

# JOHN — WEEK 1

## THEOLOGY



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

This first week in the Gospel of John is logical instead of chronological. Jesus is introduced as the Word. Then John tells us that the Word is the Life and the Life is the Light that gives light to **all** men. John also brings in John the Baptist to testify to who this Light is. Those who receive this Light are given the right to become children of God!

Finally, John gives us His name—Jesus Christ. We can see God in Him.

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T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

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1 John 1:1–4

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*

Note: This is a reference document that needs to be published so as to make it available. It may be a more cumbersome read than the DEEPs that are crafted as daily devotionals.

Example 1: If I have two apples and someone gives me two more apples, how many apples do I have?

Four.

Why?

Because two plus two equals four.<sup>1</sup>

What if I don't have any apples? Does two plus two still equal four?

Of course. Two plus two equals four whether or not you have any apples, or anything else for that matter.

OK, hold that thought. We'll get back to it later.

## **The Question of Existence**

One of the fundamental questions of philosophy is, "Why does the universe exist? Why isn't there just nothing?"

There are three basic possibilities for the origin of the universe:

- 1) The universe always existed; it's "self-existent."
- 2) The universe created itself (or sprang from nothing).
- 3) Something else that's self-existent (AKA the creator) created the universe.

Possibility 2 has a severe problem. Aristotle famously said, "From nothing, nothing comes." He's implying that the universe cannot create itself. This is the normal philosophical view.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing\\_comes\\_from\\_nothing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_comes_from_nothing)

Lately, there have been some physicists (e.g., Stephen Hawking) advocating possibility 2. This is a sharp debate between those physicists and philosophers. They don't even agree on the definition of nothing, so a resolution is not at hand. We'll get back to this later.

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<sup>1</sup> This is referring to normal arithmetic. The field of mathematics includes other types of arithmetic, which sometimes use the same words to mean different things. For example, angles generally use modulo arithmetic. In trigonometry and many other applications,  $180^\circ$  plus  $180^\circ$  equals  $0^\circ$  because angles don't add normally, they're modulo 360. However, the formula for the sum of the internal angles of a polygon with  $n$  sides is  $(n-2) \cdot 180^\circ$ , which tacitly assumes normal arithmetic, even though it involves angles.

Unfortunately, possibilities 1 & 3 also have a severe problem. How can anything be self-existent? What does self-existent even mean?

If the reader has never wrestled with the problem with the concept of self-existence, I recommend taking the time to consider it. Something self-existent is something that exists because it *cannot not* exist. Take away everything and it's still there. You can't get rid of it. It *must* exist.

That's where two plus two equals four comes in. Might that qualify as self-existent? The line used above was, "Two plus two equals four whether or not you have any apples, or anything else for that matter." Might it be able to stand on its own? Might it belong to the class of things that cannot not exist?

The reader is encouraged to stop for a while to let this settle. Can abstract (i.e., immaterial) concepts such as two plus two equals four be self-existent? Don't get bogged down in how insignificant our example is. We just want to break through the "I can't conceive of *anything* being self-existent" barrier.

If, after thinking this through, the idea of something being self-existent is still a non-starter, then the rest of this write-up will be boring. It might not even make sense. From here on, we will assume that the reader accepts that two plus two equals four can be self-existent.

### The Possibilities

If two plus two equals four can be self-existent, all the rules of arithmetic could also be self-existent. In fact, why not all of mathematics? All the rules and theorems of mathematics are just as apt to be self-existent as two plus two equals four, as are the proofs of those theorems, and anything else immaterial.

Thus, the concept of self-existence is established, and we see many possible self-existent things. This allows for a self-existent creator. Unlike two plus two equals four, the creator is beyond our comprehension, but the concept of self-existence isn't.<sup>2</sup>

So, we've opened the door to possibility 3. We've also opened the door to possibility 1, but the second law of thermodynamics closes it. The universe can't be infinitely old because everything always runs down thermodynamically (entropy always increases). It would already be dead. That rules out a self-existent universe.

Let's now revisit the case for possibility 2 as advocated by some physicists.

<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141106-why-does-everything-exist-at-all>

Those physicists use a definition of nothing that includes many important behaviors. They explain the origin of our universe as resulting from those behaviors. That's a curious definition of nothing.

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<sup>2</sup> There's a misunderstanding that we must preclude here. If we can conceive of two plus two equals four being self-existent—meaning it *must* exist—the word *must* in the definition of self-existent doesn't mean it must be self-existent. It *can* be the case that it *must* exist; not it *must* be the case that it *must* exist. Two plus two equals four might be self-existent or it might not. We can conceive of both possibilities. Arithmetic might be part of what was created by the creator. We'll get back to this.

