

Adult Teaching Resources

January 5, 2020



Season after Christmas (January 5)

Now Appearing

John 1:1-9, 10-18 – “The Word that Reveals”

Epiphany (January 12-February 23)

Matthew 3:13-17 – “A Son Who Pleases”

John 1:29-42 – “A Lamb Who Leads”

Matthew 4:12-23 – “A Preacher Who Calls

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The Word that Reveals

John 1:1-9, 10-18

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

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

We are the people of God, created by God, in the image of God. Throughout scripture we have God meeting and interacting with different people in ways that changed and transformed their lives. But, God realized the best way to be revealed was through the person of Jesus the Christ.

Today, we explore the beginning of the John’s gospel and find God embodied in human form, in a way that we can better understand and relate to the Almighty.

Opening

After everyone arrives for your class, give each person a pen and an index card or small piece of paper. Write this question on the board:

When I think of God, I think of...

Ask each person to complete that sentence. Then, collect all the papers and read them out loud, one at a time. After reading each answer, ask the group to help describe and unpack the sentence. Even if it wasn’t their answer, encourage others to add their thoughts to each statement.

Transition from this activity to the Bible by reminding the group that before the incarnation of God through Jesus, there was not one, single path or idea of who/what God was. The people held differing views about God. Their idea all pointed back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; but until Jesus, their ideas were not the same. When Jesus came, it all changed.

Reading the Bible

What was in the beginning? (the Word)

What was with God? (the Word)

What was God? (the Word)

Who was in the beginning with God? (He was)

What came into being through him? (all things)

What was in him that came into being? (life)

What is the light of all people? (life)

What does the light do? (shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it)

What man was sent by God? (John)

What did he do? (came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him)

What was coming into the world? (the true light)

Making Connections

When you hear the words, “In the beginning...” what immediately comes to mind? What does that mean for you? How does that affect how, and what, you believe?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The basic meaning of the term *logos* is “word,” but it could also carry connotations such as “reason,” “wisdom,” “matter,” or even the “reckoning” of an account.” What meaning do you ascribe to “word?” How does definition help inform your understanding of the first verse of our passage?

How did you first come to know of Christ? Who, or what, helped you understand? What was your first understanding? What did that understanding mean for you?

Would you rather sit in a totally dark room or sit in a room with a small, lit, birthday candle? Why? Would you rather walk in a totally dark tunnel or walk in a tunnel with the flashlight from your phone? Why? Would you rather walk to the kitchen in your house in the total dark or walk to the kitchen with all the lights on? Why? What affect does darkness have on you? What affect does a little light shining in the dark have on you?

When have you clearly experienced Jesus when those around you remained unaffected or uninformed? What was the situation? What was the “Jesus moment?” How did you know it was a holy moment? How were you affected?

What does it mean to you to be called “children of God?” How are we children of God? How should we act in that type of relationship?

Making Connections *continued*

Why do you think God made the decision to have Jesus live among us as a fellow human? What was God hoping to accomplish with this act?

What is your definition of grace? How do we get it? Why does God give it?

So What?

In our lessons this month, we've spent time with the truth that God is with us. We unpacked the Old Testament words of Immanuel from Isaiah. We were reminded of that truth on Christmas. Today, we again know that no matter what happens, God is with us.

To help make this truth more personal, ask your group(s) from the Reading the Bible section to get back together. Give the group(s) paper and pens. Then, ask them to write a short psalm affirming God's presence—write a psalm of Immanuel.

Give the group(s) time to write, then share the psalm(s) out loud. Celebrate the psalm(s) as you celebrate the truth of God's presence in good times and bad times.

The Challenge

This week, open your eyes, ears, and hearts to see God around you. How is God revealing God-self to you? Are you paying attention?

Prayer

Loving God, it's easy to get a little down depressed after the holidays. We've spent so much time building up and getting ready for Christmas that when it's over, we crash. Be with us, as you have promised to be with all your children throughout the ages. Remind us of your presence not only today, but also all days. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

The author—The Fourth Gospel, commonly called the Gospel of John, was written anonymously. Tradition holds that it was written by the apostle John, brother of James and a son of Zebedee. A concluding note to the gospel identifies the author as “the apostle Jesus loved” (21:20-24).

Many scholars doubt that John the son of Zebedee could have been the author, citing significant differences between the Fourth Gospel and the earlier synoptics of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It appears to have been written late in the first century, and takes a more philosophical approach that seems uncharacteristic of a Hebrew fisherman.

A strong tradition associates a man named John, perhaps the same as the John known as “the Elder,” who spent the last years of his life in Ephesus (some traditions insist that John, the beloved disciple, took Jesus’ mother Mary there to care for her). Some attribute authorship to him.

Others believe multiple authors contributed to the Fourth Gospel. The puzzle has no clear solution. Fortunately, the truths we learn from it do not depend on knowing the identity of the author.

The logos—Greek philosophers used the word *logos* in different ways. Some, such as Aristotle, used the term in the sense of reasoned discourse or the body of an argument, while the Stoics associated the word *logos* with a supernatural principle that pervades the universe and animates living things. Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher, employed the term *logos* with reference to a supposed demiurge, an intermediary bridging the great distance and difference between God and humans. In the Jewish philosopher Philo’s thought, the *logos* was the means by which God created the world and holds all things together. Scholars have often noted some similarities between the Fourth Gospel and Philo’s concept of the *logos*.

