

John 1:1-18

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Date: 13 August 2017

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] together. And as always, if you find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet so that you can see where we're going. My watch has broken, so it genuinely has. So we'll see how we go.

Who knows how long we'll take? Oh, I'm being offered one. There you are. A subtle warning from the bishop. Let's pray and ask for God's help.

Father God, we thank you so much for your word, the word about Jesus. We thank you for Jesus, your word, and we pray that you will give us heads that can understand your word to us now, and hearts that are willing to change and follow you. For Jesus' name's sake, amen.

I don't know where you've been on holiday this summer. You might not have been away, but if you've been in Leicestershire in a village called Blaby, you'd have seen an unusual advert in the local newsagents just up there with the classifieds. Here it is. For sale, a second-hand large Hadron Collider for three billion pounds. The seller says, I bought it in 2009, and to be honest, I've not used it as much as I could. I'd rather it went to someone who'd use it. He warns that it wouldn't be suitable for anyone with an electricity meter, and he suggests that if you're coming to collect it yourself, you'll need a big van because some of the parts are a bit large, and he includes details of the European Organization for Nuclear Research who you're to contact.

So they were asked about this advert, and they said, well, their spokesman said, we are very happy with our unique machine and not willing to ever sell it. So the scientists working on the machine, a lot of them are here in Glasgow, and they're using the machine to find out some of the things about our universe that we don't yet understand. And one of the great quests of our time in the world of physics is to have a theory of everything. We kind of have theories about what happens at the subatomic level and theories about what happens at the massive astrophysics level, but having a theory that unifies that, the theory of everything. Now, if you were living in the Roman Empire in the first century, and you knew much about what the kind of leading thinkers were thinking about, they talked about the logos. The Greek philosophers talked about this idea of the logos, and the logos is what we translate that word, but it's a broader word than that, the logos. And they used it to describe the theory that there was a guiding principle for the universe, and that you needed to know what that principle was, that kind of rational design for the universe, and live your life aligned with it to prosper. So if you like, it was their own version of a unifying theory of everything.

[2 : 52] And just like today, in the realm of science, what they were looking for was a formula. They were thinking of something impersonal that would help them work out how the universe works.

But if you were one of God's people, if you were a Jewish person in the first century, you had the Bible, you had the Old Testament. So you knew that behind any word that governs the universe was God. Science answers our questions like what and how, but the Bible answers questions like who and why for us. So in Genesis, we learn there's a personal God behind it all, and any logos or word is his word. The word is God creating, and he reveals himself through his creation.

But ultimately, the word is his ultimate self-revelation in the Bible, as he makes himself known. Then we turn to John's eyewitness account of Jesus' life, and he starts, he doesn't start with the stable, does he? With the shepherds. He doesn't start with angels visiting Mary and Joseph, like Matthew and Luke. He doesn't start with Jesus' adult ministry, like Mark does. No, he starts before time began.

And he uses that word, logos, that we have translated word in our Bibles. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. It's extraordinary.

John says the logos, the word, is uncreated. In the beginning was the word. It's divine. The word was God. And the word is a person. He was with God in the beginning. So that's our first point, a

word of reality. The word is the creator of everything, verse 3, through him all things were made. And he's the source of life, in verse 4. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. Now John Calvin, the Christian writer, wrote that you can't know yourself until you know God. You see how that works? Until you've worked out what ultimate reality is, and studied that, and worked out what you believe about ultimate reality, you don't know who you are yourself.

[5 : 08] It radically affects what you think a human being is, and who you think you are. And if you decide to believe that the guiding principle that governs our universe is nothing more than a formula, then life is totally meaningless. There's no purpose, and human beings don't matter at all.

Richard Dawkins, the atheist writer, he was being challenged by Christians about saying, well, if there's no God, there's no purpose to life. And he was talking to a fellow atheist, Francis Watson, about it. He writes about the conversation where he said to Francis Watson, people are troubled, saying, I don't know what we're for. And Francis Watson said, well, I don't think we're for anything. We're just products of evolution. You can say, gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don't think there's a purpose. But I'm anticipating having a good lunch. And we did have a good lunch, too. Now that might sound okay. It's okay, maybe, for a minute, if you're healthy and wealthy enough to live somewhere where there's peace, and you can go somewhere like Yusebi Deli over the road and have a lovely lunch.

