

A Teaching Commentary on the

# Gospel of John

## Chapters 1 – 3

*A Verse-by-Verse Teaching Commentary*

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## Introduction to the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John stands apart from the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in both style and purpose. Written by the apostle John — the “beloved disciple” — late in the first century (likely A.D. 85–95), this gospel makes no attempt to provide a chronological biography of Jesus. Instead, John carefully selects seven miraculous “signs” and arranges his material around a single, stated purpose:

*“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.” (John 20:31)*

John writes as an eyewitness and theologian. His vocabulary is simple yet profound — life, light, love, truth, word, believe — repeated throughout with ever-deepening meaning. His gospel is structured around the “Book of Signs” (chapters 1–12) and the “Book of Glory” (chapters 13–21). These first three chapters introduce the divine identity of Jesus (the Prologue), the testimony of John the Baptist, the calling of the first disciples, the inaugural sign at Cana, the cleansing of the Temple, and the life-changing nighttime conversation with Nicodemus.

Scriptural quotations in this commentary follow the English Standard Version (ESV). Cross-references, Greek word insights, and historical context are woven throughout to support classroom teaching and personal study.

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# Chapter 1

## The Prologue: The Word Became Flesh (1:1–18)

The Prologue is one of the most majestic passages in all of Scripture. In just eighteen verses, John answers the most fundamental question about Jesus: Who is he? The answer is breathtaking — he is the eternal Word of God, through whom creation came into being, who became human flesh, and who alone reveals the Father. The Prologue functions as the “lens” through which everything else in the gospel should be read.

### John 1:1

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

The opening words intentionally echo Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning, God created...”). While Genesis begins at the moment of creation, John reaches back before creation to declare that the Word already existed (“was”). The Greek word translated “Word” is Logos, a term rich with meaning in both Jewish and Greco-Roman thought. For Jewish readers, the “Word of God” was the creative and revelatory power of God (Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 55:11). For Greek readers, the Logos was the rational principle ordering the cosmos.

**Key Word — “Logos (Word)”:** In Greek philosophy the Logos was the divine reason permeating the universe. John takes this familiar concept and fills it with personal, relational content: the Logos is not a force but a Person.

Three statements are made in rapid succession: (1) The Word was in existence at the beginning — implying pre-existence before time itself. (2) The Word was “with God” (Greek: *pros ton theon*) — a face-to-face relational intimacy, indicating personal distinction within the Godhead. (3) The Word “was God” — sharing in the divine nature fully. This verse is foundational to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and is the clearest affirmation of Jesus’ full deity in the New Testament.

**Teaching Application:** *Many students today question whether Jesus “really” claimed to be God or whether that was a later invention of the church. John 1:1 places the divine identity of Christ at the very beginning of his gospel, not as a later development but as the foundational premise for everything that follows.*

### John 1:2

*“He was in the beginning with God.”*

Verse 2 restates and reinforces the truth of verse 1. Far from being repetitive, this is John’s way of emphasis. The pre-existence and relational distinctiveness of the Word are not incidental facts but the bedrock of the gospel. The Son has eternally existed in fellowship with the Father — a fellowship of love that overflows into creation (see 17:24).

### John 1:3

*“All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”*

The Word is presented as the agent of all creation. The word “through” (Greek: di'autou) indicates that the Son is the instrumental cause of creation, while the Father is the primary source. This matches Colossians 1:16 (“all things were created through him and for him”) and Hebrews 1:2. The negative statement — “without him was not any thing made” — is a deliberate double emphasis ruling out any exception. The created order is the handiwork of the one who later walked among us.

**Teaching Application:** *The God who became flesh in Jesus is not a distant, unknowable force. He is the same one who spoke galaxies into existence. Knowing this elevates our understanding of the Incarnation: the Creator entered his own creation.*

### John 1:4–5

*“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

“Life” (Greek: zoe) is a key Johannine term used 36 times in this gospel alone. It refers not merely to biological existence but to the divine quality of life — eternal, relational, and transforming. Light and life are inseparably linked: the Word is the source of both. “Light” here is spiritual illumination, moral clarity, and the revelation of God.

Verse 5 introduces the great conflict of the gospel: light versus darkness. The darkness represents sin, ignorance of God, and spiritual death. Yet the light “shines” — present tense, indicating ongoing, unceasing activity. The word translated “overcome” (Greek: katelaben) can mean either “comprehend/understand” or “overpower/extinguish.” Both meanings may be intended: the darkness neither extinguishes the light nor grasps its nature.

