

The Word on the Word

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, if you would please open a Bible in front of you, you might have to share with someone next to you at John chapter 1, page 886.

We begin a series in the Gospel of John. We are leaving Ezekiel behind us, which is a bit more familiar, although I think John's Gospel, if anything, is more direct and straight.

So instead of acted parables and glory disappearing and appearing, John confronts us with the full glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And this first passage that was read for us a moment ago, chapters 1 to 18, the Bible, the books call it a prologue. The commentary says it's like a foyer or an overture, both of which are far too gentle. It's like the dropping of a bomb, a napalm bomb, which spreads and spreads and changes everything it touches.

[1 : 13] But instead of spreading death and darkness, it spreads life and light. However, I will give the commentary to this. It is a carefully crafted poem.

And it's crafted around one central text. And the central text is verse 12. To all who receive Jesus and believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

And that's the kind of pointy end of the massive impact that the eternal word of God, Jesus Christ, makes coming into the world and what it means for us.

Jim Packer, who most of you have heard of, wrote a wonderful book called Knowing God. And he says, being the children of... You have heard of Jim Packer. Is there anyone here who has not read Knowing God?

Good. See me later. And I'll confess to you, I haven't finished it either. He's a very good writer. He says that this, being the children of God, is the highest privilege the gospel gives us.

[2 : 24] If you really want to tell someone's heart is beating in time with God, you find out how much they make of the thought that they are God's child, having God as their father.

If it's the heartbeat of their worship and their witness and their life and their thinking and their decisions, then that marks them out as Christian. He says, everything that is distinctively Christian is summed up in the knowledge of the fatherhood of God.

Father is the Christian name for God. I think that's great. And we'll come to that in our second point. But there's so much treasure here. It's mouth on the fire hydrant sort of passage.

I just want to look at two things with you. And the first is the glory of the word. We'll spend a bit more time there. And the second is the gift of the word. So firstly, then, the glory of the word.

And I know it takes time to get used to John's gospel. We're in a different kind of book now. And each week I want to point out a tactic that John uses to help us understand his meaning.

[3 : 34] And the first tactic that you'll notice in John's gospel is that he uses double meanings. Often uses words that have double meaning. Born again can mean born from above.

And whenever John uses a double meaning word, the great thing is he means both. He has it both ways. We don't have to choose which he means.

That's important because he starts the gospel with a word which has a double meaning. These very familiar verses. Verses 1 and 2. So this word beginning can have two meanings.

It can mean beginning in terms of time. In other words, way back before the foundation, before the creation of the heavens and the earth, the word was with God and the word was God.

He was with God having a face-to-face fellowship. It's a word of closeness and intimacy. And he was God. But this beginning word is a bit of a shock to the Jewish readers who say, well, hang on, the Bible starts in the beginning, God created.

[4 : 51] And John starts in the beginning was the word. So, yes, it does mean eternity past. It means that this Jesus who was born, whom we've just celebrated his birth in Bethlehem, he existed

for eternity past with God and he was God.

But the word beginning has a second meaning. It contains this idea of firstness, but it's not just firstness in terms of time. It's firstness in terms of the reason or the cause or the very basis for something.

John is saying that the word is the beginning of all things because he is at the root. He's the source and the foundation and the base of everything. And I don't know how you'd say that exactly in Vancouver today.

It's like John picks up all our assumptions and beliefs and activities and he sweeps his arm across the chessboard and he says, it's not a chessboard, it's a scrabble board.

That everything we do and everything we believe and everything we've experienced and everything we know, if it's not based on Jesus Christ, the eternal word, it's temporary, fleeting, misguided in some way.

[6 : 03] So that you can add all sorts of tremendous experiences and understandings to your life, but there's not going to be any real light or spiritual reality unless they're built on the person of Jesus Christ.

It's like in your life, what you're doing is you're building a house, building house, building house, building house, and suddenly someone comes along and shines a light and you discover that you've been building it in the dark, the complete dark.

And the house is not only leaky, it's ugly. And you're not only building on sand, you're building on the side of a volcano. Where I grew up in East Africa, they have Bayabab trees.

Bayabab trees are ugly trees. Their branches look like root systems. And the local Africans say that the gods came along and punished these trees and they call them upside down trees because God pulled them out and put them in this way, upside down.

That's what John is trying to say here. Has massive implications for us. Has implications if you're suffering, for example. Where's the root of your life?

[7 : 09] Where's the foundation? This is what Leslie Newbigin says on this. He says, what if the new thing John wants to introduce us to is so radically new that it calls in question all previous axioms and assumptions, all inherited tradition, all human experience, so that even language itself cannot serve to communicate it?

What if the new thing is in fact the primal truth by which everything else has to be confronted and questioned? How do you begin to explain that which must in the end be accepted as the beginning of all explanation?

I mean, just take one little question that has plagued humanity. I mean, why do I exist? Why do all things exist?

Why is there something, not nothing? The answer is the word. As John says in verse 3, all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.

See, such is the power and glory of the word that coming into the world of the word is going to make such a massive difference. It's going to overturn. It's going to redefine everything.

