



got life?

The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

John 1:1-18

I. The Blind Men and the Elephant.

John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887) wrote a **cute** poem based on an ancient Indian parable about the futile efforts of a group of blind men to define an elephant. But like many children’s stories, this poem aims at making a **serious** philosophical point.

*It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation, might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
Against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
'God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!'*

*The second feeling of the tusk, cried: 'Ho! what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!'*

*The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
The squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake:
'I see,' quoth he, 'the elephant is very like a snake!'*

The 4th blind man took the elephant’s knee and concluded he was like a tree. The 5th took his ear . . . like a fan. The 6th took his tail . . . like a rope. But it is only in the closing two verses that we discover the philosophy of this dangerous poem.

*And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
And prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!*

Conclusion: God is **unknowable**. The best we can do is make intelligent guesses about what he (she? it? they?) is like. Of course, Mr. Saxe is correct in his **agnosticism** if this is all there is to the story, *but* what if the elephant **spoke**? What if he turned to the blind men and said, “Gentlemen, let me introduce myself. I’m an elephant.” This is precisely the point John makes in his prologue.

II. How to Know God.

A. The “Elephant” Speaks

John begins his Gospel by explaining that God has not left us in **the dark** about who he is and what his purposes are. He speaks! We don’t have to guess or remain stuck in agnosticism. Our knowledge of God is not based on human wisdom but on God’s self-disclosure! The theological name for this doctrine is **revelation**. The theme of John’s prologue is **the Word** (*logos*).

B. John 1:1–18. The word before the word (*pro-logue*).

John begins the story of Jesus with no reference to Mary, the manger, the star, or the shepherds. Rather, he goes much further back to **the beginning**. He tells us who God is and describes how he has spoken to us through the Christ event. In these verses, he introduces the key themes of the book he is writing.

The Pre-existent Word	The Forerunner to the Word	The Rejectable Word	The Enfleshment of the Word
He was God and yet he was distinct from God.	John the Baptist was the first to recognize him and urged us to believe in him.	Most failed to recognize him and many rejected him; but some believed.	The Word became flesh and his appearance was glorious: full of grace and truth.
1–5	6–8	9–13	14–18

C. Notes on the text.

- John 1: 5, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not **overcome** it” (ESV). Other translations say that the darkness has not understood the light or perhaps extinguished the light. The point John is making is that all the darkness of the universe cannot dispel the one shining light of Jesus. Darkness will **not prevail**.
- John 1:9, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” John speaks of a general illumination that is available to all men everywhere. This speaks of the doctrine of **prevenient grace** which makes salvation a potential possibility for **everyone**.
- John 1:14a, “The Word became flesh . . .” Though the Word is **eternal**, there was a moment in time when he **became** a man. The Unchanging One changed! “Flesh” is an almost crude way of referring to human nature and is intended to have shock value.
- John 1:14b, “The Word . . . **dwelt** among us . . .” The Greek term literally means that he “pitched his tent”; a reference to the dwelling place of God in the Tabernacle in the wilderness.
- John 1:14c, “The only Son from the Father . . .” Older translations say “**only begotten**” (generated, engendered). The emphasis is on Jesus’ **unique** status, but it may also speak to the Son of God being eternally *from* the Father. As the creeds will clarify, Jesus is “begotten, not made.”
- John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; the only God [the Son], who is at the Father’s side, he has **made him known**.” The Greek term “made him known” is the verb form of the word “exegesis.” Every Greek student knows this word. It means to **interpret** or to understand a text. Jesus exegetes God. He explains and interprets who God is for everyone who is humble enough to look and listen.

D. The Logos: A brilliant way to describe Jesus.

In using the term *logos* (Word) to introduce the person and ministry of Jesus, John chooses a term that resonates deeply with both Greeks and Jews.

1. Even for those without Greek or Jewish roots, the term is profoundly rich in meaning. Consider the following:
 - a. A word **reveals** what someone is thinking, feeling, or desiring. If you don't speak, I can only guess who you really are.
 - b. A word is composed of sound plus **breath**.
 - c. While animals may have basic communication skills, they don't talk. Only persons communicate with words. This is part of the **image of God**.
 - d. Words make life **meaning-full**. They can interpret facts and events that otherwise would remain mysterious.
 - e. Words make intimate **relationships** possible. It takes more than touch or eye contact to have genuine community.
2. Long before the New Testament was written, Greek philosophers spoke frequently about *the logos*. For the Greeks, the term referred to **reason**, thought, or the divine principle. This explains why so many English terms today have "-logy" at the end. Biology is the study of life, geology is the study of earth, etc. That John would speak of Jesus in terms of "the logos of God" would surely capture the intellectually curious among the Greeks.
3. The primary source of John's thinking was surely the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the **Old Testament**). Here we have many rich allusions to "the word" that help to explain John's choice of this vocabulary:
 - a. The **creative** Word. When John says, "In the beginning..." every Jew immediately recognizes this as an allusion to Genesis 1:1 and the story of creation where God created everything with **a word**: "Let there be..."

