

Genesis overview

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[0 : 00] The reading is taken from John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18 and you can find it on page 1068 of the Church Bibles.

So that's John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18. 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 anything 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. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light.

[1 : 09] The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

He came to his name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.

Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness about him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.

For from his fullness we have received, all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

[2 : 24] No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made known him known. Let me add my welcome to Ben's.

My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the lead pastor here at Grace Church. And it's lovely to have you with us. We work hard at Grace Church to make sure that every Sunday is very much for everyone.

Whether you would regard yourself as someone who is exploring the Christian faith. Or someone who is sceptical. Or perhaps someone who is a follower of Jesus already. But then occasionally we have these talks.

Such as this one this morning. I guess particularly designed for those who are wanting to investigate. Or perhaps for those who are a bit sceptical. So today you'll know our talk title, Is Anyone There?

Does God Exist? What is he like? Now I guess the assumption behind the question is that we can't really know if God is there.

[3 : 25] And we certainly don't know what God is like. The actor Brad Pitt perhaps sums it up for so many of us. When he says, I'm probably 20% atheist and 80% agnostic.

I don't think anyone really knows. You'll either find out or not when you get there. Until then, there's no point in thinking about it.

Well, clearly, at least we think there is some point in thinking about it. Which is why we're here this morning. But maybe the, I don't really think anyone knows. Maybe that resonates with us.

In which case, the big truth which we're thinking about this morning, that is at the very heart of the Christian faith, is this. That God has made himself known.

Now that, of course, immediately changes the goalpost, doesn't it? Because it means the answer to our question, is anyone there, no longer depends on me searching for God and trying to find God.

[4 : 32] No, God, rather than hiding, or being a mystery, or simply plain unknowable, has made himself known to us.

So what I want to do this morning is to look at that reading which we had from John's Gospel. So do turn back to page 1068 in the Church Bibles, John chapter 1.

And I simply want to look at each of, each half of our questions in turn. So first of all, is anyone there? Does God exist? And then secondly, what is God like?

And just to say, after the talk, we're going to have an interval, which will be partly an opportunity to get a cup of coffee or tea, but also an opportunity to write down a question. And you'll see there are question slips around the place on the chairs.

So if during the talk there's something and you're just thinking to yourself, I'm not quite sure if I understand that, or please could you say more about that, then do jot down a question. And then once we've all had a cup of coffee, later on, then I'll try and answer those questions.

[5 : 37] So do bear that in mind. First of all, does God exist? And I want us to focus really on just one verse this morning, and that is John chapter 1, verse 14. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth. John's gospel is one of four historical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

No serious historian doubts that Jesus existed as a person in history. So the question becomes then, well, who was he?

Was he just another religious teacher, miracle worker, or prophet? Well, yes, Jesus was all of those things, but so much more. Have a look at verse 18.

No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the father's side, he has made him known. Well, that's right, isn't it?

[6 : 40] No one's ever seen God. Left to our own devices, God is completely unknowable. And yet the claim here is the claim that Christians have always made, that it's Jesus Christ who reveals God to us.

How is that possible? Well, because Jesus himself is fully God. Fully man, and also fully God.

Have a look and see how John begins his gospel, verses one and two. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. The Word is just another way that John talks about Jesus. Notice there, we see that Jesus existed before creation. He was God, and yet separate from God.

He goes on, verse three, All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

[7 : 42] He is the God who created everything. In fact, there's nothing that has been created that he didn't create. He is the life giver. It's a glorious reminder that Jesus Christ is God with flesh and bones, which means very simply that God needn't be a mystery.

We can be certain that he is there. As John says in verse 14, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.

we've seen him, says John. We have seen God on earth. In other words, the reason that you and I have never seen God is not because he doesn't exist, or because he is unknowable, but simply because we weren't around at the right time.

In other words, if we had been born 2,000 years earlier, if we had lived not in this wet country, but in what is now Israel today, actually we could have seen God just as John saw God and heard God in the flesh.

And that is why, of course, as we go through the accounts of Jesus, as we go through the gospel accounts, we see him doing the kinds of things we'd expect God to do. He demonstrated his authority over evil, over sickness, over death, over nature.

[9 : 13] On one occasion, he calmed a storm simply by speaking. He was in a fishing boat with the disciples. A furious storm came up, the disciples in despair for their lives. Don't you care if we drown, they said.

Fishermen, terrified of the storm, a big storm. One of them shook him to wake him up. And Jesus, standing up in the back of the boat, simply said, with the authority of the creator.

To the wind, stop. And to the waves, down. And they did. Now, I don't know about you, but I was slightly captivated by some of the film footage of Hurricane Florence last weekend.

Now, I'm not aware of anyone who would have said to Hurricane Florence, be still, stop. Of course not. You'd be mad to do so. And the disciples, goggle-eyed, say to Jesus, who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?

Who is this indeed? On another occasion, a little girl, Jairus, Jairus' daughter, had died. And Jesus takes her by the hand and says, little girl, I say to you, arise.

