

The Life and Light of God

John 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was in the beginning with God.

³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it [or “the darkness did not receive/comprehend it”].

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

I want to ask you a question about your Bible. What is the New Testament? It is literally a collection of books written by disciples and Apostles of Jesus about the covenant he made in his blood on the cross. This collection of books is placed in a larger collection that we call the Old Testament. Together, these books make up the Christian Bible. Of course, you already know all this. Then, about 100 years ago, something happened. Christians began passing out Bibles that were **just New Testaments** along with the Psalms and Proverbs. This was new in church history. The Church had always read the

NT with the OT. She believed that both were needed. Suddenly, that no longer seemed necessary.

Now, to me, passing out NT only “Bibles” would be a lot like passing out the second half of Mere Christianity ... without the first half. You could figure out the ending, but it wouldn’t make a lot of sense. You would be missing a lot of important information. I wonder if any of you felt that way about the Bible growing up in churches where such a sharp separation was common? Did you feel lost in what you were reading? Bored? Did you wonder what you might be missing?

The New Testament simply cannot be understood properly without the OT. In the same way, Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from the OT. John 1 introduces us to Jesus in some strange ways with strange language and strange titles. People have problems understanding him today. For example, it is so common to pit Jesus against the God of the OT, and this is a direct result of not viewing the two Testaments as part of the same book. Perhaps you have fallen prey to this thinking yourself. Do you think of God as this mean hateful tyrant in the OT and Jesus as this loving nice person of the NT? Do you view the OT as irrelevant and impractical, but the NT as the book for Christians? I’ve certainly had friends that believed all this.

The basic way I understand **the NT** and what John is doing in particular, is to see it as **the inspired Christian commentary** on the Old Testament. Have you ever thought about reading the NT as a commentary? My point is, the NT explains what the OT means. But, and here is the key, it is not just a bunch of guys sitting around giving a commentary from a ivory tower, aloof and far off from the ordinary people. This commentary does not only **explain** the OT; it shows you that the OT has meaning only in as much as Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of its prophecies, types, shadows, hopes, and requirements. The NT is telling you that the OT is about Jesus. That's what the NT is trying to show you.

Yet, it does not only **tell** you about Jesus. It **confronts** you with Jesus. It forces you to ask questions about him. Who is he? Why did he come to this earth? What kind of a person was this? What makes him special out of all the other people ever born to a woman? Then, it not only confronts you with Jesus, but it forces you to **make up your mind** about him. Is he God or isn't he? If he is God, then what are you going to do about that? Will you believe in him? Will you repent of your sins and trust in him? Will you live your life by faith him? Will all other things pale in comparison to the joy of knowing and serving him? Such is the nature of the NT.

Perhaps you want to answer, “I’ve already been confronted with Jesus, pastor. I’ve made my choice to follow him. I’ve moved beyond all that. Now tell me something new. The gospel is for unbelievers.” I answer, “Really? You have moved beyond Jesus? The chief end of man is to enjoy God. You have moved beyond this end? Would you tell this to your spouse, ‘Honey, I’ve moved beyond you now.’ What about your sin? Do you continue to sin? Then perhaps you have not yet seen Jesus for all that he is. In fact, none of us ever will, but the more we know about him, the more we will hate our sin. And what about this choice of yours? Isn’t it he who chose you first? Isn’t your choice rooted in his choice? Have you forgotten that so quickly? Do you really want to move on to something better than Christ? Tell me, what would that be? A law? A rule? A tip? Is that why you come to church? Are you here for things you can get out of it? Or do you want to see and savor your savior, so that you can worship him with God’s people?” Let’s try to see him better today.

JOHN 1:1-5: A COMMENTARY ON THE OT

Why would I ask this question about the nature of the NT? Can you think about anything in **John 1:1-5** that would cause me to think about the NT as a commentary on the OT? Let’s look at it. “**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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Does this remind you of anything in the OT?

