

The GOSPEL *According to JOHN*

AN ENCOUNTER WITH GRACE & TRUTH

**JENNIFER MCGAW PHELPS
TAMI PALLADINO
& MATTHEW PHELPS**



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN: AN ENCOUNTER WITH GRACE & TRUTH

LESSON 1	<i>in the beginning was the Word</i>	4
LESSON 2	<i>and this is the testimony of John</i>	11
LESSON 3	<i>there was a marriage in Cana</i>	16
LESSON 4	<i>a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus</i>	21
LESSON 5	<i>there came a woman of Samaria</i>	27
LESSON 6	<i>do you want to be healed?</i>	33
LESSON 7	<i>a lad with five barley loaves</i>	39
LESSON 8	<i>I am the living bread</i>	43
LESSON 9	<i>rivers of living water</i>	49
LESSON 10	<i>this woman has been caught in adultery</i>	55
LESSON 11	<i>I am the light of the world</i>	59
LESSON 12	<i>a man blind from his birth</i>	64
LESSON 13	<i>I am the good shepherd</i>	69
LESSON 14	<i>I am the resurrection & the life</i>	74
LESSON 15	<i>the hour has come</i>	80
LESSON 16	<i>a new commandment I give to you</i>	87
LESSON 17	<i>I am the way, the truth & the life</i>	92
LESSON 18	<i>I am the true vine</i>	97
LESSON 19	<i>when the Spirit of truth comes</i>	101
LESSON 20	<i>and this is eternal life</i>	106
LESSON 21	<i>whom do you seek?</i>	111
LESSON 22	<i>my kingship is not of this world</i>	116
LESSON 23	<i>it is finished</i>	121
LESSON 24	<i>woman, why are you weeping?</i>	126
LESSON 25	<i>do you love me?</i>	130
INDEX OF SCRIPTURE CITATIONS		136
INDEX OF TOPICS		142
RELATED CHURCH TEACHING		145
LOCATIONS OF KEY EVENTS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL		146

NOW JESUS DID MANY OTHER SIGNS
in the presence of the disciples,
which are not written in this book;
but these are written that you may believe
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and that believing
you may have life in his name.
—the *Gospel According to John* 20:30–31



The GOSPEL According to JOHN

AN ENCOUNTER WITH GRACE & TRUTH

JOHN 1:1–18

1 ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God; ³all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

⁹The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. ¹¹He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father. ¹⁵(John bore witness to him, and cried, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) ¹⁶And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.



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IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Link to a free lesson video and other study materials at www.turningtogodsword.com.

The *Gospel According to John* opens with a prologue full of hope, promising that all who receive the light of Christ will be given power to become children of God. One thing that can hamper understanding of Scripture is assuming that we already know what a passage means. We are especially susceptible to this danger when we read the Gospels, which Catholics regularly are exposed to in the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. This potential hazard can be offset by approaching Scripture with no preconceived ideas about what the text means—looking instead to learn about who God is.

The *Gospel According to John* presents fallen humanity as a fundamental problem. God has come to earth to save humanity, but because the Word appears in human form most people are unable to recognize God. The *Fourth Gospel* teaches that faith is the initial step in solving this problem.

How is it that men and women are able to recognize Jesus in the present day? What are some things that prevent people from accepting that Jesus is God? What is Jesus' purpose in your life?

1 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:1–3, which parallels the account of the first day of Creation in the book of *Genesis* 1:1–5. How are the heavens and earth described at Creation? What is God's first act of Creation? Why might the Evangelist have chosen to open his Gospel with the same phrase used to begin the book of *Genesis*?

2 Consider ways in which the Word in the prologue of the *Fourth Gospel* compares with what Paul writes about Jesus in his *First Letter to the Corinthians* 8:6 and in his *Letter to the Colossians* 1:15–16. According to the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:1–2, what is the relationship between the Word and all things?

3 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:4–5, which connects the Word with images of light and life, themes to watch for in the *Gospel According to John*. What reason might the Evangelist have had for writing about the Word before writing about light and life? The *Gospel According to John* 1:5 more literally can be translated as the darkness “did not” overcome the light (as opposed to “has not” overcome it). Consider how this wording changes the meaning.