[10 : 31] And she did. Just as the son of a widow in Nain, already in a coffin, they had finished the funeral service. They were taking him out to bury him.

Jesus stops the procession and says, young man, I say to you, arise. Now, I've taken many funerals as a Church of England minister, and it's never occurred to me to knock on the coffin and to do that.

How grossly insensitive that would be. because I'm not God. I can't do it. But it happened. The dead man sat up in his coffin.

On another occasion, Jesus fed a crowd of over 5,000 people just with a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. Amazing. Creating stuff, creating matter out of nothing.

Who but the Creator who created the world out of nothing can do that. Above all, of course, there's the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, never to die again.

[11 : 38] Jesus had said he would be killed. He had said that three days later he would rise, be raised to life, never to die again. He really died. The soldiers who were tasked with crucifying him, they knew how to do their job.

The tomb was empty. A guard had been put and put over the tomb. It wasn't worth their job not to do their job, not to guard the tomb properly. Jesus was then seen alive by many eyewitnesses on one occasion by more than 500 people at a time.

His disciples were transformed from being fearful to being fearless in their proclamation of him. Indeed, many of them would lose their life for believing in Jesus.

And Jesus says the reason for all these things is that he is God, God in the flesh. Which means that God isn't hiding, he has stepped out into the blazing sunlight of history in the person of Jesus.

Here's an extract written in a letter written in 1982 by former US President Ronald Reagan but only just released last weekend.

[12 : 57] It's a letter in which he pleads with his dying father-in-law to put his trust in Jesus Christ. And he's already talked in the letter about what he calls the miracle of Jesus' life and he goes on to say this of Jesus.

Either he was who he said he was or he was the greatest faker and charlatan who ever lived. And then towards the end of his letter Reagan says for 2,000 years he has had more impact on the world than all the teachers, scientists, emperors, generals and admirals who ever lived all put together.

In other words, in answer to the question is anyone there? I don't need to go any further than the Jesus of the Bible.

The evidence is there for us if only we'd investigate. But then the second part of our question, what is God like? And of course we're not the first ones to ask the question.

In the Old Testament the prophet Moses asked God that very question. He said, please will you show me your glory? And God did. He proclaimed himself to Moses to be a God of grace, compassion, a God who is just and righteous.

[14 : 20] He always does what is right. Although Moses didn't really see very much, he just got a glimpse of God and yet he heard God's voice. Now go back to our key verse, chapter 1, verse 14 because you see for John's readers with a far greater grasp of the Old Testament than we have, that word glory in verse 14 would simply have leapt off the page.

It's a bombshell moment as John claims to have seen the God that Moses only ever got a glimpse of. In other words, you see, we must never think that somehow you can be a Christian by believing in God and yet not believing in Jesus Christ.

Or that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are somehow different. You often hear people say that, don't you, that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment, the God of the New Testament is a God of love.

No, there's total consistency. So look again at the verse because John uses two words to describe what God is like for us. and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth.

Grace and truth. Let's think about each one in turn. First of all, truth. I guess it stands to reason, doesn't it, that if Jesus is God, then he speaks the truth about God.

[15 : 56] If Jesus is God, he speaks the very words of God. As we read through John's gospel, as we see Jesus teaching people, we are witnessing God himself speaking, teaching. That's why, of course, people said they'd never heard anything like it.

And as we read through John's gospel, we hear him speaking clearly, authoritatively, about the things that really matter. Who am I?

What am I created for? What does God think of me? Can I trust the Bible? Are there many ways to God or just one? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell?

Can I be sure which one I'm going to go to or do I just have to wait and hope for the best? Is there a judgment? Is this life it? Is there anything else beyond it? Jesus speaks the truth.

Now just think about that for a moment because it is, of course, very, very wonderful and very liberating because, you see, it saves us from the I like to think God is like syndrome.

[17 : 01] You know, I like to think there are many gods, someone says. Someone else says, I like to think there is just one God. Someone else says, I like to think God is rather like a kind of cuddly teddy bear.

Someone else says, well, my kind of idea of God is rather like a stern school teacher. Someone else says, I think of God as dot, dot, dot. I guess every one of us in this building has a view of God even if it's that God doesn't exist.

Now the problem, of course, is how do we know who is right? is God like this person over here imagines him to be? Or actually, is he like this person over here imagines him to be?

At which point, I guess it's very easy to conclude that actually we can't really know what God is like, that every opinion is equally valid. And to conclude that actually it's rather arrogant to claim that we can know what God is like.

After all, why should my view of God trump your view of God? And that is why it's such a wonderful breath of fresh air when we come back to the eyewitness accounts of Jesus Christ because he speaks the truth.

[18 : 15] Of course he does. He is God. He shows us there's only one God, not a pantheon of gods. He shows us that God is personal. It's possible to know him.

