Jesus: the Eternal Word
John 1:1-18

Imagine a publishing house wanted someone to write a biography of you, would you want it written by someone who *really* knows what you're like, or by someone who thinks you're wonderful? Well, our new series is on the Gospel of John, one of four accounts in the Bible of Jesus' life. And it's written by John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples. In fact, even within that group, he was one of Jesus' 3 closest friends. So if anyone knew what Jesus was *really* like, it's John.

But instead of someone writing a biography of you, what if you were to sit down and write a biography of someone else. You'd have to have a good reason for doing that, wouldn't you? Either you'd do it because you wanted to preserve their memory, or because you think there's something others can learn from their life, or just because you think it's an inspiring story. But John has his own reasons, and he tells us at the end of the book: 20:31, he's written it 'so that you [the reader] may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of God, and that by believing *you may have life in his name*.'

So, think what he's saying. Because you're alive already. You've got a pulse. But John's saying that what you need more than anything else is life. Even if you don't know you need it. And it can be found in Jesus, when you understand who he is.

Sure, you might say, but why do I need life? What is it? And why is Jesus the only place to find it?

Well that's what the rest of the book is about. But in his opening John begins to set out his case. And we're going to look at three things. Who is Jesus? What does he offer? And how does he give it?

Who is He?
Now, if you *were* writing an account of someone's life, where would you start? I'm currently reading a novel that tells the story of a boy orphaned in a terrorist attack. But it starts with him as a grown man, living out of a hotel bedroom. So you could start your biography with where the person is now, or how they first became famous, what they were like at their peak, and then work backwards. Or you could start at their birth, or set the stage by talking about their parents and where they've come from.

And the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do exactly that. Matthew starts with Jesus' family tree, a descendant of Abraham. Mark starts with the beginning of Jesus' ministry and John the Baptist preparing the way. And Luke begins with his birth.

But John starts even further back. Further back than the start of his ministry, further back than his virgin birth, further back than his ancestor Abraham. Further back even than the beginning of the Universe. Verse 1: 'In the beginning was the Word.' So in the first verse of his gospel he is deliberately echoing the first verse of the Bible: Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning God.' So before anything else began, before *anything* was created, when there was only God, John says there was the Word.

Now Arius, the third century heretic said, 'there was a time when the Word was not.' And Islam would agree - Jesus was just a prophet, and Jehovah's witnesses would agree - Jesus was a created angel. And secular atheism would agree, Jesus was just a man. But John, who knew him better than anyone else, would not agree. Because if Genesis 1:1 begins the Bible by saying, 'In the beginning

God created the heavens and the earth' John 1:1 does not begin by saying, 'In the beginning God created the Word' but 'in the beginning *was* the Word.'

But then he says, 'And the Word was *with* God.' And that word 'with' is a Greek construction used for two people, in close relationship. You see, if I were to say to you, I've been spending time with Su, or I need to spend some time with one of my girls, you'd know exactly what I meant: that I was focusing on them, giving them my undivided attention, investing on our relationship. And John is saying God and the Word have been with one another for all eternity. Like lovers spend time together, like a father with his child, God and the Word have been turned towards one another, delighting in one another. It's why in v18, John describes the Word as the One 'who is at the Father's side' - or, as you could translate it, the One close to his heart.

But that means the Word is a person, who has existed from all eternity, in close, intimate relationship with God. And yet, look what John says next, v1 again, 'And the Word was God.' So the Word is a person, and God is a person, and yet the Word is God. They share the same divine nature. In the words of the creeds, they are distinct in their persons, but one in their essence or substance.

What is that? It's the first two persons of the Trinity, the Father and the Son. And as theologians down the centuries have attempted to describe the indescribable, the love that they share between one another is the third person, the Holy Spirit, as they eternally exist together in mutual adoration.

But why call that second person, *who John is going to identity as Jesus,* why call him *the Word*? Because in Greek philosophical thought, the Word, *the logos*, was *the* rational, unifying principle of the universe, the nature behind all nature, by which everything exists, and the essence of the human soul. So if you were a pagan Greek, and you read this, you'd be going, I know what John's talking about. And today you might call that Reason, or Metaphysical reality, or quantum mechanics or just Science.

But if you were Jewish, you would have heard John saying something different. Because to them the Word *of God* was God's power at work. He created the universe by his word, he delivered his people from slavery by his word, he spoke through his prophets by his word and he brought judgment through his word.

So John is saying to pagans and to Jews, 'you know what I'm talking about'. I am talking to you about the nature of being and the substance behind the very fabric of the universe. I'm talking about power - the power that can create something out of nothing; the power that can change people's lives; the power that lies behind all truth. And it's not a philosophical construct, and it's not a physical theory, and it's not a religious image or idea. It's the Word and he's a person.

