

Unwrapping God's Greatest Gift
THE DEITY OF JESUS CHRIST
John 1:1

Joshua Bell emerged from the Metro and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript—a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play.

For the next 45 minutes, in the D.C. Metro on January 12, 2007, Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly taking notice. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man for the world-renowned violinist he is. They also might have noted the violin he played—a rare Stradivarius worth over \$3 million. It was all part of a project arranged by *The Washington Post*—“an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?”

Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for \$100. In the subway, Bell garnered about \$32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation.ⁱ

In this series we are unwrapping God's greatest gift – the person of Jesus Christ. After all, that's what Christmas is all about. My concern is that, even for us who claim to be Christ followers, we can walk right past this most precious gift and hardly notice the beauty, the wonder, the truth, the preciousness of what we have in Christ. The pace of life and the repetition of well-known truths can blind us to the profound nature and transcendent beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so we can also ask: “in a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, will beauty transcend?”

That's the desire of the evangelist John as he pens these inspired words in John 1. Listen carefully to what he says. I'll read simply verses 1-2 and verse 14.ⁱⁱ

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. John 1:1

And now verse 14:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Jesus Christ is the meeting place of time and eternity, the embodiment of deity and humanity, the junction of heaven and earth. This morning, our desire is to pause long enough to see him for who he truly is – *full deity* in flesh. (By the way, for those who may not be familiar with the expression, when we speak of the deity or divinity of Jesus Christ, we are speaking of the doctrine, the teaching that he is God.)

By the way, before going any further we need to ask, “Just who or what is this ‘Word’ that John is speaking of?”ⁱⁱⁱ Even if you’ve never been exposed to the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, you may know that this title, the “Word,” is a translation of the Greek term λόγος. This was a very popular term among the Greek philosophers of John’s day. They would sit around and debate about the λόγος, the “supreme principle behind the universe.” And even the common people, who were not well-versed in philosophy, talked a lot about this concept. It may be, then, that one of John’s motivations in using this term to describe Jesus Christ is to build a bridge of communication into the lives of those to whom he’s writing. In fact, Justin Martyr (AD 100 – 165), one of the first Christian apologists (i.e. a defender of the faith), became a believer in Christ after a long search for truth in the pagan philosophies. The turning point for Justin Martyr was when he realized that Jesus was the true λόγος the philosophers were talking about, but whom they had never come to know or understand.

But the real background of John’s thought is found, not in Greek philosophy, but in the Old Testament. In Genesis 1, the account of creation, we find the words “Then God *said*” more than eight times. And when God spoke, things happened! God’s word has creative power. God’s word brings life! So those in John’s day who had some knowledge of the Old Testament would think first of all of divine power when they heard the word λόγος.

But here’s the point. While John may have caught the interest of both Greeks and Jews in using this word λόγος, he’ll go on to show that the Word is not just a divine *principle* (as the Greeks thought) or an impersonal manifestation of the *power* of God (as the Jews thought). NO, the Word is a *person*—the person of Jesus Christ!

Jesus Christ as the *word* of God is the expression of God. What is a “word?” A word is an expression of what is in one’s mind and heart. That’s why S.D. Gordon has said, “Jesus is God spelling himself out in language that man can understand.” In Jesus Christ, who has existed from eternity past, God is “spelling himself out” in language that you and I can understand. That’s why Jesus can say, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

If you want to know what God is like, look at the Son, the Word. There God is spelling himself out in language that you and I can understand. And that’s our purpose in this series. It will also be our purpose in our study of Hebrews together beginning in January. We want to be like those who came to Philip and said, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (John 12:20-21). Is that your desire this Christmas season? Or is your mind taken with all the hectic rush of family celebration and gift-giving? My prayer for myself and for us as a church is that we can all be renewed in our desire to see Jesus Christ for all that He truly is – God’s greatest gift to humanity.

JESUS, THE WORD, EXISTS ETERNALLY

John helps us “unwrap” God’s greatest gift by saying that, “In the beginning was the Word.” Can you think of another book of the Bible that begins that way? You’re right, the first book of the Bible, Genesis. It says, “In the beginning, God...” And not only does Genesis begin that way, but throughout Genesis 1 *and* John 1 we find the same themes of creation, light and darkness.

What is remarkable, however, about John’s statement is the emphasis upon the fact that, if you go all the way back to Genesis 1:1 and the creation of the heavens and the earth, *even before*

that, the Word already was! Go back millions, or billions, or trillions or “squillions” of years, and there the Word already is. Mark in his gospel begins the story of Jesus at the Jordan River where Jesus is baptized. Matthew and Luke start at Bethlehem. But John takes us all the way to eternity past.

