

Searching for God?

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[0 : 00] Well, I want to start with the question on the top of that little outline that you've got in your newsletter. And that is, how can we know that God exists? How can we know that God exists and for sure?

What do we need to look for if we're searching for God? Is it a vision that we need or a dream where God appears and proves that He's real?

Or is it God moments in our lives? You know, where there are specific things or events that occur so that we cannot help but think, that's a divine intervention, that's got to be God.

Or maybe some of you are more rational, you know, you want to think things through. And so you're looking for logical proof or reasoning that shows that God is real.

Now, I'm pretty sure that if there was a definitive matter found up to now, that we would have been told already. Some universally agreed way so that there is no other argument.

[1 : 09] Well, that's not obviously the case, so the search continues. Or does it? What's more, this topic is not something that we can actually have different views happily coexisting, is it?

Because either God exists or He doesn't. You can't have it both ways. Now, if God does exist, you may also wonder how He might choose to make Himself known.

Of the various methods that we spoke about earlier, which one would He choose? And would there be another way, perhaps? Well, as Christians, we believe that God has chosen His way.

And that's why we're looking at this passage in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Because in our passage today, we are actually told how. Now, John's Gospel was written by one of Jesus' disciples.

In fact, John was a really close disciple of Jesus. He witnessed the life of Jesus close up for nearly three years.

[2 : 20] But I'm jumping the gun a bit because John introduces his Gospel by telling us about another person who is mysteriously called the Word. So let's start there in verse 1, on the slide in your Bibles, where it says, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. 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. So, John, right at the start, declares that God exists. Now, this is not a proof as such.

But what he does say is that there is a person whom he calls the Word, who can reveal to us God's existence. Why? Because the Word was with God in the beginning.

Now, for Jewish readers at the time, the words, the beginning, is a clear reference, not to the beginning of the year or someone's life, but the beginning of time.

[3 : 31] And we heard a direct echo of that at the start of the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 1, which Tiff read for us earlier, where it proclaims on the slide, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And there in Genesis, just like it is here in John, there is talk of darkness and light and of life being formed out of nothing. And so this word must be someone special, right?

Because he was there in the beginning. He is distinct from God. And yet John says at the same time that he is God. Now, if that's a little confusing for you right now, that's okay.

Hopefully things will become clearer in a while. But the point to take away is this. If what John says of God's existence is true, then the way to find out whether God exists or not is to meet this person, right?

Called the Word. For he was with God at the beginning. So that John now tell us where we can meet the Word. Well, in fact, John does, because he goes on to say that this Word came into the world.

[4 : 35] So as we keep reading in the Bible, after talking about another man, also called John, like him, who bore witness to the Word, the Apostle John, that is the one who wrote this Gospel, he says in verse 9, Now, if you recall earlier, he had already said that the Word was the light that shines in the darkness.

Now, John declares that this light has come 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.

Now, I'm pretty sure many of you are familiar with Banksy. Yes? Everyone started looking up. He's a famous street graffiti artist, isn't it?

And all his work has sort of popped up around the world on walls, kind of. A lot of it in London. One of his pieces of art is called The Girl with a Balloon.

That's a picture of that on the slide. Right? And as some of you will know, that piece of art, the one on the left, sold for a record sum at auction.

[5 : 48] Only for, you know, when the hammer came down, the moment the hammer came down, only for that piece of art to be shredded. And so you see that on the right, where it sort of went through.

So the frame is some sort of paper shredder, I think. But, you know, I don't know. And someone rich enough to pay out on millions probably think that's a really, still really good thing to have.

Look, Banksy, my shredded art. So many of you will know Banksy. It's a distinctive, very distinctive is his artwork. And you can see sort of black and white with a bit of color and then always with a sort of a political kind of message.

Easily recognizable. But the problem is nobody actually knows who Banksy is. Right? There's no photo of him.

Unless some of you, anyone here got a photo of him? No. And no knowledge of his real name besides Banksy. Right?

