

## A Word from God

### Christmas Light, Part 1

*John 1:1-3*

In his recently published commentary on the Gospel of John, called, *Insights on John*, Chuck Swindoll told the story of Thayer Warshaw, an English teacher near Boston.

Warshaw was concerned that since the Bible had been banned in his public school district, his students were nearly completely illiterate regarding the Bible.

To prove his concern, he devised a simple quiz on common phrases that came from scripture – phrases that often appeared in secular literature and language.

In spite of the fact that most of Warshaw's students were heading for college, most of them couldn't fill in the blank on these phrases.

I thought I'd give you the same quiz and see how well you do – and I'm sure you'll do just fine.

Fill in the blank:

- Many are called, but few are \_\_\_\_\_ (chosen); 79% couldn't finish that sentence.
- The truth shall make you \_\_\_\_\_ (free); 84% couldn't finish that one.
- Pride goes before a \_\_\_\_\_ (fall); 88% couldn't finish that sentence.
- The love of money is the \_\_\_\_\_ (root of all evil); 93% couldn't fill in the blank.

His quiz included matching questions and answers regarding well-known Biblical characters and narratives – you know, where you draw a line between someone's name and then something about them.

I always liked those kinds of questions because somewhere in the opposite column was the correct answer.

Still, his students connected all the wrong things. Some of them thought:

- Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple;
- that Eve was created from an apple;
- that Jesus was baptized by Moses;
- that Jezebel was Ahab's donkey;
- that the Four Gospels were Matthew, Mark, Luther, and John.<sup>1</sup>

Warshaw made his point rather clearly.

Now even for people like many of you who've come to faith in Christ and have read your Bible through – even still, some questions are difficult to answer, aren't there? And perhaps even mysteries that defy any attempt to understand fully.

I remember years ago, our youngest daughter Charity came home from Colonial – from her first grade Sunday school class. And she had a sheet of paper with her stuff – Marsha read it and handed it to me with a smile on her face.

On one side of the paper, Charity had drawn a picture of an angel in the sky, and, on the other side, there were questions written down; like these:

- How come God is called Jesus' Father?
- Why does Jesus need a Father?
- If God is invisible, how does *He* see?
- If God the Father is invisible, how does *Jesus* see Him?

Then the teacher had written a little note that read, "These are questions your child has about God. Take time to answer them."

What's Sunday School *for*? Thanks a lot.

Of all the questions that you might be asked – or that you might have – the question that is answered clearly in the Bible is the most important question

you will ever need to answer – and it's this; just who is Jesus Christ?

Everything not only about your life now, but your eternal life to come – in fact, everything related to the truth of Christianity is hinged on the answer to that question.

And it's not a new question either – and people have suggested all sorts of answers.

Dan Brown in his bestselling book a few years ago claimed that his fiction was a historical reality. His page-turning fiction attempted to repackage old ideas and Gnostic theories that Jesus was never crucified at all but lived in the South of France with his wife, Mary Magdalene where they raised their large family. In fact, Brown claims, the bloodline of Jesus traced through a dynasty of French Kings. 80 million copies of that book have been sold, to date.

Oxford scholar Geza Vermes was considered by the liberal world to be the – quote – greatest scholar on the life of Christ. He even lectured several years ago at UNC and Duke University – both champions of orthodox theology – I mean basketball!

Geza Vermes spent his academic career teaching that Jesus was nothing more than a Galilean Rabbi without any desire to found a church or a religious movement . . . and he was certainly without any divine attributes.

One author who followed suit with these and other authors like them, admitted – and I quote, “In order to reach our speculations, we are obliged to read between [the] lines, fill in certain gaps, deal with omissions and innuendos, with references that are, at best, [vague].”

I'll say.

Barbara Thiering, long time Australian professor of Dead Sea Scrolls and the author of the bestselling book entitled, *Jesus the Man*. The central thesis of her book was simply that Jesus was the leader of a radical faction of Essene priests. He was not virgin-born, did not die on a cross.

Yes, he'd been crucified in between Simon the Magician and Judas Iscariot, but survived when one of his followers slipped some snake venom to him that rendered him unconscious.

