

The Theology of Christmas

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

John chapter 1, verse 1. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Please be seated. In a 1995 interview, historian David McCullough, a pretty famous historian, said, we are raising a new generation of Americans who, to an alarming degree, are historically illiterate.

He continues, the situation is serious and sad. It's quite real. It's been coming on for a long time, like a creeping disease, eating away at our national memory.

[1 : 18] We're losing our story, forgetting who we are, and what it's taken to come this far. The warning signs have been sounding for years, he says, but now he's begun to experience them.

He describes talking to students at one of America's most prestigious colleges, and asking, how many of you know who George Marshall is?

Now, this is an alive question for us. He says he asked, and no one did. Not one person knew who George Marshall was.

At another college in the Midwest, he said a young woman said she was glad he came and spoke this morning, because she had no idea that all the 13 colonies were on the eastern coast.

What happens when we forget history? We forget who we are. We forget our story. We forget how we're here and why we're here. We forget how to live.

[2 : 21] In that same interview, McCullough said, history shows us how to behave. History teaches, reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for.

At their core, the lessons of history are largely lessons in appreciation. Indifference to history isn't just ignorance, it's rude.

It's a form of ingratitude. So McCullough says, we need better textbooks. We need better teachers. We need to hold on to history.

After all, if you don't learn from history, you begin to repeat it. Now, remembering history is not just something we must do as Americans. It's something we must do as Christians, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the most repeated commands in Holy Scripture is to remember. The people of Israel were commanded to remember the day that the Lord brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

[3 : 22] They gather to remember. They sing to remember. They feast to remember. They pray to remember. So too we must remember. All you have to do to begin to drift in the Christian life is to forget.

There is fruitless remembering. Remembering that's not helpful. Remembering your sins and not the work of Christ is fruitless remembering.

Remembering your failures and not the sovereign grace of God over them is fruitless remembering. Remembering the good old days to try to hold on to them is fruitless remembering as well.

But there is a thing called fruitful remembering. In the history of church, as Gil mentioned, the church has gathered the weeks before Christmas to remember.

Remember a season of anticipating and celebrating what God has done at Christmas in sending his son as a baby.

[4 : 21] The coming of Jesus was a long, long time coming. In previous years, we've studied the prophecies of Isaiah about the coming servant.

These servant songs are wonderful. We've remembered the songs of Mary and Zachariah and the angels and Simeon. We've remembered the stories of the angels and the shepherds, the wise men and Mary and Joseph.

This year, we're going to study John 1. And look into the theology of Christmas. Because with all the lights and trees and shenanigans, Christmas actually takes us into the deep end.

Some of the deepest theology comes to us at Christmas. At the study of the incarnation. So where we're going this morning as we tackle these three verses, short text, is listen up and believe.

Jesus Christ is none other than the Son of God sent to reveal and redeem. Listen up and believe.

Jesus Christ is none other than the Son of God sent to reveal and redeem.

[5 : 35] The first point is the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. The Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. My mom loves family history.

When I was a boy, I was bored sick as my mom brought it up time after time. Telling me about so-and-so, marrying so-and-so, having three kids, moving this place, and having more kids.

She would talk for what seemed like hours. And all I wanted to do was play Legos or guitar or something like that. But over the past several years, as my parents have gotten older, I've gotten into family history and wanted to learn more.

Well, the Apostle John, he's beginning his gospel. This is one of the apostles writing about what the Lord Jesus has revealed about himself and what he did.

And the Apostle John begins his story, not with Mary and Joseph, not with a genealogy, not with Mary and Joseph and their parents' parents.

[6 : 35] He goes back way further than that. He begins at the beginning, before the creation of the world. You remember, you likely remember how the Bible begins.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And so, John references that as he begins his gospel. He says, in the beginning was the Word.

You notice the difference immediately when we might read, if we read in Genesis, in the beginning, God. He immediately points out, in the beginning, the Word was. John is saying that way back before the stars and mountains were made, the Word was.

He didn't come into existence or begin to be. He was in the beginning, already there, in existence, in the beginning, always there. The Word never began.

The Word is everlasting. Before the mountains were formed or ever He had formed the earth and the world, the Word is everlasting to everlasting. The Word is before every moment in time.

[7 : 41] Time is bound up with what is made, but the Word is before anything that was made was made. The Word is not bound by time. You know, all of our lives, it's impossible to extract our lives from time.

