



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

John 1:1-5

“The Johannine Prologue: The Silence Broken - I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for this time, for the opportunity to study again together. We do praise Thee and thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee that he is the Lord, the Messiah, his name shall be called Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins, and so he is the Savior, Son of Man and Son of God. And now as we turn to consider in a little more detail something of the teaching of the word concerning him, his nature and attributes, we pray for illumination. May the Holy Spirit teach us the truth of God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Now the subject is "The Johannine Prologue: The Silence Broken" and this is the first of a series at the present time of two messages on this topic in which we discuss primarily the full deity of our Lord Jesus. Now, since I have given you a chance to look at that, I want to get all that I have on the transparency before you, but at the top it's The Johannine Prologue: The Silence Broken, John 1:1-18.

Now if you have your Bibles or your New Testaments, I'd like for you to turn with me to the Gospel of John chapter 1. This is the prologue of the gospel. And I'm going to read the first five verses because we'll spend our time tonight on these verses. John writes,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This one (that is, this one who is God) was in the beginning with God. All things have come to pass (or have to come be, literally) through Him, and without Him not even one thing has come to be."

Now there is a different way of punctuating this verse because, remember, in the Greek text, in almost all of our earliest manuscripts, there is little or no punctuation. So the division of the words and the punctuation of the clauses and sentences depends upon the understanding of the sense of the passage by the editors. Now I'm reading from the Greek text and this particular editor or group of editors has punctuated it this way. "All things have come to be through him and apart from Him, not even one thing has come to be." Then, "That which has come to be in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

Now it may also be punctuated this way, and almost all of your English versions do follow this particular punctuation. Verse 3,

"All things have come to be through him and without Him, not even one thing which has come to be, has come to be without Him. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. And the Light shines (notice the present tense) in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (that is, the light)"

The Johannine Prologue: The Silence Broken. Job has expressed something of the longing of the human heart when moved by the Holy Spirit for the knowledge of God. You remember this very beautiful text in the Book of Job, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat." John, the apostle, recounting the

Lord's words and works, makes the stupendous claim that the knowledge of Jesus Christ is the knowledge of God. That when a person comes to know him, he does know God.

Now if you'll turn over to the 8th chapter and the 19th verse of the Gospel of John, you will find that the author says, "And they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You neither know Me nor My Father; if you had known Me, you would have known My Father also." "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also." "

And then in chapter 14 and verse 9 in a more familiar text, we read, after Philip has said "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.' Jesus said to him, "Am I so long time with you, and have you not known Me, Philip? The one who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father?'" So you can see that the Lord Jesus claims that the knowledge of himself is the knowledge of God.

William Cannon, a very well-known Methodist scholar, has said, "Jesus of Nazareth is all we know of God, and yet all we need to know."

Now that is not altogether correct, but that is not far wrong because when a person knows Jesus Christ, he knows God. Well, we're going to turn tonight to a study of this person to learn of him in his full deity and in his true humanity. And we're going to concentrate for the next couple of times together on one of the greatest passages in the New Testament, John's prologue to his gospel.

One of the Lutheran commentators has said, "John's gospel is the paragon among the gospels. The one tender real crown gospel of them all." Now that expression comes from Luther. He said it was the "real crown gospel of them all." And then the Lutheran teacher continues, "And the prologue is the central jewel set in pure gold."

We're looking first at the Word in eternity and among men in the five verses. Now there're different ways to handle the prologue of the Gospel of John. For example, it is possible for us to divide this prologue up into four parts.

Now the prologue, you can tell, begins in verse 1 and concludes with verse 18. But, it is possible to see four strophes in this particular part of the gospel. For example, in the first five verses, the first strophe we could entitle The Logos of God because it is about the word. And then the second strophe, verses 6 through 8, is The Witness that Points to Him. And as you can see from looking at your book here, that is the witness of John the Baptist. The third strophe is in verse 9 through verse 13, and here we have The Fate of the Logos in the World. And finally in verse 14 through verse 18, we have The Confession of the Believing Community.