Let’s take some of the phrases and single them out: “in the beginning,” “all things were made,” “the light shines in the darkness.” Beginning, creation, light and darkness—what does this sound like? It sounds like Genesis 1. In fact, this is intentional. [John 1:1-5](#) is John’s commentary on [Genesis 1:1-5](#), although the word “life” recalls things that take place later in the chapter.

1:1-5	-5
¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.	¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.	² He was in the beginning with God.
³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.	³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.
⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the	⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.
	⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.	
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Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God ...
And the earth was without
form and void
And darkness was over the face
of the deep

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God
And the Word was God.

There is more going on here than a mere commentary on Genesis 1. John makes it clear that the Word in Genesis 1 is Christ. In Genesis, however, it is not completely apparent to everyone that the Word is actually a person within the Godhead. (When I speak about a Godhead you must remember that Christians believe in One uncreated God who manifests himself in three eternally distinct persons. **We are Trinitarians.** You can see this idea begin to show itself in John 1:1 where the Word is both identified as God and yet distinct from God). In fact, it doesn't even look like a person

Who are the figures that we can see clearly in **Genesis 1:1-5**? You can see **God**. "In the beginning, God ..." You can see the **Holy Spirit**, "... and the Spirit of God was hovering." What about the Word? Well, we can certainly see God speaking. "And God said ..." But is it clear in this passage

that the Word is a separate person from the Spirit, a distinct person within the Godhead? Not entirely. It is a mystery that needs further revelation, other Scripture.

Just here I want to bring in a third passage, because I believe John does. This is Proverbs 8. Proverbs is a book about wisdom. There is a fascinating section of the book where Wisdom speaks as if a second person within the Godhead. It is **Proverbs 8:22-31**. Let's look at it:

²² "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,

²⁶ before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

In this passage, Wisdom is clearly being viewed as a person within the Godhead. In **verse 27**, Wisdom refers to the LORD as “he,” and himself as “I”: “**When he established the heavens, I was there ...**” They are distinct. This sounds very much like John 1:1 and the *logos*/Word where the Word is distinct from God.¹

Who is this Wisdom? It is a person? It is Jesus. The NT tells us that “**Christ [is] ... the wisdom of God**” (1 Cor 1:24). It says, “**In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom**” (Col 2:3).² Here, then is what John is doing. He is looking at **Genesis 1:1-5** by putting on the glasses of **Proverbs 8:22-31**. In typical Jewish fashion,³ he is explaining an earlier text with a

¹ You might read the beginning of this passage and think that Wisdom is a created thing. Wisdom says, “I was **set up**” and so on. Think about it logically for a moment. Was there ever a time when God lacked wisdom? Is God growing in knowledge? Was God incomplete at some point? It is irrational to think so, not to mention unbiblical. So the language used here is poetic. It is trying to help you see that while God has always possessed Wisdom, Wisdom is itself a person within the Godhead.

² Meredith Kline argues that Wisdom is also intimately related to the Holy Spirit. See Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 38.

³ One of the hallmarks of Jewish writing is the chiasm. There is an important chiasm in vv. 1-2.

⊃ Beginning was the Word
the Word was with God
the Word was God
as in the Beginning with God

later text and doing it as a preacher (this is called *midrash*). John 1:1-5 is a miniature Jewish sermon, and the next 13 verses are its unpacking.

You might ask, if John is using Proverbs 8, why doesn't he use the word "Wisdom?" Why does he use the word "Word?" This is because he is commenting on Genesis, not Proverbs.⁴ **Genesis 1:3** has the Word: "And God said ..." By the time John was writing, it was well established Jewish interpretation that the Word/Memra (see the sermon on John 1:1) could be viewed as a distinct person within a Godhead.

What John does here should have profound implications for the way you read Genesis 1 and for how you should understand the story Moses told you there. Today, Genesis 1 is almost completely read as if a chapter from a science text book, proving either young earth or old earth creationism. This is not how John reads it. **He reads it with Christ at the center** and focus. His only concern is with helping you see that God created the world through Jesus. Jesus was God's Word. While the scientific arguments are interesting, I am shocked by how often they all miss this most basic point from

⁴ For a detailed summary of this argument see **Daniel Boyarin**, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," *HTR* 94 [2001]: 268-73. <http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TwoPowersInHeaven/Boyarin%20Memra.pdf>. I would add a point that Boyarin does not. *Sophia* (wisdom in Hebrew) is feminine and she was often worshipped as a goddess. In fact, she still is. John stays far away from any idea of goddess worship by not using "wisdom."

