

GREAT TEXTS: JOHN 1:1-18

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 23, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Of all the important questions that men face the one of greatest significance is the question, "How shall we regard Jesus Christ?" Is he to be regarded merely as the greatest man who ever lived, or is he to be worshipped as God? Is he to be regarded simply as the greatest of the prophets, or is he to be regarded as the Messiah, the Savior of the world?

Does it really matter how we regard Jesus of Nazareth? Is it really true that faith in him has a deep bearing upon happy and successful living? Is it really true that our eternal destiny depends upon whether we believe in him or not? And along with these questions there is another: Do we have adequate evidence or support for faith that Jesus is the divine Son of God?

These are the questions which the gospel of John was written to answer. The great apostle, the beloved disciple, wrote these twenty-one chapters in order to tell us the answers to these crucial questions. And in a very brief way he gives us the answers in his opening prologue, the eighteen verses which begin the first chapter of John. I have chosen for our study on this occasion these eighteen verses.

I am sure you remember that John wrote his account of the life of Christ long after Matthew, Mark, and Luke had penned their accounts. These men wrote by the middle of the first century. John lived longer than any of the other apostles, and while we do not know exactly when he wrote, it would be closer to the end of the first century than it would be to the middle. In other words, these other accounts of the life of Jesus had already been in circulation generally for several decades. People knew the facts of Jesus' life. They knew he had been born; they knew where he had lived; they knew the miracles that he worked; they knew his teachings. Why, then, was it necessary to write more? The answer is that John wrote to tell us in the full deep sense that Jesus is the divine Son of God, that he is eternal, that he never had a beginning, and that he will never have an end of existence.

That Ye May Believe

John wrote to tell us as the very center of his message, that unless we believe in Jesus as the Christ there is no hope of our eternal salvation. For example, in John 3:16, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." Then still later in the gospel according to John, "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe (you see the emphasis) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31). John wrote to say that Jesus is the divine Son of God, that men must believe in him as such, and to show the blessings that will come to those who believe in him and accept him. This is the story of the incarnation, a word that we do not often use. It is not a common word that we use every day, but it means God coming down in fleshly form and living among men. It is the greatest thing that ever happened in our world.

In the opening eighteen verses of this great book John says it magnificently. The first five of these verses are designed, as is no other single paragraph in the whole New Testament, to emphasize the divinity and eternity of Jesus. Let me read them to you: "In the beginning ... " That means before our world existed, before there was any animal or human creation, before there was any universe. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The word "Word" is capitalized to show that it does not mean word as we ordinarily think of it. It comes from the Greek word logos and has a special meaning. It refers to the personality. In the beginning this personality was present with God.

The Word

I do not know exactly why "Word" was chosen. Sometimes we pause to say as we read this passage that words are bridges over which ideas flow. As I speak to you I am using words, and by the use of these words ideas in my mind cross a bridge into your minds. Words are bridges over which ideas flow, and in that sense Jesus is the bridge over which the idea of God Almighty comes into the minds of men.

In this same verse of John, chapter one, there is the idea of eternity. This Word which became flesh and dwelt among men also existed in the beginning. He never had a beginning; he existed in that infinite past before time began. You remember in Genesis 1:26, Jehovah God said, "Let us make man in our own image, after likeness." The pronoun is plural, "Let us make man," not singular. Back there, in the beginning God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit existed, The three of them make up the trinity, the Godhead. Jesus is no inferior being; Jesus is a part of divinity. Everything else is not divine, but Jesus and God and the Spirit are divine.

Next, notice verse three, "All things were made through him; (he had a part in the creation) and without him was not anything made that hath been made." He is as much a part of that creation scene as was Jehovah the Father. Without Christ nothing was created.

Life and Light

“In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” This is a great illustration. In the time before Jesus came to the earth men were in sin, contaminated, soiled, their lives ruined. They were “dead in sin,” to use Paul’s expression, because they were sinners. Then it says, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” This life that existed in Christ was given to men. If we are Christians, we are alive. If we are not Christians we are still dead.

The second illustration in this great passage concerns light. The world was in darkness until Jesus came and brought light. Have you ever been in darkness, waning light, when suddenly someone pushed a button, turned on a flashlight or a car’s headlights and light bathed the whole scene? In a sense that is what happened when Christ came into the world and gave the world spiritual light to guide men to salvation.

These first five verses are designed to say that Jesus is divine and that he brought light and life to men. At the end of verse five there is the tragedy of the gospel, “And the darkness apprehended it not.” Christ brought the light, but the darkness did not recognize the light. In your mind visualize the Jews, the high Priest and the other priests, the Sanhedrin and all the others. They did not see that he was the light; they did not recognize him as bringing life; they died in darkness. The tragedy of our world is that many people never recognize Christ and never come to him for salvation.