You probably have noticed in your reading of the prologue that in verse 14 the author changes from the third person to the first person. He says, "And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory." So he does here in verse 14 begin to give personal confession.

Now one of the commentators who has given us this fourfold division of the prologue suggests that what we have here in these eighteen verses, which stand out from the rest of the gospel, is a kind of history of salvation in the form of a hymn. I won't quote the German expression to you, but there are one or two who might know a little German. [German indistinct] So it is a history of salvation in the form of a hymn. It's the chanting of the history of salvation in psalmatic form. In other words, these eighteen verses are very much like a psalm. They are arranged in strophe form. So it is a magnificent piece of literature.

Now from the outline that I'm giving you, you can see a difference because I have given you a slightly different analysis. Mine is threefold.

Now preachers find it very difficult to do anything in fours. It's either three or seven. Three is the ideal number for preaching. And I won't tell you what they say in homiletics classes and theological schools because you might get mad. But it's either three or seven.

Now seven is the perfect number. And so naturally, some messages must have seven parts. But this one has three. And I am suggesting that we have here a kind of concentric development. We have the word in eternity and among men in verses 1 through 5. We have after this, and we'll deal with these in our next studies, the word in history and among the Jews. And finally, the word in history and among believers in verses 14 through 18. So I'm suggesting that we have a threefold division of these eighteen verses and that it is a kind of concentric development.

In fact, we could illustrate this by simply drawing three circles in which there is a wide circle, then a smaller circle, and still a smaller one. So that, we begin at the broadest which is the word in eternity and among men. Then we move to the word in history and among the Jews. And then we narrow down attention to finally this last small circle, to the word in history and among believers.

A number of years ago when I used to teach the exegesis of the Gospel of John in an elective course in a theological seminary, one year we were going through the opening part of the gospel here, and I was making some comments about the fact that the Gospel of John is really a propaganda document because at the conclusion of it John says, "Many other things did Jesus which are not written in this book, but these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing you might have life through His name."

Now that makes it clear that John is giving us a propaganda document. He wants people to read this gospel and come to the conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and further, that in believing this they might have life through his name. And a young fellow in the class raised his hand and said, That's rather interesting, Dr. Johnson, because you have said that the gospel is a propaganda document, and furthermore, you have said that John moves from revelation on into the response to it. He said, Now I happen to be a journalism major in university. And he said, That is exactly what they told us when they told us how to write an article for the newspaper. They said you must

begin with the general in the opening part of your reporting and then move to the particulars.

And I think that's still followed in a lot of the reporting because in the newspapers I notice this. That in the opening paragraph the essentials of the story are given, and then details are filled in from that time on.

Now if this is a propaganda document then, we should expect in this opening part of it to have a kind of them of the whole of the gospel. And that's precisely what we do because we have revelation and then we have response to it, the response of unbelief and the response of belief. And you know from reading the Gospel of John, that that is precisely what you have. You have the unfolding of revelation in the signs that our Lord did and the sermons that he gave in connection with them. Then you have the response of unbelief and then our Lord deals with the believers preparing them for the future and the gospel concludes with an account of the passion which is the foundation of the salvation that is being portrayed.

No book has ever opened with a more magnificent prologue than the Gospel of John. Mark began his story at the Jordan River. Matthew and Luke begin their stories in Bethlehem of Judea. But John goes back to the very beginning of history, even beyond history, as if to say there is only one true perspective in which to see this story. You must see it in the light of eternity. And that's the way it begins. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

So let's look now at capital A: The Person of the Word. Verses 1 and 2.

Now the Gospel of John is the story of the new creation. Genesis is the story of the first creation. Genesis begins with the creation of the physical universe. The Gospel of John begins with the story of the new creation, the story of the origin of the sons of God. In other words, Genesis begins with the physical and material creation. John begins by dealing with things that have to do with the spiritual creation of the sons of God. So it's not surprising since this is the story of the new creation, as over against the

old creation, that the words of John should echo the style, the vocabulary, the syntax and the general sense of the opening verses of genesis.

