

## John: The Prologue

### *The Sound of Music Overture*

In case you didn't recognize it that was the overture to the musical "The Sound of Music", starting with "The Hills are Alive to the Sound of Music", then "Do-Re-Me", "My Favourite Things", "Something Good", and "Climb Every Mountain" briefly at the end. The overture doesn't contain the whole musical score, but just portions of some of the songs - in this case, about half of the songs from the musical. Its purpose is to whet your appetite for all that will come, to stir up your anticipation for a few of your favourite songs that are going to feature prominently as the story unfolds.

In the Gospel of John, the overture is the first eighteen verses of the Gospel. These verses set the stage for many of the major themes that are coming in the telling of the Jesus story that John is writing. I'll read the whole thing, then we'll look at the themes which we'll see John develop further on in the gospel:

*In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and He was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that He didn't make. Life itself was in Him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.*

*God sent John the Baptist to tell everyone about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world.*

*But although the world was made through Him, the world didn't recognize Him when He came. Even in His own land and among His own people, He was not accepted. But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan - this birth comes from God.*

*So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. John pointed Him out to the people. He shouted to the crowds, "This is the One I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming who is far greater than I am, for He existed long before I did.'"*

*We have all benefited from the rich blessings He brought to us - one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But His only Son, who is Himself God, is near to the Father's heart; He has told us about Him. (John 1:1-18)*

The analogy between the prologue to the gospel of John and an overture breaks down in the first verse. John introduces the story of Jesus by describing Him as "the Word" and he doesn't come back to that idea again. But notice where he begins his telling the good news. Mark begins with Jesus already a grown man, being baptized by John at the Jordan River. Matthew begins with a genealogy that goes back to Abraham.

Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam being made by God. But John goes back further still: "In the beginning was the Word. He was with God and He was God." So before there was a universe, before there was a big bang, before there was light and the life that we know, there was Jesus, the Word. And He was the One who created it all: "Nothing exists that He didn't make." How do we know that John is writing about Jesus? We'll get to that in verse 14.

Now that he has introduced the Word as both God and Creator, John starts the overture with the sentence, "Life was in Him and this life gives light to everyone." Life and light are both major themes in John's writing. In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." In 1 John, he starts right away by declaring that Jesus is the word of life and then, in verse 2, that He is "life from God" whom they have seen. And in the next paragraph he is writing about God being light and that no darkness is in Him at all. Light and darkness are descriptive of the difference between life that is lived in Christ and life that is lived outside of knowing and obeying Him.

Back to the Prologue. John declares that the light will triumph (the darkness can never extinguish it), that John the Baptist was sent to tell people about the light, that John the Baptist was NOT the light, but that he was a witness to the One who is the true light, the One who gives light to everyone and who was coming into the world.

In this little section, John slips in another key theme that will become central to his Gospel: John's witness was given so that everyone might believe.

As John moves into the next section, he builds on the earlier thought that the Word created everything that exists, but then notes that those He created did not recognize Him and that, even among His own people, "He was not accepted". John deals a lot with opposites: light and darkness, accepted and rejected, belief and unbelief. Here, after saying that the world rejected Jesus, John makes this glorious declaration: "But to all who believed in Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God!" On the one hand, there is ignorance and rejection and on the other there is belief, acceptance and the reward of becoming children of God. John is building his list of contrasts.

The next theme that he slips into the Prologue is the idea of being born again, the idea that Jesus and Nicodemus have a long conversation about just two chapters later. In verse 13 of the Prologue, John writes about the people who believe and accept the light: "They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan - this rebirth comes from God." In chapter 3 he will describe being born again as being born of the Spirit.