[6 : 50] So imagine one day that if you're there and you're a fan of Banksy, right? You're in front of one of his pieces on a street in London. Only to find out later, and he likes to post things on social media as well, cryptic things.

Only to find out later that he's posted a picture on the internet with you in the photo looking at the art. Now you would realize immediately that he was there.

Right there with you. And you didn't know it. If only you had turned around and looked. I mean, maybe you still wouldn't have recognized him. But that would have been so frustrating, isn't it?

If you are a fan of Banksy. To think that he was right there behind you. And yet, you didn't get a chance to see his face.

Well, that's the sort of exasperation I think we hear in John's words. Where he said the word came into the world and they didn't recognize him. Worse, he came to his own, that is the Jewish people, and they did not receive him.

[7 : 59] Now this happened not because like Banksy, the people didn't recognize him. Rather, they didn't receive him because they rejected him. They knew who he was. But they found that what he had to say was unpalatable.

But if the word was truly with God and you were indeed searching for God, then this is a once in a life, no, once in a world history event, isn't it? A lost opportunity that they had just let slip through their fingers.

Well, thankfully, not everyone rejected him because John, in particular, didn't. And that's why he's so keen, isn't he? Writing to tell others about it.

Now you see from the outline that verses 12 and 13, which we would normally go to next. I've just skipped over for now. It's actually point three rather than point two.

Now, that's not because they're unimportant. They're actually the key verses in this passage, which you want to save until the very end. The Jews like to do this kind of writing, you know, structure the writing in this way, where the most important bits are often in the middle of the passage.

[9 : 11] A bit like the filling in the hamburger, right? The juicy beef patty is in the middle and the dry buns are on the outside. Not that the passage has dry buns on the outside.

That's still pretty good. But it's the middle two verses. So let's skip over the verses for now and come back to it a bit lighter.

So if you keep going then, verse 14, what John does now is give us his own encounter with the word. He 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.

So to become flesh is to become human. That is, the word didn't come as an angel, didn't come as a ghost. He had a body of human flesh and lived among us.

The words made his dwelling implies actually setting up a tent, a temporary, almost flimsy dwelling, which reminded the people of Israel, the Israelites, that God had dwelt with them at one time as well.

[10:21] Living in a tent in the wilderness as they were escaping Egypt and heading to Canaan. But in spite of the fact of the word being in a human body, frail and humble, probably no ripping biceps or V-shaped torso, John sees his glory.

Now, this is not physical glory, but inner glory. That of character, full of grace and truth, it says. That is, not harsh and unforgiving truth, but said gracefully.

And yet, without compromising the truth itself. Both grace and truth. And I wonder whether you've met people like that, graceful and truthful at the same time.

They may not be perfect, but they're actually very attractive people, aren't they? You're drawn to them because they have integrity, and yet, compassionate humanity. You know, when they talk to you, you sense that they actually understand you, and have a deep empathy for what you're going through.

And yet, they're not afraid, either, to tell you what you need to hear, even though it might not be pleasant. Well, this is how John describes the word.

[11:41] Except the word was always full of grace and truth. His glory was overwhelming and constant. And then, John goes on to reveal a bit more of his identity, for he says that he's the only son of the Father, that is God.

Now, John then returns in verses 15 to John's witness, John the Baptist's witness again. He says, 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.

Now, why is John telling us this? Well, he's trying to tell us that even though the word became flesh, that is, he was born, his existence predates his humanity.

So yes, his humanity had a beginning in time, but not his existence. Because before John was himself born, the word was already here.

And then finally, John unveils the identity of the word. He says, 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.

[12:56] Now, I'm sure that I haven't surprised anyone here because after all, as the slide says, it's Meet Jesus Sunday, right? So, the title has sort of given the identity of the word away.