But it's not okay, actually. In fact, for all the talk about people being atheists, nobody actually lives as though that's really true, as though there's no purpose for our lives.

And all that human beings are are impersonal forces made more complex. All that life is is just the impersonal complex. When suffering comes into your life, none of us can really live consistently with the idea that at the heart of ultimate reality is just impersonal forces. So there's no real right or wrong. There's no real justice. It means that human rights have no real foundation.

I was reading this week about the partition in India. It's 70 years ago this month that India went through its partition as the British troops left. And horrific stories about what happened as India plunged into civil conflict. And more than a million people were killed. British soldiers who were there, who had been involved in the Second World War, said that what they experienced and saw was worse than the Nazi death camps, as people were mutilated, pregnant women, sliced open, horrific things.

[7 : 19] If there is no God, shrug your shoulders. A genocide is like a total eclipse. It's just matter in motion.

So here in John chapter 1 we hear this staggering claim that ultimate reality is a personal God of relationship. God the Father and God the Son existing in loving relationship for one another in the unity of the Holy Spirit. So that at the heart of ultimate reality isn't a mathematical formula. It is other person-centered love. A loving relationship that gives us the foundations to think our lives matter, human rights matter, morality matters. A loving relationship that overflowed into the making of you and me because verses 3 and 4 tell us we were made by that loving God. And when you know who God is like that, you know who you are. Francis Schaeffer put it like this. It's on the screen.

The dilemma of modern man is simple. He does not know why man has any meaning. He is lost. Man remains a zero. This is the damnation of our generation, the heart of modern man's problem. But if we begin with a personal, and this is the origin of all else, then the personal does have meaning. And man and his aspirations are not meaningless. Man's aspirations to the reality of personality are in line with what was originally there and what has always intrinsically been. And you might not be a very philosophical person. You might feel some of this isn't really what you think about day to day. But I remember Peter Adam, who we had with us in the summer here preaching for us, talking about a period of terrible depression that he endured earlier in his life, and how one of the key breakthroughs for him in coming out of that long-lasting depression was when he recovered a deeper grasp of the reality that God made him in Christ. God planned him as the person he is. His life came from God the Son, the uncreated source of all life. So he mattered to somebody he'd been fashioned and thought about.

So John's gospel starts with this claim that changes your whole worldview. Like any claim, how do we weigh it up? Well, that's our second point. It's a word of revelation. He tells us in verse 9, the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. In verse 14, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Now, as we read things like that, John is introducing themes that he'll bring out later in John's gospel. It's like a movie trailer. And like all good movie

trailers, it's throwing out images that we'll discover as we go through John's gospel more about what he means. In fact, it was very well read by Alan, but I didn't ask him in advance if he could put on a good, that classic movie trailer voice, that American deep voice that we're used to. But it was very well read. Now, when we get to chapter 20, John says he's writing about evidence that he has seen so that we can believe in Jesus and have life. And here in the trailer, he says, we saw him. We've seen his glory, the glory of God in this man. In other words, in Jesus, people saw God. John saw and believed. And he'll introduce us to witness after witness, men and women who saw God in Jesus. A renowned religious leader, Nicodemus, a Samaritan adulteress at a well, a man who was born blind. And Jesus made him see. We meet Lazarus and Martha and Mary and Bethany. And these eyewitnesses, John introduces us to, they go hand in hand with something else in John's gospel. There's a bit of a puzzle in these opening verses. I don't know if you thought about it. The puzzle is, why does John the Baptist get on the red carpet? As John unveils this incredible prologue to the gospel, he says in verse 6, there was a man sent from God whose name was John. Not this John who wrote this, John the Baptist. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light so that through him all might believe. He comes back to John in verse 15 as well. Why? Now partly it was because John the Baptist was the most prominent religious leader for generations. And he was the one everyone would have been following his Twitter feed and listening to everything he said. And he points people to Jesus.

[12:03] But I think it might also be because John the Baptist was in some ways the last prophet of the Old Testament period. So he embodies for us all that the Old Testament was pointing forwards to.

The Old Testament is pregnant with promises of the coming Messiah. And John the Baptist kind of represents that pregnancy. And again, as we read John's gospel alongside the eyewitnesses, he keeps pointing us to the Old Testament, saying this is to fulfill what had been promised for centuries so that you can believe this is the one God's promised rescuing King. I don't know what you think about that, but for my money, that's one of the key reasons that I'm a Christian.