**Teaching Application:** *The light of Christ continues to shine even into the darkest situations. This is a powerful word of hope for believers facing opposition, suffering, or seemingly hopeless circumstances.*

### John 1:6–8

*“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 narrative suddenly shifts from the cosmic to the historical with the introduction of John the Baptist. This abrupt transition is deliberate: John (the Baptist) is not the eternal

Word — he is a created human being “sent from God,” a commissioned messenger. The emphasis on John’s role as “witness” (Greek: *marturia*) is critical. The Baptist’s sole function was to point away from himself to Jesus.

The repetition that John was “not the light” may reflect an early controversy in which some in the church over-elevated John’s status. The gospel repeatedly subordinates the Baptist to Christ (see 1:20, 27; 3:30).

### **John 1:9–11**

*“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.”*

“True” (Greek: *alethinous*) in John contrasts not false versus genuine, but shadow versus substance. Jesus is the real, ultimate light of which all other light is merely a dim reflection. His light illuminates “everyone” — the gospel is universal in scope even if not everyone responds.

The tragic irony of verses 10–11 is stunning: the Creator (“the world was made through him”) entered the very world he made, yet the world “did not know him.” Then, more specifically, he came to “his own” — the Jewish people, his covenant community, who had been prepared for centuries through the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms — “yet his own people did not receive him.” This rejection sets up the conflict that drives the rest of the gospel.

**Teaching Application:** *The rejection of Jesus by his own people is not merely a historical event. Every person faces the same decision: will we recognize and receive the light, or remain in darkness?*

### **John 1:12–13**

*“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.”*

Here is the gospel offer in its simplest form. To “receive” Jesus and “believe in his name” are parallel expressions describing the same act of faith. “His name” in Hebrew thought represented the whole person — believing in the name of Jesus means trusting in who he is in his full identity as the Son of God and Savior.

The result is receiving “the right” (Greek: *exousia* — authority, power) to become “children of God.” This is adoption — a change of status, relationship, and identity. Verse 13 immediately removes any human contribution: this birth is not from physical descent (“blood”), human desire (“flesh”), or human will (“man”). It is entirely the work of God. This anticipates the conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3.

**Key Word — "Believe (pisteuo)":** Used 98 times in John (more than any other NT book), "believe" is always a verb — never a noun — suggesting that faith in John is an active, ongoing commitment rather than a static intellectual assent.

### **John 1:14**

*"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."*

This is the theological heart of the Prologue and one of the most important verses in the New Testament: the Incarnation. "Became flesh" (Greek: sarx egeneto) means the eternal, pre-existent Word took on complete human nature — body, emotions, hunger, weariness, and ultimately death. This is not appearance but reality. Christian orthodoxy insists that Jesus was fully God and fully human, two natures in one person.

**Key Word — "Dwelt (eskenosen)":** The Greek verb literally means "to pitch a tent" or "to tabernacle." This is a deliberate echo of the Tabernacle in the wilderness where God's glory (Shekinah) dwelt among Israel (Exodus 40:34–35). Now God has taken up his dwelling place in human flesh. Jesus is the new and living Tabernacle.

"We have seen his glory" — John writes as a first-hand eyewitness (cf. 1 John 1:1–3). The glory of God, once hidden in the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle, was now visible in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). "Full of grace and truth" summarizes the character of this divine-human person. Grace (unmerited favor and loving-kindness) and truth (reliability, faithfulness — echoing the Hebrew hesed and emet) perfectly describe Jesus' ministry.

**Teaching Application:** *The Incarnation means God is not merely interested in us from a safe distance. He entered fully into our condition. Whatever suffering, limitation, or struggle you face, Jesus has experienced it from the inside.*

### **John 1:15**

*"(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.'")"*

The Baptist is re-introduced briefly to underscore the paradox: Jesus came "after" John chronologically (John began his ministry first), yet Jesus "ranks before" John — indeed, Jesus existed "before" John, because he is eternal. This is yet another affirmation of Christ's pre-existence. John the Baptist, the greatest prophet of the old era (Matthew 11:11), readily subordinates himself to Jesus.

### **John 1:16–17**

*“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.”*

“From his fullness” — Christ is not a partial mediator but the overflowing source of all divine blessing. “Grace upon grace” (Greek: *charin anti charitos*) is literally “grace in place of grace” — an unending succession of divine gifts, each new blessing replacing and surpassing the last.