What John is saying is this: the Word has existed eternally. There was no beginning point where the Word *came* into existence. John is very precise in the selection of his words. When he talks later in verse 6 about John the Baptist coming on the scene, he also uses a word that can sometimes be translated “was.” In fact, the King James Bible in verse 6 reads, “There *was* a man sent from God whose name was John.” But John the Baptist had a beginning, like each one of us here today. And he also had an ending, when his head was lobed off. However in verse 1, as John describes the Word, he uses a word that is always, literally translated “was” and not “came” or “became.” So John is saying, “Go all the way back to the beginning of time and there the Word already is.”

JESUS, THE WORD, IS DISTINCT PERSONALITY

But Jesus Christ, as the “word,” is more than the eternal *expression* of God. That could be easily misunderstood. Jesus Christ, as the Word, is a distinct personality. By that I mean a distinct person. Notice what John says in the next part of this verse: “...and the Word was *with* God.”

Again, let’s not be in too much of a hurry and pass over that full meaning of that little word “with.” The word carries the idea of accompaniment and relationship. It literally means “face to face with God.” And that speaks of personal, intimate companionship and communion.

But it also implies that Jesus Christ, the Word, is *distinct* from God the Father. You can’t be “face to face with” someone if you *are* that someone. For John’s readers, even those acquainted with the Old Testament, this is a new concept. Remember, they thought of the “word” as an impersonal manifestation of the power of God. But to now say that this “word” is a person, with a distinct personality, who is “face to face” with God? Wow, that is novel! But that is exactly what John is saying.

Some have the mistaken idea that God is one person who simply manifests himself in different ways at different times. In the early church this understanding was considered a heresy called “modalistic monarchianism” or sabellianism. It was developed by a man named Sabellius who lived in the 3rd Century. He taught that God was *manifested* as the Father in the Old Testament, later as the Son to redeem mankind and finally as the Holy Spirit following Pentecost. This is sometimes illustrated by a man being a son, a brother and a father, depending on the relationship he is in at the moment. This view is in error in that it denies the *distinct personality* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It also denies the truth that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist *at the same time as distinct persons*. But John says, “The Word was with God.” The Word, Jesus Christ, *is* a distinct person and not to be confused with God the Father.

JESUS CHRIST, THE WORD, IS FULL DEITY

While not to be confused with the distinct personality of God the Father, the Word, Jesus Christ *is* full deity. He possesses all the divine attributes of God. Is God the Father eternal? Then Jesus

Christ is also eternal. Is God the Father all-powerful? Then Jesus Christ, the Word, is also all-powerful. In other words, Jesus Christ is full deity.

This is what John says next: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the *Word was God.*” John’s statement is very carefully crafted and we again must not pass too quickly over what he is saying. For example, we must not water down that statement as one translation does by simply saying “The Word was divine”^{iv} or god-like. This sounds as if Jesus Christ is some kind of demi-god, in that no-man’s land between God and his creation. If John had wanted to say that, there are other words in his language that he could have chosen. But he again is very precise

John also does not say what the Jehovah Witnesses want him to say in this passage: “and the Word was *a god.*” They argue that because the word “God” does not have the article reading “the God,” John meant “*a god.*” But this doesn’t make sense. If they took their own translation seriously then they would be polytheists. A polytheist is one who believes in more than one God. And if Jesus is only *a god* among other gods, then we should all be polytheists!

But there’s another reason that the Jehovah Witnesses are mistaken (as well as other cults which take this same perspective). Their translation of this verse betrays their lack of understanding of Greek grammar. The fact that the word “God” does not have the article “the” before it (reading “the God”) is intentional in John’s Greek language. He is emphasizing the *qualitative* aspect of who Jesus Christ is. He is saying, “The Word has the same nature as God” or “The Word is full deity.” The fact of the matter is that John *could not* have placed an article in front of the word “God,” for then the phrase would read: *The Word was the God*, meaning the Word was God the Father. But that’s not what John wanted to say. To say, “The Son *is* the Father” is to deny the distinct personality of the Son. John did not want to say this

But there’s something else that John doesn’t say in this verse. He is *not* saying that “God is the Word.” He is *not* saying that *all* of deity is the Word, Jesus Christ. There is more to God than the Word. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are also deity, i.e. “God.” So while the *λόγος* is *not* the Father, he does have all the qualities that add up to the fact that he is full deity. If John is not saying (1) the Word was god-like; (2) the Word was a god; (3) the Word was *the* God; or (4) God was the Word...what is he saying? John is saying this: The Word was God, i.e. the Word, Jesus Christ, has the same nature as God. The Word is deity.

Bono, lead singer of the rock group U2, was asked if the claim of Jesus’ divinity is farfetched. Here’s what he said:

No, it’s not farfetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn’t allow you that. He doesn’t let you off that hook. Christ says: No. I’m not saying I’m a teacher. Don’t call me teacher. I’m not saying I’m a prophet. I’m saying: “I’m the Messiah.” I’m saying: “I am God incarnate.”