Genesis. Jesus created the world. The NT repeatedly affirms this (Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, John 1 etc). But are we so preoccupied with science that we have forgotten our Maker?

Imagine this in the first century. “John, you are trying to tell me that this carpenter’s son that I went to synagogue with spoke the world into existence?” Now that’s a profound question, one that you would really have to personally wrestle with in those days. What about you today?

Of course, I’m really getting ahead of myself, because John has not actually talked about Jesus yet. He springs Jesus on us in vs. 14. Up to this point, everything he has said would be more than welcome by many of his Jewish counterparts. In fact, some scholars have argued that these first five verses may actually be an old Jewish explanation of creation in some lost midrash or oral tradition or targum, and that that John uses it and starting in vs. 6 and explains as being fulfilled in Jesus.⁵ Even if that is not true (it is speculation), there is nothing in the first five verses that would automatically get you kicked out of Jewish school.

Creation by the Word

Let’s continue. The idea of creation is introduced in **John 1:3**. “All things were made through him.” The Word made all things. Nothing was made without him at creation. You

⁵ Ibid., 267, 82.

think Jesus was just a nice man walking around telling people how to behave and healing them every once in a while? That is one of the biggest understatements ever made about Jesus. And it is deceptive. The claim is that he created everything. “Look, that man, over there, healing those people, casting out demons, riling up the Pharisees, he created the universe.”
Wow!

The pre-existence of the **Word** is why there is such a focus on God *speaking* throughout Genesis. What is one of the most common phrases in Genesis 1? “**And God said ...**” It occurs 10 times in the first chapter. This is the Word of God, John is saying. **Colossians 1:16-17** says the same thing about Christ. “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

But the OT says the same thing. “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (**Ps 33:6**). This is a great verse, because it shows the intimate connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit. Try speaking without breathing. Breathing is not just inhaling, but also exhaling. Hold you had up to your mouth and say a “p” or a “t” sound. You make air move. When you

Speak, you breathe. You cannot help it. In this verse, “Word” and “Breath” are parallel. “Breath,” is the Hebrew word for Spirit. It is the same word used in Genesis 1:2 for the Spirit of God.

Hebrews 1:2 tells us, “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” Jesus created the entire universe. This is a staggering thought. But that is the claim. You are confronted with it now. If he is not therefore worthy of your worship, who is? Is this all a lie, some crazy joke? The disciples were all murdered or exiled for this belief. If he is not therefore worthy of being trusted in and believed upon, who is? Some of you still wait and hesitate. You pretend like you know you will have tomorrow. What are you waiting for? Nothing is guaranteed in the future. Trust in Christ, because he created you and all other things in the universe. Stop playing Russian Roulette with your soul.

Life and the Word

Let me give you more things to think about regarding Him. **John 1:4** says, “In him was life ...” If you want to really be blown away, ponder these four words deeply. Life was not given to the Word. The Word is life. The Word has life. The Word was life. The Word has always been life. The Word has always had Life. Eternally begotten of the Father,

there never was a time when the Father did not have the Word, and there never was a time when the Word did not have Breath. God has always been. God has always had thoughts. God has always had words. God has always had life. No one created God. No one created the Word. No one created the Breath. They are self-existent. They had no beginning. They always were. Can you fathom this? Are you wise enough to discern infinity? Can you plumb the depths of the ages of God's existence?

You friend are not like this. In fact, nothing around you is like this. Everything you see here today had a beginning. You were born from your mother's womb. Nine months prior to that, you had no life. You did not exist. Your Bible and chair were created from trees, and did not exist at some point in time. There was a time when this building was not here, but only a barren field. But there was a time when this field was not here too. There was a time when this earth was not here. There was a time when the sun was not here, when the moon was not here, when the stars were not here. They had a beginning. They had a cause. Therefore, someone caused them.