It's not just the very precise predictions of the Old Testament, though they are extraordinary about where Jesus would be born and how he would die and that he would rise again and that they cast lots for his clothing on the cross and that he'd go into Jerusalem on a donkey and all these predictions. It's not just that. It's that as you read the Old Testament, it's full of these shadows, themes, and then you go to Jesus and the shadows are fulfilled.

The ram at Abraham's altar provided so that Isaac could live. The serpent crusher promised in the Garden of Eden. The lion who would be a ruler from the tribe of Judah. The Passover lamb who would take the place of, would take God's judgment for a family.

The spirit anointed king to lead God's people. The shepherd king to look after the sheep. The prophet who would bring God's people back to him. The priest who would stand in the gap between God and his people. There are these themes. The tabernacle where you would meet God in his holiness.

[13:51] In Jesus, all these shadows are brought together in one man. So that in just a few verses, John's brought us on this breathtaking journey from the ultimate reality in eternity down to a dusty road in Galilee where 2,000 years ago, if we'd been there, we would have seen God. And that gives Jesus the authority to tell us the truth about God. If you just imagine for a moment that we were all suddenly, we suddenly woke up in this room and we don't remember going to sleep, but it turned out we'd been drugged and we've all woken up and we've all lost our memories and the doors are locked and the windows are blocked. We might start trying to work out, well, is there anything beyond the room? And we'd have our guesses about, some people might say, well, I've had a dream about what's outside the room. Let me tell you what's outside the room. There are monsters everywhere. And someone else might say, well, I don't think there's anything outside the room. But what we need is someone to come from outside the room in and tell us what's outside the room. Perhaps a policeman could come in and say,

I know what happened. You've all been drugged by the preacher to make an elaborate sermon illustration. And you would realize what's happened. But the person who steps in from outside has the authority to tell us the truth. And Jesus is like that man. He's from God with a unique authority to make known to us the truth about God. And this is wonderful because it means there is no God in heaven except as he is made known to us in Jesus. In pastoral ministry, I meet people who believe in God, but they're struggling to trust God. They know Jesus is wonderful. They're like Jesus.

But when they look at the world around us and the suffering, or they look at things in their lives, it gives them this nagging doubt about whether they can really trust that God is good and God is loving.

But here is the great news in John chapter 1. There is no God in heaven who is not like Jesus. It's great news for us. That's our second point, a word of revelation. And it might sound obvious that hearing that we would receive it positively, but that's not what happens at all. Our third point is that it's a word that gets rejected. The prologue here is like a sandwich, and the revelation of God is the bread on either side, and in the middle you get to the meat of the sandwich, the response to that revelation. Let's pick things up again in verse 9. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. First, John keeps things general. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. And then he goes specifically to God's people.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. So we've heard that the divine word, the second person of the Trinity, is the source of all life, but when he came into the world he'd made, he wasn't accepted.

[17:00] And it's not because there's not enough evidence. John uses the word light in this prologue about Jesus. In verse 4 he says, in him was life, and that life was the light of men.

So light in one sense is the life that Jesus gives. But actually, light is also a picture of goodness and darkness of evil. And then we get this statement in verse 5 that it's been described by one writer as a masterpiece in deliberate ambiguity. If you just have a look at verse 5, John says, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Now if you are familiar with perhaps all the translations of the Bible, you might have got used to it saying what it used to say here, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it.

And now scholars have gone for overcome it. It's the same word. They sound quite different, don't they? But if you think about the word master, if you say that you've mastered something, what you might mean, if you mean I've mastered chemistry, you mean I know all about it, I understand chemistry.

But if you're talking about, say, an animal, like a horse, and you say I've mastered the horse, you mean you've overcome it, struggle against you. So it's a word with breadth, and it's hard to know quite what John means here, understood or overcome.

[18:19] But it might be that he means both, and that there are actually two ways that you can reject Jesus. One is that you reject him because you just don't understand him.

And there are people more and more all over Scotland today who are spiritually open to hearing more about God, but they just don't understand Jesus. And they're not going to walk into church, and we need to speak to them about Jesus bravely as his people.

But there's another way that you can reject Jesus, and that is that you want to overcome him. You push him out. You understand that he's goodness from God, and you reject him and want him out. And we hear why that happens in John chapter 3. Jesus says, Light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. I've been doing some gardening this summer, for I think the first time ever in my life.

