

Today, I have the distinct blessing of beginning a brand-new series on the Gospel of John titled I Am. It has all sorts of cool meanings we're going to explore over the next 16 months. I invite you to really dig in with us. If you like to go deep into things, then buy some commentaries, highlight passages, start a notebook, and take some notes. Let this time be food for your soul. We hope this will magnify the name of Jesus and bless you abundantly. I invite you to open up your Bibles to John 1.

You may remember that scene in *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice stumbled across a rather large, blue, sleepy, hookah-smoking caterpillar who asked her what would appear to be a very simple question. "Who are you? Of course, Alice, in that moment, having changed rather significantly since she went down the rabbit hole, didn't quite know how to answer his question. I want to pause for just a moment to ask you to put yourself in her shoes. If you found yourself talking to a blue caterpillar and it asked you that question, how would you answer it? Who are you?"

On the surface, questions like that might seem easy. If you asked me that question, I might say Josh, but there are lots of Joshes. I might say I'm a pastor, but there are lots of pastors. I could say I'm a dad. I could say I'm a son. I could say lots of things that may be true of me, but is that who I am? Because interestingly, whatever you might be inclined to say, there is an invitation to dig deeper and deeper. It turns out that when Shrek said that ogres were like onions with all sorts of layers, there was something more profound about that answer than we may have first realized.

We all have many layers. It's a complicated, abstract question to answer—who are you? Because the truth is that who we think we are is influenced by all sorts of things. It is influenced by nature and nurture, by successes and failures, by community and loneliness, by circumstances and happenstances. Some of it is done by us, some of it is done to us, but it is how we answer that question truthfully that is the most important thing about us. That will become more evident as we close this message.

I want to introduce and talk about the Gospel of John because, at first glance, we tend to think of it as just one of the four Gospels. This is just one of four accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. But why do we have four of them? In what ways are they similar or different? Why the Gospel of John and not the Gospel of Matthew, Luke, or Mark?

Those are all important questions to begin unpacking, because in most other parts of the Bible, we only have one account of a

thing. But the Gospels are unique. If you've studied the Bible for any length of time, you may be familiar with the phrase Synoptic Gospels, which is a fancy way of separating Matthew, Mark, and Luke from John. Synoptic is a compound word of syn, meaning together, and optic, meaning views, what it looks like. In other words, Matthew, Mark, and Luke look alike. They tell many of the same stories in the same ways, with minor variations for very specific reasons.

When you read Matthew, for example, it is clearly written for a deeply educated Jewish reader. This is for someone who knows the Old Testament scriptures and the Torah very well, someone who knows the prophets and expects a Messiah to come. But John, on the other hand, is quite different from those other three and is often called the Fourth Gospel. One commentator, William Barclay, sums up those differences better than I could.

The Fourth Gospel has no account of the birth of Jesus, of his baptism, or of his temptations. It tells us nothing of the Last Supper, nothing of Gethsemane, and nothing of the Ascension. It has no word of the healing of any people possessed by devils and evil spirits, and perhaps most surprising of all, it has none of the parable stories that Jesus told, which are such a priceless part of the other three gospels. One thing is certain: if John differs from the other three gospels, it is not because of ignorance and lack of information. The plain fact is that, if he omits much that they tell us, he also tells us much that they do not mention.

John alone tells of the marriage feast at Cana of Galilee; of the coming of Nicodemus to Jesus; of the woman of Samaria; of the raising of Lazarus; of the way in which Jesus washed his disciples' feet; of all of Jesus' wonderful teaching about the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, which is scattered throughout chapters 14 through 17. It is only in John that some of the disciples really come alive. It is in John alone that Thomas speaks; that Andrew becomes a real personality; that we get a glimpse of the character of Philip; that we hear the carping protest of Judas at the anointing at Bethany. And the strange thing is that these little extra touches are intensely revealing. John's picture of Thomas, Andrew, and Philip is like a little cameo or vignette in which the character of each man is etched in a way that we cannot forget. William Barclay

So, what I want you to begin to see, understand, and internalize as we embark on this journey in John is that if this feels different,

if this reads differently, it's not just some happy little accident. There is a purpose behind the uniqueness of John's gospel.

