

JOHN 1

In the Beginning Was the Word

Memory Verses

**“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him
and without Him was not anything made that was made.”**

JOHN 1:1-3

**“But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God;”**

JOHN 1:12

In the Beginning was the Word. These insightful words begin one of the most profound books ever written, the Gospel According to John. At the opening of the book we have the words “in the beginning.” This poetic device, known in poetry as the “objective correlative,” describes something out there in the world that corresponds to the very term being used in the text. So there is an interplay between two beginnings here: the literary beginning of the book, and the beginning in which was located the eternal Word.

This same poetic device is found at the opening of four books of the Bible.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

“This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1).

The first sentence of each of these books includes the term “the beginning.” One of these examples is at the very opening of the Old Testament, and three of the examples are at the introduction of individual books within the New Testament. Certainly, both of the New Testament authors, Mark in one case and John in the others, were consciously imitating the commencement of the Book of Genesis. “In Genesis, God’s work of creation reaches its peak when he creates man in his own image and likeness; in the Gospel, the work of the Incarnate Word culminates when man is raised to the dignity of being a son of God” (The Navarre Bible, *The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, [Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 2000], 523).

The Hebrew name for each of the first five books of the Bible (the Torah or Law) is derived from the first words of each book. So, ancient Hebrews called the Book of Genesis, “Bereshith” or “In the Beginning.” Jewish Christians referred to the Book of Genesis as “The Book of ‘In the Beginning.’” The allusion to Genesis found at the opening of the three New Testament books is a clarion call to all readers to connect those books to Genesis.

The beginning referred to in Genesis tells of the beginning of the created universe. The beginning in the Gospel according to Mark proclaims the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. However, the beginning referred to by this Johannine Gospel and by the Johannine Letter is the Beginning of Beginnings, before time began. John tells the story of the Eternal Word who has no beginning and no end. The beginnings of Genesis and Mark are straightforward and historical, describing events that could have been seen in real time by actual people, provided they had been there. John advances a paradoxical beginning, a true revelation of an existence beyond this world and outside of time. John reflects on a beginning that has no beginning, a power that is the beginning of all other things without having any proper beginning itself. God is the beginning, without having a beginning. There is nothing prior to Him. He exists before time began.

By comparing the four books of the Bible that start by mentioning the word “beginning” we see different kinds of beginning. All but one occur in history. One beginning takes place outside of time and this is the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father. Outside time is the one beginning. Inside time there are so many beginnings that we could declare that every moment is a new beginning. St. Thomas Aquinas offered the theory that in every instant God creates the world out of nothing.

Deists wrongly believed that God created the world in the beginning and then left it to run by itself, like a watchmaker who winds up a clock and then departs, allowing the machine to function according to design. In that case, God would wind up the watchmaker and leave him to make the clock unassisted, and then the watchmaker would make the clock and wind it up to leave it unassisted, and so forth. There could be universes within universes of abandoned and ignored creations. The problem with this theory is that God belongs to a whole different order of being than either the watchmaker or his clock. God is absolute, independent Being, while everything else is dependent upon Him for continued existence. The true relationship between God and the world is that the world, from instant to instant, receives its existence from God. Each instant in time is the beginning described by Genesis occurring over and over again, in the technical phrase “*creatio ex nihilo*” = “creation out of nothing.”

If every instant in history is a first moment, then the beginning described by Mark, the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, is a sharing in the reality of Genesis. However, John goes far deeper. John goes before the beginning described by Genesis. When John says “in the beginning,” he means in the beginning without beginning, the Beginning that made possible each and every one of the subsequent beginnings of history.

Several beginnings are described in the first chapter of John, and all are dependent on the Beginning in verse one.

✦ The Beginning before Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1:1) clearly references the everlasting Divinity of Christ. The Blessed Trinity emerges hidden in this chapter. St. Athanasius explains “The Son, being the Offspring of the Father’s own substance, is not a creature, but is of the same substance of the Father. Whoever believes in the Father knows the Son is in the Father, and the Spirit not outside the Son; and in this way he believes also in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The Godhead of the Trinity is one. This is the stamp of the Catholic Faith” (St. Athanasius [295-373 AD], *Four Letters to Serapion of Thmuis*, 3.1,6).