Verse 17 does not pit Moses against Jesus as adversaries. The Law was a genuine gift from God — given “through Moses” as an instrument. But “grace and truth” characterize the new era that came “through Jesus Christ” — the first time this full name appears in the gospel. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything Moses pointed toward (5:46). The contrast is between a preparatory revelation and its ultimate, personal fulfillment.

### **John 1:18**

*“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”*

The Prologue closes with a bookend to verse 1. The invisible God (“no one has ever seen God” — even Moses only saw God’s back, Exodus 33:20–23) has now been fully “exegeted” — that is the literal meaning of the Greek word translated “made him known” (*exegesato*), from which we get the word “exegesis.” Jesus is the exegesis of God — the definitive explanation and revelation of who God is. To know Jesus is to know God (14:9).

“At the Father’s side” (Greek: *eis ton kolpon* — literally “in the bosom”) is an intimate image of the closest possible relationship. The eternal Son is always in loving communion with the Father, and it is out of that communion that he reveals the Father to us.

**Teaching Application:** *Want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. His compassion for the outcast, his anger at religious hypocrisy, his weeping at the grave of Lazarus — these are not merely human responses. They are windows into the heart of God.*

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## **John the Baptist’s Testimony (1:19–34)**

With the Prologue concluded, John now turns to history. The first extended narrative centers on John the Baptist and his role as witness to Jesus. Three successive “days” (or scenes) structure this section: John’s testimony to the religious authorities (vv. 19–28), his identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God (vv. 29–34), and the first disciples following Jesus (vv. 35–42).

### **John 1:19–23**

*“And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed,*

*‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.’”*

“The Jews” in John’s gospel typically refers to the religious leadership — here, a delegation from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. They were rightly concerned about unauthorized movements and messianic claimants. Their questions reflect the spectrum of Jewish expectation: the Messiah (Christ), Elijah returning (Malachi 4:5), or “the Prophet” (Deuteronomy 18:15 — a Moses-like figure).

John the Baptist’s triple denial (“I am not”) is emphatic in the Greek. His self-identification is striking in its humility: he is not even a person with a name, but merely “a voice” — anonymous, instrumental, expendable. He quotes Isaiah 40:3, placing himself in the role of the herald who clears the path before a royal procession. The king is coming; the herald’s job is to make way.

**Teaching Application:** *John’s example of self-effacing ministry is a powerful model. Christian leadership is not about building a platform for oneself but preparing the way for people to encounter Jesus directly.*

### **John 1:24–28**

*“(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’”*

The Pharisees were strict legal authorities who would have been alarmed by John’s practice of baptism — a ritual cleansing ordinarily used for Gentile converts to Judaism. Why was a Jew being baptized as if he were starting fresh? John deflects the question by pointing to the one standing among them — already present but unrecognized. This “standing among you” may hint that Jesus was present in the crowd at this very moment.

The sandal imagery is powerful. Rabbinic tradition held that a disciple should perform any service for his teacher except loosening his sandals — that was too lowly even for a student. John says he is unworthy even of that service for Jesus. The greatest figure of the old covenant era measures himself as infinitely lesser than the one who is coming.

### **John 1:29**

*“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”*

This declaration is one of the most theologically rich sentences in the New Testament. “Behold” (Greek: *ide*) is an urgent command to look and pay attention. “The Lamb of God” draws on a constellation of Old Testament imagery:

1. The Passover Lamb (Exodus 12) — whose blood protected Israel from death and inaugurated their liberation from slavery. Jesus is crucified at Passover (19:14).
2. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7 — “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.”
3. The daily Temple sacrifices — lambs offered morning and evening for Israel’s sins.
4. The scapegoat of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) — which “took away” the sins of the people.

What is remarkable is not just that Jesus is called a lamb, but that this lamb “takes away the sin of the world.” The scope is universal — the entire human race, not just Israel. And the word “takes away” (Greek: *airon*) means to lift up and carry off — Jesus does not merely cover sin but removes it entirely.

**Teaching Application:** *Every Old Testament sacrifice was pointing forward to this moment. When students understand the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, John 1:29 becomes an “aha” moment — Jesus is the fulfillment of everything those sacrifices promised but could not permanently deliver.*

### **John 1:30–34**

*“This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel... I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”*

John clarifies that his ministry of water baptism had a specific purpose: to provide the public stage on which Jesus would be revealed to Israel. The phrase “I myself did not know him” does not mean John and Jesus were strangers (they were cousins, according to Luke 1). Rather, John is saying he did not recognize Jesus in his full messianic identity until the divine sign was given to him.