How does the Book of Genesis begin? Well, it begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Now in the translation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament made by Greek-speaking people or made for Greek-speaking people, the opening words of that Greek translation of the Old Testament are the words "En arche." And that is precisely how this gospel begins, "en arche". "In the beginning was the Word." And it is likely that John, when he wrote this, "In the beginning was the Word," had Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 upon his mind.

Now let's look at this verse in some detail. It happens to be one of the really important verses of the Bible touching the true or full deity of our Lord Jesus.

Now I want you to notice that there are three clauses in the verse. First of all, "In the beginning was the Word," clause number one. "And the Word was with God," clause number two. "And the Word was God," clause number three. Three clauses, perfect text for preaching, three points, you see.

Now in the first clause, we have stated the eternity of the Word. "In the beginning was the Word." I would imagine, though there is dispute over this, I would imagine that when John wrote, "In the beginning," he was thinking temporally. He was thinking of the beginning as a temporal beginning. "In the beginning was the Word."

Now it is very difficult for us to know absolutely whether John has in mind the beginning of the creation, that is, the beginning referred to in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning," that is, when God created the heavens and the earth, or whether this "In the beginning" goes back beyond that. It is possible that it does because in verse 3 we read, "All things have been created through Him." So he mentions creation after this beginning. It is possible then that this beginning is intended by John to go back into the ages of

eternity past, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Unfortunately, there is no way that I know of, after studying this for twenty-five or thirty years, there is no way to be absolutely certain what John meant by "In the beginning."

Now I'm still living, in spite of the fact that I had another birthday today, and I passed another milestone. And so, as long as I'm breathing, there's hope that I may be able to find the solution to this particular dilemma. But fortunately, there is a statement or a part of this text that makes it very clear that the sense does go back to the ages of eternity past, whether "In the beginning" refers to that or not, because the little word "was" is a word in the original text that refers to past time in a durative sense, durative past time.

So let us just say for a moment that "In the beginning" refers to Genesis 1:1, that beginning. So "In the beginning" when God created the heavens and the earth, the Word was. In other words, the Word was in existence and had been in existence at that time. So that would tell us, then, that the Word was preexistent in so far as the creation was concerned. In other words, the verb tells us that the statement made concerning the Word is something that goes back beyond the creation of the heavens and the earth. So it's not necessary for us to really know the precise sense of "In the beginning."

John Calvin says, "It's not necessary to appeal to the tense because the idea of eternal existence for John (as Calvin says) takes the readers back to the eternal sanctuary of God in thought." Now what he means by that is that this text goes on to say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God" then. Now to be with God means that the Word was existing in the presence of God. So that in a sense, what we have here is a kind of opening of the door so that we see the persons of the Trinity in fellowship one with another when the creation takes place down here upon the earth. So I think

then that we are safe in saying that this passage, this particular clause, does teach us the eternity of the Word of God.

One of the false teachers, about which you'll study if you take Church history, was Arius. Arius once said [Latin indistinct] which means "there was a time when he (that is, the Son of God) was not."

Now this text disputes the claim of Arius. There never was a time when the Son of God was not. Now of course, we don't have to have just this text. We have many other texts that teach that our Lord was the eternal Son. Now there is no statement that says he is the eternal Son, but the eternal Sonship is taught in the word of God.

What does he mean when he says "In the beginning was the Word"? What does "the Word" mean? Now some look at this and say, why that's a Greek term. They use the term *logos* as the rational principle permeating all reality. That's the *logos*. I grew up on Plato. And in the Greeks, you will find a full use of the term *logos*. And it is used in this sense of the rational principle that permeates all reality, the *logos*, reason.

