

Truth for Today

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The Word, the Only Begotten and the Witness of John the Baptist - John 1

A little while ago the media published details of a visit Britain's Prince Harry made to Africa, visiting children there. He made this visit as a necessary part of his effort to help the needs of these children who did not have the benefits in life we all enjoy. But what of those children? They would have heard that this was the son of the heir of the British throne visiting them, a man of great position and stature. It might take a long time while they lived and learned of the way the world operates, before they would slowly value what such a visit had meant.

Throughout the life of the Lord Jesus in this world, the disciples gradually came to a better understanding of Him as a Person, through His words and works. There was the momentous occasion when Peter said, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God', Matthew 16:16. Others valued those days in such a way that they gave themselves, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to write a history of the life of the Lord Jesus. We have this in the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. John was a man of a different character. There is no doubt that he was greatly affected by both the words and miracles of the Lord but, from his deep consideration of this Person, one thing stood out above all others. John sensed the tremendous worth of the Person Himself, the Son of God with all His divine nature, who came into this world for man in all his need. John wrote his Gospel, also guided by the Holy Spirit, because he wanted to declare all the glory of the Son of God in this world as a man.

The Gospel of John was thought to have been written later than the other Gospels. At the time, the early Christians were troubled by some known as Gnostics. We may know some today who claim to be agnostics. They are people who suggest that it is not possible to have an understanding of God and of His things. Gnostics, on the other hand, claimed to have certain knowledge but their ideas deny the truth of the Godhead and that Jesus was truly human. Both Paul and John saw this as a tremendous threat to the truth of Christianity. How was it possible that these so-called teachers should speak so disparagingly of the Lord? In answer to these theories Paul, writing to the Colossians, wanted to concentrate his readers' minds on the Person of the Lord. John, also, determined to write the Gospel to give the evidence in clearest terms that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. When he reaches the end of his Gospel he tells us, 'These (things) are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, ye might have life through His name', John 20:31. As we consider part of this Gospel, in a very limited way, let us again appreciate the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The beginning

Our brief and limited consideration today is of John 1. John begins his work by taking us right back to the beginning. We have 'the beginning' elsewhere in Scripture. John begins his first letter by referring to the beginning of the Lord's life in this world and with His disciples. The book of Genesis commences in a similar way but goes back much further, to the beginning of the world which God created. In this Gospel record, John goes back further still, to eternity.

The Word

Without introduction we are immediately brought face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ, as The Word. 'In the beginning was the Word', verse 1. Why the Word? In our everyday life we generally communicate with others by words. We can express ourselves, how we feel, what we need, the joy or despair we are experiencing. In Old Testament times God spoke. Adam knew the voice of God; Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and many others, all knew the voice of God speaking with them, but the voice is only one method of communicating. God chose to communicate Himself by an exact representation of Himself, in the Person of the Word. Thus He can express the attributes of His love, His mercy and His grace as well as His power by more than a voice, by the distinctness of the Person of the Son. This is the One who fills the gaze of the disciple, John.

There is only One who is **the Word**, only one Word. Yet today we find some who would demote the Lord to the level of many others, who equal Him with other men, and would reduce the blessing of salvation to a man-provided work. How impossible this is! Let us thank God again for 'THE Word'. Let us never forget that the way God has expressed Himself to man is through the Word, in the Person of His Son.

We note that **He is eternal**. John first tells us that He was in the beginning. He was not only there at the time of creation but at that time He already *was*. He did not exist as One who had commenced to be; He already existed. Furthermore, in emphasis, the writer points out that all things were created, that is, made out of nothing, by Him so He was before creation. There was no creation before He created for He created all things, verse 3. Oh, the greatness of God! How impossible it is for us to understand this.

Next we learn that this Word has a **distinct personality**. He 'was with God'. That personality is eternal and has an individual place in the Godhead. Again, in emphasis, John points out that 'the same was in the beginning with God', verse 2. We must not mistake in any way the eternal and distinct being of the Word.

This is followed by detailing that He has **full deity**; 'the Word was God'. Some claim that the Scripture does not say that He is *the* God, thus He is only a God. But the Greek language does not have the article and, at the same time, the word for God is strong, thus showing that He is absolute Deity. The full deity of God Himself is expressed in the One who came to this earth to reveal and interpret the mind and will of God, in His Person. In no way, then, is He a being, even such as the angels, for He is the Source of all things. As we think of these matters, the one who is the Word, is the expression of all that God is, and He Himself *is* essentially all that He expresses. This should fill our hearts with wonder and praise again.

In verses 4 and 5 we are told of His great attribute, **Life**. The apostle tells us 'in Him was life'. This statement must be applied to spiritual life for this life is not available to anyone apart from the second Person of the Godhead. Life provides the eternal capacity for knowing, enjoying, serving and worshipping God and being in His presence for ever. The One called the Word is the source of that life and by contemplating Him, we receive an understanding of that life. This statement again completely rebuffs all who would say that He was only man. In the Garden of Eden, man forfeited that life and his consequent sinfulness has prevented possession of it without the work of the Saviour. Our true life, now, can only be from the Saviour. This life, eternal life, was in Him and comes from Him.