The descent of the Spirit “like a dove” is the divine authentication of Jesus’ identity. The Spirit’s remaining (Greek: *menon* — abiding, staying) on Jesus distinguishes him from Old Testament figures on whom the Spirit came temporarily. Jesus possesses the Spirit without measure (3:34). John’s conclusion is unequivocal: “This is the Son of God.” The Baptist’s entire ministry has been building to this witness.

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## **The First Disciples (1:35–51)**

On successive days, Jesus gathers his first followers. John structures this section around the simple but deeply significant phrase “Come and see” — an invitation to personal discovery rather than argument or coercion.

### **John 1:35–39**

*“The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, ‘What are you seeking?’... He said to them, ‘Come and you will see.’”*

The Baptist again points his disciples toward Jesus — a second time he says “Behold, the Lamb of God.” Two of John’s disciples immediately follow Jesus. One is identified as Andrew (v. 40). The other is almost certainly John the apostle (the author), who characteristically avoids naming himself throughout the gospel.

Jesus’ first words in John’s gospel are a question: “What are you seeking?” This is no trivial inquiry. It probes the deepest intention of the heart. What are we truly looking for? The disciples’ response — “where are you staying?” — uses a loaded word in John (Greek: *menein* — “to abide/remain”), a theme that will climax in chapter 15. The invitation “Come and see” is the foundational posture of discipleship: come into proximity with Jesus and discover for yourself.

**Teaching Application:** *“What are you seeking?” is the question Jesus still asks every seeker. Our answer reveals whether we want Jesus himself or merely what he can provide. True discipleship begins with wanting to be where Jesus is.*

### **John 1:40–42**

*“One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas’ (which means Peter).”*

Andrew’s first act after encountering Jesus is to find his brother. This is the most natural response to genuine discovery — you tell those closest to you. Andrew’s declaration “We have found the Messiah” is remarkable for its confidence after what appears to be a single afternoon with Jesus.

When Jesus meets Simon, he does two things: he looks at him with penetrating knowledge (“you are Simon the son of John”) and he renames him “Cephas” (Aramaic for rock; Greek: *Petros/Peter*). Names in Hebrew thought express identity and destiny. Jesus sees not only who Simon is but who he will become — a foundational figure in the early church. The new name is simultaneously a diagnosis, a promise, and a commission.

## John 1:43–51

*“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’... Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’... Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”*

Philip’s call is the most direct in this passage — Jesus simply says “Follow me.” No theological argument, no extended conversation. Philip then immediately does what Andrew did: he finds someone else and shares the news. Philip frames his invitation in scriptural terms — Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire Hebrew canon (“Moses... and the prophets”).

Nathanael’s skepticism about Nazareth is understandable — it was an obscure village with no prophetic significance. Philip does not argue; he simply repeats the invitation: “Come and see.” Jesus’ knowledge of Nathanael under the fig tree — before any introduction — astonishes him. The fig tree was a traditional Jewish place of private prayer and Torah study. Nathanael’s immediate confession — “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” — and Jesus’ response promise that the disciples will see “heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (an allusion to Jacob’s ladder, Genesis 28:12) establishes Jesus as the ladder — the living connection between heaven and earth.

**Key Word — “Son of Man”:** This is Jesus’ preferred self-designation in John (used 13 times). It combines the humble (“son of man” = a human being) with the exalted (Daniel 7:13–14 — the heavenly figure given all authority). Jesus is both fully human and the cosmic judge and king.

**Teaching Application:** *Nathanael’s prejudice (“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”) is overcome not by an argument but by a personal encounter with Jesus. This is a consistent pattern: the most effective apologetic is not winning a debate but issuing a genuine “come and see” invitation.*

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# Chapter 2

## The Wedding at Cana: The First Sign (2:1–12)

Chapter 2 opens with the first of Jesus’ seven “signs” in John’s gospel. John chooses this word carefully — a sign (Greek: semeion) is a miraculous act that points beyond itself to a deeper spiritual reality. Signs reveal who Jesus is; they are not merely demonstrations of power but windows into his identity and mission.