[8 : 26] You know, Jesus steps across the dichotomy that we have between material and spiritual reality. He is life and light.

And then suddenly in verse 5, for the first time, there's a negative note. Darkness is introduced. And I say that because there is in our lives and in this world an anti-light, anti-life, anti-word power.

Our world is alienated and estranged from God. And there can be no peaceful coexistence between light and darkness. I know it sounds very intolerant, but that's just the way light works.

And Jesus has come to replace the darkness. That is why he's come. So just scan down to our favorite verse, verse 14. Very wonderful verse. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

We've seen his glory. Glory is the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth. This is a great Christmas text. It's sublime in its glory. But it has this deep, jarring note in it.

[9 : 44] See, it's not a happy holiday. The word doesn't sort of float down. John is like a Greek god who takes over a human form for a little while to see what's really going on.

He's not an avatar, a remote-controlled avatar over the internet somewhere else. The word that John uses here to describe what's happened to the word is quite crude.

He does not say the word became man. He doesn't say the word became a body. It's literally the word became meat. And I don't think you can...

We can't conceive of a greater descent, a greater humiliation, a greater sacrifice in a way than the eternal word who's been face to face with the Father, entering the world as a dependent human baby.

We see his majesty in the very humility of what he does. And John's not deliberately trying to offend us, but... I mean, this sublime truth was an affront to those who heard it in those days.

[10:57] You know, if you were Greek, bodies were... They were nasty business. They were an envelope for, you know, the real stuff was the stuff of the mind. If you were Jewish, this was impossible. But the word became flesh for us.

He couldn't have come closer. This is the glory of the word. It's an astounding act of self-giving coming in the flesh. And as we track through John's gospel, and we probably won't get through it all, you know, the glory of Jesus is most clearly seen when he serves.

It's seen when he takes a towel and he washes feet. But when he dies on the cross, that's the great revelation of his glory. And John gathers up the glory of the word in verse 18.

Very familiar. No one has ever seen God. The only God, that's Jesus, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. Now here we come to a second tactic in John's writing, and that is the use of the negative.

Very helpful, actually. John really wants to get his meaning across. And he'll often state the positive. And just in case there's any confusion, he states the negative.

[12:08] And I think he got it from Jesus. Remember later in the gospel, Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. And I don't know anyone who doesn't like that. Everyone likes that phrase. And then Jesus says, and nobody comes to the Father but by me.

Don't like that so much. Not so popular, that phrase. And here John, he begins this with a negative note. He says, no one has ever seen God. And I don't want to be provocative, although it's a very difficult thing to do when you're teaching from John's gospel.

John is writing in a religiously pluralistic context, much more pluralistic than ours. And he deliberately engages with those who have other religions and other worldviews.

In these first 18 verses, he even takes some of their favorite terms, like the word light or the word logos. The word logos, the Greeks thought, was like a world soul, a kind of a Gaia force, modern equivalent.

John says, no, no. It's the person of Jesus Christ who became flesh for us. And you see, when he says no one has ever seen God, what he's saying is that every human idea, every idea you have about God and that I have about God that's not based on Jesus Christ is basically a fantasy.

[13:28] It's just an opinion. That all the religions of the world are testimony to our ignorance and darkness. That all the religions of the world, if you put them together, cannot give us true knowledge of the true God.

It's hard, isn't it? There's no such thing, Jesus is saying here, as an inner light, you know, as sort of a divine spark that guides us along the path. It doesn't.

It's not there. He says only God can make God known. Verse 18, the only God who is at the Father's side, he's made him known.

And this word known means exegete. It's to tell the full story. Jesus, the word comes to make him known. And that's the glory of the word.

We need to move, secondly, to the gift of the word. And I'm just, I'm very aware of how different this is from what we hear day by day. In fact, someone came up to me after the earlier service and said, isn't this very intolerant of God?

[14:33] And we had a wonderful conversation about whether tolerance is the highest virtue or not. There are some things that shouldn't be tolerated. Well, what is the gift of the word?

So Jesus comes. And what was the welcome like? John tells us at the center of the passage, there are two diametrically opposite responses to Jesus.

The world is not naturally sympathetic with Jesus. And despite the fact that we always want to create a mushy middle ground between these two, there are two still different reactions to Jesus. C.S. Lewis put it this way. Christianity says, Christianity, if it's false, is of no importance. If it's true, it's of infinite importance.

The only thing it cannot be is moderately important. So you have to have an extreme reaction to Jesus one way or other, or else you just haven't begun to come to the truth of what Jesus is saying.

[15 : 35] What are the two reactions? The first, astoundingly, in verses 10 and 11, is rejection of Jesus. Rejection. Do you notice the irony? Here is the one through whom the world was created.

He comes into the world, and the world did not know him. It's not an accidental lapse of judgment. The world doesn't want to know him.

The world doesn't want to recognize him or believe in him. It doesn't want to accept the fact that he is the eternal word from the Father. We don't naturally want to do that. And John says this is a willful refusal to accept and believe Jesus is God's son.

