

# **BaptistWay Bible Series for December 3: John reminds of Christ's eternal nature**

November 28, 2006

Posted: 11/28/06

## **BaptistWay Bible Series for December 3**

### **John reminds of Christ's eternal nature**

- John 1:1-18, 29-36, 43-45

**By David Wilkinson**

*Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth*

As you read the opening lines of the Gospel of John, imagine the following scenario: The aged apostle sits alone at the rough-hewn table where the light from an oil lamp casts long shadows across the room. John, the beloved disciple, son of Zebedee and fisherman-turned-follower, scans the pages of parchment spread before him. Nearing the end of his life, some seven decades since he and his brother James left their nets to trudge the dusty trails of Palestine with the itinerant preacher from Nazareth, John has completed his Gospel.

He has penned a faithful account of his vision of Jesus, including Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing, his conflicts with the religious establishment, his execution at the hands of the Romans and his

resurrection at the hands of God.

 [For a printer-friendly version, click on the printer icon at bottom of page.](#)

The completed work before him is a brief treatise. John’s intent was to do more than retell the story of Jesus. It was to interpret his life, to communicate the meaning of what Jesus said and did. It was to lead his readers to believe.

Now, as the evangelist reviews his work again, it seems incomplete somehow. It cries for something else, something that captures the glory and mystery of the Son of God and puts everything into perspective.

So John—or, if various biblical scholars are correct—an editor who was probably a member of the Johannine community, picks up another piece of parchment. In the stillness of the night, he pauses and prays. For the next half hour, he reflects once more on the wonder and mystery and glory of it all. Then he picks up the quill again—and in the days that follow, a new introduction begins to take shape.

John remembers the Book of Beginnings from the Hebrew Scriptures. And he writes: “In the beginning ...”

He ponders the Hebrew idea of wisdom and the Greek concept of the word, the logos, and he adds: “In the beginning was the Word ... .”

He envisions the pre-existing Christ—Jesus as the Word that existed even before the creation of the world, and he continues: “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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3).

This language echoes Paul’s description of the cosmic Christ in the letter to the Colossians: “He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, [who] exists before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1:15, 17). Jesus is the eternal Word, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. He is the great “I Am,” the One who is and was and ever shall be.

John thinks again about the opening lines from Genesis. He whispers the familiar words to himself, recalling the themes of creation, life, light and darkness. He remembers being taught as a boy in the synagogue that the Torah is the light for the world. So he writes that in Jesus is life, “and the life was the light of all people,” the light that “shines in the darkness,” the light that puts chaos to flight.

At some point, John also recalls the poetry of a hymn used in the liturgy of the emerging Christian churches, and as he writes and rewrites he weaves some of the phrases into the opening paragraphs. This makes perfect sense, for there are times when narrative will not do, when prose cannot suffice, when only the language of the heart—the soul’s language of poetry and song—can give voice to depths of meaning.

Finally, like a composer creating an overture to a magnificent symphony, John the poet carefully introduces in these opening paragraphs the themes to be developed in the larger work—especially the rich metaphors of Jesus as “life” and “light.”

## **Poetry of the prologue**

Whatever the actual process may have been, the result is a literary and theological masterpiece known to us as the Prologue to the Gospel of John. For William Barclay, “The first chapter of the fourth Gospel is one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the mind of man.” John Killinger calls it “a tremendous introduction—one of the greatest poems ever written.” Frederick Buechner writes that the prologue, like all of John’s Gospel, is “a hymn to perform surgery with, a heart-transplanting voice.”

Rather than attempting merely to define or describe, the poetic voice is evocative. Fred Craddock reminds us: “Poetry is especially appropriate when the topic is God and the purpose is confession, for we do not have here a subject that will sit for a photograph nor submit to precise description. The burden of definition is upon the writer; the burden of poetry is shared with the reader. And, of course, even poetry is inadequate but it is hardly surpassed when expressing the inexpressible.

In expressing the inexpressible, John’s prologue offers us such grandeur it is impossible to grasp it fully, to get our arms around it easily. So, as with great art, it is best simply to experience it. As we begin our journey through the fourth Gospel, I encourage you each time you turn to its pages to begin by reading the prologue (1:1-18). Such repeated exposure to its poetic and theological grandeur will enrich your experience.

### **Confession of faith**

John’s prologue is not so much a doctrinal statement as a confession of faith. As with the entire Gospel, it is a confession that repeatedly confronts the reader with an invitation and a decision. Near the beginning of John’s account, Jesus says to the two disciples (and to us), “Come and see” (1:39), which is soon followed by the invitation to Philip (and to us), “Follow me”

(1:43). Near the end of the Gospel, John declares he has “written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Ultimately, as with all would-be disciples, we must decide: Is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God or not? And do we believe—or not?

### **Discussion questions**

- Imagine the Gospel of John without the prologue. How would its message and its impact be affected?
- In what ways does this lesson’s opening “scenario” add to your understanding of and appreciation for the Gospel of John?
- In what ways is the two-pronged invitation of Jesus to “come and see” and to “follow me” extended to us today?