Next comes one of the great condensed theological statements of the New Testament: "So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unending love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father." (1:14) Although he hasn't named Jesus yet, John has made it clear that

that's who he is writing about. The Word, who was with God and who was God, has made an appearance here on earth and John, and others, have been eye-witnesses of that appearance - "we have seen His glory". In this one verse, John introduces three concepts that will be emphasized in different ways throughout the gospel. The first is the love that Jesus would demonstrate through His life, and His death, to His disciples and anyone else who would believe in Him. The second is the concept of glory, which we'll look at in a minute, and the third is the revelation of Jesus as Son of God, the "only Son of the Father". In the other gospels, Jesus refers to Himself mostly by the Daniel title, "Son of Man", but John emphasizes the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

Why do you think John caps off this great message, this huge announcement, that the Word has become human and lived here on earth, full of unfailing love and faithfulness, with the statement, "and we have seen His glory"? Why not say, "and He has broken the power of sin and death?" or "the Word became human and lived among us and showed us how to live in a way that pleases His Father"? Why do you think John would have driven this point to the place of seeing the glory of the Word that became a man?

First off, a little review. Glory can mean the brilliance of something, its luminosity. Glory is what happens to your eyes when you're just waking up and someone opens the blinds or flicks on the light switch. It's too much to take in and you close your eyes again or put your head under the pillow. The second meaning of glory is the weight, the substance of a thing. When the glory of the LORD descended on the tabernacle in the wilderness, people would have experienced that as something substantial, a weightiness, coming down from heaven. It filled the tabernacle with God's presence.

The overall meaning of glory, combining luminosity and weightiness, is captured by the word "essence". When the ancient texts that we call the Old Testament were being translated from Hebrew into Greek and they got to the story of Moses on Mount Sinai making his big request of God - "show me Your glory!" - they translated it, "show me Yourself". "Show me who You are, Yahweh - I want to know You as You really are."

Darrell Johnson, in teaching through the Gospel of John, has said that our greatest human need is to see the glory of God. He says that when Moses made his request on the mountain, that all of his lower level needs had been met. He had meaning and purpose and fulfillment in every area of his life, but he needed something more - he needed to know God in a fuller way, and so asked God to show him His glory.

Writers from ancient times often used a technique called "bracketing" to emphasize certain things or to make transitions obvious. John uses the word "glory" to bracket, or set apart, the whole of chapters 2 through 11 which contain the miracles and teaching of Jesus earthly ministry. In John 2:11, after Jesus changes the water into wine, John writes, "This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was Jesus' first display of His glory." And then he adds, "And His disciples believed into Him." And then, just before He raises Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11, Jesus says to Martha, the dead

man's sister, "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" And then He prays to His Father and calls the dead man to come out of the grave.

Chapter 12, then, marks the transition from the miracles of Jesus to His sacrifice. And there are two important statements of this transition. The first occurs when Jesus starts to speak in verse 23:

*The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory.*

At the end of His declaration that his death is imminent, he asks,

*Should I pray, 'Father, save Me from what lies ahead?' But that is the very reason why I came. Father, bring glory to Your name.*

*Then a voice spoke from heaven, saying, I have already brought it glory and I will do it again. (12:27,28)*

What's Jesus saying and what is John remembering that is so important at this pivotal time? That Jesus will be glorified through His sacrificial death and the resurrection that follows and that, through His death and resurrection, the Father will be glorified. It's a certainty ... it will happen. This is why Jesus has come to this earth and He will complete the task of fully demonstrating the Father's love for us and then both He and the Father will be glorified. Again, that means that they will demonstrate their light, the light that breaks through the darkness, they will accomplish something of weighty significance, something that will change the world, and they will make themselves known ... glory.

If someone asks you what God is like, you can point to this culmination of Jesus ministry on earth, His self-giving love, His amazingly merciful gift of His own life and how that expresses love to you. In John 14, 15 and 16, Jesus is talking with His disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on the night before He is betrayed to His death.

Chapter 17 is entirely a prayer that Jesus offers up on behalf of His disciples and, to some extent, on behalf of you and me. It starts like this:

*Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son so He can give glory back to You.*  
(v. 1)

Down to verses 4 and 5:

*I brought glory to You here on earth by doing everything You told Me to do. And now, Father, bring Me into the glory we shared before the world began.*

And this prayer sets the stage for the agony of crucifixion that took place on the next morning. This is glory; this is God making Himself known to human beings like John, like us.