In fact, as we go through John, we'll find the basic sin, basic definition of sin in John, is the refusal to believe and to know God in Jesus Christ.

But the tragedy deepens in verse 11. He came to his own people, the Jewish people, the nation who had been prepared by generations of prophecy.

[16 : 38] Now, this is eminently understandable, isn't it?

I mean, if you've been building your house in the dark for a very long time, and someone comes and shines a light on it, and it looks like it's leaky and ugly, and you realize you've been building on quicksand on the side of a volcano, and that all your experiences and options and actions and opinions are futile without him, it's much easier to say no to him, isn't it, than to up sticks and move and base yourself on him?

Jesus is very honest about this. He says in chapter 3, light has come into the world. People prefer the darkness. They love the darkness, he says, rather than the light because their works are evil. Everyone who does wicked things hates the light, doesn't come to the light. Why? In case his works are exposed. So in one way, it's the most natural thing to reject Jesus.

Not because Jesus isn't good enough, but because he's too good, and he exposes what's really going on for us. But that's not the final word, rejection. There is a group within this group who break against the current.

[18 : 04] And so this is the second reaction, verses 12 and 13. The privilege of those who do believe. And I just want to slow down here a moment because this is very important, very simple but important.

This is the purpose Jesus came into the world. This is the purpose the gospel is written. Verse 12, read it again. To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

You could not describe a more extreme transformation in someone. None of us are born naturally children of God.

We don't know God, our heavenly father, naturally. Something vast and radical has to happen to us. We have to become children of God, as he says.

What that means is, you see, that salvation is not just the forgiveness of our sins. It's not just a fresh record. You know, as good as that really is.

[19 : 08] It's not just a fresh start and a clean slate. It's not just being healed of the sickness of sin. Sin's much more than sickness. It's an internal change.

Our whole relationship with God has changed and become something new. You could be forgiven and stay basically the same. The wonderful truth is that at a fundamental level, we've become children of God.

Martin Lloyd-Jones was a famous preacher in England, died about 30 years ago. He said that in the rest of the New Testament, often we're called sons of God, but John insists always of calling us children of God.

And he said that the difference, if there is one, is that sons is an objective title. Speaking about our status, we have, you know, we receive an inheritance.

That's our standing. But children is subjective, internal, much more intimate, if you will. It's direct. We have an internal relationship and connection with the Father.

[20 : 12] It means that we have the same nature as our Heavenly Father. If you'll forgive me putting it this way, God implants his own spiritual DNA in us to make us his children. It's not something we can do for ourselves.

It's a gift of his grace. He gave the right to become children of God. And the right doesn't mean, you know, I have these rights and I can exercise them as an option, some possibility.

To have this right, it means to have this honour. To be reckoned worthy of being a child of God.

It's a privilege. It's being made new. God looks at us and he honours us and says, you are my children because you believe and receive my Christ.

Jesus, the unique son of God, he was God's son by nature. We were not. And he becomes ours and he takes on our nature to give us his, if you will.

[21 : 19] We never become sons of God in the sense that he is. But we are born of God. How does this happen? Verse 13. Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

If I could dare say this, this is even better and more than adoption. See, in adoption, there's love and family making and sometimes adopting families are richer than natural families.

But the parents cannot impart their own DNA to the child. That's what John's saying. It's not of blood. It's not descent. It's not your pedigree.

It's not who you grew up with or where you come from. It's not of the flesh, not of the will of the flesh. It's not by human procreation. It's not of the will of man.

There's no human teaching or human religion can do this. It is of God. What John's describing is no small change.

[22 : 23] It's not a legal thing outside us. It's an inner supernatural change at the deepest possible level of who we are. It changes our very nature.

It changes who we are and where we belong. In the words of the Apostle Peter, we become partakers of the divine nature.

It's dangerous stuff. So we call God our Father. We call Jesus our brother. And this has massive implications, doesn't it? We don't have time to look at them this morning.

It has implications. It changes the way we deal with our past and the way we think about the future. It changes how we relate to our present. It changes how we relate to each other.

You know, if Christ has come from heaven to rescue us, the DNA of Christ, if it starts to breathe in us, creates hospitality and generosity and a concern for mission.

[23 : 19] But the most basic implication is this. I just want to ask you, do you know God as your heavenly Father? And when you pray to him, do you call him Father?

Do you know him as a father? Or do you just call him God? Do you understand something of the privilege that you have in being a child of God? It's the whole reason the word became flesh, that we might become children of God.

This is the glory of the gospel, that Christ visited us bringing life and light. And when we rely on him and trust in him, he lifts us up into his family.

What marvellous love the Father has extended to us, says John later. Just look at it, he says. We're called the children of God. That's who we really are. It's also why the world doesn't recognise us or take us seriously.

It has no idea who he is or what he's up to. But friends, that's exactly who we are, children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up.

[24 : 27] What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we'll see him, and in seeing him, become like him. And all of us who look forward to his coming, stay ready with the glistening purity of Jesus' life as a model for our own.

Amen.