*The Grand Design* by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow is one of the key references for this point of view. It posits a state from which our universe sprang. This state has no time dimension, but still has many physical properties—and thus qualifies as a universe. The authors ignore the question of how this universe could be self-existent. They seem to think that a universe without a time dimension (and/or zero net energy) would automatically be self-existent. Its self-existence is far from obvious, and the authors fail to address the issue.

The linked BBC article takes a different tack. It emphasizes, “Nothing is an unstable state.” But that instability is a behavior, which makes the label “nothing” rather dubious. It’s a thing, which can give birth to our universe. If such a thing (or state, or “mother universe,” or whatever one wishes to call it) can be self-existent, the proponents of this theory need to explain that. Labeling it nothing, when one must spend many words describing its characteristics, is just a dodge. Such a thing is much more than nothing. Its self-existence cannot just be assumed.<sup>3</sup>

So, while we can explain how an immaterial equation can be self-existent, the pre-existent thing posited by the physicists lacks a similar explanation. The problem is that it *acts*, to wit:

Two apples plus two apples equal four apples. *If only we had some apples.* The equation cannot create the apples. When it exists only in the abstract, it isn’t *in action*. If apples exist, the equation can apply to something and be *in action*. The problem with the creation theory posited by the physicists is the definition of unstable—prone to change over time. *If only we had some time.* The equations of physics that have *t* in them (e.g., Schrodinger’s Equation) are in the abstract. They’re powerless to create the time (or Schrodinger’s state function— $\Psi$ ). Where did we get the time? Or the  $\Psi$  for that matter? Thus, this starting thing posited by the physicists is not nothing.

To put it simply, the universe cannot spring from nothing. Aristotle was right. The very act of giving birth to the universe contradicts the concept of nothingness. The source of the universe must be a “thing.” It can’t be nothing.

## The Result

Having eliminated possibilities one and two, we’re left with only possibility number three—the self-existent creator.

But consider mathematician Leopold Kronecker’s famous bon mot:

*“God created the integers. All else in the work of man.”*

Could Kronecker be right? Could even the concept of numbers be created? Our second footnote explains that arithmetic might be self-existent, or it might not. Arithmetic not being self-existent is hard to picture, but that’s our human limitation. We shouldn’t rule it out.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that if it were indeed nothing, then it would automatically be self-existent.

But consider the alternative. What if immaterial things like arithmetic are self-existent? The mathematical formulas theorems and proofs we used as examples are things that we might call “truths” and the whole collection of abstract self-existent things, “truth.”

If only this “truth” had the power to create the universe! Then all the dots would connect.

This turns out to be remarkably similar to the Jesus presented in the gospel of John. John 1:1–4 describes Him as the Word. The Greek word is *logos*, from which we get the word logic. The connection to self-existent abstract truths (especially formulas and proofs) is obvious.

And then there’s John 14:6a.

*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”*

Notice that Jesus doesn’t merely claim to be truthful, or true, or even a truth.

He is the truth.

2 John 1:1–5

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

How wonderfully important the gospel of John is. It doesn't begin with a baby in a manger or even with a pregnancy; it begins in eternity. John's perspective is different. Praise God that we have this more complete picture of the Christ. How impoverished our faith would be without this grand description!

In John 1:1–18, which we will cover in this lesson plus the next three, John focuses on apologetics and abstract theology. It might be the most important section in the Bible; it's certainly the most densely packed. Much of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity comes from this section.

John begins by telling us that Jesus is the Word. In Genesis, words are the agent of creation.

*Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. — Genesis 1:3*

The Word is the agent of creation. *All things were made through Him.* The Greek here is unambiguous. Everything was made *through Him*, not by *Him*. Yet John's inspired writing includes a clarification—*and without Him nothing was made that was made.*

This shows creation as an action of the whole Godhead, with Jesus playing a critical role best described by the word *through*. Thus, this passage precludes an error we sometimes don't think about—Christ's existence didn't begin in Bethlehem.

Then John moves on to describing Him as the life and light. The life **is** the light.

Note that this is about eternal life (zoh-ay), not biological life (bee-os). Jesus is the source of eternal life—not just its restoration through His death and resurrection.

Why? He is where life came from to begin with.

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This eternal life is much more than just avoiding hell. It illuminates. Darkness is powerless to resist light. Everywhere that light shines, darkness vanishes.

The New King James translation says, "*and the darkness did not comprehend it.*" Other translations say "overcome" instead of "*comprehend.*" The Greek word (kah-teh-la-ben) has many meanings, even overtake, but it simply fits what we know about the relationship between light and darkness. Light wins.

But what does John mean by darkness? Is it simply the absence of the light needed to keep us from bumping into things? No, it is the absence of perception, especially spiritual.

Eternal life allows us to see eternal things.