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... For he spoke, and it came to be, he commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33:6, 9) (See Hebrews 11:3).
 - b. The **prophetic** Word. When the prophets say, "Thus says the Lord," they are declaring God's purpose, his will, and his commands. The Word of God is **authoritative** and final; non-negotiable. Even when God's voice is only a **whisper**, it is more powerful than storm, earthquake, or fire (I Kgs 19:12). God's word is like a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces (Jer 23:29).
 - c. The **eternal** Word. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8). Wicked king Jehoiakim tried to destroy God's word by **burning** Jeremiah's scroll, but God's word remained in force, even stronger than before (see Jer 36).
 - d. The **life-giving** Word. The prophet Ezekiel preached the Word of God to a valley full of dead men's bones and new life came to them all (Ezek 37:1-14). God's Word can bring about a **new creation**.
 - e. The **victorious** Word. God's Word cannot fail. What he says, he will do! "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall **succeed** in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11).

John's Gospel shows us how **Jesus** is the Word of God in every one of these dimensions. He doesn't just speak God's Word, he *is* God's Word.

E. Creedal Precision.

It took several centuries to get the wording right to articulate the truth of Scripture when it comes to describing who God is (Trinity), who Jesus is (Incarnation), and why he came (Soteriology). The Nicene Creed (325 AD) is a beautiful example of the importance of **precision** in the words we use.

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made;

*Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. . . .
(Version from the Book of Common Prayer, 1662)*

III. The Word about the Word.

It is only in John 1:17 that John clearly tells us the name of the Word: **Jesus Christ**. In calling Jesus “the Word,” John is making claims about his Person and his Work that explode our minds, capture our hearts, and take our breath away.

- A. The Word is **pre-existent**. Although there is a point in time and space when **Jesus** began his life (Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago), it only marks the moment the **Son of God** took on flesh. The Son of God has existed from the beginning. He is uncreated. This is why John the Baptist could say “he who comes after me . . . was before me” (Jn 1:15).
- B. The Word is **with God** (Jn 1:1). The connection between who a person *is* and what a person *says* is profound, yet the two are **distinct**. In a similar way, John makes clear that God the Son is distinct from God the Father, though they have the closest and most intimate relationship. God and the Word are one, yet they are not identical. The Trinitarian formula is: one God, three **Persons**.
- C. The Word is **God** (Jn1:1). Though distinct from one another, John deepens the mystery by declaring that “the Word was God.” How can they be distinct and yet one? Welcome to the **mystery** of the Trinity. Jesus put it succinctly: “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). Paul put it this way: in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). As Dennis Kinlaw loved to say, “All there is of God is in Jesus. But Jesus is not all there is of God.”
- D. The Word **created** everything (Jn 1:3). Paul makes the same point when he says “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**.” (Col 1:16–17).
- E. The Word is the source of **life** (Jn 1:4). “In him was life.” Jesus is **self-originating** and self-sustaining. This is true of no creature. “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Jn 5:26).
- F. The Word is the source of **light** (Jn 1:4–5). Jesus is the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12). He enlightens everyone! Light dispels darkness, yet some remain blind (see Jn 9).
- G. The Word became **flesh** (Jn 1:14). Up until verse 14, many Jews and Greeks might have nodded in approval of John’s philosophical and theological insights related to

“the Logos.” But in four short words, John drops a nuclear bomb: “The Word became flesh.” God wrote himself into the **script**! He chose to become one of the characters in the drama of human history. It is remarkable that nowhere does Jesus use the prophetic formula, “Thus says the Lord.” Rather he consistently says, “Amen, amen, **I say** unto you.” He is the Word! He did not come to bring a message; he *is* the message (Rev 19:13).

- H. The Word **exegetes** God. Though no one has ever seen God, Jesus gives us a clear **picture** of who God really is! “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (Jn 14:9).
- I. The Word confronts us with a **choice**. Will we become children of God or will we continue to live in darkness? In these 18 verses, John is not just teaching theology. He is preaching the good news of the gospel that **demand**s a decision for everyone who hears it!
- Will I not **recognize** him (Jn 1:10)? Am I so blind that I can’t see the Light of the world? Am I so deaf I can’t hear the Word of God (see Jn 12:28–29)?
 - Will I **reject** God because I disapprove of the form in which he chooses to come to me (Jn 1:11)?
 - Or will I **receive** him and **believe** on his name, giving me the right to become a child of God (Jn 1:12–13)? The Word will never force himself on anyone! He leaves the decision up to us. Note well what John is saying: The Son of God became flesh so that flesh (you and me) can become sons and daughters of God. While we are not divine and never will be, we are given the opportunity to become his children by being **born of God** (Jn 1:13; 3:1–15).
 - The light that enlightens every man (Jn 1:9) means that there is **no excuse**! He gives us enough light to enable us to say “yes.” If we refuse him, it is our own willful rejection of the truth. For such a decision, we will be held eternally accountable (Jn 3:19, 36).