We're always living at a point in time with a past, a present, and a future. And that time keeps on ticking. And as hard as we might, we can't outpace our biological clocks because the time is ticking on us.

As my kids like to point out, it's ticking and creating new wrinkles around my eyes every year.

Hopefully from laughing and enjoying. But in the beginning, the Word was.

In the beginning, the Word was everlasting. The Word was eternal. Mark Johnson, in his commentary, says, Without apology or qualification, John goes back in time beyond Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, and Nazareth, where He was conceived.

Indeed, back beyond the beginning of time itself. And allows us to glimpse a glorious person who has eternal existence.

[8 : 55] John begins this way for important reasons, as we'll see. Now, the Apostle John is saying something very important about our Lord Jesus Christ. The Word is just another name for the Son of God, as we will find out.

Now, we could draw out the implications of this very verse all afternoon. But what it means, firstly and foremost, is that the Son of God was not made.

He's unlike all the other created things that are made, that have a beginning. John underlines this reality with the use of only begotten Son, which occurs four times in John's Gospel and once in one of his letters.

It's most recognized, perhaps, in John 3, 16, one of the old translations. For God so loveth the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might have everlasting life. Sometimes it's translated one of a kind or one and only. But only begotten is probably best. Now, begotten is a word used in other parts of Scripture.

[10:04] We think about Matthew 1. Abraham begat Isaac. Isaac begat Jacob. What does that mean? He caused him to come.

He fathered Isaac. And then Isaac fathered Jacob. Perhaps he has a spitting image of his old man. Why?

Because he was created like him. He had his genes. But this word is monogenes. We can say it that way. Mono like one.

Mono e mono, you might say. And genes like to come forth or be brought forth. It's only used for Jesus Christ. Why? Because He was made in a way unlike anything else that was made.

Because He is the Son of God, eternal. So the Son is unlike any other created thing. The only begotten Son. But when was He begotten? The language of only begotten takes us back to the 4th century.

[11:07] When the church wrestled about what it meant that Jesus was the Son of God. We have the truths of Scripture. But the problem was everyone had the same Scripture.

They argued about what the Scriptures meant. And so they came up with these confessions to capture and define what Scripture means by different words.

And the Council of Nicaea was gathered to counteract some of the teaching to argue about. And to disprove some of the teaching by a man named Arius. Now Arius would have taught that the Son of God was begotten before all worlds.

He would have taught that He was begotten before anything was made. The problem is He would have taught that He was still begotten at some point.

Meaning, though the Son was before creation, He was still created. Which means there was once a time when the Son was not.

[12:07] Now we're going somewhere with this. You might be wondering. Only begotten is one of the words the Council of Nicaea captured to refer to the fact that the Son of God is the Father's only and true offspring.

And fully God as a result. The truth aligns with Scripture. We just read this morning that Jesus Christ, who though He was in the form of God.

That doesn't mean He was merely in the appearance, but that He was God. Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself. Colossians 1 says He's the image of the invisible God.

Hebrews 1 says He's the exact imprint of His nature. So He's the one and only true offspring. Not only that, but more important for our purposes here, it appears that the Son was begotten eternally. Our text seems to make it clear when it says, In the beginning, God. Now we would read that if we were studying Genesis, to mean that God is eternal, separate from everything that is made.

[13:18] When everything was made, had a beginning. God had no beginning, because He is the eternal God. And so too, when it says the Son, in the beginning was the Word, it's saying the Son has that same property.

He is the eternal God. Other texts seem to make this clear, pointing that He was begotten in times past, or ancient days.

Psalms 2, Proverbs 8, Micah 5. They're all saying those things. But in this very Gospel, Jesus Himself teaches that He is eternal. To those who oppose Him and say they are following their father Abraham, Jesus says, Before Abraham was, I am.

Now He's not saying that He was born before Abraham. That's preposterous. He's 30 years old. He's saying He is God.

That's why they picked up stones and tried to kill Him. He's eternal. So when was the Son of God begotten? Unlike human generation that begins at some point at conception, there was never a time when the Son of God was not.

[14:37] Nor was there ever a time when the Son of God was not from the Father. So the Son of God is eternal. That's what John is telling us right away.

And the Nicene Creed captures this so well. We actually sang a lot of it in that, Oh, Come All You Faithful, that verse that was added. It says, I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten.