He survived, married his closest disciple, Mary Magdalene, but divorced her later on and then married Lydia of Philippi after traveling there with his friend Paul – as in the Apostle Paul – but then Jesus basically wandered around the Mediterranean, until he died in obscurity in Rome.

I couldn't help but think how tragic it is now for Barbara Thiering, who, after decades of teaching, died just a few weeks ago.

Who is Jesus Christ? Who is He, really?

This isn't a new question, by the way.

In fact, it's started making the rounds some 2,000 years old.

- When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, *all the city was stirred, saying, Who is this? (Matthew 21:10);*
- The scribes and Pharisees asked themselves in stunned unbelief; *who is this man? (Luke 5:21).*
- After Jesus had stilled the storm at Sea, the disciples asked each other and asked, *Who then is this, who commands the winds and the water to obey Him? (Luke 8:25)*

Listen, the most important question you will ever answer is that one. If He was only a man, then you can safely forget about Him. But, if He is God incarnate, as He claimed to be – you were actually created to worship Him.

And if He is the coming Son of Man, as He declared Himself to be to the Jewish Sanhedrin, He will come one day to judge the world.

In other words, it's one thing to miss a question on the quiz and get Sodom and Gomorrah wrong, or Jezebel mixed up with a donkey or Moses out of place – but you can't afford to get this one wrong. Who is Jesus?

Let me take you to the writings of an old man who is writing one of the last Books of the Bible, even though it appears early in the order of New Testament Books.

It was written about 50 years after Jesus Christ had died and His disciples began spreading the word that they'd seen His empty tomb and talked to their resurrected Lord.

John was the last living apostle, and when he wrote his Gospel account, his brother James was already dead. Peter, the leading apostle to the Jews, had already been martyred, evidently crucified upside down on a cross; Paul the church planting apostle to the Gentile world had already been executed in Rome by Nero.

All the Apostles were gone, except for this one remaining Apostle, named John.

I mean, if this was all wrong and they had misunderstood who Jesus was, it was high time to admit it.

But instead, this dying Apostle is more committed than ever. Turn in his Gospel account to chapter 21 and look at verse 24. ***This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true.***

Let me make an analogy to what John is effectively writing here.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of doing something that only judges, justices of the peace and ship's captains can do. I am licensed, for the time being, to join a husband and a wife in a legal and holy union called marriage.

Before the big day, the couple goes to the courthouse downtown Raleigh and pays a fee and answers a few questions and obtains a marriage license, printed on a heavy stock of linen paper.

After the ceremony, I take out my pen and write my signature and title and address and date – and I invite two witnesses to sign their names as well to attest to the fact that I indeed performed the marriage ceremony and that this signature attached is truly mine – if the Register of Deeds can read my handwriting, this is effectively my sworn statement that this event occurred under my eyewitness supervision.

It was also customary in Rome, to have all legal documents signed and sworn, testifying to their authenticity. So as John finishes his original scroll and prepares to roll it up and distribute it to the churches throughout the empire and beyond, he adds this legal language.

This is his sworn statement, testifying that all he'd written had indeed been the truth – an eyewitness account, and he references here the fact that there are witnesses with him – notice, ***and we know this witness – this testimony – is true.***<sup>2</sup>

Now, there are many people who, on their deathbed, come out with a secret – we call it a deathbed confession. In other words, as death approaches, they feel a compelling need to set the record straight and clear their conscience. It's time to come out with the truth.

There are famous accounts of deathbed confessions – murder, theft, and lies.

These people said, "I don't want to die with this on my conscience."

John effectively says, "Listen, I'm nearing the finish line . . . and I want to make sure the record is straight . . . and my conscience is clear; everything I'm telling you about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus . . . is true.

In fact, John adds this closing phrase – verse 25. ***And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.***

In other words, if you think what you've just read is amazing, you can't even imagine what could be written if the world had enough paper and ink to handle it.

And you're left wondering, aren't you, "John, tell us more . . . don't stop here."

In fact, it leads you to wonder why John wrote what little he did.

And John answers that question – if you turn back a page, you'll read in ***chapter 20 and verse 30*** these clarifying words; John writes: ***Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30)***

In other words, John's record may not be comprehensive, but it is enough to be conclusive. It might not be an exhaustive account of Christ's ministry and life, but it is adequate for you and me to believe the gospel – that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the very Son of God.