So what you’re left with is: either Christ was who he said he was—the Messiah—or a complete nutcase. I mean, we’re talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson.... The

idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that's farfetched.^v

Let me go back in time and cite from another well-known figure (quite unlike Bono!). A few weeks before he died, Benjamin Franklin, who was known for his curiosity, intellectual aptitude and was esteemed by philosophers and intellectuals both in the US and Europe, was asked about his religious faith by the then president of Yale University. Franklin said this:

As to Jesus of Nazareth...I have...some doubts as to His divinity, tho' it is a question I do no dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the good consequences...of making his doctrines more respected and observed.^{vi}

John, the Evangelist, who wrote the words we just heard read, does not take this matter of the deity (or divinity) of Jesus so lightly. And the fact that John, in contrast to Benjamin Franklin, takes that very seriously is seen in John 8:24 where he records these words of Jesus himself: "I told you that you would *die in your sins*, if you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be]."

Do you catch the contrast? Benjamin Franklin says, "Hey, this whole question of Jesus being God, I've never really studied it, I don't think much about it, and I have my doubts...but soon I'll find out if it's really true or not!" But Jesus Christ himself says: "If you do not believe that I am [i.e. the one I claim to be...God in the flesh], then you will die in your sins."

In one inspired verse consisting of seventeen words in John's Greek language we are told that (1) Jesus Christ, the Word, has existed eternally; (2) Jesus Christ, the Word, is a distinct personality; and (3) Jesus Christ, the Word, is full deity. And throughout this gospel, Jesus himself affirms each of those statements. And then adds, "If you do not believe that I am [i.e. the one I claim to be], *you will die in your sins*." Do you believe? If not, will you take that step of faith this morning? When you do believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be and that he did for you what he claimed to do – taking your place as an offering for sin on the cross – then you *will not* die in your sins. You will die forgiven and cleansed.

But there is also much in this one verse for those who already believe. If what John says about Jesus Christ is true, then Christ is able to satisfy all the needs of the human heart. He is able to satisfy the needs of *your* heart.

In Philippians 4:19, Paul writes to the believers saying, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." We've just looked at some of the "glorious riches" of who Christ is. And it is out of that sufficiency that God through the Word, Jesus Christ, is able to respond to our needs. Some have interpreted this purely in financial terms. And it's true that Paul *is* talking about financial resources in Philippians chapter 4. But he is talking about *more* than that. He says, for example, beginning in verse 11:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and

every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:11-14

In meeting the need of the human heart, God doesn't always change our circumstances. He more often than not changes *us*. That's what Paul learned. And it was through God's "glorious riches in Christ Jesus," the living Word of God, that Paul found the deepest needs of his heart met.

For many, believer and unbeliever, Christmas is the most difficult time of the year. What circumstances are you facing today? And this week? And next week? And through the Christmas season? Jesus Christ, who has existed eternally and is full deity is there to strengthen you, so you too can say with confidence, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

ⁱ Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," The Washington Post (4-10-07); submitted by Stephen Nordbye, Charlton, Massachusetts to www.PreachingToday.com.

ⁱⁱ John 1:1-18 are a prologue to the entire gospel. In these verses we find in germ form the various themes that John is going to develop in the rest of his gospel. In other words, everything to follow in this gospel is intended to prove the accuracy of what we find in these first eighteen verses. These verses are also extremely important because John gives us here an apologetic of the Christian worldview. John was confronted, as we are today, with a plethora of worldviews and philosophies on life. For example, polytheism – the worship of more than one god, was very prevalent in John's day. We'll see how John addresses that in these first two verses. John also had to counter what was known as the state "cultus" of the time – the worship of the emperor. And in these verses he demonstrates that the true God of the universe became flesh and offers a kingdom that is not of this world. Another worldview that John had to combat was Hellenistic philosophy. The Hellenistic philosophers placed a high esteem on the value of intellectual reasoning, but offered no solace for the human heart burdened down with sin. But John shows in these opening verses how the Word of God, Jesus Christ, meets this basic human need.

And then there was the widespread occultism of John's day, with its superstition, spiritism, witchcraft, astrology and black magic. But John tells us that all of this is countered by the fact that Jesus Christ is the light of the world that brings light to the darkest corners of our lives.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the exegesis of this passage, I am appreciative of the excellent study of David J. MacLeod "The Eternality and Deity of the Word: John 1:1-2" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (January – March 2003): 48-64.

^{iv} Moffatt's translation.

^v Michka Assayas, Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas (Riverhead Books, 2005) submitted to www.PreachingToday.com.

^{vi} Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), xvii as cited by Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations and Quotes*, 484-485.