That's the language, right? Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. Now up to this point, Arius is with us. But not after this. God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

So the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. Point two, the Lord Jesus Christ is a person. The Lord Jesus Christ is a person.

He continues, we're actually just going to mainly hang on verse one this morning. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The Word was with God.

[15:50] John is unveiling a great glory in these few words. The Word was there in the beginning, and the Word was with God. In saying that the Word was with God, John is underlining a deep, active relationship between God and the Word.

It's not that the Word and God coexisted alongside one another. It's that the God and the Word lived in active relationship with one another. The Word could even be translated to or toward as if God and the Word were face to face.

Now ministers often have the privilege of the best seat in the house in certain moments. You know, you can see the congregation when you preach.

Sometimes the congregation doesn't realize that if they can see you, you can see them. I've been preaching and saw my kids wallop one another while I'm in the middle of the preaching moment. Thankfully, there's some other moms that smacked them in the head. You watch the congregation as you gather around the Lord's Supper. It's a stunning privilege to look in your eyes.

[17:06] You get a great seat, so to speak, at baby dedications and baptism. You get a better view of engaged couples at the wedding. You're a few feet away.

You watch them make their vows, no longer two but one, at this deep and significant moment. You have the privilege of saying you may kiss your bride.

Everyone loves that moment. But for the minister, the best seat in the house at that moment turns more than a bit uncomfortable. You're too close to this moment.

You're in their personal space and there's a similar effect that should happen as we read this verse. We're peeking into the darkness of eternity where God and the Word are together in perfect fellowship.

Now, while the verse establishes a deep, active relationship between God and the Word, it also establishes a distinction between the two. Though they are together, they're separate. They are distinct.

[18:16] John is saying the Word is not a message, a news, a communique, nor is the Word an agent through which everything was created. Merely, the Word is a person.

In trying to define who God is, people have sometimes said that God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just different expressions or different modes, kind of like water, can appear as liquid, ice, or steam.

But that won't hold up here because the Word was in the beginning and the Word was with God. While a person may be by himself, he's never with himself unless he's crazy in his mind.

And so it's helping us to understand what's going on even back in Genesis when it says, in the beginning, God, and he spoke and he spoke and he spoke eight times and then he says, when he created man, he said, let us make man in our image, in the image of God.

Let us make him male and female so it's becoming clear the Lord Jesus Christ is not another name for God. Lord Jesus Christ is a person like God the Father who's been with the Father for all eternity.

[19:31] Now all this means or one of the things this means is that the essence of who God is is fellowship. In 1 John 4, 16, John says, God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in him.

God is love. There's few places in the scriptures that speak that clearly about God's personal and unchanging character. God is love but the implication is that if God is and always has been love then God is not one person.

C.S. Lewis observed about this verse, the words God is love have no meaning unless God contains at least two persons. If God was a single person then before the world was made he was not love. But God is love. So what's going on? The truth is God has existed eternally in fellowship as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sharing with one another freely and joyfully.

This means that Christianity does not begin with God making his way to me and me making my way to him. Christianity revolves around a relationship between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. [20 : 48] Christianity revolves around fellowship. Contrary to what your grandmother may have taught you God did not create you and Jesus did not die for you because he needed you.

He did not do all this because he was lonely or because he was bored or because he was looking for a good asset for his team. No! It's even better.

God created you and Jesus died for you to invite you into fellowship with him. And this is the fellowship into which no one is worthy but he invites us into it at the essence of who God is is fellowship and at the essence of why God created the world is fellowship.

Christianity is not about you minding your P's and Q's. Not about you making your list and checking it twice. It's definitely not about you giving God an hour of the week.

Christianity is about fellowship. About being invited into fellowship with God the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

[22 : 02] that's what the Bible is trying to do from page one and to the end. Sometimes we think about the Bible as a rule book or a love letter.

It's like my least favorite thing to describe the Bible as. The Bible at the end of the day is just it's this incredible living document trying to bring you into fellowship with the living God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's incredible. It's right there. John's saying we've got to re-understand what's going on in Genesis because God what God was doing in the beginning and all through the Old Testament was preparing for this revelation what He's done in Jesus Christ.

The breaking open of fellowship with God to every tribe tongue and nation through Him. It's incredible. Point three the Lord Jesus Christ is fully God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is fully God. He says in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

[23 : 34] Now this is a bit silly sounding. How can you be with someone and also be someone? It'd be really silly if I said Kim is with my wife and Kim is my wife.