Now, when we speak words, they disappear, don't they. But not when God speaks. His Word is an ever sounding word. A Word with the power to create. As John says, v3, 'All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.' So… from the smallest to the greatest, from the visible to the invisible; from the most powerful angel to the smallest microscopic bacteria. From the most glorious of galaxies, to the most majestic of mountains, to smallest of stones in your shoe, John says the Word made them all.

He made the sun that shines in the day and the speck of dust that dances in the sun's rays. He made the birds that sing and the dolphins that dive and dance in the waves. And if he made everything, then he made you. Your eyes that see, your ears that hear, your heart that beats, are all his handiwork. And you are alive because he spoke you into being.

Which would be incredible enough, except, v14: '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.' And so like an author might write himself into the story, or a director into his film, so the Creator has written himself into creation. And that baby born in a stable and laid in a manger, that man Jesus who John says 'I knew as a friend', was the eternal Word of God.

And we sat with him and ate with him and spoke with him. And he 'dwelt among us,' John says. Or, more literally, he pitched his tent among us. And if you know the Old Testament, you'll know that when Israel wandered in the desert, God's glory, his presence, dwelled among them in a tent. And here is John saying, and God has done it again. Only this time his glory is not that of unapproachable fire, or hidden behind layers of material, and curtains, and inner and outer courtyards. Instead, it was Jesus, living amongst us. The Word become flesh.

And so the One outside of time entered time. The one who the highest heavens cannot contain was contained in a body. The one who can never die took on mortal flesh. As John writes in v18, 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.'

Well, let me ask you a question, do you know him? You see in v10-11 John writes, '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, as the gospels make clear, the demons knew him and the wind and the waves knew him; and the wine at a wedding feast knew him; and the bread in his hands that he broke knew him; and death and disease knew him. Creation bowed before him. But do you know him? Because you can, John is saying. That's why he came.

Just for a moment, compare that to what else is being presented to you. You see Buddhism presents you with a man, Gautama, who even though enlightened is always just a man. And Islam offers you a prophet and a god who you cannot know in any meaningful relational way. And secular atheism just offers you yourself and random, remorseless, purposeless chance.

But Christianity is unique because it says that the eternal God has become a man, and you can know him. Why should that interest you?

What Does He Offer You?
Look at v4, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men.'

Now what do you need to live life? And I don't mean having a roof over your head or food on the table. I mean, what do you need to get through life and make sense of life? Well, John says you need light. Light in the darkness.

You need a light that helps you see why you should behave in some ways and not in others. A light that tells you what's light and what's dark, what's right and what's wrong and why you should

choose the right and forsake the wrong. And a light that gives you an inner light, the power to do the right.

But you also need a light that helps you when life is dark, that gives meaning to life when bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That helps sustain you when your life is hard and makes sense of what's happening to you.

And you need a light that helps you see your way in life - that gives you a sense of purpose and direction and meaning, that tells you what life is about, especially when life is confusing.

Secular atheism can give you none of those things. It can't offer you life but only death and a nature red in tooth and claw, and a universe that will either burn or freeze. And it can give you no ultimate explanation for right and wrong, and certainly no reason why you should choose the right and not the wrong. And it can offer you no hope or help in your suffering, because the universe doesn't care about your suffering, because it doesn't care about you. And it can offer you no sense of purpose in life, because there is no ultimate purpose.

But Buddhism doesn't do much better, does it? Because the enlightenment that it offers is that ultimately suffering is an illusion and we need to dissociate ourselves from all attachment and desire - the desire that things might be otherwise. But try telling that to a mother whose child has cancer. And it's hard to craft a sense of purpose in life, when any sense of you as an individual is also illusory and the great prospect held out is that your soul loses all sense of self in a sea of eternal oneness.

Or think of legalistic religion. Because maybe you grew up with a form of this. Religion has no problem telling you what's right and wrong, and that you must choose the right. It just gives you no ability to do it. It shows you you're sick, but gives you no medicine to cure your sickness. And so if you think you're doing well at keeping the rules, it makes you self-righteous, but if you can't it leaves you feeling deflated. And so the very thing that calls you to live right, and by the rules, ends up producing *wrong* in your life: pride or despair. And what was meant as light becomes dark. And as for suffering, well, that's what happens to bad people - but what good is that, when it happens to you? It has no light to help you walk through the darkness of life.

So whether it's morality and what is right and why, and how, you should choose the right. Or whether it's a sense of purpose in life, or help when life is hard, neither atheism nor religion can give you life or light - at least not in a way that stands up to scrutiny. But John says Jesus can. Verse 9, 'The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.'

Plenty of other religions or philosophical systems will claim to be the light. Even the New Atheists, people like Daniel Dennett, formed the Brights, with their symbol of a heavenly body illuminating its members. But John says amid all these other offers, only Jesus is the *true* light.