It does not answer all the questions but it does answer *the* most important question – *Who is Jesus Christ.*

Without holding back, John opens his account with the strongest language possible in revealing who Jesus is.

Turn to that opening paragraph in ***chapter 1***. John is going to use some key phrases or words that describe the truth about who Jesus Christ was and is today.

Let me give you two truths that John signs his name to:

### **1. Truth #1 - Jesus Christ is eternally equal with God the Father.**

***Chapter 1:1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.***

Now if you're young in the faith, and this is your first time to see this paragraph, you might be wondering Who the Word is – so go ahead and skip ahead to verse ***14***: John clears up any mystery. ***And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and***

*we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

This eternal, divine Word that expresses the glory of the Father is none other than Jesus Christ.

So this is quite a statement that ascends in stunning audacity if you want to believe exactly what John is declaring – Jesus is the eternal word. So just transfer that up to these statements in verse 1. In the beginning was the Word – Jesus; and the Word/Jesus was with God, and he Word/Jesus was God.

Jesus was and is, in essence, fully God – of divine, eternal essence.

And that obviously creates a big problem for other cults who want to use the Bible to defend their version of Jesus as just a man who finally got promoted for making good grades and keeping His nose clean.

The New World Translation of the Bible, published by the Jehovah's Witnesses, translates this exactly as John wrote it until they get to that third phrase. Their translation reads, "and the word was a god." They insert the word a and drop the capital G for God and make it a lower case.

Which really doesn't solve their problem, because now they have two different gods. But they argue that since the Greek text lacks a definite article before the word "God," it could be rendered "a" god or "any" god.

Now they're really in trouble, because if they use that argument, they're going to need to translate verse 6 to read – look in your Bible at the untampered text – There came a man sent from a God. There's no definite article there either. But they leave that one alone.

And they'd also need to translate *verse 12* the same way because there's no definite article there either. So to be consistent with their translation, they would need to translate *verse 12 to read: But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of a or any God."*

Joseph Smith's inspired version, he called it, altered this opening text as well. I mean you've got to change it . . . it's just too bold . . . too clear.

And remember, John's intention in writing this Gospel – to give us enough to know why Jesus is in fact, God in the flesh – God the Son – God the second Person of the Trinity – God the eternally equally divine Word, made flesh in order to dwell among us and reveal the glory of God the Father.

So Joseph Smith's – quote – inspired version – tries to solve it by writing it this way; In the

beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son.

That's actually pretty clever.

The problem is, Joseph Smith created another problem. He still has to translate *verse 3*. And he doesn't seem to catch on to the problem he creates because he pretty much copies *verse 3* word for word; Joseph Smith wrote, at *verse 3. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made which was made.*

And here's the problem now; if Jesus isn't pre-existent, eternal deity, but created humanity, then Joseph Smith has just written that Jesus has to create Himself effectively before He even exists.

Listen, whenever you plagiarize, or tamper with the text, or shuffle things around to suit your understanding, you end up, at some point, at a dead end.

But when you believe the text, you are led to believe something incredible – something mysterious – something amazing – something mind-blowing – but something consistently presented throughout the New Testament – that Jesus Christ is equally eternally God the Son, having taken on the form of human flesh and blood at a point in time.

Now you might say, but I'm not a Greek scholar, and I can't check out all these articles and prepositions and Greek tenses.

I can't argue from the Greek New Testament when they show up at my front door.

You don't have to.

Let me give you the literal translation of John 1:1? Get a pencil out and be ready to write it into the margin of your Bible - here it is - *In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . did I go to fast?*

Now you can break this first verse down into its three incredible statements:

- **First, in the beginning was the Word.** This declares Jesus to be eternally existent with God;
- **Second, And the word was with God.** This describes Jesus as intimately close with God;
- **Third, And the Word was God.** This demands that Jesus is nothing less than equal with God – equally divine yet separate in Person and personality.

Now, do I understand that? Do I grasp the concept of a Divine Trinity? No. I don't believe it

because I understand it; I believe it because the gospel declares it.

What we know from the word of God is that the Trinity is three persons, yet one God. In the opening chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1 introduces us to God by using the name Elohim.