The next thing we see is John the Baptist calling out to the crowds of people who had gathered to see him and he's pointing out Jesus to them, saying:

*This is the One I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming who is far greater than I am, for He existed long before I did.'* (1:15)

Somehow John knew that, even though he was a few months older than his cousin, that Jesus existed long before, from ancient times. The greatness of Jesus is from time

immemorial, from the deep past, from the beginning of time. Here's an echo from the first verse of the Prologue: "In the beginning was the Word."

We have one final paragraph to look at in which John tells us that we have all benefited from the rich blessings Jesus brought us. John doesn't say who the "we" are, but he does say there was an abundance of blessing - "one gracious blessing after another". Then, this remarkable statement that really forms the core of Paul's theology in his letters.

*For the law was given through Moses, God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. (1:17)*

We just had that, back in verse 14:

*So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.*

Now we see this description of the core of God's character once again: unfailing love and faithfulness.

And there's more. At the heart of John's writing is his conviction that Jesus shows us what God is, and what God is like.

*No one has ever seen God. But His only Son, who is Himself God, is near to the Father's heart; He has told us about Him. (1:18)*

Jesus will show us all who God is. He has come from the Father with a mission to reveal to all people the heart of the Father and we'll see this again and again throughout this Gospel. John's desire that people who read His good news will believe in Jesus involves this: that we would believe that Jesus reveals God to us.

What applications do we get from the Prologue to John's Gospel?

1. If you've been to a movie that requires 3D glasses, then you'll know that when you take those glasses off, you'll see double images - nothing will be very clear and you'll put the glasses back on just to keep from getting a headache. 3D movies are made to be seen with 3D glasses and John's Gospel is written to be understood through the lenses of this Prologue. This is the code that interprets the mysteries that follow. The one who reads and understands the Prologue will have an easier time reading and understanding the stories and teachings that follow because you'll hold the interpretive key. What makes that key work? Knowing that Jesus is the pre-existent God, that He reveals God to us, that to all who believe Him and accept Him, He gives the right to become children of God. He is the good news and John doesn't want that to be a mystery to his readers as he begins to tell the story of the Word, the Creator, the light, the life. Just a thought - if you need a project for the next few weeks, try memorizing the Prologue to John's Gospel, or at least the parts that really speak to you about who Jesus is.
2. Later on this year, I'm going to address some issues that are affecting the church, particularly in the West. One of those issues is the revival of fear-based religion in quite a number of Christian churches. Some of the largest and fastest-growing churches around espouse a rather harsh view of God, not one that John would agree to. I want you to give serious attention to the phrase that appears twice in

this Prologue describing Jesus: “He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness”. Unfailing love describes the nature of God, His glory, His real substance, His character - His way of dealing with flailing and failing people like us who truly desire to do better, to live closer to His heart, to reflect His glory, etc. John asks us to believe that this is an accurate description of who Jesus is and to believe that Jesus, in His unfailing love and faithfulness, accurately represents the Father to us. Hang on to that - because we’ll keep landing on that spot.

3. The third application for today is simply that glory belongs to God. Yes, we reflect His glory when we walk closely with Him and follow the leading of His Spirit, but it’s His glory that we reflect - His brilliant luminosity, His significance, His loving character. I love how John the Baptist plays his role in the opening chapter of the Gospel. He shouts out that Jesus is the One whom he had earlier announced, One much greater than John, One who had existed far earlier. And when the crowds demanded to know who John was, he first told them a bunch of things that he was not - Messiah, Elijah, the Prophet - and then admitted only to being a voice, shouting out in the wilderness, “Prepare a straight pathway for the Lord’s coming!” At every turn, John seemed so aware that he wasn’t the great one, the hope of Israel, and he was perfectly content to point to Jesus. I hope that’s something that is on our radar for this year; to be less concerned with what others think about us and more aware of what they are thinking about Jesus ... so that, ultimately, He can get more glory, His reputation can be enhanced, His Kingdom come and His will be done ...