He's the ultimate source of all light and life. *The* Light who spoke light itself into being. The light of conscience that shines in everyone's heart and holds all of us accountable. But he's also the light of salvation. The One who can tell you why there is so much darkness in the world and in our hearts, but doesn't leave us stumbling around in the darkness, like people trapped in a cellar, but shows us the way up and out. The one who can shine in your heart so that your heart is changed, so

that, as Paul puts it ‘For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord’ (Eph 5:8). The One who can show you what life is really about and can give you purpose and meaning.

That is what Jesus came to offer you, John is saying. God the Eternal Word, who has taken on flesh, so that we can have his life and light.

The question is… third point…

How Does He Give It?

In his book, *Sanity of Belief: why faith makes sense*, Simon Edwards, a fellow at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, uses an illustration first used by Lesslie Newbiggin the British missionary. And that is that when two scientists get two totally different results in the lab, each contradicting the other, they don’t embrace one another saying, ‘isn’t it wonderful that you can have your truth and I can have mine.’

And that’s because they’re not dealing in the realm of values and feelings… but facts.

But Edwards and Newbiggin say that the same is true for Christianity. Because at the root of Christianity is not a set of values for you to accept or reject, nor a metaphysical experience of enlightenment. It’s a claim to physical, historical facts that are either true or not true: like, did Christ *really* come into the world and take on flesh, as John claims he did? But there are others, and in this, his opening, John alludes to them. Like a trailer to a movie, he gives us a taster of the opposition, and the death Jesus will endure, but ultimately of his resurrection from the dead.

Verse 5, ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’ But the darkness tried. Because when John describes seeing Jesus’ glory, he’s not talking about Jesus going around with a radioactive glow, so it’s obvious to everyone, ‘He’s the eternal word’. It was the opposite. Verses 10-11: ‘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.’

In fact, far from receiving him, the Jewish religious leaders rejected him and at his trial, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate questioned and mocked him, “Where are you from?” But [John says] Jesus gave him no answer’ (19:9). The eternal Word was silent. So neither the Jewish nor the pagan rulers knew him. Neither realised who he was or where he was from. They didn’t want to. Neither saw in him *the logos* made flesh.

And their rejection was so complete that they crucified him. The death reserved for the scum of the earth. And yet he was the king of heaven. And the cross was cut from a tree, that Jesus himself had once spoken into life, knowing what it would be used for. And at the cross, as the sun was blotted out, the true Light, the Light of men, was plunged into darkness, the darkness our sin deserves. And the life of the world was given over to death, so that in him death might die and we might live.

Because what John makes clear is that rejection was not the only response Jesus encountered. Two thieves were crucified beside him, and one mocked him, but the other called out, ‘“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). He saw what the leaders failed to see. That this Jesus, beaten and broken, crowned with thorns and nailed to a tree, was the king over every king. And to him the Eternal Word spoke: ‘today you will be with me in paradise.’ Because death cannot hold the One in whom is life, the One whose light can never be put out.

But that thief was not the only one who saw and believed. John says, v12-13: ‘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.’

What does it mean to receive Christ? It’s to know who he is and put your trust in him and give your allegiance to him. And those who do that, John says, are like people who have been reborn. Because if we’re made through the Word, we also need to be remade by him. At our conception and our birth he gives us life, but we also need new life. He creates us, but we need to be recreated. And have our sins forgiven and our hearts made new and our slates wiped clean. And when that happens, you become a child of God, adopted into his family.

And that gives you the resource you need for when life is hard - maybe even this coming week - because you know who he is, but you also know who you are. So you can speak to yourself: Because of Jesus, I am a beloved child of God. And that light can see you through the darkness.

Compare that to how everything else demands something of you, even, especially when life is hard. Other religions, and secularism, demand you perform, either to achieve enlightenment, or to be accepted - by God or the opinion of others. And if you don’t, the weight of their law: religious or secular, the opinion of their god or the opinion of others, bears down on you. And God’s law itself says that if you want to make yourself perfect, if you want to save yourself, if you want to be your own light, you have an impossible hill to climb. As Augustine wrote, ‘Think what you had coming to you by the law, but instead, in Jesus, what you get is grace.’

Verses 16-17, ‘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.’

So what does Jesus demand of you? What do you have to do to receive his life and light? You just have to receive him. And trust that he has done it all for you. That he has lived the life you have failed to live. That where you have been dark, he has been light; where you have been wrong, he has shone. And in trusting him you receive grace. You discover you were way worse than you thought you were, and more loved than you ever knew you were - in wave upon wave of a never ending ocean of grace.

Who is Jesus? He is the eternal Word made flesh. What does he offer you? Life and light. And how does he give it? By grace.