### John 2:1–2

*“On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the guests, to the wedding, and his disciples.”*

“The third day” may be reckoned from the calling of the disciples in chapter 1, making this the seventh day since John the Baptist’s first testimony — possibly evoking the seven days of creation and suggesting a new creation is underway. Cana was a small village in Galilee near Nazareth.

The significance of Jesus attending a wedding cannot be missed. He is no ascetic who withdraws from ordinary human life. He enters into the celebration of marriage — a covenant event — and honours it with his first miracle. This stands in contrast to religious systems that equate holiness with joylessness.

### John 2:3–5

*“When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’”*

Running out of wine at a wedding was a serious social embarrassment in the ancient Middle East — a host’s hospitality was a matter of deep honor. Mary brings the problem to Jesus with implicit confidence in his ability to help. Jesus’ response — “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” — sounds harsh to modern ears but is not disrespectful in the original Greek. “Woman” (gynai) was a term of respectful address (he uses it again from the cross in 19:26). The phrase “what does this have to do with me?” is a Semitic idiom meaning “this is not our shared concern” or “let me handle this in my own time.”

**Key Word — “My Hour”:** The phrase “my hour” (Greek: hē hōra mou) appears seven times in John and consistently refers to Jesus’ death, resurrection, and glorification (7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). Even at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus is aware that everything moves toward the cross.

Despite Jesus’ seeming hesitation, Mary’s instruction to the servants is one of the most practically profound statements in the New Testament: “Do whatever he tells you.” This is her final recorded speech in John’s gospel, and it is the perfect word of faith — complete trust without demanding understanding.

**Teaching Application:** *“Do whatever he tells you” is the posture of every true disciple. Mary models the kind of faith that doesn’t require explanation before obedience.*

### **John 2:6–10**

*“Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons... Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim... the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first... But you have kept the good wine until last.’”*

Six stone jars used for ritual purification — hand-washing and ceremonial cleansing required by Jewish law. Six in Hebrew numerology is one short of seven (the number of completion). These jars represent the best the old religious system could offer: ritual cleansing, external purification. But they could not produce joy, fellowship, or the wine of the new covenant.

The master of the banquet — an objective, disinterested party — pronounces the new wine the best of the evening. Custom dictated serving the best wine first; this host appears to have reversed the order. This is John’s theological point: in Jesus, the best has not been served first and is now running out. Rather, the best has been reserved and arrives last. The old covenant’s finest was glorious; the new covenant initiated by Jesus is infinitely better.

### **John 2:11**

*“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”*

John marks this as the “beginning” (Greek: *archen*) of Jesus’ signs — deliberately echoing the “beginning” of 1:1. Something new is starting. The sign “manifested his glory” — the same glory the disciples beheld in 1:14. The miracle is not an end in itself but a revelation of who Jesus is: the Lord who transforms, the bridegroom of the new covenant, the one who saves the best for last.

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## **The Cleansing of the Temple (2:13–25)**

The second event in chapter 2 is the dramatic cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem. John places this event at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, whereas the Synoptic Gospels record it in the final week. This may represent a different occasion (Jesus may have cleansed the Temple twice) or John’s theological ordering — placing it at the start to signal the kind of ministry Jesus would have from the very beginning.

## John 2:13–16

*“The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there... And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’”*

The Temple courts were filled with merchants selling sacrificial animals and money-changers converting Roman currency to the temple shekel. Over time, this had become an exploitative commercial enterprise, concentrated in the Court of the Gentiles — the only area where non-Jews could worship.

Jesus’ response is not a quiet word of correction. He makes a whip, drives out the animals, overturns the money-changers’ tables, and scatters their coins. This is holy anger — a righteous indignation at the corruption of worship. His words are pointed: “my Father’s house.” Jesus claims a unique Sonship that transforms the Temple from “the house of God” into his Father’s house — a personal, familial possession. The commercial activity has displaced prayer and welcome for the nations.

**Teaching Application:** *Jesus is not always “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” His anger against religious corruption is a reminder that God takes the integrity of worship seriously. We should ask: what in our churches has become more about commerce, performance, or self-interest than about genuine encounter with God?*

## John 2:17

*“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”*

The disciples recall Psalm 69:9 — a Psalm of David expressing devotion to God’s house even at personal cost. The word “consume” (Greek: *kataphageta*) implies being devoured, eaten up. Jesus’ passion for the holiness of his Father’s house is total and self-costly.