Then we read that this life 'was the light of men'. It is good to note that the Lord is concerned with men, not angels, or any other creature. The light is essentially that which is made up of the words and works of the Word, 5:36. The light of His life has beamed into many hearts and verse 14 speaks more of the way this has happened. When God said in Genesis 1, 'let there be light', darkness was banished. Sadly as we look at the far more powerful effect of the light of the Word, much of the darkness was not reached. Man refused to see the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of the God in the face of Jesus Christ', 2 Corinthians 4:6. But this light, every believer has seen, praise God. May we constantly observe this Person and rejoice in the light of the knowledge He gives.

The Witness

Having set out the facts of The Word, who expresses God in all His ways, we are next introduced to the witness. In verses 6 to 13 the writer now shows the need for a witness to the light. How dark the world is to need a witness at all. John (the Baptist, so called) was only a man but was to be the witness. 'He was not that Light', verse 8, but a witness to the Light. We read in 5:35 that John was a shining lamp (rather than light), a witness to draw others to the Lord. However, when 'the Word' came, He was the true Light and brings light to the world. The word for world is what we know as 'cosmos', generally meaning the universe as a whole. Here, then, is God expressing Himself by the Word to the world, not just to Israel, introduced by John and seen in His brightness.

The Effect of the Light

Now the apostle shows the effect of the light in verses 11-13. How sad it is to know that 'He came unto His own' (things), those He had made in the corner of the world He visited, but the darkness in man's heart was such that man never could grasp who He was: 'His own (people) received Him not', verse 11. Some were scribes and Pharisees who felt their own authority and pride was undermined and, therefore, sought a way to kill Him. Some, later, were Gnostics and tried to explain away the Person of Christ by theories. Others, like John the apostle, came to a full realisation of this Person as the Son of God. The Gospel goes on to point out some others, who received Him. They had their eyes opened to the Light; they received Him and consequently have become children of God, having a vital relationship to God Himself. What a transformation to be in this position! Let me ask you, have you received Him? Have you believed on His name? You and I, listeners, who have believed in the work of the Lord Jesus, can claim this to be true of ourselves, too, and praise Him for it. When we receive Him, He gives us the right to be children of God, verse 12. This new birth is not of natural means by man's activity, but wholly of God, verse 13. It is the communication of the life, the Divine nature to each one who believes. We may ponder on the life of the Lord, clearly displaying all the Light of His Person, on the Cross, where all that He had, even His natural life, was yielded, and on the glorious resurrection, and say with thankfulness, 'He died for me'!

The coming of the Word and its effect.

How did all this happen? The writer now describes the coming of the Word and its effect. 'The Word was made flesh', verse 14. What an incoming into the world! The eternal God in all His Deity, in the person of the Word, was made flesh; He became a Man as we are. This is a tremendous act showing His love for man. In that He was made flesh, he really became Man. So the apostle counteracts one of the arguments of the day that He was not truly Man. As such, He became One who could communicate with men in a way God as Spirit could not do and became the 'one Mediator between God and men', 1 Timothy 2:5. He 'dwelt among us', verse 14. In the Old Testament there are various occasions when God visited man. Those visits were known as theophanies. But now, by comparison with those visits of old, He is dwelling, tabernacling, to give a lasting sense to His dwelling with men.

The apostle is so affected that he has to stop at this point. He cannot cease to wonder at the coming of the Word into this world. So we have a parenthesis, that part of verse 14 in brackets. In effect, thinking of the presence of the Word of God with them he says, 'we beheld His glory', we studied Him, and contemplated that glory. The apostle could not get over this. He repeats in his first epistle, 'that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes; that which we have contemplated, and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life...', 1 John 1:1, JN Darby Translation. The glory of God at Sinai was so different. There, Moses appreciated the righteousness of God in all His demanding Majesty, but John appreciated the glory of the divine relationship existing between the Father and Son and His presence here. He goes on to say, 'the glory as of an only begotten with the Father', verse 14, JN Darby Translation. The expression 'only begotten' brings in the uniqueness of the relationship to the Father. It, in no way, suggests a birth but a dear and intimate relationship existing between the Godhead. Nor does it refer to the coming at Bethlehem because we have already noticed that He was, before ever creation took place. Yet, there is a distinctness from created things. There can be no comparison either between the Son and the many children of God. In no way did the Son become such for He was always there. Children of God on the other hand, have been adopted into the family of God, Ephesians 1:5. What filled John's heart with wonder should also fill the heart of each believer as we contemplate these things. That relationship of love and intimacy clearly enthralled the loving apostle John.

Now, if we leave out the parenthesis, in brackets, the verse reads, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. What qualities existed in the Word. Grace was demonstrated continually in His life. Truth was part of His very nature. The *basis* of truth is centred in the knowledge of God. So here is the Word, God Himself, full of truth but full of grace, characteristics most necessary for the blessing of man.