But for the readers of John's gospel at the time, this may have been the first time up to this point John has held back telling them who it is. And this is the first time that they're reading about Jesus. And even the Jews who believed in the existence of God at the time may have been surprised at the revelation of Jesus. But if you've been waiting patiently for your answer to the question that was put to you at the start as to whether we can know that God exists for sure, then here is John's answer.

God has revealed himself to humanity in the person of his son, the man Jesus who is also God. And actually, John goes on to make an even more exclusive statement right there in verse 18.

He says, no one has ever seen God but the one and only son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, he has made him known. What John is saying then is that not only is Jesus the way to know God and to know he exists, he is the only way to know that God exists because no one else has seen God.

[14:20] And that makes sense, doesn't it? Because unless someone has come from God, how can they reveal to us exactly who God is? And even more so for Jesus himself claims to be God.

Not just with God, the Father, but God himself. And so to know Jesus is to know God. To be in relationship with Jesus is to be in relationship with God.

And John comes to this conclusion that Jesus is God after having spent more than two years being by Jesus' side. He's seen everything that Jesus has said and done.

And more importantly, he sees Jesus rise from death on the cross. And that's when he understands that Jesus is indeed the epitome of truth and grace.

That the fullness of Jesus' glory is shown on the cross. Now, not everyone may be convinced of John's claims here, but this is the simple but audacious claim of Christianity.

[15 : 30] Christianity. That Jesus is God and proven to be God's son because he rose from the dead. If you want to know what Christianity is all about, this is it.

Take away all the other stuff. At the center of it is this truth that Jesus is God. He's proven to be God's son because he rose from the dead. And so we can have certainty about God's existence. We can know that God exists for sure, not with visions or dreams or feelings because to be honest, they come and go not to some sort of scientific experiment or proof, but by believing that Jesus is God's son.

Now we can't meet Jesus face to face because he walked the earth many years ago, but we have eyewitnesses like John, reliable witnesses who have written and told us about it.

And so that's why this year at this church we've been encouraging people to read through the Gospel of John with us. You can read through the Bible, but this year we said let's read through the Gospel of John with us and we've been handing out these little books called Uncover John for those who might like to read it, whether one-to-one or in a small group with others.

[16 : 51] And each time, you know, if you open up this book, you read a small portion of John, talk about it, there are sort of empty lines on the right side for you to jot down some notes, and then progressively you gather up information to make up your mind about Jesus.

And so if you're here today and you're interested to do this, please come speak to me, I've got extra copies down the front here, or speak to the person that brought you and say, look, can we read this together?

I'd like to do that. But the amazing thing I would say is that even as we begin to do that, we find that whilst we may think that we're searching for God by doing this, it turns out that God is the one that has been seeking us out in the first place.

God is the light of the earth to become flesh. Even the word word speaks a bit about what God is trying to do, isn't he?

He's trying to speak to us through his son, reaching out to us so that we may know him in his son. That's why Jesus is the light which illumines the darkness.

[18 : 05] which brings us back now to verse 12 and 13 because God is searching us out so that we might respond to him by receiving his son and believing in his name.

Even as we're searching for God, it turns out that God made the first move by revealing himself to us so that we might be called his own. We might belong to him.

So verse 12, yet to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, not of human decision or husband's will, but born of God.

You see, we belong to God not because of what we've done, not because of what your parents have done, but because of God. To be born of God means to be born as a result of his will.

He chooses us and we're only able to be children of God because he sought us out and gave us the right to be his children. Now, sometimes we hear stories, don't we, of people separated from their parents at birth, and yet, you know, even though they may grow up to be quite accomplished, very successful, even have happy families of their own, they still have that deep longing, don't they, to find their biological parents.

[19 : 29] They may even have adoptive parents that are, you know, super loving to them, and yet they still feel like something is missing, and they continue to track down their parents, and in this days, there's lots of modern techniques like DNA testing and even historical records that you can use to try and do that.