There are three questions we should ask of any text. Any time you go into the text, ask three questions: Why this? Why here? Why now? If John is different, why? The answer has far less to do with having variety or "Well, this is just John's writing style. It's different. He doesn't have his own brand," or something like that. It has more to do with the target audience.

One of the clues we get in the New Testament about the target audience comes from a series we recently finished: The Seven Letters to the Church in Revelation. The Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation are both written by John the Apostle, not to be confused with John the Baptist; they're not the same person. What that begins to tell us or remind us of is that John's residence, and his audience, are likely not in and around Jerusalem and Judea the way the other three gospels are.

Instead, we know, for instance, that later in life, John, who personally knew Jesus very well, had moved to Ephesus in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. This is where all those seven letters in Revelation were addressed. The significance of this is that, as the first century drew to a close, Asia Minor became the center of the early primitive church, which, as one commentator said, was "The most strongly Christianized province of the Roman Empire."

I want to unpack what that means just a little bit. First, John is not necessarily writing to people who were raised as Jews. Some of them were, but he's also writing to other people. Second, John is not primarily writing to people who lived with AD 30 problems. Instead, more like AD 68 or 70. This is a few decades later. Third, John is writing to a multicultural audience, something that we know a little bit about here.

So, sure enough, as you read scholars and commentators discussing the origin of the Gospel of John, you will see some who point to Greek influence, and to the language of the philosophers we know so well from growing up. But others see Roman influence because, after all, this was the Roman Empire. Still others look at it, and say, "No, there's Palestinian influence all over this." And still others say, "No, no, this is deeply influenced by the Samaritans."

Well, the reality is that more than one of those things is true at the same time. John's primary goal in writing this gospel will become evident as we jump into the text and begin to unpack it together. We could teach an entire semester college-level course on the rich theological depth of just John chapter 1, not even the rest of the Gospel of John, just the first chapter. So there will inevitably be things that we skim over, that we skip in order to stay focused on what these first 18 verses are all about.

John begins with some of the most iconic words in the entire Bible. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,*

and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (John 1:1-2). Right off the bat, this is a great example of the multicultural influence in John's writing. It is no mistake that John begins with the same exact three words that the Book of Genesis begins with. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth." So this is a hyperlink by John as a nod or an homage to the beginning of the Torah, the beginning of the Hebrew scriptures.

As John's gospel continues, he will shift his attention to a new word. Your Bibles likely translate that word as "Word," but more specifically, it is the Greek word *logos*. So in the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. Unlike the first three words, *logos* does not have Hebrew origins. It has no Jewish origins at all. It's a Greek word, and it's a Greek concept that began centuries before Jesus, but it evolved as Greek thought.

Greek language and culture began to grow and influence the world at large, emerging most prominently around the time of Jesus in the writings of a Jewish philosopher named Philo of Alexandria. He was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, greatly influenced by Greek thought. So for Philo, the concept of *logos* was that it was an intermediate figure with a number of different functions. He's piggybacking on hundreds of years of Greek thought when he's talking about this. He's saying that the *logos* is cosmological, that the *logos* is the image of God that provided the model for the ordered universe, and the *logos* is the instrument through which it remains ordered. The *logos* keeps everything all together that it created.

The *logos* was anthropological; the *logos* is the image of God that provided the model for the human mind, saying that man was not created as the image of God, but according to the image of God. The *logos* was anagogical. The *logos* functions as a guide for the human soul to the heavenly realm. So, just to recap, in Greek thought, the *logos* orders the universe, models the human mind, and guides the soul toward the heavenly realm. So I want you to keep those things in mind as we keep reading.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. vv. 3-4

Now, perhaps you've never read John's gospel before. You might be wondering what this is all about. The Word is with God, but is God, who made everything. How does this all work? If you're asking questions like that, you're asking really great questions, because on one hand, Genesis says that God created the heavens and the Earth. And now John comes along and says, "Well, it's through the *Logos* that all things were made, and nothing was made without him. Nothing was made that has been made." So you look at those two things and wonder how to reconcile that. How do we make sense of those two things?

