His own self-revelation in creation and—supremely—in redemption (the Scriptures being the inspired deposit of this redemptive revelation).

Do you know Him? Is it your desire always to know Him more? When Jesus prayed His High Priestly prayer in John 17 He prayed these words:

- John 17:3 — This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Do you have this "eternal life"? John writes, not in this Gospel but at the end of 1 John:

- 1 John 5:20 — The Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

And then John says this:

- 1 John 5:21 — Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

So often we settle for that which isn't "life" at all – though we tell ourselves it is, and though the world tells us it is. So often we can find ourselves running after "idols." And then our "religion" becomes mere formalism – just knowing the facts and going through the motions. But this is not "eternal life." This isn't the life that is in Him and that shines in the darkness. So therefore, let us keep ourselves from all idols – whatever they may be. Let us desire above all else to know and to love the only true God. This is something that the world can never take away from us. This is the only thing that really matters.