And some have thought that perhaps John here is trying to set up some common ground on which the Greeks and Gentiles and Jewish believers such as he may meet and then on the basis of this common ground of the *logos*, he may draw them to consider the claims of our Lord Jesus to be the true *logos*. I don't think that that is true. That has been held by a lot of New Testament scholars down through the years, generally of the liberal and unbelieving kind, though not entirely.

It is much better, I think, to take this as a Hebraic word. Because if you read your Old Testament, you will find that the term word is very common in the Old Testament. In fact, the term word is a good Hebrew word. *Dabar*, for example, is the Hebrew word for word, and it has a wide usage in the Old Testament. What is the usage of the term word in the Old Testament? Well, you will find it referred; it will refer to God's creative power in action for one meaning. The word, the word of God, God's creative power in action.

Now the word, the sense of the term word. The word "word" is not found in this passage, but the idea is right there in Genesis 1:3. "And God said," that is, he spoke a word. "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

Now that use of the term is found in connection with the term word in the Old Testament. So word refers to God's creative power in action. It also refers to God's guiding purpose at work in history, his word.

Now you'll remember in, for example, the prophets, you have this often. Hosea will say, "The word of the Lord came to me," and then the content of the word is given, the burden that the prophets had. So that that is God's guiding purpose at work in history. Hosea chapter 1, verses 1 and 2 have a twofold use of the term word in that sense.

And finally, the term word is used in the Old Testament of God's redemptive power. Let me give you one illustration, Psalm 107 and verse 20, "He sent His word and healed them." So the word is a word of redemptive power.

I think then when we think of the word of God as a term for our Lord Jesus Christ we are to think of it as God showing himself in Jesus Christ in power, in wisdom and in redemptive love. This is why John calls the Lord Jesus the Word. He is the power of God. He is the wisdom of God. And he is the redemptive love of God.

"In the beginning was the Word." What a beautiful expression that is. And then when we read, "And the Word became flesh," what a tremendous thing that is to think of, that this Word, representing the power of God, the wisdom of God and his redemptive love, actually came down in our midst into this human scene.

So, as is true of most of the Gospel of John, the background of the book is the Old Testament, not Greek literature. The writers of the New Testament do not pay a great deal of attention to what the Greeks and the Gentiles were doing. And with good reason, because they weren't doing anything particularly good. So they naturally phrase all of

their thought in the language of the Old Testament. So first of all, "In the beginning was the Word," the eternal Word.

Now the second clause says, "And the Word was with God."

Now I'm saying that that expresses his community of interest with the Father. The preposition that is used here and translated with is a preposition that does not simply mean with in the sense that I am here in front of you with this pulpit desk. Or I am here in front of you with my Bible, that is, this is accompanying me. Or I am here with something else that is inanimate. This expression with does not ordinarily in classical Greek mean in the presence of, but in the New Testament and Hellenistic Greek, it often has the expression as the meaning of in company with or with in the sense of having fellowship with. And that is its force here. "And the Word was with God."

I think that it is not a real bad rendering to say, In the beginning was the Word and the Word was in the company of God.

Now the meaning of that is that he was in the company of God, in fellowship with God, and there was an interchange of communion between them. So the Word was with God.

I wish I had time to look up passages, but if you have a pencil and a piece of paper, just jot down some of these, and when you go home, look up 1 John chapter 1, verse 2; chapter 2, verse 1 of 1 John; Mark chapter 6 and verse 3; Mark chapter 9 and verse 19; 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 and verse 4; and then one other text in Mark, Mark chapter 14 and verse 49.

In the passage in Mark 6:3, which you need not look at, we read here, "Is not this the carpenter (they were saying), the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Justus and Judas and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" And that's the expression, "with us", and they meant by that they are living with us. We see them every day. We have relationship with them. So when we read here, "The Word was with God," we are to think of, as Calvin says, "The heavenly sanctuary in which the triune God sits and acts

and moves and we have Father, Son and Spirit and they're engaging in communion one with the other."