Turn back to Genesis 1 because here we get some clues. Right off the bat, if you're just skimming along, particularly starting in verse 3, God begins to create. He says, "Let there be light," and there was light. And he continues, "Let there be," and it was so. "Let there be," and it was so. This happens over and over again. What you'll hopefully pick up on is that, unlike you and me, we make things with our hands. God has a completely unique way of creating. He simply speaks a word, and it happens. Furthermore, there's another subtle clue that begins in verses 26 and 27 of Genesis 1.

"Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:26-27

In the blink of an eye, we go from a plural pronoun to a singular pronoun. You might find yourself asking, "So which is it?" The answer, surprisingly, is yes. It's both. The Bible teaches that there is one God in three persons. There is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We typically call this the Trinity, or the Godhead, or we describe God as being triune.

Something being confusing or hard to grasp doesn't make it untrue. Case in point, if you know even the basics of quantum mechanics, you know it's entirely possible for one particle to appear to be in two places at the same time. It's called superposition. It just depends on where you look for it.

Just like if I take a coin and flip it up in the air, if I ask you in the moment that the coin is in the air, flipping, flipping, and flipping, "Is this heads or tails?" Well, the answer to that question is it's not heads, and it is not tails. The answer is yes. It is heads and tails. Does that track? Are you guys following with me so far?

So is the one God, Father, Son, or Holy Spirit? Yes. And in John's gospel, that concept is reframed with different wording and semantics, but it's the same truth. That in the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. The Logos was with God in the beginning. And through the Logos all things were made, and without the Logos nothing that has been made was made. And the Logos was life, and that life was the light of all mankind, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. What I want you to see here is that it is like a zipper, or like playing cards when you shuffle them together. It is two cultures, two vocabularies being mixed and woven together to tell one truth.

So now the question emerges: What is this darkness that John is talking about? And why is the Logos the light? Well, if Genesis 1 is the creation story, which is a story of order, goodness, and shalom, well, then Genesis 3 is its nemesis. Because Genesis 3 is the story in which the serpent appears and tempts Adam and

Eve with the forbidden fruit, in that moment, the order created by the Logos was replaced by sin, death, and disorder. What had once been light had become darkness.

Sure enough, for thousands of years, the people lived in that darkness, both personally and corporately. You know this well. Everywhere they looked, there was sin upon sin. There was death upon death. They lived in a world of only evil all the time. I'm curious, have you ever been somewhere where you were in total abject darkness?

When I was a kid growing up over in Modesto, it was common, either as a family trip on the weekend or sometimes some school field trip, we would head over to Calaveras County, and we would visit the Moaning Caverns. I loved it there because, after this long journey, you would go through this narrow tunnel, and then it would open up wide. There was a long spiral staircase that went down a couple of hundred feet to the bottom of this main chamber of the cave.

When you got all down there, they would cut the lights. And no matter how long I waited for my eyes to adjust, I could wave my hand close to my face and couldn't see anything. It was a total and complete absence of light. But if even one candle, just one candle, had been lit in this entire massive chamber that would have changed everything because just a little glimmer of light defeats darkness. The next verse begins to introduce hope.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. John 1:6-8

This is not the John who wrote the Gospel of John; the Apostle John is writing this book, and here he's mentioning John the Baptist. So I don't want you to be confused by the Johns. But the gospel writer begins to tell us about a man sent by God to witness and testify about the light that was coming into the world. I want you to pay particular attention to the legal or courtroom-style language depicted here. One scholar, George Beasley-Murray, discussed it like this.

Witness is a central theme of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, and it is developed in harmony with the fundamental idea of the term, for witness, is basically an attestation of facts that have bearing on a case presented in a law court, and by natural extension it denotes attestation of convictions held to be true. In the Fourth Gospel, the whole story of Jesus is shot through with trial motifs. Witnesses are called, witness is borne, and the testimony is constantly questioned and rejected by opponents of Jesus till at length he undergoes a final trial. Beasley-Murray

The purpose for John the Baptist to come and bear witness to the light coming into the world is spelled out, it's laid out plainly for us in verse 7. So whenever you see phrasing in the New

Testament that says something like, “In order that,” or “So that,” it’s likely the Greek word *hina*, which seems like a small, inconsequential word, but often in the New Testament, it’s the word that explains the why behind the what.