✦ The beginning of the life of the precursor, John the Baptist: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony to bear witness to the light” (John 1:6). This man sent by God is the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist.

✦ The beginning of the human life which the Divine Second Person of the Blessed Trinity assumed. The Incarnation of the Son of God reveals Jesus as the true God-Man: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Jesus did not come into existence when He was conceived in Mary’s virginal womb. Rather, even before the Annunciation, He existed in eternity as the divine Word, one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The world is truly changed since God entered the world and assumed human nature. This was a beginning for all of us, for the whole human race.

✦ The beginning of the public ministry of John the Baptist: “And this is the testimony of John” (John 1:19). It was the tradition of those times that rabbis began their public ministry when they turned thirty years old. Since John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus according to St. Luke, there would have been a corresponding period of time when John had begun his public ministry but Jesus had not.

✦ The beginning of the public ministry of Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). From the Gospel of Luke, we know that John the Baptist belonged to the priestly tribe of Levi (his father, Zechariah, had been a priest of the temple in Jerusalem). One of the duties of the priest was to select the lamb for sacrifice, examining all available lambs and selecting the one “without spot or blemish” for the purpose of sacrifice for the sins of the people. Here, John the Baptist fulfills the priestly function of selecting Jesus as the “Lamb without blemish” for the sacrifice which would definitively take away the sins of the world.

✦ The beginning of the public ministry of Jesus is described. Here is the Divine Word-Made-Flesh, and finally He speaks! What does He say, but a question: “What do you seek?” (John 1:38). All this time, the world has been waiting for a word from God, and the first word it receives from the Incarnate Word is a question! In the narrow sense,

Jesus asks this question of Andrew and the other disciple of John who were pursuing Him. He asks them to examine their motives and decide what their purposes are in following Him. In the broader sense, Jesus makes this demand of every person on earth: “What are you looking for?” If we seek false gods of our own creation, we will find them and be disappointed by them. But, if we seek the one true God, we will find Him and be satisfied in Him. The first thing God desires of us, since it is the first question issuing from His mouth in the Gospel that calls him the Word, is to clarify our own purposes. This is our beginning, the beginning of our commitment to God. Just as marriage is the continual renewal of the married vows from the first moment they are uttered until the last breath taken by one of the beloved, so our faith requires the perpetual renewal of our commitment to God. As God creates the world anew in each moment, we need to renew our faith from moment to moment in response to God’s action.

✳ The beginning of a personal relationship with Jesus the Messiah and the beginning of evangelism is introduced by the apostle, Andrew. “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). Andrew wants to follow Jesus and he brings his brother, Simon Peter, to meet Jesus. Jesus finds Philip and begins to gather His disciples around Him to teach them, redeem them, change them, and empower them.

The Beginning of the Public Life of Jesus. The poetry of John reads beautifully and yet challenges the reader to return again and again to prior passages to glean truths about God that remain mystery for the human mind, but give hope to the human spirit. Returning to previous verses, the plan of God in sending Jesus and His role and mission on earth are revealed. John Paul II says “Remembering that ‘the Word became flesh,’ that is, that the Son of God became man, we must become conscious of how great each man has become through this mystery, through the Incarnation of the Son of God! Christ, in fact, was conceived in the womb of Mary and became man to reveal the eternal love of the Father and to make known the dignity of each one of us” (Pope John Paul II, *Angelus Address*, June 5, 1979).

St. John Chrysostom proclaims “He that was Son of God became Son of Man so that He might make sons of men become children of God ... In no way did He diminish His own essence by this condescension, but He raised us, who had been in darkness and disgrace, to indescribable glory” (St. John Chrysostom [344-407 AD], *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 11.1).

The Greek for “to dwell,” *esk Enosen*, can be translated as ‘to pitch one’s tent’ among us. Recall that in Old Testament times, God’s people lived in tents throughout their exodus to the Promised Land, and God dwelt among them. God’s presence was revealed in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22) and ultimately in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34). Now, God’s presence manifests itself in Jesus Christ, perfect God from all eternity and perfect Man, dwelling in the midst of sinful men.