That name is a plural noun. And in *verse 26 of Genesis 1* we read, ***Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . . and God created him, male and female He created them."***

Not many gods . . . but One God, in mysterious unity of plural personage – One God, three Persons.

And the Bible introduces us to these Three as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Each with differing functions, yet each in perfect subordinate harmonious unifying function; each equal in essence, equally eternally divine.

The trinity is not:  $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$  gods, but  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$  God.

- Just as our one universe is triune: space, matter, and time;
- Just as space is triune – length, breadth and height
- Just as matter is triune – of energy, motion, and phenomena
- Just as time itself exists in tri-unity; past, present and future
- Just as mankind is arguably triune – body, soul and spirit
- So God, the Creator of all there is, exists in perfect communion and triune relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Augustine, the brilliant early church father, was walking along the seashore where he observed a young boy who had dug a little hole next to the water's edge - he was furiously going back and forth with a little bucket - from the sea to the little hole pouring water into it. Augustine asked him, "What are you trying to do?"

And the boy responded, "I am pouring the sea into this hole in the sand."

To fully understand or explain the Trinity is to pour an ocean of infinite truth into a small finite mind!

Truth #1 - Jesus Christ is eternally equal with God the Father.

## **2. Truth # 2 – Jesus Christ did not have a beginning as God the Son.**

In other words, He had a beginning as a baby boy – a human being named Jesus – but not as God the Son.

One of the most interesting Greek verbs appears three times in *verse 1*. ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.***

The verb *was* is in the imperfect tense, which expresses an ongoing state.

And I want to point that out because if you wanted to paraphrase and amplify the translation correctly you could expand it in light of this verb tense to read:

- In the beginning was, and is and always will be *the Word*;
- and the Word was and is and always will be *with* God;
- and the Word was and is and always *will be* God.

There is another expression that John uses to introduce us to the nature and character of Jesus Christ. It also appears three times as well in this incredibly loaded verse.

The word John uses three times, translated, ***word***, is the Greek word, *logos*.

Jesus is the eternal *logos* – the Word.

You can also render *logos*, with the English word, reason, or explanation.

Insert that word into verse one and to the English reader it explodes even further with implications: Jesus Christ, lying in that feed trough, is nothing less than the physical arrival of the explanation of God.

Now, to the person living in John the Apostle's generation, any logical or clear explanation from the confusing, tumultuous world of the gods was hopeless.

Xenophanes who lived 500 years before the birth of Christ wrote, "Guesswork reigns over us all."

But a man by the name of Heraclitus correctly wrote that the universe operated according to a unified ordering principle, which can be clearly detected if you carefully observe its patterns.

In other words, the universe has a Designer.

According to this theory by Heraclitus, living in Ephesus, centuries before the birth of Christ, all the laws of physics, mathematics, reason, and even morality can be traced back to this ordering principle. And Heraclitus first called it by this same term – he said, It all points to a *logos* – a divine word.<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that John the Apostle, writing this gospel account; many believe, while living in the city of Ephesus, would select, under Divine inspiration, this term – the divinely ordering principle, John reveals, is a Person.

The Logos is the Messiah – the Son of God – the explanation of who God is and what God is like – He’s just been born to a young couple, camping out overnight in a makeshift barn.

- So when your six year old comes home and asks you, “How big is God . . . and what does God look like?”

Just tell them – look at Jesus Christ; He is the One whom you will one day see – and when you see Him, you will see God in resurrected, glorified, flesh and blood – just like you’ll be, one day in Heaven.

- When someone asks you, What can God do? And does He really exist – and does He really know who I am?

Just tell them, well, let Jesus Christ answer that . . . let me show you . . . here, in His word.

- If someone is troubled or anxious or hopeless and they ask you, “I feel so lost . . . so sinful . . . what does my existence mean . . . how can I find any meaning to life?”

Tell them – let Jesus Christ lead the way.

We have been given just enough . . . to meet God . . . and to know God . . . and to know God . . . and to await that day when we, in person, will worship Him and serve Him and live with Him forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/13/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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1 Charles R. Swindoll, Swindoll’s New Testament Insights: Insights on John (Zondervan, 2010), p. 21

2 Adapted from Swindoll, p. 360.

3 Adapted from Swindoll, p. 24