WHO IS THE WORD?

Christians know that the Word in the *Gospel According to John* refers to Jesus Christ, but for the first 16 verses of the prologue the Evangelist avoids giving the Word a name. That does not occur until after the Word has become flesh in the *Gospel According to John* 1:14. Before that, however, the Word still existed. The Incarnation is a radical concept. Few in the Evangelist's original audience would have expected the God of their Hebrew ancestors to take on human form.

pro•logue a preface or introduction to a literary work

From the Greek πρόλογος (*prologos*—composed of *pro-* “before” and *logos* “word”), a **prologue** originally introduced a Greek play and set the stage for the drama that was about to unfold. The **prologue** to the *Gospel According to John*—the first 18 verses—is designed to do much the same thing. It introduces key characters and ideas to which the Evangelist will return. These themes include the role of the Word of God in Creation,

how darkness and light interact in the world, the divine lineage of Jesus, and testimony to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. Because the Evangelist uses the word *logos* to refer to Jesus, his **prologue** can be viewed as an attempt to describe the state of things before the existence of the Word of God. But even the Evangelist finds that idea too mysterious for human language and simply states: “In the beginning was the Word.”

THE HOLY LAND IN JESUS' TIME

The descendants of Jacob once ruled two kingdoms in a narrow strip of land about 150 miles long and 60 miles wide located roughly between the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the Jordan River and Dead Sea on the east. Galilee, Samaria, Perea, and the Decapolis made up the former northern kingdom of Israel, which fell to Assyria in 722–721 BC. The former southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by Babylon and Judah's inhabitants deported in 597 and 586 BC. Persia allowed their return in 538 BC. By Jesus' time, the region had come under Roman rule and was called Judea (from Judah) or Palestine (from Philistia, which originally referred only to the coastline area ruled by the Philistines).



4 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:6–8. By whom was John sent and for what purpose? About whom was John entrusted to bear witness? What is John's relationship to the light? Consider why it is that God needs to send someone to bear such a witness. In what context do the words "witness" and "testimony" usually appear?

5 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:9–10. Who is the true light? Consider why the Evangelist includes the modifier "true" when describing the light. What might the author mean by writing that the world knew him not? Based on the prologue, consider how such a thing can occur. Refer to *Psalms* 82:4–5, the *Book of Proverbs* 4:19, *Acts of the Apostles* 26:16–18, and the *Second Letter to the Corinthians* 4:4 to describe what darkness represents.

6 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:11–13. What is the contrast between "his own people" and "all who received him"? What state of humanity is represented by "his own people"? What option is available to these people? To which sacrament of the Church might this option refer? Consider what the Evangelist might mean when he writes about children of God. What advantages might there be to becoming a child of God? What disadvantages?

LINEAGE OF JESUS

The genealogy in the *Gospel According to Matthew* 1:1–16 establishes Jesus as a direct descendant of Abraham, while the genealogy in the *Gospel According to Luke* 3:23–38 traces Jesus' ancestry to Adam. The *Gospel According to John* takes a different approach, presenting a divine rather than human perspective. In the prologue to the *Fourth Gospel*, the Evangelist focuses on the presence of the Word at Creation, intentionally ignoring Jesus' earthly ancestors to emphasize that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God.

7 Read the *Gospel According to John 1:14*, which includes this familiar description of the Incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Refer to paragraphs 457–460 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to learn the four effects of the Incarnation. Consider in what ways these effects are desirable. Consider whether one of these four effects is more important than the others.

RECALLING GENESIS & EXODUS

In the prologue to his *Gospel*, the Evangelist alludes to the first two books of the Old Testament, *Genesis* and *Exodus*. Stating that the Word of God existed prior to Creation recalls Creation accounts in the first two chapters in the book of *Genesis*. The original Greek of the *Gospel According to John 1:14* describes the way in which the Word “tabernacles” (dwells or pitches a tent) among God’s people, recalling the tabernacle that housed the ark of the covenant in the book of *Exodus 40:18–35*.