## John 2:18–22

*“So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’... But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed.”*

The religious leaders challenge Jesus for an authorizing sign. His response is a riddle they cannot understand: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The leaders think of Herod’s Temple (under construction for 46 years). Jesus speaks of the temple of his body.

**Key Word — "Temple (naos)":** The Greek word *naos* refers specifically to the inner sanctuary — the most sacred space. Jesus’ body is the new *naos*: the place where God’s presence dwells fully and where all sacrifices find their fulfillment.

Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection. Notably, the disciples only “remembered” and believed this statement after the resurrection (v. 22). John frequently notes that the disciples understood things retrospectively. This is honest eyewitness testimony: they did not understand everything in the moment.

### **John 2:23–25**

*“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people...for he himself knew what was in man.”*

Many in Jerusalem “believed” in response to Jesus’ signs — but this faith is superficial, based on spectacle rather than genuine understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus perceives the difference. He “did not entrust himself” to them, because he knows the unreliability of human hearts. This prepares the reader for the next scene, where we meet a man who comes to Jesus while still in this category of incomplete faith.

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# Chapter 3

## Jesus and Nicodemus: Born Again (3:1–21)

Chapter 3 contains what may be the most theologically concentrated passage in the New Testament. The conversation with Nicodemus moves from a private midnight dialogue into one of the clearest explanations of the gospel ever recorded. John 3:16 — the verse at the center of this passage — has been called “the gospel in miniature.”

### John 3:1–2

*“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’”*

Nicodemus is identified with extraordinary precision: a Pharisee (the most rigorous sect of Judaism), a “ruler of the Jews” (a member of the Sanhedrin, the 70-man supreme council of Judaism), and a man who comes by night. In John’s gospel, “night” also carries symbolic weight — it is the realm of darkness and spiritual blindness (see 9:4; 13:30).

His opening statement is a compliment grounded in evidence: “we know you are a teacher come from God.” The “we” suggests he speaks for a group. His reasoning is sound as far as it goes: the signs point to divine authorization. But as Jesus immediately reveals, Nicodemus has come to the right conclusion about the evidence while remaining far short of the response required.

### John 3:3

*“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”*

Jesus bypasses Nicodemus’s opening and goes directly to his need. “Truly, truly” (Greek: *amen, amen* — a double emphasis unique to John’s gospel, used 25 times) signals an authoritative declaration. “Born again” (Greek: *gennēthē anōthen*) is a deliberate double meaning: *anōthen* means both “again” and “from above.” Both senses are intended. Spiritual rebirth is both a new beginning and a divine origin — it comes from above and must happen afresh.

**Key Word — “Born Again (*gennēthē anōthen*)”:** The Greek *anōthen* is intentionally ambiguous: “again” or “from above.” Nicodemus hears only the temporal sense (again); Jesus means the spatial/origin sense (from above). True rebirth is not a human achievement — it is a divine act initiated from heaven.

### John 3:4

*“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’”*

Nicodemus takes Jesus’ words literally, as many in John do when Jesus speaks metaphorically (cf. 2:20; 4:11, 33; 6:52; 11:12). His question is not stupid — it is the natural response of one thinking only at the physical level. John uses these misunderstandings strategically to force Jesus to explain more deeply. The impossibility Nicodemus identifies is exactly John’s point: the new birth Jesus describes is humanly impossible. It requires divine agency.

### **John 3:5–6**

*“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’”*

“Born of water and the Spirit” has generated significant interpretive debate. Several options exist: (1) Water = physical birth (amniotic waters), Spirit = spiritual birth. (2) Water = baptism and Spirit = regeneration. (3) Water and Spirit together referring to the cleansing and renewal promised in Ezekiel 36:25–27: “I will sprinkle clean water on you... and I will put my Spirit within you.” This last option seems most likely given the Ezekiel reference and Jesus’ rebuke that Nicodemus, as “Israel’s teacher,” should have known this (v. 10).

Verse 6 establishes the unbridgeable gap between human and divine: flesh produces flesh, Spirit produces spirit. No amount of religious effort, learning, or moral achievement can generate spiritual life. Only God’s Spirit can do that.

### **John 3:7–8**

*“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

The wind analogy is elegant. In both Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*), the same word means both “wind” and “spirit.” The wind’s reality is undeniable — you hear it, you feel its effects. But its origin and destination are mysterious. You cannot control it or fully explain it. So it is with the Spirit’s regenerating work. The new birth is real, its effects observable in a transformed life, but it transcends human comprehension and control.