God does not have a cause, because God does not have a beginning. God and the Word have always been. Don't treat God like yourself. He is infinitely unlike you, even though you


are made in his image. Ponder these things. Take stock of them. Be subdued by the Word.

The Word was not created in the womb of Mary. He **came down** from heaven and **incarnated** in the womb of Mary. The body of Jesus was fashioned and did not exist prior to his conception. But the Word made flesh has always been eternally, and in one human being, the eternal Word took on a new nature. This is what gives him such power. This is what frightens people about him. When he walked on water, they thought he was a ghost. When he calmed the storm with his voice, they fell to their knees in terror. This is also what makes him so compelling.

You are confronted with this Jesus today, this Jesus who gave you life and gave all things life. What will you do with him? In this very Gospel Jesus says, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”** That is the claim. What do you say?

Light and the Word

Maybe you have never seen him and therefore do not know him? This leads to the second part of **verse 4** which says, **“... and the life was the light of men.”** What is light? What does it do? Light illumines. Light shines. Light dispels darkness. Light generates heat. Light burns. Light purifies. The next verse says, **“The Light shines in the darkness.”**

Without light, people grope about stubbing their toes or hitting their shins. I remember one particular climbing weekend. We had finished our 14ers and were back at camp. Someone spotted an old mining cave that was not blocked off. We went in to investigate. It went for hundreds of feet. By the time we got to the end, it was complete darkness, except for our lights. One of my friends got the bright idea  to turn off his light and walk back in the darkness. Literally, he took two feet and fell to the floor with a crash and a scream, having hit his head on the rock ceiling.

Most of us have never been in darkness like this. We have light switches, light bulbs, and candles when all else fails. Living near the big cities, we are accustomed to light pollution. It never gets very dark. But utter darkness is a frightening thing. It makes you claustrophobic. It causes you to panic. When the light is turned on, it is difficult to see at first. You must get adjusted to it. Some people feel that way when they move from a church that never spoke of Christ to one that does, when the law and gospel are rightly distinguished, or when Christian liberty is finally put before them. It is a strange feeling. You want to close your eyes. Too much light! But after time, you begin to see things, sometimes for the very first time.

This way of connecting the Light to the Word is perfectly OT. You see it there in Genesis 1:3. You see it in the Burning Bush and the voice of the Angel of the LORD who speaks out of it. You see it in the pillar of fire, where this same God goes before Israel and fights for them. You see it in the fire on Mt. Sinai and the voice the people heard on the mountain. John is simply drawing from that deep OT spring.

But some do not receive the light? How come? There is more than one reason in answer to that question. **As we will see next time, the Light must give life.** For the Light is Life. If the Light chooses not to give life, then there will be no life or light. In Christ, the light that illumines the darkness was coming into the world.

Again I'm getting ahead of myself. John will unpack this more in the coming verses. Our verse tells us that **the Light was already, in some sense, in the world.** John is not referring to the light of Genesis 1:3, even though his comments cause of to think of this. The light of Genesis 1:3 is clearly a *created* light. There is controversy over this light source. Some people will tell you that this light is actually the light of God, because they are trying to harmonize this light with the lights on day four.⁶ The idea is that if God created the sun on day four,

⁶ A very interesting targum reads, "The first night, when the Lord was revealed over the world to create it. The world was formless and void, and darkness was spread over the face of the deep, and the Word of the Lord was the light, and it shone" (Targ. Neofiti Ex 12:42). This targum clearly

then what was this light on day 1? I'm not going to get into all of that. I just want you to **see clearly that the light here was spoken into existence** in the same way that everything else in Genesis 1 is spoken into existence.

The point is, when John calls the Word the Light, he is elaborating, not on the created light of **Genesis 1:3**, but on the eternal Light that created the created light. John's light is not created. The sun is a mirror or a copy or a reflection of the eternal Light of heaven. The Light of God came first and was the prototype for the sun, moon, and stars. John is focusing on the prototype, on the eternal Light. He connects this Light with Life and the Word, forming three great ideas that embody the person and work of Christ.