The book of *Exodus 40:34–35* suggests a link between the unapproachable glory of God in the Old Testament and glory of the only-begotten Son of God now made visible in the New.

GOD IS A FATHER

The parallel between the opening verses of the *Gospel According to John* and the book of *Genesis 1:1–2* emphasizes the role in Creation that God the Father shares with his only-begotten Son. This opens the door for the re-Creation in Christ that allows men and women to become children of God. Fathers who figure in the book of *Genesis*’ several genealogies include Adam and the patriarchs Abraham (“father of our faith”), Isaac, and Jacob (father of the 12 tribes of Israel). The serpent in the book of *Genesis* is the “father of lies.”



A NEW WAY OF SEEING THE LIGHT

In the *Gospel According to John*, the Evangelist is writing to explain who the Word is, and he begins with a parallel to the book of *Genesis* in order to include the Word in the Creation narrative. The Word present “in the beginning” has come into the world again—this time to bring about a re-Creation.

In the book of *Genesis 1:1–2*, the two elements recorded as being present prior to Creation are water and the Spirit. Throughout the *Gospel According to John* both will play a crucial role in the interpretation of Jesus’ ministry. By casting Jesus Christ as the Word—“God said...” from the book of *Genesis*—the Evangelist sets up Creation as a dialogue between God and humanity.

At the beginning of Creation described in the book of *Genesis 1:3*, God first created light. In the prologue of the *Gospel According to John 1:4*, the Word is equated with light and life. By implication of the Creation story, light is the framework upon which all existence rests. The Evangelist refers to the Word as the light of life to establish Jesus as a foundation for all of Creation.

John—Jesus’ cousin sent from God—is tasked with bearing witness to the light of the world. From this it is apparent that the light of life needs to be spread to humanity, something that requires human testimony. John (referred to as John the Baptist in the synoptic *Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke*) is able to show the light to others, but only the Word made flesh is the light.

In the *Fourth Gospel*, darkness is an image of original sin. The Word is not recognized by people enveloped in the darkness of sin. Prior to the Word being made flesh no one had seen God, so humanity could not recognize God’s entry into the world.

The Evangelist introduces a new way of recognizing God. This is described in the *Gospel According to John 1:12–13* as a different sort of birth—being born of God: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” This is the first of many references to the sacrament of Baptism in the *Fourth Gospel*.



JESUS IS GREATER THAN MOSES

By the time of Jesus, the worship practices of the descendants of Jacob who returned from the Babylonian Exile in 538 BC had developed into Judaism, a law-based religion centered on following the Torah, also known as the Law of Moses contained in the first five books of the Old Testament. When in the *Gospel According to John* 1:17 the Evangelist records that the law is given through Moses but grace and truth come through Jesus Christ, he is making a strong statement about the superiority of Jesus over the person held in most esteem by Jews. The grace and truth given to humanity by Jesus is greater than the law given through Moses. The law is a reflection of the light—but Jesus is light itself.

lo•gos the Greek word translated as the Word

Word in English can mean “a brief expression or remark” (a word of advice); “a promise or assurance” (he gave his word); some news (have you heard any word?); or “a signal or command” (give the word and the troops will march).

The Greek word for “word” is λόγος (*logos*). In Greek philosophy, **logos** means “reason.” It is the root of the English word “logic.” Many Greek philosophers considered **logos** to be the controlling principle of the universe, and it was believed to be manifested by speech. The Jews thought of the Word of God as God’s manifestation of himself, which occurs three ways in the Old Testament: through Creation, through prophecy, and through deeds of power and grace.

When the Evangelist John writes about the Word of God in the prologue to the *Fourth Gospel*, the term allows both Jews and Gentiles to connect with Jesus. As the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus is the complete revelation of God. The *Gospel According to John* 1:14—“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—is a deceptively straightforward description of the Incarnation, a basic Christian doctrine that is far from simple.

Old Testament revelation consists of God telling men and women who he is—again and again. A careful reading of the Old Testament, however, shows that not many people were listening. The Incarnation is God’s solution to this problem. New Testament revelation consists of God’s Word coming to earth in the human form of the second person of the Blessed Trinity in order to enable men and women to see who God really is.