So you ask, “Why did John the Baptist come? The text says, “So that, [*hina*,] through him all might believe.” This is the first clue about the purpose behind this entire block of scripture, this entire Gospel of John—through him all might believe. Now, you might say, “Believe what?” Well, that Jesus is the Logos, that Jesus is the Light that is coming into the world. But you see, there’s a problem, according to John. Verse 9 says,

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. John 1:9-11

So the world did not recognize him, and his own did not receive him. Here is this multicultural duality of John, that in one sense, you have the Jews, who’ve been told for hundreds of years that there is an anointed one, this Messiah, this Christ who is coming. The prophet Isaiah wrote,

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:2,6

My point is that they’ve been expecting him. But on the other hand, however true that is, it doesn’t mean they will receive him or believe him. They will not receive him or believe him if they have preconceptions about what this Messiah might look like. So if they are expecting, for instance, a warrior king that looks like King David, and instead they receive an impoverished baby born to a teenage nobody from Nazareth, that might not fit their paradigm.

Conversely, there’s this whole other population. We sometimes call them the Gentiles, but they’re the Greeks and the Samaritans, the outsiders. The people who, from a Jewish cultural lens, never had an ounce of hope and were never worthy of salvation. How might they receive the light that is coming into the world? John says they didn’t recognize him.

So if I told you, for instance, that my aunt was coming over to your house for dinner, you wouldn’t know who to expect. You wouldn’t recognize her because she’s never been part of your family. But John the Baptist came for a reason. And John the Apostle wrote this gospel for the same reason: that all might believe. Because according to verse 12, it says,

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. John 1:12-13

This is the gospel. This is the good news. This is what this book is all about. Contrary to the stories that the Jews had believed about themselves for millennia, being a child of God, a child of the promise, a child of the covenant, had nothing to do with who your father was or who your grandfather was or who your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was, and everything to do with whether you received and believed that Jesus was the Logos, that Jesus was the light of the world.

There was a pivotal moment way back in the Old Testament, many years before John ever wrote these words, and many years after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. It came in a moment of great darkness for God’s people. For 400 years, they had been enslaved by the Egyptians. For 400 years, they had cried out to God for mercy and deliverance. For 400 years, they had waited and waited on God.

One day, Moses is out tending a flock in the wilderness when he looks up and sees a strange sight. There’s a bush that is on fire, but it is not burning up. As God called to him from within the bush, God told him that he had seen the misery of his people, that he had heard their cries, and that he had great plans to deliver them from the captivity they were in and bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. We know this as the Promised Land.

You probably know that story reasonably well, but it’s what happens next that is so important to where we’re going today. Because Moses heard all that God had to say to him, and do you know how Moses responded? He said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? God, don’t you know how small I am?” Does that question sound familiar at all? I love how God answers Moses’ question, or I should say doesn’t answer Moses’ question. God said, “I will be with you.”

So Moses already asked the first question. He said, “Who am I?” Here comes the better question: “Who are you?” “Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?’” (Exodus 3:13). Like, who are you, God? And God said to Moses—I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I Am has sent me to you.

Who am I? Who are you? Those are the questions we’re going to come back to in just a moment. As the rest of this opening section draws to a close, the Apostle John brings the reader back to the Moses story, as if to try one more time to plead the case to the Jewish reader. Verse 14 says,

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. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. John 1:14-18

So the Logos became flesh and tabernacled, pitched a tent, moved in among us. So, who is this Logos? Well, John says that we have seen what Moses never could. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. John tells us, clear as day, it's Jesus. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the one that we have all been waiting for, but will they believe? Can they believe? So that's part of the journey that we're going to be on.