The purpose of Jesus’ public ministry is foreshadowed in verse 12. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John

1:12). Pope John Paul II explains that “Christ’s union with man is power. . . . The Word gives power to become children of God. Man is transformed inwardly by this power as the source of a new life that does not disappear and pass away but lasts to eternal life (John 4:14)” (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 18.2).

John the Baptist serves as a bridge, the last of the Old Covenant prophets to point to Jesus, the Messiah. John also testifies to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus (Matthew 3:11-17 and John 1:33). The Blessed Trinity emerges in beauty and mystery. John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1:34). Andrew told his brother, Simon Peter “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). The next day, Philip tells Nathanael “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth” (John 1:46). And finally, Nathanael proclaims “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).

This is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry to bring the world to Himself and to reconcile the world to the Father through His suffering and death.

These are the distinct beginnings in John 1, but they are representative of many, many beginnings that constitute our whole life, both here and hereafter.

‡ Every child that is born in the world is a new expression of God’s hopes for humanity.

‡ Each New Year’s Day we feel the beginning of new opportunities for repentance and self-improvement.

‡ Each morning is a new beginning, a new opportunity to do good and reject evil.

‡ Each time we sin, God holds out His hand so that we can make a new beginning of goodness.

‡ His grace renews us always, and the mission of the church in the world is to teach the world that, no matter how much violence takes place, there is always the possibility of a new beginning of peace.

‡ St. Paul says we are to “Make all things new in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10). Even when this world passes away, there will be a New Heaven and a New Earth perpetually renewed by God’s grace.

Let us thank God for all the beginnings He has already given us, many of which we have failed to recognize, and thank Him for the beginning He provides us right now in starting this study of the wonderful and profound Gospel of John. Pray for new eyes with which to see the beginnings He lays out before us in the future. John 2 begins with the first of seven great miracles reported in the Gospel of John. We do see, don’t we, that the miracle of John 1, the entry of the Divine Word into the world, is the supreme miracle from which all other miracles flow?

So, at the end of the first chapter of John, the Word of God speaks. Jesus is about 30

years old before John quotes anything. Jesus' first words in John are simple yet profound. First the simple question, "What are you looking for?" And then the invitation, "Come and see." So they went to stay with Him. For three years they were privileged to be His earthly companions, and now they enjoy eternity with Him. Come and see!

1. What are the first three words of Genesis 1:3, Genesis 1:6. Genesis 1:14, Genesis 1:20, Genesis 1:24 and Genesis 1:26?

2. What happened in Genesis when God spoke? Genesis 1:9b

3. Where does a person's word originate? Matthew 15:18

4. How did creation come about? Psalm 33:6

5. How does God the Father desire to speak to us now? Hebrews 1:1-2

6. Why did the Word become flesh? Use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

CCC 457

The Word became flesh
for us in order to

CCC 458

The Word became flesh
so that

CCC 459

The Word became flesh
to be

CCC 460

The Word became flesh
to make us

7. Define the word “Incarnation.” **CCC 461** and **463**

8. Jesus is the true light (John 1:9) that enlightens every man. What else can we use to light our way? Psalm 119:105.

9. What two things are necessary to become children of God? John 1:12

10. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
full of _____ and _____;
we have beheld his _____,
_____ as of the only Son from the Father.” John 1:14 RSV
11. Which John is spoken of in John 1:6, John 1:15 and John 1:19-36?
12. What is this John’s blood relationship to Jesus? Luke 1:13, 36, 41.
13. What sacrifice did God demand of the people of Israel? Exodus 12:3-5
14. What did the blood of the Passover Lamb do for the people of Israel?
Exodus 12:23
15. To whom do the following references in Revelation refer?

Revelation 5:12

Revelation 7:17

Revelation 17:14

16. How did the following people describe Jesus?

John the Baptist

John 1:29, 34

Andrew

John 1:41

Philip

John 1:45

Nathanael

John 1:49

17. What two things does Jesus ask in John 1:39 and John 1:43?

18. Recall some significant beginnings in your life.

19. How long has God known you? Psalm 139:1-17

20. Find a Douay-Rheims or Revised Standard Version Bible and write down the first four words of the Bible. Ponder them for awhile. Genesis 1:1

21. At the beginning of this study, can you pray the following prayer?