Power to become children of God—The word often translated as “power” is *exousía*, and it can also be translated as “right,” “privilege,” or “ability.” Without Christ we are mortal persons in a mortal world with no hope for anything beyond. With the coming of the *logos*, however, those who acknowledge Jesus as the divine Word can enter a special relationship with God.

Down and up—To put John’s argument in simplistic terms, Jesus left heaven and came to earth to engage with humans so humans can leave earth and enjoy a heavenly relationship with God.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Naming God, or not—Although we tend to think of John’s gospel as being written largely for people well versed in Greek philosophical categories, this verse reflects John’s desire to communicate with literate Jews, as well. Readers familiar with rabbinic writings would immediately notice that John used three common references to God in a single verse.

In Jewish writings such as the Targums (Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament) and the Mishnah (collected teachings and commentaries of the rabbis), there was a strict prohibition on using God’s name – even the Hebrew versions of “God” and “Lord” – because it was thought to be presumptuous. Therefore, a number of circumlocutions were used to speak of God without naming God.

In the Targums, the most frequent terms used to indicate God’s activity were terms that we would translate as “Word,” “Presence,” and “Glory.” In describing God’s work, the rabbis would say, for example, that the Word spoke, the Presence dwelt, the Glory appeared.

Notice John’s use of similar terms in v. 14: “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.” For any literate Jew, the obvious presence of these common circumlocutions would make a clear claim that Jesus Christ was the living embodiment of God himself (see G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* [Harper & Row, 1966], 264).

The custom of avoiding any public use of God’s name continues among observant Jews, who avoid either saying or writing “Yahweh,” “God,” or “Lord.” Instead, they are likely to refer to God as “the Holy One, blessed be He,” or “the Name (in Hebrew, *HaShem*). When writing God’s name, they will intentionally misspell it as “G-d.”

Grace upon grace—In the phrase “grace upon grace,” the word translated as “upon” could also mean “over against” or “instead of.” Perhaps John is suggesting that the grace we have received for past sins can be “exchanged for” new grace to deal with our present failure. We can experience God’s grace time after time because it comes from an inexhaustible source, “from his fullness.”

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

How should we use the phrase “the Word of God”?

Many people habitually refer to the Bible as “the Word of God,” going so far as to capitalize “Word.” We often conclude a public scripture reading, for example, with “The Word of God for the people of God.”

This is typically done as a sign of respect, and I don’t wish to criticize those who practice it, but the question is worthy of more thought than we typically give it. My personal preference is to reserve “Word” with a capital “W” as a term for Christ, after John 1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Capitalizing “Word” in this instance recognizes the divinity of Christ as the incarnate Word of God.

The Bible, although it claims to contain words of God, does not present itself as “the word of God.” The prophets often spoke what they believed to be direct words from God, using formulas like “this is what God says” (Isa. 42:5), or “thus says the LORD” (Isa. 37:6; Jer. 37:7, 44:25; Ezek. 45:9). More commonly, however, they insisted “the word of the LORD came to me ...” (Jer. 1:11, 13; 2:1; Ezek. 3:16, 6:1; among many others) or told their listeners to “hear the word of the LORD ...” (Isa. 1:10, 28:14; Jer. 7:2, 17:20; Amos 7:16, et. al.).

Narrators telling stories about the prophets often used similar language. “The word of the LORD” is said to have come to Abraham (Gen. 15:4), Samuel (1 Sam. 15:10), Elijah (1 Kings 17:8), Nathan (1 Chr. 17:3), Isaiah (Isa. 38:4), Hosea (Hos. 1:1), Joel (Joel 1:1), and others. Similar permutations appear: Moses taught “the words of the LORD” (Exod. 24:3, Num. 11:24, others). “The word of the LORD” came to all Israel (Deut. 5:22) and was even spoken of as being heard by a “stone of witness” (Josh. 24:27).

We could cite many similar instances, but the point is that the Bible contains some words that it claims were spoken *by* God, but most of the Bible consists of words *about* God, or about the ongoing and usually troubled relationship between God and God’s people. It is a witness to Hebrew and Christian efforts to explain their understanding of God, the beginning of a long relationship story in which we continue to play a part.

The Bible as a whole, then, does not claim to be “the word of God” (with or without an uppercase W), though it does purport to contain words from God. Although it’s commonly done, to speak of the Bible as “the Word of God” – especially when “Word” is capitalized – could be seen as overstating the case. Moreover, for some believers it may come perilously close to “bibliolatry,” to making of the Bible an idol, ascribing to it a sacred or divine status that it does not claim for itself.

The Hardest Question *continued*

The Bible itself, keep in mind, does not name itself. The word “Bible” is from the Greek *biblia*, meaning “scrolls” or “books,” and “Holy Bible” is a title ascribed by people, and not claimed by the text itself.

We believe the Bible is a vehicle for divine revelation, but it is not in itself divine.

While we clearly should have deep respect for the Bible and may properly speak of it as “sacred” Scripture, that is because of its testimony that points us to God, not because it possesses divinity.