And in our garden, there are these paving stones leaned up against a wall. So you get all these bugs underneath them, and when you lift them up so that the light shines on them, the bugs scatter away because they want the darkness where they feel safe.

[19:31] Well, naturally, that instinct lies in our hearts when it comes to the true goodness of God. We get confronted when he starts to shine his light into our lives, and his brightness exposes the darkness of how we've lived and what we've said and what we've thought.

And we hate that. We'd much rather make up our own minds what's right and wrong so that we're not kind of condemned by that goodness. So we reject the light. I guess that means all of us need to be very careful when we read John's Gospel.

We need to read it. It's the most important thing we could do, but it's very dangerous. And we need to ask if we feel pulled away from Jesus.

Is it that we can't believe this, or is it that we won't believe it? So the light gets rejected. But that's not the end of the story, and now we get to the very heart of the prologue, the climax.

We've heard about a word of reality, a word of revelation, a word rejected, but finally, a word that offers relationship. We get that in verse 12, if you have a look with me. Yet to all who did receive

him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[20 : 44] Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. You can see there that it's a gift, your birth is one of the key moments in your life, isn't it?

It's kind of key, but you really have no control over your birth, over who's there at the time, over what time it happens. It's a gift. And this relationship on offer is a fresh start as one of God's children by his grace.

And it leaves us asking the question of ourselves, do you really want to know God? I spent a summer working at Buckingham Palace when I was a student, because they open it up to the public in the summer to show people around.

So I was in the kind of estate rooms, answering people's questions as they come around. And so you had to learn all this information about the royal family and about the building so that you could answer the questions.

And again and again, when I was in these rooms, you get asked, does the queen actually ever come into this room? Okay. And so you get fed up of kind of saying, yes, she uses these rooms.

[21 : 48] So one of my friends one day brought into work with him a cornflake, and he went into the white drawing room where there's this table and chairs, there's a picture of it there, and he put the cornflake down on the rug.

And when this tourist, American tourist came in and said, does the queen actually ever come in here? He said, yeah, the queen has a breakfast in here every morning. And then he looked down and went, look, she's spilt some cornflakes there.

And this tourist got out a handkerchief out of a handbag and put the cornflake in and wrapped it up and put it away. And it's probably still on a mantelpiece somewhere in somebody's home, the royal cornflake.

And I knew all kinds of facts about the queen. I knew which was her favorite room, what was her favorite picture. I knew about her family. But I never met her because she's in Balmoral all summer. That's why they opened Buckingham Palace. I knew about her, but I didn't know her at all. But the word of God steps into our world not just so that we can know about God, but so that we can know God.

[22 : 51] And that is the great privilege of every one of God's people. Maybe at this time of year, we get this sense of formal, I don't know whether you know formal, this fear of missing out that people describe in life.

When you get back off the summer, lots of people have been away, you hear about all these amazing things that people have done. And you might think, I'm lacking something. I didn't go on holiday where they went on holiday. Or you've been at lots of weddings and you're not married. Or your friends have got good exam results and they're heading off to university. And there's this fear of missing out. But if I know God, I don't need to worry that I'm missing out on anything. I will not ever need to look back on my life with any regrets. I don't need to dwell on what might have been or feel sorrow for anything I've missed out on because I know God.

And that's what I was made for. And if we want to know him better, personally, we have to go through Jesus. Through him, we get grace and truth.

[23 : 56] That grace and truth couple mentioned twice, verse 14 and verse 17. Grace, because as soon as you hear his voice say to you, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and you go to him and you trust him, by his grace, you can know God through him.

Truth, because you have to go to God through Jesus. If we don't do that, for all our perceived spirituality, we will just fashion an idol in our minds and hearts of what we want God to be like. But when we build our lives on Jesus, we get grace and truth together and the result is life changing delight. Like the words of a hymn, in the stars, his handiwork I see, on the wind, he speaks with majesty.

Though he ruleth over land and sea, what is that to me? Till by faith, I met him face to face, and I felt the wonder of his grace. Now he walks beside me, day by day, ever watching over me, lest I stray, helping me to find that narrow way.

He is everything to me. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. We praise you, Lord Jesus, that you are the uncreated word of God.

[25 : 28] We marvel that you were with God in the beginning. Through you, everything was made. The giver of life, the giver of understanding, the giver of truth and grace.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to know your Father as our Father. help us to grow in that relationship as we spend time in your word, as your people, as your church, and for your glory. Amen.