I believe that what we have here is an idea that is expounded in verse 18 a little fuller. "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father." That's what it means when it says "And the Word was with God." He was in the bosom of the Father, in the most intimate relationship that you could possibly have, the Son with the Father, the communion perfect, the communion intimate. What a magnificent picture of the dignity of the Son of God, in the bosom of the Father.

Now finally, at the conclusion of this verse, we have the third clause, and here we have clearly expressed the deity of the Son, "And the Word was God."

Now we don't have time to argue this grammatically. Jehovah's Witnesses, who make a habit of tearing Scripture to shreds, cannot make any sense out of the Bible at all because they do not study the Bible with the context of the Bible in view, make a great deal over this passage. They like to point out that the word God in that third clause is a word that does not have the article. And consequently, in their translation of the New Testament, their New World Translation, you will find, 'And the word was a god.' In other words, there are gods many, and the Word is a god. Jesus has the dignity of a God, but not the dignity that he is given in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Jehovah's Witnesses are not Christians at all. Do not think for one moment that they are Christians. They appeal to the Scriptures just as Mormons do, who also are not Christians. They like to say they're Christians, but they're not Christians. You cannot be a Christian if you do not believe in the Trinity. That is fundamental to the Christian doctrine. And the deity of Jesus Christ is essential to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now I don't have time to argue the grammatical side of this question about whether this clause should be translated as the "Word was God" or the "Word was a God." Suffice it to say, I don't know.

This, incidentally, is not designed to prove anything. But I don't know of any self-respecting scholar of the New Testament Greek who would disagree with the translation "The Word was God." Now he might have one basis for translating it this. And another might have another basis, because it is possible to explain this in two ways grammatically. There is an older way, which many of the older scholars have used. And there is a newer way which some more recent scholars have sought to support.

I personally still prefer the older explanation of this. And I rather think that that is the reason why it should be translated, "The Word was God." But even if we disagree over the reason for it, we all agree in the study of the word here in the Greek text, that the meaning is "The Word was God." So that, what John is saying is that the Lord Jesus Christ possesses full deity.

Now I don't think that it is possible to understand the Gospel of John if you don't understand that. You see, this is a kind of introduction to the gospel. That's what we mean when we say prologue. It's the introduction to the gospel. And consequently, the ideas found in the prologue are the principal ideas of the Gospel of John.

You see, the reason John has written this verse here right at the beginning, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," is because he wants to impress upon you right at the beginning that the deeds and the words of the Lord Jesus Christ are the deeds and words of God. And he wants you to also to know that if this is not true, then this book that he is giving the story of Jesus in, is a blasphemous book because that's what he says as it is his fundamental presupposition, that the words and deeds of our Lord Jesus are the words and deeds of God. And if they're not, then the whole book is nothing more than a piece of literature of interest only because it's nineteen hundred years old. That's all. He wants all of his readers to read the book in the light of these opening verses which make up his prologue. So you will never understand the Gospel of John as you should if you don't see right at the beginning what John is saying and read the book in the light of it.

Now the second verse and I'll just make one comment about because really it's a simple repetition of the preceding. He says the second verse to reemphasize the preceding one. He says, "This one." Well, that one that I've just said is God. That's a reference to the third clause of the preceding verse. "This one was in the beginning." That's the first clause of the first verse. "With God," that's the second clause of the first verse. So all he's done is to gather up the third clause in the word "this" and repeat what he has said in order to emphasize what he's been saying in verse 1. "This one," that is, God, "was in the beginning" and he was "with God" in the beginning.

Now you can say at this point that John's thinking has not reached the crystalized stage of Chalcedon, the great Christological agreement or symbol as a result of the council that took place there. But what he said is in harmony with it. He thinks of the Son as the eternal God. He thinks of the Son as distinct from the Father for he was "with God" personally. And he thinks of the Son as possessing the attributes common to the Father, for he says he is such a person as God.