3 John 1:6–9

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*

Every book of the Bible was written for a reason; something needed to be said. John’s gospel was written at the end of the first century. At that time, there were some things that needed to be clarified about who Jesus Christ is.

So, John starts off with divinity. Jesus is more than just a man. He is God. He was there *in the beginning*. Next, John moves to depicting Jesus as light—the descriptor he will use in today’s passage. *In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*

Now John brings up John the Baptist. Why? That seems like an odd order of things, but John isn’t writing a chronology; he’s writing an apologetic.

John the Baptist was very well-known and popular in the first century. His testimony carried a lot of weight. John moves to him to build the apologetic foundation of showing who Jesus is. It’s why John the Baptist came in the first place—to *bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.*

His popularity was by design.

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Notice that up to this point John hasn’t used the words, “Jesus,” or “Christ.” He is introducing Him in abstract form, first as the Word, then as Life, then as Light. This fits Isaiah’s prophesy.

*The people who walked in darkness  
Have seen a great light;  
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,  
Upon them a light has shined. — Isaiah 9:2*

John wants to make one thing perfectly clear; John the Baptist is not the light.

*He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.*

Isaiah’s prophesy is fulfilled, but with two great twists.

*That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*

This *Light coming into the world* means incarnation. John hasn’t yet mentioned His human form, nor His human name, only that *the true Light is coming into the world*. The *true Light* is not a created thing.

The other great twist is that the *true Light* won’t just be for the Jews. It *gives light to every man*.

This is another thing that, at the end of the first century, John knew needed to be said.



4 John 1:10–13 (NIV)

*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband’s will, but born of God.*

Incarnation is strange. The world doesn’t recognize its creator when He steps inside it. *His own* (the Jews) don’t recognize him either. Some do, but it’s far from universal.

John states this bluntly to emphasize the contrast. You might expect the world to recognize its creator when He shows up in person. That it didn’t is a profound insight into the extreme nature of incarnation. The creator, once inside His creation, isn’t obvious.

You might also expect His people to recognize Him when He’s right in front of their faces. With *his own*, it’s not exactly a failure to recognize; it’s a failure to *receive*. The difference may not seem significant, but remember that the demons recognized Him just fine—receptive, not so much.

But to the ones who did receive Him, *he gave the right to become children of God*. Right? They gain a right? Why describe it that way?

The word translated as “right” here (*exousia*) means right, authority, ability, power. In other words, the action of becoming *children of God* isn’t complete, but it’s enabled.

And what is enabled is spectacular—to become *children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband’s will, but born of God*.

John still hasn’t used the word Jesus, yet he has already nailed down the entire gospel with incredible precision.

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This being *born of God*, becoming *children of God*, is everything to a Christian. We want this for ourselves as well as for everyone we love. Actually, we want it for everyone, whether we love them or not. Unfortunately, most people think of this in selfish terms.

*Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” — Mark 10:17*

That’s not completely wrong; it just misses the point about what eternal life encompasses. It’s more than an inheritance.

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. — John 5:24*

Eternal life begins now, and with it comes the ability to see.

5 John 1:14–18

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

*John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ ”*

*And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*

Now John fills in the flesh and bone of the incarnate Word of God. He *dwelt among us*. We got to behold *His glory*. Then John adds another theological detail—one we might not notice because we know it so well—He’s *the only begotten of the Father*.

And to leave no room for ambiguity about what this means, in verse eighteen John calls Him *the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father*. Make no mistake; He’s the second person of the Trinity.

Then the gospel cites John the Baptist to back this up with, “*He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.*” Make no mistake; He’s eternal.

The last paragraph is also incredibly rich. Grace replaces law. The significance of that shift cannot be overstated.

*For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

At last! We get the name of this Word/Life/Light/only begotten Son of God—*Jesus Christ*.

Then comes a curious clarification. *No one has seen God at any time*. Why bring that up? What’s the point?

Jesus ends the era of “*no one has seen God*,” though it’s not simply that we get to see God the Father. Rather, *the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him*. Other translations say, “made him known,” instead of, “*declared Him*.”

If this isn’t clear enough, John will make it completely unambiguous when, in John 14:9, he quotes Jesus as saying, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father.*”

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This completes the abstract part of the Gospel of John. In only eighteen verses, John has taken us on a whirlwind tour of creation, the Trinity, incarnation, the gospel, and eternal life, plus he has shown the evidence of how we can know that it’s all true. This lays the logical foundation for the historical narrative to come.

It that’s anywhere near as intense as this first section, fasten your seatbelts.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Christians refer to Jesus as “the incarnate word of God.” What is your mental image of that?
2. How have your perceptions changed since becoming a Christian?
3. How does personal testimony help to lead someone to Christ?
4. Christians use the phrase, “born again” a lot. What does that mean?
5. What is your mental image of the Trinity?

*Items for prayer:*