Well, I think that's the same impulse that we have when, whenever we have that sense of wanting to search for God, to ask questions about his existence, we innately want to know, don't we, where we came from, as a human race even, to fill a missing puzzle to life.

And it's not just an intellectual curiosity, isn't it? Because what we're searching for is for meaning and identity and belonging.

And as we read further in John's Gospel, we also discover how we become lost. John explains it to us, or Jesus does. Not because God has abandoned us, but because we've turned our backs on him.

Collectively, as a human race we have, but also individually, because we've been proud and rebellious. But despite this, what we find is that God did not give up on us, but came for us by sending us his son to pave the way back to him through his own death and resurrection.

[20 : 55] God didn't just seek us out. He provided for our reconciliation through the costly sacrifice of Jesus.

Now, you may have grown up in a Christian home or even in this so-called Christian country like Australia, which celebrates Easter and Christmas every year, doesn't it?

but the only way back to God is not about coming to church or observing Christmases or Easter.

The only way back to God is to receive his son and believe in the name of Jesus.

This is the only way to become, as John says, a child of God restored in relationship with him. Now, next month we're going to have another one of these Sundays called Meet Jesus on the 25th of August.

You may have picked up a little handout in your notices with the details. We're going to go more into what believing in Jesus means and why that's necessary and why it requires Jesus' death and forgiveness.

[22 : 05] So please, I invite you to come back and join us if you want to hear more. But today our question is simply to ask how we can know God exists. And my answer, going by what John says, is that we know God exists by meeting Jesus in the pages of the Bible.

And here's the really life-changing thing when you do, and I speak from my own experience. You know, sometimes when we open, let's say, the Gospel of John for the first time, and we think we're reading a story about Jesus, some guy, you know, like a famous guy, but who existed a long time ago.

A bit like, you know, when you pick up a biography of Abraham Lincoln, you know, yeah, American president, but he's dead and gone. Interesting, but you feel distant from them. But what I found with Jesus is that it's more like finding a long-lost relative, still alive, but on the other side of the world. It reminds me of the story of this lady called Yiling Andrews. Some of you may have watched the show, Every Family Has a Secret, SBS. She was actually given away as a child by her parents in Taiwan to an acrobatic troop.

And she finally comes and makes her way back somehow to Australia. That's why she has the name Andrews, that's the Australian adoptive parents' name. But for more than 60 years, she had no clue what her roots were.

[23 : 36] There was a hole in her life she called a deep, dark, vast space. It's the beginning of her life, but it was void of any knowledge of who she was.

So at the age of 64, she began a search for her parents, and that took her back to Taiwan. And amazingly, through careful research and investigation, paid for by SBS, no doubt, she discovers and finds her little brother, not so little anymore, that's the older man on the left there, who in turn had managed to find their mother before she died.

And what the mother had done was given him a little black and white photo of the two of them as children, a sepia-toned portrait of two tiny solemn children.

Li Ying stares wordless at it. It's a small photo, but for her, it contained a whole universe of emotion and history and loss and family secrets.

And then as the little promo write-up in the SBS says on the slide, Li Ying's eyes filled up with tears as her brother tells her that their mother's parting wish was that she wanted him to find her.

[25 : 01] They weren't discovered like rubbish after all. They were treasured, wanted, remembered. Friends, this is what happens when we meet Jesus in the Bible.

It's not just reading a story of a dead historical figure. Instead, what we find is that we're meeting a long-lost brother, real and alive.

And he tells us that we're not discarded nor forgotten, but instead we are treasured, wanted, and remembered.

And what he has done is to come to us, to win us back to the Father, to die for us on the cross, so that we can receive and believe in his name.

And so friends, if that's what you would like to do tonight, please come and talk to me. Afterwards, when people are praying, you can pray along with them. Ask to receive Jesus into your life.
[26 : 09] But if you still have more questions, then I urge you as well to come, talk to your friend, talk to me, come back again, read the Gospel of John, so that you can find out for sure whether Jesus is the Son of God.