These are great words. They almost make a Methodist say Hallelujah. It takes more for a Presbyterian, [Laughter] but a Methodist.

Now Capital B: The Work of the Word. Verse 3 opens with a Hebraic antithetical parallelistic statement. Notice what it says. "All things have come to be through Him, and without Him not even one thing which has come to be has come to be, or came to be." So in other words, he states it positively and negatively for the sake of emphasis.

The all inclusiveness of these words, incidentally, in verse 3 raise the question of the problem of evil. I throw it out to you in order that you might think a little bit, expand your mind. "All things have come to be through Him." What about evil? What about evil? If it's a thing, it has come to be through him. Think about it.

Now we all as Christians, we all agree that God is not the author of evil. He is not evil. Evil does not proceed out of his being, cannot proceed out of his being, for he is a holy God. But who determined that the evil of the crucifixion of Christ should take place?

Well, we all agree that it was God, do we not? This one by the determinant counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have with wicked hands taken and crucified. So there was a conjunction of the determinant counsel and foreknowledge of God and the wickedness of evil men. "All things have come to pass through Him."

Now, I threw that out just to excite you a little. But really, the primary thing he's talking about is the creation of the physical universe, isn't he? "All things have come to pass through Him, and not even one thing," he says. "Not even one thing which has come to be has not come to be through Him." So he says everything has come through him and then negatively, "Not even one thing has not come to be through Him." Now that's the work of creation.

In the 4th verse, he speaks about the work of revelation. "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." Now since this doesn't pertain to the full deity of Christ, you'll pardon me if I only make reference to it. He is referring not simply to spiritual life, but he's talking about spiritual life before the coming of our Lord. "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men."

What does he refer to? Why, he refers to Old Testament events, Old Testament types, Old Testament ceremonies, Old Testament ordinances, Old Testament theophanies. "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." He has given life to the whole of the creation. And through the events and all of the other things that make up his physical world, he has spoken.

Now he has not yet come to the time of our Lord. He does that in verse 5. He says, "And the Light shines," present tense. The tense changes. "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Now for the sake of time, that is simply a statement that over against the light is the darkness, a word that, by the way, presupposes the fall of man. And he says here that it was the work of darkness to try to overcome the light when the light came in our Lord Jesus. But the Light, the darkness was unable to overcome the Light. He has overcome,

and he refers to the cross, of course, ultimately where the Lord Jesus has overcome Satan, sin, all of the darkness of the evil one. So the Light is unconquerable.

Let me close. Ignatius was one of the first, if not the first, Christian Bishop. If you want to know where the system of the bishops arose, well, the monarchical bishopric arose evidently around the time of the period between the finish of the New Testament and Ignatius' writing, a very short time. Ignatius was a Christian man. He wrote a letter to the Magnesians. And in this letter he speaks of Christ as the Word of God. He says, Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God which came forth out of silence.

The idea of our Lord coming out of silence originated with Judaism. It was linked with Genesis 1:3, "And God said." He hadn't spoken until then. But he finally spoke and so the silence was broken when God said, "Let there be light," according to the Rabbis. The Rabbis asked, What was there before God spoke? And then they answered, God's silence. It became a token of his inexpressible majesty.

But the Christian message is God is no longer silent. He has spoken out of his silence. And he himself has come in the Lord Jesus as the Word of God, with words of inexpressible grace. No wonder the early Christians, according to Pliny sang a hymn at the daily observance of the Lord's Supper to Christ as a God. We must do it too. He does possess full deity for only a God can save sinners such as we are.

Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for this wonderful prologue of the Gospel of John. We shall never exhaust it. It's meaning is too deep for us, but we rejoice in the clear testimony that thou hast broken Thy silence. Thou hast spoken. And in Jesus Christ the voice of God has reached its final and ultimate expression. Enable us, Lord, to respond in proper faith. If there are some here who do not know him, draw them to him who is the Word of God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.