**Teaching Application:** *We cannot program, predict, or manufacture the new birth. This should produce both humility (we cannot save anyone by our own methods) and prayer (only God can bring new life, so we must ask him to work).*

### **John 3:9–10**

*“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’”*

Nicodemus’ final question (“How can these things be?”) reveals he is still at the intellectual level, seeking a mechanism or explanation rather than responding in faith. Jesus’ response carries a gentle but pointed rebuke: “Are you the teacher of Israel?” The use of the definite article (“the” teacher) suggests Nicodemus held a prominent teaching role. The Scriptures he taught — Ezekiel 36, Jeremiah 31, Joel 2 — all promised a new covenant marked by Spirit renewal. Nicodemus had the text; he lacked the spiritual ears to hear it pointing toward Jesus.

### **John 3:11–13**

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”*

Jesus shifts from “I/you” to “we/you” — suggesting he speaks with divine authority alongside the Father. Verse 13 is a remarkable claim: Jesus alone has ascended to heaven and descended from it. This rules out all other claimants to divine revelation. Jesus speaks of heavenly things from experience: he has come from the Father’s presence.

### **John 3:14–15**

*“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

Jesus introduces the heart of the gospel through an Old Testament type. In Numbers 21:4–9, Israel sinned and God sent poisonous serpents as judgment. When the people cried out, God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole — all who looked at it lived. This was an act of grace: the instrument of judgment became the means of salvation.

“Lifted up” (Greek: *hypsōthē*) is another deliberate Johannine double meaning: it refers both to being physically lifted up on the cross and to being exalted/glorified. The cross is simultaneously Jesus’ humiliation and his glorification in John’s theology.

**Teaching Application:** *The bronze serpent is a striking image for atonement. The serpent (symbol of the curse, Genesis 3) was lifted up and became the means of healing. Jesus, who “became sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21), was lifted up on the cross and became our healing and salvation.*

### **John 3:16**

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Perhaps the most memorized verse in the Bible, John 3:16 is the distilled essence of the gospel. Every word carries weight:

“For God” — the initiative is entirely with God. Salvation begins with the Father, not with human striving.

“So loved” — the Greek adverb *houtōs* means “in this manner” or “to this extent.” The measure of God’s love is what follows: the giving of his Son. This is not sentimental emotion but costly, sacrificial action.

“The world” (Greek: *kosmos*) — in John, the “world” often refers to humanity in its rebellion against God. This is not a lovely, admirable world God loves from a comfortable distance. It is the world in its sin, darkness, and hostility. Yet God loves it.

“That he gave his only Son” — the verb “gave” (Greek: *edoken*) echoes the language of sacrifice. “Only Son” (Greek: *monogenē* — unique, one of a kind) underscores the incomprehensible costliness of this gift.

“That whoever believes” — the offer is genuinely universal (“whoever”). The condition is singular: faith. Not race, nationality, achievement, or religious heritage — belief alone.

“Should not perish but have eternal life” — two alternatives, two destinies. “Perish” is not annihilation but final separation from God. “Eternal life” (Greek: *zoē aiōnios*) is not merely unending existence but the quality of life that belongs to the age to come — knowing God personally (17:3).

**Teaching Application:** *This is the verse to know by heart and to help every student know. It is the gospel in 26 English words. When teaching this verse, spend time on each phrase — do not rush past the depth.*

### **John 3:17**

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

A clarification that guards against misunderstanding: the mission of Jesus’ first coming was not judgment but salvation. Condemnation already exists as the default state of humanity (see v. 18). Jesus came to rescue, not to execute a sentence already in effect.

### **John 3:18–21**

*“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already... And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... But whoever does what is true comes to the light.”*

These verses explain how judgment works in John's theology. It is not a future verdict imposed from outside but a present reality determined by one's response to Jesus. The diagnosis of human sin is penetrating: people "loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." Unbelief is not primarily intellectual — it is moral. People avoid the light because it exposes their sin.

The solution is not more arguments but a change of heart that turns toward the light, trusting that grace — not condemnation — awaits there (see v. 17). "Whoever does what is true comes to the light" — the one who is genuinely seeking truth will come to Jesus.

