

Just the Right Word

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. Let me invite you to turn once again in the Pew Bibles, this time to John chapter 1, verses 1 through 18.

That's page 833 in the Bible in front of you. John chapter 1, we're going to look at verses 1 through 18. Let me read the Gospel of John for us.

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. 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.

[1 : 29] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 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 all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God.

The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. One of the great struggles of any writer or any speaker is to find just the right word to get across to your audience what you want them to feel and know.

[2 : 43] Mark Twain once said, The difference between the almost right word and the right word is a really large matter. Tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

Maybe you can relate. Have you ever struggled to find just the right word? Whether composing a tricky email at work or having an awkward conversation with a family member?

We get a lot of those around this time of year, don't we? Or maybe writing a note of thanks to your friend. How do you capture what's in your mind and heart and really get it across?

It can be tough. Often, we hope for the lightning but end up with little more than lightning bugs. Well, the Gospel of John begins by telling us about a word.

But this word, at long last, is the right word. The word that brings life and light. For this word is the word that does something that no other word has been able to do.

[3 : 57] This is the word that makes God known. Look again at verse 18 if you have it open. At first, John in verse 18 sounds like a good skeptic.

No one has ever seen God, he says. God, after all, is God. And if God is God, the infinite creator of all things, we shouldn't just expect to see him around like some other object, right?

Like we see a chair at Ikea. Imagine a play by Shakespeare. You know, no matter how long Hamlet searches and searches in his literary Denmark, he's never going to meet Shakespeare.

He's never going to run across Shakespeare in his play like he meets Rosencrantz or Guildenstern. And so, John says, it's the same with God.

No one has ever seen God. And when you think about it, at the same time, that hasn't stopped human beings from talking a lot about God, has it?

[5 : 11] And struggling to find the right words to describe God. Just think of all the words that we use. Infinite, eternal, holy, omnipotent.

These words sound like lightning. But who's to say that they're not just lightning bugs after all? No one, after all, has ever seen God.

But what if, what if God chose to make himself known? What if God had just the right word to say that would communicate all he is to us?

What if in this world, flickering with lightning bugs, God himself would send the lightning? And that's what the opening of John's gospel is all about.

And that's what Christmas is all about. That word has come. The perfect word. A word that from all eternity was with God.

[6 : 23] A word that from all eternity was and is God. And when the fullness of time had come, a word that became flesh and dwelt among us. When I was in middle school, the internet was relatively still a new thing.

And I remember in computer class, after about 10 minutes that it took to dial up to the internet. Remember when you had to dial up to the internet? After logging in, we would send emails to students in other parts of the country.

Sort of like electronic pen pals. And of course, we take that for granted now, don't we? But what an amazing thing.

We can share spoken and written words with people across the globe in a fraction of a second. And that's wonderful because there's so much that words can actually do.

There's so much of ourselves that we can share. But imagine, what if after years of writing, after years of messages traded across impossible distances, suddenly you meet your correspondent, your friend in person, in the flesh.

[7 : 47] You see, friends, the reality is God had been speaking for thousands of years. At many times and in many ways, God spoke through means of prophets and dreams and visions and oracles and written words.

But on Christmas night, the word became flesh. God arrived in person. In Jesus Christ, the word himself was present for all to see, for all to hear, for all to know.

No one has ever seen God, but then the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Shakespeare, as it were, wrote himself into the play.

The one who had sent letter after letter after letter at long last, crossed the ocean of eternity and dwelt right in our midst.

And the result of this, John says, is that it's like light shining in our darkness.

[8 : 57] Light that darkness cannot overcome. And in verse 14, John uses a very particular word for this light. He uses the word glory.

Now, in the Old Testament, when Moses longed to know God, Moses asked God for a glimpse of his glory. And so God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock and the side of a mountain and then passed by.

And Moses didn't see God, but in that moment, God spoke and God proclaimed himself to be compassionate and gracious and at the same time, just and righteous.

In other words, the glory of God is that he is a God of perfect justice and perfect compassion at the same time.

And now, in Jesus, John says, we can see this perfect justice and perfect compassion, this divine glory in human flesh.

[10 : 05] Now, most of our experience is of one or the other, isn't it? Either justice or compassion. Either the sentence of the law or the leniency of mercy.

We usually have one or the other. But read the Gospels for yourself. Consider how Jesus is able to interact always with justice and with compassion.

whether it's with a skeptical disciple like Nathaniel or whether it's with a marginalized outsider like the Samaritan woman at the well or whether it's with a fearful but curious religious authority like Nicodemus or whether it's with a pair of grieving sisters like Mary and Martha.

There is always in Jesus this perfect justice and compassion. But the greatest display of Jesus' glory will be seen at the end of his ministry where in his own person the full justice and the full compassion of God will be displayed.

But at that moment it won't be from a throne amidst kings. And it won't be in the temple amidst the priests and the religious authorities.

[11 : 33] And it won't be surrounded by admiring onlookers. No, the light of the glory of God in Jesus will shine most brightly in the darkness of the cross.

Because there the justice of God against human sin and the mercy of God for human sinners will both be taken up and fulfilled when Jesus speaks his final word from the cross.

It is finished. Finished. The word is spoken. The light has come. But tragically as John's prologue tells us here in verses 10 and 11 our natural response to this word and to this light will actually be to reject him.

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.

How strange and broken we human beings are. When the word is spoken we close our ears and when the light is shining we shut our eyes rejecting the one who is life itself.

[13 : 04] and yet this is not how it has to be. Verse 12 says but to all who did receive him who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God who were born not of blood nor of the will of flesh nor of the will of man but born of God.

Do you see what John is saying? The ancient church fathers used to put it like this they said the son of God became a son of man so that sons of men could become the children of God.

The incarnation opened up a new reality for us humans. The reality that we can not just know about God but that we can know God and even more be known by God as his sons and daughters.

That is that we can be reconciled to him. And what that means is that Jesus isn't just God's word to us but Jesus has to become our word to God.

What do I mean by that? If you were to meet God what words would you say? What words would you speak to God in order to be accepted by him to know his life and favor to enter into his light?

[14 : 34] What would you start talking about in that moment? Would it be your intellectual rigors? Your moral accomplishments?

Your family background? Your religious observances? words will flicker like a lightning bug and then go dark.

The only word that we can speak before the presence of God is the word God has given to us. The incarnate Son our Lord Jesus Christ Christ.

To those who received him who believed on his name he gave the right to become children of God. And so friends, brothers and sisters, the good news of Christmas is this.

not just that God has spoken his word to you in Jesus so that you might at last truly know him and what good news that is that we can know God but that this word can become your word as well so that in Jesus you might join God's family and know his life and light.

[15 : 55] Finally the right word now that is lightning and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus how familiar to many of us this time of Christmas is.

Lord how often we've read some of these texts before and yet we also acknowledge that for some of us here tonight these things are brand new. God we ask that you would open our eyes and our hearts to receive this word afresh that Jesus has come to show us God what you are like and to bring us home to your family.

Oh Lord would this Christmas time be a time of relishing and enjoying and perhaps even grasping the truth about Jesus for the first time. we pray all this in his name.

Amen.