“IN HIM WAS LIFE”

John 1:1–5

Key Verse: 1:4

“In him was life, and that life was the light of mankind.”

Have you ever thought about the question, “Who’s the greatest?” People *love* that question! The greatest leader? The greatest thinker? The greatest innovator? The greatest artist or musician or athlete? The most handsome man? The most beautiful woman? The richest person in the world? We get fascinated by who these people might be. But at a more personal level, each of us likes to think that I’m self-sufficient, that I don’t need anybody else, that secretly, I’m better than others, that honestly, I’m the only person that really matters. It’s also known as pride. We easily can get obsessed with ourselves. Out of this tendency there’s an increasing tribalism in our society today. Whether we’re liberals or conservatives, whites or blacks, Hispanics or crazy rich Asians, techies or artists, bikers or jocks, people love to think that their kind of people are best, the only ones who’re right. It’s true today, and it was also true at the time John wrote his Gospel. The Roman Empire was filled with all kinds of cultures and religions, and everybody thought *theirs* was superior. So John begins this book by writing about someone who really *is* the greatest, who really *is* best. Knowing this unique person has a huge impact on us. It humbles us to our core. It changes the way we look at the world, at people and at ourselves. Knowing this unique person actually gives us life, and light, and victory over darkness. Though we’re all so different, knowing him makes us one. As we meditate on who this person is, may God open our hearts and speak to us personally.

Read verses 1,2. What a bold statement to start off with! The unique person John is writing about is “the Word.” We need to stop for a minute to try to wrap our minds around what he’s saying. Words aren’t *people*; they’re *symbols* that try to describe concepts, ideas, objects, places, people or feelings. But here John refers to “the Word” as “He,” meaning that this “Word” is not a concept—he’s a *person*. Who is this person, “the Word”? Later in verse 14 John writes, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Here John is actually writing about Jesus. John wants us to think of Jesus as “the Word.” We’ll come back to that shortly.

But in these first two verses John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” These sentences begin and end with the phrase “in the beginning.” What does it mean? It’s a clear reference to the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Ge1:1). “In the beginning” means before creation, before time and space existed. “In the beginning” means “in eternity.” John is emphasizing in these first two verses that Jesus actually existed in eternity. So somewhere else in the Bible Jesus is called “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev22:13). Jesus was never created; he existed in eternity with God. In his prayer before he was arrested he prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (Jn17:5). Before creation, only Jesus shared glory with his Father God in eternity. In this world, seniority often matters. Who came first? Who’s the oldest, the most mature? But Jesus who existed in eternity with God was before everyone and everything. No one is ahead of him.

And in verses 1,2 John is making an even more radical and profound statement. Not only was the Word “in the beginning,” but also “the Word was God.” How could the Word be “with” God and at the same time “be” God? It’s so hard for our finite minds to understand, but John is introducing us to the reality of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Three Persons in One. It’s a divine mystery. Each Person of the Trinity is unique, and at the same time, each is fully God. And among the three Persons of the Trinity, John is focusing on God the Son, who is Jesus. So Jesus wasn’t just a great man, a great miracle worker, a great teacher or a great prophet. Jesus is God. It’s the major theme of John’s Gospel. John declares it right from the start, and he shows it to us again and again in these 21 chapters. Once, the Jewish leaders were arguing with Jesus: “Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!” (8:53,58) He was either crazy, or, the most unique person to ever have walked this earth. Sure it’s hard for us to understand and accept, but truly believing in Jesus means believing that Jesus is God. It’s not a theological argument we’re going to win; it’s a personal experience we need to have. As we see at the end of this Gospel, the doubting disciple Thomas finally confesses to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28) When we realize that Jesus is God, we truly know him, and we’re truly saved.

Jesus who is God, at the same time is called “the Word.” So why is John using this term? It’s best to think about it in the most simple sense. Words are the means by which we get to know people. We may have some rough ideas about a person by looking at outward things like her appearance, or the things she seems to be doing. But we really get to know people by carefully listening to them talk. And so often, people’s words reveal something very different from what we originally thought. In the same way, Jesus is God’s “Word” to us. We may have some ideas about God, but we actually don’t know him very well. God speaks to all human beings through nature, revealing his eternal power and divine nature from what has been made (Ro1:20). God has spoken to us through his prophets at many times and in various ways. But now he has spoken to us by his Son. God the Son, Jesus, is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb1:1–3a). We have a most precious record of Jesus the Word through all he said and did, recorded in the Bible, especially here in John’s Gospel. We can choose to pay attention to the Word, to really listen to him and think about him, or we can choose to ignore him. In this world we hear so much noise, so many confusing voices competing for our attention. And honestly, our desire to know God may be pretty weak. But, if we *want* to know God, if we truly want to *know* him, we need to be listening to his Word, Jesus.