It's wonderful, wasn't it, to hear Lizzie explaining how she came to know him personally, for herself earlier. Jesus shows us God is the creator with power over his creation.

Jesus shows us that God is compassionate and gracious. He's not vindictive. And yet he's also the judge, the one to whom we are personally accountable on the final day. And you see, to know these things about God is not arrogant because it's not based on what any one person happens to think God is like.

but instead it's based on the words of Jesus. He is the one who speaks the truth. So what is God like? Well, he speaks the truth and then the other word in verse 14, grace.

Full of grace. grace. Now, grace doesn't mean much to us, does it? I guess, other than something which some people say before meals. But in the Bible, it's used alongside such words as kindness and love and mercy.

[19 : 30] And the reason the Bible uses a special word to describe God's love is simply because God's love, his grace, is unique. Firstly, because grace is always free.

God's love for us always comes as a gift, not as a reward. In other words, it's always undeserved. Secondly, grace is always rich. It's lavish.

It is unstinting. It's never restrained. Jesus came full of grace. He shows us God's unique love.

Now, we see that very clearly in verses 10 to 11. Just have a look up at them. Speaking of Jesus, he was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. Now, they're shocking verses that John is talking about. The Jewish people, they had the Old Testament in which God said that he himself would come to earth and yet on the whole they rejected him.

[20 : 39] Just like us. I speak for myself as much as anyone. We want to keep Jesus, we want to keep God at a distance. It's what we naturally do because none of us are naturally members of God's family.

We'd rather live our own way, our own life without God. But then you see, look on to verse 12. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Here is the wonderful promise that those who believe in Jesus Christ have the right to become children of God and part of his family.

What do you say? How is that possible? How can people who are far from God be welcomed by God and become part of his family?

Well, John chapter 3 verse 16, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[21 : 46] life. Jesus Christ died on a cross such that we might not perish at the judgment but instead have eternal life.

Life with God. Life with God in this life. Life with God in the next. Jesus died so we might be forgiven our wrongdoing and sin and instead might be members of God's family.

Now that is great isn't it? That is generous. That is undeserved. In other words, you see, the answer to our question does God exist isn't simply yes.

If the answer was simply yes, well, I guess at best that would leave me thinking, well, but what is he like? Can I know him? At worst, it would leave me thinking, well, what about the judgment to come?

Now, the answer is he does exist but it's also that he is full of grace. Those who believe in Jesus can be certain now in this world that they are part of God's family and certain that on the final day they'll be welcomed as members of his family into heaven.

[23 : 10] God needn't be a stranger. We can be welcomed as a friend. God's family Well, let me talk about responses before we have our coffee break because I guess once we've grasped this then we do need to think about how we might respond.

If you've never investigated the claims of Jesus Christ and done so as a consenting adult so to speak then you owe it to yourself to do so. You'll see there is a tear-off slip on the service sheet.

A couple of ways obvious very good ways to think further about the Christian faith. One is to sign up for the Christianity Explore course which you'll see details there on the tear-off slip.

It's a course which is run by churches up and down the country. It's DVD based. An excellent way just to go through Mark's Gospel with a group of others. Some people like to go on the course and just listen.

Others like to go on the Jesus because it's so often the case that those who reject Jesus simply haven't really investigated and haven't really done so as a grown up so to speak.

[24 : 54] So easy isn't it? Just to live off second hand information and there's certainly plenty of second hand information regarding the Christian faith.

The Bible is full of contradictions. The Gospels were made up centuries after the events. There's no real evidence for Jesus. It's all been made up by the church and so on. Speaking personally, I'm not from a Christian family, speaking personally, it was only really when I did investigate the Jesus Christ of the Gospels for myself that I realised at that point that Jesus I'd been rejecting was in fact a caricature and I hadn't really understood the real Jesus neither in terms of who he is nor in terms of why he came.

But it may be of course there are one or two here and you're thinking but I want to become part of God's family. How do I do that? Well perhaps you know you're far from him, you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and you want to turn to him as Lord and Saviour.

Well if that is you I'm going to close this part of our meeting by praying a prayer. Let me just read it out. So as I read it out the first time just think to yourself is this the kind of prayer that you'd like to pray and then I'll read it out a second time so that you can you're ready to pray.

Lord God I'm so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart soul mind and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died. I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus death on a cross for me I ask you to forgive me.

[26 : 51] From now on please give me the desire to obey you and help me to well if that is the kind of prayer that you like to pray I'm going to read it out again and do echo it in the quiet of your own heart.

Lord God I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart soul mind and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus death on a cross for me I ask you to forgive me from now on please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost Amen Now can I say that if you've prayed that prayer for the first time then today is a great day you can be assured that God has answered the prayer you can be assured that you are part of his family I would love you to either come and tell me or Fiona who was interviewing Lizzie earlier if you've done that we'd love to help you get the best possible start in the Christian life and to give you a copy of this booklet

The Real Jesus which will just help you to underline what you have done and