For now, I want to revisit those two questions from just a moment ago. Who am I? And who are you, God? At the beginning of today's message, I said that how we answer that question truthfully is the most important thing about us. I spent a lot of time this week trying to climb inside the head and heart of God. Why is it so important to God that we believe? What does it even mean exactly to believe? It's a question that has puzzled some of the greatest thinkers our world has ever known. Yet in the Gospel of John, believing is everything.

The Anselms of Canterbury, the Thomas Aquinas' of the world, all approached belief through rational thought and logic. They explored proofs for God's existence. They felt that if God could be proved and demonstrated, then the world could believe. But along came people like Martin Luther who saw belief, or I should say faith, differently. For him, it had less to do with believing information about God or trusting the accuracy or authority of scriptures, and more to do with trusting him, full stop. Here's what Martin Luther said,

**Everything depends upon faith. The person who lacks faith is like someone who must cross the sea but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over.
Luther**

John Calvin put it another way. "It is not about believing in God, it's about believing God." You see, as John sat down and penned this gospel, he was writing with a particular purpose to a particular people in a particular time. The world was at a critical juncture, a critical crossroads. This Jesus, whom John knew

personally, had come into the world to save the world, and much of the world either didn't recognize him or didn't receive him.

So John's heart in writing this letter, writing this gospel, is that whether you are Jew or Gentile, all might come to know him, to know this Jesus, to receive the limitless grace that comes only through him. Because John knows that the wages of our sin are death, and that sin is entirely incompatible with a holy God.

So, for a relationship to be restored between God and us, there needs to be an intervention. And since we cannot rescue ourselves any more than a prisoner simply walks out of prison, we need a rescuer. We need a savior. The problem is that much like the world Jesus and John lived in, we are often unaware of, or unmoved by, the reality of that sin.

The reality is that sin has consequences. And I have to just stand before you now and own the fact that even as I teach this, even as I believe and know all of this stuff to be true, still, I know the depths of my heart. I know the thoughts that I'm embarrassed and ashamed of with how often unmoved I am by the reality of my own sin. I do not take it seriously enough.

Sin is a destructive force that I have too often returned to. But what I fail to realize in the moment, and what you may fail to realize in your moments of sin, is that sin is much less about breaking God's rules and much more about seizing a role or a position that is not ours to seize.

Sin is, at its root, about disordered loves. Whether I am loving myself more than God, or loving sex more than God, or loving money more than God, or power, or drugs, or alcohol, or work, the reality is that I am always putting my trust and belief in something. Every single one of us in this room puts our trust or our belief in something.

So I might say I believe there's a God. That's great. So does Satan. So do the demons. But when I'm running habitually to something else, something other than him, I am putting my trust, faith, and love in someone or something else. Tim Keller said it like this. "Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from him" (Keller). French philosopher Simone Weil said it like this:

One has only the choice between God and idolatry...If one denies God...one is worshiping some things of this world in the belief that one sees them only as such, but in fact, though unknown to oneself, imagining the attributes of Divinity in them. Weil

Put another way, sin is looking past the ultimate God and seeing the ultimate in something or someone else. Sin is a disordered identity. So I want to ask you again, who are you? I'm not asking about your name. I'm not asking about your appearance. I'm not asking about your accomplishments. I'm not asking about your LinkedIn profile. When you strip away all the stuff that we

cloak ourselves in and all the masks that we wear, who are you? Augustine said that if there is a God who created you, then the deepest chambers of your soul simply cannot be filled up by anything less.

The Gospel of John invites us to believe, and it offers a solution: the Jesus who was with God in the beginning, the Jesus who made all things, the Jesus who is the light of all mankind, the Jesus who came to live among us, the Jesus whose glory we have seen, offers to all who believe grace upon grace.

Blind people don't know when they are in the dark. But by God's grace, we are all in the light. Some of us are blind to it. Thankfully, Jesus makes all things new. Jesus restores sight to blind people. So, I ask again, who are you? Who am I? Because if you remember nothing else today, perhaps these words will help you—apart from God, I believe I'm lost, but through Jesus, I am found.

I believe that I am lost, but through Jesus, I am found. John 1:12 says, *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" So may God find us in the dark places.