There is a further parenthesis in verse 15, which brings in another effect. John (the Baptist) is active as he calls on his hearers to note who is before him. He says, 'He that cometh after me is preferred before me, for He was before me'. The Baptist had known so little of the Lord Jesus, but when the Lord came, immediately he was convinced as to the Person before him. The Lord had come after John in time, John was the forerunner to introduce the Lord, yet the Lord certainly existed before John and therefore should be regarded as having the first place.

So we return to the passage which runs from part of verse 14, leaving out the two parentheses, to verse 16. 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...And of His fullness have all we received, and grace for (upon) grace'. All that the Word is, full of grace and truth, we have received. The Lord, the Word, was God's gift to this world, He was made flesh. But He is also the Giver from whom we receive unmerited favour upon favour. What great blessings have come from Him! We have deserved nothing, but those gracious blessings have been multiplied. Moses could only offer Israel the law. There was no room for grace there. The whole situation changed when the Lord came; He brought grace and truth. It is, perhaps, remarkable that grace and truth are linked with the Lord. It is almost impossible for man to display both grace and truth. Each of us may move to one or the other. The Lord Jesus could perfectly combine both. Grace is not offered without knowledge of the truth but the whole provision of God is expressed by the Word; truth is known, grace is offered.

There is yet a further effect of the coming of 'the Word' into the world. Has any man ever seen God? The answer must be 'No' for that is what this chapter tells us. Yet it is true, there is One who has the closest and most intimate relationship with the Father, the apostle says, the Son has declared Him. By knowing the Son we have learned great lessons about God, verse 18.

Evidence of witnesses

From verse 19 to the end of the chapter, are given evidence of witnesses to the Person of the Lord. The first is again, John (the Baptist). The Jews, priests and Levites, were concerned about John and they sent to ask who he was. Was this the Christ come at last? Emphatically John denied this was so. 'Then are you one of the prophets?' they asked. Again the reply was negative. But now John tells them he has come to prepare the way for the appearance of the Lord. He came to challenge many to repentance and encourage these to confirm this in baptism. He preached repentance, and baptism was their confirmation of a desire to repent. This must not be confused with Christian baptism, which is referred to in Acts 2:38 and 41 and several other passages in that book, and the teaching

concerning baptism in Romans 6. John also told his listeners that he knew Christ was already here. He is so worthy, I am not even fit to unloose the buckle of his sandal.

The next day, the Lord Jesus came to John and immediately John knew that this was the One he came to announce. He had to call out, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world', verse 29. John had been taught the reason for the coming of the Lord. God determined that He would have the characteristics of a Lamb. The illustration of this is set out in Exodus 12 where Israel had to take the lamb, kill it and place the blood on the door posts and lintel of their houses and the destroying angel would pass over, having seen the shed blood. Now that illustration of old is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Himself, becoming the Lamb. In the sacrifice of Himself, He is able to take away the punishment for the sin of the world. This marvellous appreciation by John thrilled his heart. Here is *the* only One capable of overcoming sin.

John adds a further point. He had not known Jesus before; perhaps he had only heard of Him and had learned about the Lord. But he had expected the Lord to come, for God had given him this assurance, 'Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost', verse 33. John confirms, 'I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God', verse 34. Matthew adds in his Gospel, 'And, lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', Mathew 3:17. Here is the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, together. There was no doubt that this Man truly was the Son of God.

The following day, the Lord came again. John was with two of his disciples and he says, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' verse 36. It is no longer the work which the Lord came to do that thrilled John. The events of the previous day drew his attention only to the Person, the Lamb of God, the Son of God. He takes all the interest.

We next have one of the disciples of John, Andrew by name. After spending an evening with the Lord, he went to find his brother Simon, whom we best know as Simon Peter. He asserts, 'We have found the Messiah ... the Christ', verse 41. He was utterly convinced of the fact and brought his brother to the Lord.

Then we learn of Philip. The Lord calls him saying 'Follow Me', verse 43, and he did. Philip also found Nathanael. He told Nathanael they had found the One promised in the Old Testament and brought him to the Lord. As Jesus spoke to him, quickly Nathanael also acknowledged, 'Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel'. How definitely the Lord was able to demonstrate, by His words and actions, who He was. All these men were assured in their own soul that they were dealing with the Son of God. The glory of the Lord shone through His humanity. This could be no other.

It is noteworthy that the Person of the Lord Jesus, the intrinsic Nature which made such impact through the human appearance, so quickly brought all those who met Him to a firm realisation of His divinity. This led on to worship. John, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, all confirmed their full acceptance of Him and praised Him for it. How do we react today? Have we got used to hearing of Jesus, without studying the Scriptures and taking in the full appreciation of who He is? Are we like the Gnostics who would like to theorise and belittle this great Person? Or do we listen to the inspired writer and stand in awe of the Lord Jesus, called the Word? If we can do that, we must end up bowing low in His presence in deep adoration and worship. Perhaps we would be ready to use the words of the hymn by

Isaac Watts: *Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

May this be true of all our lives for His Name's sake.

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