Makes no sense. Either Kim is with my wife or she is my wife. And she's a lovely wife. But with the Son of God it's not silly at all.

It's hugely important. It is one thing for the Word to be with God. It's another thing for the Word to be God. Now if you've ever talked with a Jehovah's Witness this is one of their anchor verses.

When it says the Word was God it does not include an article. So they say it's not saying that the Word was the God but God like like an angel or something.

Some other divine status. God like but that doesn't work for a number of reasons. For a number of very clear reasons textually. It's clear that John is writing his Gospel to show us that Jesus is the Son of God.

[24 : 47] Not just God like or Godly or something like that but to show us that he is the very Son of God. You know the Gospel of John ends climactically with Thomas.

If you remember Thomas he said I'm not going to believe unless I see with my own eyes. And so Jesus appeared to him and he stuck his fingers into the wounds and he said my Lord and my God to close the Gospel in many ways revealing that Jesus is the Son of God.

Right after that John says this is why I wrote the Gospel. I could have written you so many different stories. I could have compiled so many things. There's no end to the books that could have been written about Jesus Christ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.

That is John's mission from page one of his Gospel to prove that Jesus is the Son of God so it doesn't work to say that without the article it just means he's God-like.

Second if John wanted to say that Jesus is divine there's a word for that. So he could have used that word. Third Greek does not demand the article when two nouns are joined together with this verb so it often doesn't use the article there's a rule about that as well.

[26 : 10] Fourthly and I think most persuasively not that it was a hard case in my opinion is that it literally reads and God was the word.

Now actually verses one and two function like a chiasm which means a bit of a stair step up so in the beginning you see that in the beginning and then in verse two in the beginning as well was the word and the word was with God you see with God as well in verse two and then at the very center

of that chiasm is the word was God.

Actually in the original language it reverses the order so it says in the beginning was the word and the word was God and God was the word. So contrary to what Jehovah's Witness might be arguing or other people might be arguing it's written that way to say emphatically and mysteriously God was the word he's with God in the beginning verse three kind of unpacks all the things that were made through him without him was not anything that was made why to signal that he is the everlasting God that created the ends of the earth who made everything he's not merely an agent or a tool or something like that he is the he is God he has all the status of God himself but what does it mean that the Lord Jesus is God now it does not mean that Jesus Christ is a copy of God like him in every way he's not the perfect body double or doppelganger or something like that he's not that he's not a copy the Lord Jesus is not like God he is God nor does it mean that Jesus is a part of God as if God is a pie in which

God the Father is part God the Son is part God the Holy Spirit is part everybody gets a piece of the pie right that's not what it means when it says that Jesus is God the Lord Jesus is not a part of God the Lord is God that's why the Nicene Creed if we could flash that back up again it says I believe in the one Lord Jesus Christ God of God light of light very God of very God begotten not made being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made I know this might not tickle your fancy but it's it's very important stuff it means that the Father and the Son share the same substance they share the same nature they're different persons but they have the same nature there's one God in three persons that's why we can say that Jesus continued to uphold the universe by the word of his power and his divine nature and yet in his human nature be a baby in a manger why because in taking up a human nature he didn't shirk his divine nature but is this biblical is it biblical to say that God the Father and the Son share divine nature surely it would be idolatrous to say they don't because there would be three gods and not one but is it biblical one of the most provoking verses in

John 5 stands out to me in this respect he says truly truly I say to you this is our Lord the Son can do nothing of his own accord but only what he sees the Father doing for whoever the Father does that the Son does likewise what in the world does that mean you know Jesus is talking about the miracles he's doing on the earth and he says that which the Father does the Son does that which the Son does the Father does what is he saying well the miracles are being accomplished by the divine nature that he shares with the Father in heaven and so that which the Father does the Son does and to blow your mind even more that which the Father and the Son do the Spirit does as well why because they all share that nature D.A. Carson about this verse says Jesus is not equal with God as another God or as a competing God but as a God of the same nature and that's what makes sense when Jesus says in the gospel whoever has seen me has seen the Father or when [30:52] Jesus says I and the Father are one or when he says if you had known me you would have known my Father why because he is God and perfectly reveals the nature of God and so on the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed he prayed to the Father Father glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had before the foundation of the world what is that glory glory it's the glory of God it's the glory that rightly belongs to God because Jesus Christ the Son of God is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible whether throne or dominions or rulers or authorities all things were created through him and for him and he is before all things and in him all things hold together he is the radiance of the glory of