John the Baptist

Next, I move to verse six, which is the beginning of what we might call the second part of this great paragraph. This shows that when Christ came men either believed in him or failed to believe. It was either faith or lack of faith. Notice these tragic words, “There came a man, sent from God, (you recognize him as John the Baptist as he is called in the scriptures) whose name was John. The same came for witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but he came that he might bear witness of the light.” You and I do not see any real need for that to be said. We know that John was not divine. We know that he was merely the forerunner of Jesus, but there have been people who did not know this.

In fact, even in that first century there was a little sect that thought John was the Messiah and, amazing as it may seem, there are still some of that sect living yet. They are known as the Mandaeans and they do not consider Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, but rather John the Baptist. Toward the end of that first century the great apostle John wrote to correct any misconception about John the Baptist. He was not the light. He simply came to bear witness of the light. Incidentally, that is what John himself said, “He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, that standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is made full. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:29-30).

John knew that he was simply to bear witness of the light. “There was the true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world.” Here the tragedy deepens. “He (Jesus Christ) was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world knew him not. (The world did not realize that one of the Godhead had come.) He came unto his own, (the Hebrews or Jews) and they that were his own received him not. But as many as received him, (some did: a handful of apostles, a hundred and twenty who waited in an upper room, three thousand on Pentecost, five thousand men a little later) to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name.”

“The Right To Become”

Right there I must stop a moment. You see, John actually says, “As many as received him ...” in other words, those who did see that he was the Son of God, those who did believe on him. Notice that it does not say that they became children of God, but rather that they who believed received “the right to become children of God.” Is there a difference? A tremendous difference! There are some who feel that all one must do is believe on the Lord and automatically he is a child of God. That scripture does not say that. It says that to those who believed on him he gave the right to become children of God.

We must couple this passage with other scriptures like John 3:5, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” To those who were believers in Christ God gave the right to become “born-again” Christians. There are some things we need to do after we believe in order to become Christians. What a glorious thing it is to believe on him. Those who believed on his name, obeyed his commands, and thus were born anew. The only adequate description of what happens to one who believes on Christ and then follows his directions is that he is a new creature, born again. Is not that a magnificent illustration? Those who become God’s people are like new creatures, born all over again, not physically, but spiritually born.

The text continues, “Who were born, not of blood, (it is not a mere inheritance that happens by procreation) nor of the will of the flesh, (it is not just a natural instinct) nor of the will of man, but of God.” This whole idea of saving is not man’s idea, but God’s. That is the end of the second segment of this great paragraph. Now, the third.

The Incarnation

Here is the point of it all, verse fourteen, "And the Word (he who had always existed, he who helped in the creation, he who was the life and light) became flesh, and dwelt among us." Who was speaking? The apostle John. He had eaten with Jesus; he had lived with him for three years. John was an eye witness. John was speaking out of his own intimate personal experience. So he says, The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father,) full of grace and truth." Those words mean something to us; they mean infinitely more to John. John was there: "We behold his glory, full of grace and truth." Then he says, "John (the Baptist) bears witness of him, and crieth, saying, This was he of whom I said, He that cometh after me is become before me: (there is a riddle) for he was before me." John the Baptist had the vision; he knew that Jesus had existed before him even though he was born after him. Then, verse sixteen, "For of his fullness (John continues to bear witness) we all received, and grace for grace."

When we come to Christ and our salvation is given us we receive blessing upon blessing beyond our power to describe. How much blessing is emphasized in these words, "For the law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." No man could be saved by the law of Moses. The law of Moses had no power to do away with sin. The law of Moses led people to Christ, but it was Christ only who could forgive sin. Finally, as this great paragraph closes we read, "No man hath seen God at any time" (God is Spirit and no one has ever really seen him) the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." What you and I know about Jehovah we learn mostly from Christ. In John 14:9 Christ said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." And so our great debt is to Jesus of Nazareth who became flesh that we might know God and be saved.

The tragedy of tragedies is that this great event of all history has been wasted so far as some are concerned. Put it this way: If you have not come to Christ, then for you Christ has not yet come. If you are not a Christian, then all of this that we have read is of no value. This is for those who come to Christ. I would appeal to you as we close this study. Come to Christ; let him come into your life and bring you light, life, and salvation. Would you be a Christian? Would you let this great passage stir you to want to become a child of God? If so, then come now, confess your faith, repent of your sins, be buried with your Lord in baptism and then live this wonderful new kind of life.