Christ is the Word. Christ is Life. Christ is the Light. These are all OT ideas.

John's point is that Christ was already in some sense in the world prior to coming here in human flesh. This is an amazing thought. All things were made through him. In him was life. He gave life to all people. This life was the light of men. He is the one that illumines our minds, heats our hearts, and stirs our affections by Word and Breath.

has the Word being the light, contrary to the text. But it is interesting for another reason. It associates the Word (Memra) with the Light. Other targums that refer to this "Hymn of the Four Nights" only have the Word creating light. See John L. Ronning, "The Targum of Isaiah and the Johannine Literature," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69:2 (Fall 2007): 253-54. Also Boyarin, p. 259.

But, we humans walked about in darkness and did not receive the Light. **Verse 5** is the climax of the passage and the end of John's interpretation of Genesis. After this, he will begin to explain how, because the darkness has not received the Light, that Jesus needed to come into the world, if he was going to save it. **Verse 5** has a difficulty **that speaks to not receiving the light**. The difficulty is how to translate the last phrase, "**has not overcome it**." There are many different words supplied by English translations.⁷

At first glance, it seems as if he must still be talking about Genesis 1. "**The light shines in the darkness**" is a clear allusion to **Genesis 1:4-5**, "**And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.**" Thus, the idea in the second half of the verse in the ESV might be that this darkness was not able to overcome the light of day 1, as God separated it from the light. Yet, he has just talked about this light being the light *of men*. There were no men on day 1 of creation. What John is doing is taking the figure of darkness, the darkness that crept over the unformed earth like a plague, and uses it as a figure for our sin. The Bible uses darkness as a metaphor for sin all the time.

⁷ For example, "did not **comprehend** it" (NAS); "has not **suppressed** it" (CJB); "has not **overcome** it" (ESV); "has not **mastered** it" (NET); "did not **perceive** it" (YLT); "**apprehended** it not" (ASV); "doesn't **extinguish** the light" (CEB); "has not **understood** it" (NIV).

What is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God. Sin is what we do when we violate God's holy law. Sin is often referred to as darkness. John is saying that the darkness has not received the light. This fits what we know about people from Adam onward. Adam hid from God, afraid that God would come to him in harsh judgment for his sin. The darkness did not receive the Light. We have John saying something almost identical to this in **John 3:19**, "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

The point is, people did not receive the light that came to them in the OT, although a few did. John makes this same point later in John 1:11.⁸ We will look at this more next week. John is telling us that the Light was here, but people did not receive Him. They did not receive Him because they suppressed Him, did not comprehend Him, did not perceive Him, did not understand Him (all possible meanings of the verb *katalaben*)

Therefore, the light came to them! The good news is that while we were hiding, Jesus was seeking. Jesus came in the flesh. Light was covered in human skin. The Word became embodied. Life was particularized in a person. He came to

⁸ On "receive" as a possible translation of this phrase see Boyarin, 271-72.

the world in a form that was readily near to our senses. People saw him, walked with him, touched him, ate with him, and heard him. He is not the figment of the imagination. He is not the delusion of crazy men. He was not a mass hallucination of tripping hippy disciples. He is not the fantasy of a powerful group of bishops. He is not a myth shrouded in fog. He was a man that walked among us, spoke and revealed the Father's will, raised people from the dead, and shined upon a small country his goodwill to those he came in contact with. He was for them the Word, the Life, and the Light of the world. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). All of this is deeply rooted in the OT Scripture. This mystery is unveiled before your eyes in the humble, ordinary, extraordinary, exalted Son of the Living God.

What will you do with him? Will you ignore him as so many have, pretending that this all never happened? Will you call him a liar? Will you call him crazy? Or will you, once and for all, believe in him, trust him, follow him, and worship Jesus Christ, very God of very God, Light of Life, Word, and Life?

What will you do?