God the exact imprint of his nature he upholds the universe by the word of his power now why does all that matter why spend time discussing the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal in a person and fully God with the same nature of God the Father we consider one further thing the son of God is called the word what does that mean some people say it's from Greek philosophy the logos is the organizing principle of the world others say its roots are in Proverbs 8 where it talks about wisdom being there with the Lord in the beginning creating all things other other people have other solutions but the most natural reading is the one that makes the most sense to me how do you get to know someone how do you find out what they like or hate or love how do you hear what they've experienced all you can know about what others think or feel is through their words and so too with God the stunning reality is that God has spoken and apparently God has a lot to say he's quite the talker now surely God did not have to talk he didn't have to say a word he didn't have to create anything and when he created anything or when he did create everything all and after we had

sinned he didn't have to say anything else in fact there are good reasons for God to not talk he is the creator we're the created he's holy and we're sinful but God talked God has spoken the heavens declare the glory of God the sky above proclaim his handiwork day after day what do they say in the invisible attributes are being made known the divine!

power of God is being displayed in the things that he has made but God has spoken even more than that God speaks about the beginning of the world about the organization of all of the world it's by his command he publishes his command he recounts his faithfulness he brings attention to our continual sinfulness so that we see our need for him and now he speaks through his son that's what John is saying here long ago and many times in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophet but in these last days he has spoken by his son and what John is saying what God speaks about his son is so great so marvelous so wonderful so revolutionary that it brings about a new creation John's reference to Genesis is not a cute literary device it's telling us that what God has done in Jesus Christ is making all things new the old creation was brought about by the speaking of the word but the new creation will be brought about by the enfleshing of the word by sending the word of

God made flesh so back to our question why does it matter why spend time discussing the fact that Jesus Christ is all this because only the word can reveal who God is and redeem lost sinners you should have your Bible open you can look down in verse 18 he says no one has ever seen God the only God who's at the father's side which is a reference to our verse he has made him known remember how Moses longed to see God God has made himself known you want to know what God is like you want to know what he loves what he hates what he weeps over what he rejoices over look no further the

[36 : 06] Lord Jesus Christ makes himself known reveals who he is it reveals what God is like who is this God the Old Testament sometimes hard to tell nice some moments take some people out some moments what is going on who is this God he's also sent to redeem the word the son of God redeems he does not just speak he suffers and when he suffers he does not speak he doesn't object doesn't ridicule one favorite old hymns is what child is this when you think about the word you know the word being with God in the beginning you can see why the hymn was written what child is this what is he doing in a manger what what's going on then the second verse says what's he doing on the cross and the hymn says the silent word is pleading the word son of

God comes to reveal who God is but it's not merely a message we can just accept and receive and go along our merry way son of God comes to redeem to step in to take the punishment that we deserve to plead not with his vocal cords but with his nail pierced hands for guilty sinners like you and me it is the word made flesh only the son of God can reveal who God is and can redeem guilty sinners only the son of God can stand in between us only the son of God can be a mediator only the son of God made flesh can mediate between God and man can be God to represent God and be man made flesh to stand in our place and it's precisely here that we see the glory and the wonder of salvation John Newton the slave trader turned Christian author of Amazing Grace said salvation is holy of the Lord and bears those signatures of infinite wisdom power and goodness which distinguish all his works from the puny imitations of men it is in every way worthy of himself a great a free a full a sure salvation it is great whether we consider the objects miserable hell deserving sinners the end the restoration of such alienated creatures to his image and favor to immortal life and happiness or the means the incarnation humiliation suffering and death of his beloved son listen up and believe

Jesus Christ is none other than the son of God sent to reveal and redeem our goal this advent is to remember there's nothing special about advent in some respects but there can be something very powerful about saying Lord I want to remember I want to be more deeply in fellowship with you on the other side that's what I offer you Jesus Christ did not come so that you could string lights around your house he came so that you would not fear the wrath of God in the end and came for fellowship so that we might know him let us go to him in our prayers father in heaven we thank you we praise you we worship you Lord we want to know you more I pray that you would help us open our eyes see more of you this advent that we might know you and love you fear you and serve you more carefully more conscientiously more reverently in the days to come we thank you for your word thank you that you have spoken and thank you that you have sent the one to rescue us we praise you in Jesus name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt

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