Now let’s read verse 3. There are many ideas about where this world came from. Many believe it happened by chance, through some kind of cosmic explosion. The ancient Greeks who saw an intrinsic order and harmony in nature were convinced that the universe was created by Reason (Logos/“the Word”). But John says here that all things were created through Jesus the Word.

Many people today would say, “Why waste time thinking about where things came from? Who cares? Let’s just have a good time! Let’s laugh, and party!” But knowing where things came from is so important. Today many people are asking, “Was this product made in China, or in America?” Where did my car come from? Is it really new, or was it used, and if so, by whom? Where did this building come from? Where did these people come from? Where did my family come from? Where did I come from? If the origins of everything are in random chance, then ultimately there’s no meaning in this world. All our struggles are just an exercise in futility, because chance rules all, and nothing can change that. And, if this world is meaningless, then *I* become my own ultimate meaning. This is where so many people are at today—trying to find meaning in themselves. But even this leaves us feeling empty.

On the other hand, if the world really was created by someone, then it does have an objective meaning, and while I’m an important part of that meaning, I’m not the most important. Human beings are all searching for personal significance. So we try to find our worth in what we have or what we can do. Some people are good at doing certain things. Some can make amazing things. And they get pretty proud about it. We’ve launched satellites into outer space, created the internet, split the atom, developed super computers and discovered the genome. But all these things, John says, were really made by Jesus. He made the substances, he made the human beings and he created the intelligence and abilities we have. Apostle Paul wrote about Jesus: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible…all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together…so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Col1:16–18). The truth that Jesus created all things pierces our pride and self-centeredness like a knife and can only make us humble.

And then John gets to perhaps his most powerful statement about the Word. Read verse 4. Creating material things from nothing is impossible. But creating life is even more impossible. Life is a miracle, and life is mysterious. But Jesus the Word created life. Who could ever create life? No one, but Jesus did. It tells us that our lives are a gift from Jesus. Many people agree with the popular song, “I don’t care what you say anymore this is my life/Go ahead with your own life leave me alone.” It’s important for people to live their own lives, not to try to live up to other’s ideas. And it may be okay sometimes to rebel against social norms or people’s expectations. But it can never be good to rebel against God’s plan for the life he gave me. The truth is, my life is not my own; my life came from Jesus, my life belongs to Jesus, and one day, on the day of his choosing, not mine, he will take it back. The Bible calls Jesus “the author of life” (Ac3:15). It means he actually wrote my life. David wrote about this in Psalm 139:16: “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Many people today are trying to write their own lives. It ends up being so confusing and frustrating. But when we accept the truth that “In him was life,” we find where our lives really come from, and then we can find the real meaning of our lives. To know the meaning of my life seems too outrageous a statement, but it’s possible in Jesus.

“In him was life” also tells us not only that Jesus was alive, but also that he’s the source of spiritual life. He’s the true vine (Jn15:1). We need to be attached to him to be alive spiritually (Eph2:1ff.) We get attached to him as we listen to his words. We need to remain in him to stay alive spiritually. We remain in Jesus not just by going to church, but as we personally remain in his words and in his love (15:7,9). Just as a branch draws on the vine’s life source, so we need to depend on Jesus personally and draw on the source of spiritual life that only he can give us. It’s not about just being a church member. That’s like a dead branch trying to hide itself among many live branches. It’s about having a very personal connection with Jesus. When we’re personally connected with him, we have life, and have it to the full (10:10b). But apart from him we can do nothing (15:5b; cf. 3:36). I pray that through our study of John’s Gospel we each may experience this wonderful life that’s only in Jesus.

Read verse 4 again. It says, “…and that life was the light of mankind.” Jesus’ life on earth was the light for all people. He says in John’s Gospel repeatedly that he’s the light of the world (8:12; 9:5; 12:46). His life is light because it shows us how to truly love God and truly love our fellow human beings. His life is light because it shows us where we came from and where we’re going back to. His life is light because it gives us hope in a world full of darkness. So many people are living in spiritual darkness. In this darkness there’s despair. There’s ignorance and confusion. There’s meaninglessness and hatred and sin and violent rebellion. Ultimately, there’s death. But in Jesus there is light. His light gives us life. His light is available to anyone. Read verse 5. His light is still shining. His light shines brightly through his words and through the people who are following him.

So who’s the greatest? Jesus the Word. What does knowing him do for us? Read verse 4 again. As we study John’s Gospel may God fill us with the life and light of Jesus, and shine his light all around us in this dark world.