8 The *Gospel According to John* 1:14 literally translates as: “And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us . . .,” a strange usage even in the original Greek. What Old Testament event in the book of *Exodus* 40:18–35 does pitching a tent call to mind? How is that event related to the Incarnation? Compare the glory of the Word with the glory described in the passage from the book of *Exodus*. Why might the Evangelist insist on linking the Word made flesh to the glory that the Old Testament reserves for God alone?

GRACE & TRUTH

Most Christians are familiar with the initial clause of the *Gospel According to John* 1:14, but few pay attention to the statement that when the Word becomes flesh and pitches his tent among us, he does so filled with grace and truth. Only Jesus is God, and only Jesus embodies the fullness of grace and truth—two attributes that underscore the way Jesus is presented in the *Fourth Gospel*.

The link between Jesus and the truth is obvious—anything other than truth involves sin. Grace is a more mysterious concept. The *Gospel According to John* 1:16 can be translated as: “And from his fullness have we all received, grace in place of grace,” implying that Jesus replaces the grace available in the Old Testament with some other kind of grace.

Paragraph 2003 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that one way in which Jesus makes divine grace available is through the sacraments of the Church. Sacramental grace enables men and women to enter into communion with the Blessed Trinity and to share in God’s divine nature.

Christ Anointed One

The Greek χριστός (*Christos*) and the Hebrew word for Messiah share the same meaning—"Anointed One." Both refer to the Savior promised by God to Jacob's descendants. The *Gospel According to John* 1:17 equates the Word of God and the Messiah by identifying the name of the Word as Jesus and the Word's title as **Christ**. In the Old Testament, anointing indicated that a person had been set apart for the specific office of king, priest, or prophet.

9 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:15–16. In what sense is it likely that John considers the Word to have come before him? The *Gospel According to John* 1:16 can be translated as: "And from his fullness have we all received, grace in place of grace." What might this imply about how grace differs between the Old and New Testaments? The Evangelist goes on to connect grace and truth. Refer to paragraphs 1996 and 1997 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to describe how the Church defines grace. Consider how it is that grace enables Christians to participate in the life of God.

10 Read the *Gospel According to John* 1:17–18. In what way is Jesus superior to Moses? Why might the Evangelist have wanted to explain this to his audience? Refer to paragraph 578 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to describe how Jesus relates to the law given through Moses. How does this differ from the way that the rest of humanity relates to that law? The *Gospel According to John* 1:18 can be translated as: "No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has led him out." What does being led out suggest about access to God?

GOD IS CREATING SOMETHING NEW

The prologue to the *Gospel According to John* presents a time frame that is difficult to follow. Although the Word was present in the beginning at Creation, the Evangelist indicates that there was a time before the Word entered the world. After the Word came into the world, people did not receive him because they failed to recognize him as the Word of God. At some point, however, some people were able to recognize God's Word.

Although the biblical text implies that no one received the Word, the Evangelist quickly goes on to record that some people did receive the Word. This strange juxtaposition reflects that no one immediately accepts the Word of God. People come to accept Jesus through the testimony of someone else already familiar with who Jesus is.

Although the Word was present at Creation, the *Gospel According to John* 1:12 explains that since then things have changed. Something different than the original Creation is happening. The Word of God makes it possible for men and women to become new creations as children of God. Paul spells out this re-Creation in his *Second Letter to the Corinthians* 5:17: "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

God is the Father of an only-begotten Son, but there is a qualitative difference between the only-begotten Son and those who become children of God through faith. The *Fourth Gospel* will continue to develop the idea of how men and women are able to enter into God's family.

faith trust

The *Gospel According to John* 1:12 includes a promise to all who believe in the name of the Word of God. Because English has no verb form of the word **faith**, belief has come to be considered synonymous with **faith**. The Greek word for **faith** is πίστις (*pistis*), and it originally conveyed the idea of trust rather than of belief. Confusion results when **faith** mistakenly is presumed to refer only to intellectual assent. In the *Fourth Gospel*, those who would become part of the family of God are asked to surrender their lives to Jesus in trust rather than simply to accept the validity of the idea of Jesus.