**Teaching Application:** *People often claim they cannot believe because of intellectual obstacles. Jesus suggests the real obstacle is often moral: we do not want the exposure the light brings. Genuine evangelism must address both the intellectual and the moral/spiritual dimensions of unbelief.*

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## The Final Testimony of John the Baptist (3:22–36)

The chapter closes with the last extended appearance of John the Baptist in this gospel. His words here constitute a beautiful model of Christ-centered humility and perhaps the clearest statement of the theology of grace versus wrath in the entire book.

### John 3:22–24

*"After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim..."*

A period of parallel ministry: both Jesus (through his disciples, cf. 4:2) and John were baptizing in the Jordan region. This geographical note grounds the narrative in history. The note that John had not yet been put in prison is a reference to events recorded in the Synoptic Gospels — John is clarifying that this conversation predates John the Baptist's imprisonment.

### John 3:25–30

*"A discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification... they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan... look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.' John answered, 'A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven... He must increase, but I must decrease.'"*

John the Baptist's answer contains three interlocking movements: (1) A theological grounding — "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." Whatever influence or following anyone has is given, not grasped. There is no competition. (2) A re-statement of identity — John is not the Christ. He is the forerunner, the "friend of the bridegroom." The bridegroom (Jesus) has the bride (the new covenant community);

the friend's role is to facilitate the marriage and rejoice. (3) The culminating statement: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

This is perhaps the most selfless statement in the New Testament. John is not diminishing reluctantly; he is pointing out the necessary, joyful order of things. Jesus' growth into his full ministry is the goal; John's fading is the evidence that the goal is being achieved.

**Teaching Application:** *"He must increase, I must decrease" is the vocation of every Christian minister, teacher, and disciple. The success of Christ-exalting ministry is measured not by our platform but by how effectively we point others to Jesus and then step back.*

### **John 3:31–36**

*"He who comes from above is above all... The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."*

"He who comes from above is above all" — Jesus' origin determines his authority. No earthly prophet or teacher can speak with the same absolute authority as the one who comes from the Father's presence. John the Baptist speaks "of the earth"; Jesus speaks what he has seen and heard in the heavenly realm.

"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand" — the infinite scope of Christ's authority flows from the Father's love. All authority, all creation, all judgment has been entrusted to the Son.

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" — "has" is present tense. Eternal life is not merely a future hope but a present possession for the believer. Conversely, "whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Notice the change from "believes" to "obeys" — genuine faith expresses itself in obedience. The wrath of God "remains" on the unbeliever — it is the default state awaiting those who do not turn to the Son.

**Teaching Application:** *John 3 ends where the Prologue began: with the absolute centrality of the Son as the hinge of eternal destiny. The invitation of these three chapters is clear — the Word who created all things has entered the world to make us children of God. The question is the same one Jesus asked the first disciples: "What are you seeking?"*

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# Summary of Key Themes in John 1–3

The first three chapters of John lay the theological and narrative foundations for everything that follows. Before moving further into the gospel, here is a summary of the major themes established:

## 1. The Identity of Jesus as the Divine Word

From the first verse, John establishes that Jesus is the pre-existent, divine Word — fully God, distinct from the Father, and the agent of all creation. Every sign, conversation, and conflict in the gospel flows from this foundational claim. The question “Who is Jesus?” is not an open question for John — it is an answered question whose implications are inexhaustible.

## 2. The Mission of Witness

John the Baptist, Andrew, Philip, and ultimately the entire gospel serve the same function: to point people to Jesus. Authentic Christian ministry is fundamentally an act of witness — not self-promotion but Christ-promotion. “He must increase; I must decrease” is the posture of every true servant.

## 3. The New Birth — Faith as the Gateway

The conversation with Nicodemus establishes that entrance into the Kingdom of God requires a supernatural rebirth — one initiated by God’s Spirit, received through faith. This rules out all human achievement as a basis for standing before God. The offer is universal (“whoever”); the condition is singular (believe).

## 4. Light and Darkness

John’s world is divided by the response to Jesus. Those who come to the light experience revelation, life, and salvation. Those who remain in darkness are not neutral — they are under judgment because they have refused the light. The light is not passive; it shines persistently into the darkness.

## 5. Signs That Point Beyond Themselves

The wedding at Cana and the cleansing of the Temple are not simply impressive events. They are “signs” — windows into Jesus’ identity and mission. The best wine reserved for last, the new Temple in his body: these point to a new covenant, a new creation, a new way of being in relationship with God that fulfills and surpasses everything that came before.