



## The Book of Signs - Week 1

### Week 1, Day 1

#### John 1:1-18

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

*<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

#### Understanding the Passage:

Welcome to another edition of Scripture+Shared! We're studying the first half of the Gospel according to John. John is divided into two parts: chapters 1-12 and 13-21. The first part is commonly called the Book of Signs, due to the seven signs of Jesus included in this section. The second part is the Book of Glory, which tells the story of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Originally the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory were two separate scrolls, but at some point in early church history, the two scrolls were understood as one seamless unit telling one story about Jesus. The scrolls were likely sewn together and copied onto one solitary scroll, giving us one complete masterpiece, what we now call the Gospel of John.

Who was John? We'll never fully know, at least on this side of heaven. We know he is *not* John the Baptist and *not* John of Patmos, the author of Revelation. The author never identifies himself; none of the Gospel writers do. The church has traditionally attributed authorship to John, son of Zebedee, because that John is repeatedly called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It is that John who had a special and intimate relationship with Jesus, or so the tradition goes, and went on to compose this Gospel based on his memory of that relationship. It's also likely that John, son of Zebedee, founded a church with Christian converts out of a Jewish synagogue; and his missionary proteges, in honor of their beloved mentor, wrote the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory with the stories and words of Jesus that John had passed on to them. Either way, when we refer to John and the Gospel of John in this study, you may assume this is John, son of Zebedee.

Let's briefly discuss four topics from today's passage.

1. *In the beginning.* Whatever the uncertainties over authorship, it's clear the author is referring to the beginning of all beginnings, Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning when God created..." Christ was present with God at the beginning of all things *and* was an active participant in their creation. Given the allusion to Genesis 1:1, we may also consider John's Gospel as a kind of Genesis. What is happening with Jesus is an act of new creation. God is making a new people with and through Christ.
2. *The Word.* The Greek word for Word is *logos*. It literally means "word" but less static and more active. "Message" is closer. *Logos* is the communication of an idea. As the Word, Christ is what God has to say to us. Christ is the expression of what God thinks about.
3. *John the Baptist.* Over a quarter of the verses in this prologue are devoted to John the Baptist. He is not the Christ, but can't overstate the importance of John the Baptist. He is the one who pointed to the light coming into the darkness and called others to embrace the light. We'll never be Christ, but we can be John. We are to be living signs pointing to the light.
4. *Grace and truth.* We can assume a mostly Jewish Christian audience because John wants us to remember and honor what Moses did. Moses gave the law. The law instructs what Israel *must* do if Israel is to remain in good standing with God. The law is obligation. But grace and truth come from Jesus Christ. Grace and truth are what we are *free* to receive and how we may *freely* live as new creations who have been born a second time. Grace and truth are gifts. Yes, we are obliged to love God and love neighbor as the fulfilment of law, but not, and this is crucial for John, in order to satisfy the terms of God's agreement, but rather we are *free* to love God and neighbor because that's just what a born-again person does.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are you most excited about learning in this study?
2. What about your life do you wish God would make brand new?
3. How can you point someone to the light of Christ today?

### Week 1, Day 2

#### John 1:19-34

<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' <sup>23</sup>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.*

*<sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' <sup>26</sup>John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.*

*<sup>29</sup>The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup>This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." <sup>31</sup>I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' <sup>32</sup>And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. <sup>33</sup>I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." <sup>34</sup>And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

John had a following. His movement was just as large if not larger than Jesus' movement, so John would have faced similar questions as Jesus. "Who are you? Are you the one we're looking for?" John denies being the Messiah, the chosen king of Israel. He denies being Elijah, of whom it was told would return at the end of days and help the Messiah defeat all of Israel's enemies. And he denies being "the prophet," someone who, like Moses, would return in the fullness of time to assist the Messiah with ushering in a new age of Israelite sovereignty. John is *not* who the people think he is, that is, the fulfillment of their ultimate hopes for salvation, renewal, and everlasting peace. He's not the Chosen One.

So who is he? He is, quite simply, the voice. He cites but doesn't directly quote Isaiah 40:3, which says, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.'" John self-identifies as that voice. He's not the Christ who was foretold would come; he's the voice calling people to the Christ, yet the voice was foretold, too, and the voice has come. Because the voice is here, that means the Christ is near.

John has interrogators. The Gospel calls them "priests and Levites from Jerusalem." Imagine John, a small-town, renegade, fire and brimstone preacher, gazing at the best that the big city temple can send: the religious establishment, sophisticated and dressed in the best, with all the right credentials, sent to investigate who this threat to their world is. They do not understand John, They can't, for those obsessed with self-preservation do not understand those who wish only to lift up others.

The establishment asks John why he is baptizing. Baptism was a mark that your sins had been forgiven. There's the assumption that the one who baptizes has the authority to baptize and therefore forgive sins, yet John, not being the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet, doesn't have that authority. John's argument is his baptism is a forerunner, an appetizer, of the real thing - baptism of the Holy Spirit. His baptism leads to real change in people, they feel their sins are forgiven, but it doesn't carry the deep change of heart that only the Holy Spirit can do. The authority to perform that kind of baptism, John confesses, doesn't rest with him.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is never baptized. Like in the other Gospels, the Spirit descends on Jesus, and the Spirit has the outward appearance of a dove, but there is no dramatic epiphany where Jesus

comprehends who he is, the Beloved Son, or voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son.” John sees the Spirit alight like a bird on Jesus, but we don’t see it. John sees something that tells him Jesus is the Messiah, but we never see it. And that’s the point. “Blessed is the one who believes without seeing,” Jesus will say to doubting Thomas. In the end, we never see proof that Jesus is who he says he is. We’ll never be at the banks of the Jordan to see the heavens open and the Spirit descend. All we can do is take John at his word and believe: here is the Lamb of God.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you identify more with John, on the fringes of organized religion, or with the establishment, at the center of religion? There is good and there are troubles with both. Where are you?
2. Do you struggle with believing without seeing? Is there an element of faith that you wish you could see with your own eyes?
3. How can you be a John and lift up others today?

### Week 1, Day 3

#### John 1:35-51

<sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup>and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ <sup>39</sup>He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. <sup>40</sup>One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. <sup>41</sup>He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). <sup>42</sup>He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ <sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ <sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ <sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ <sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ <sup>50</sup>Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ <sup>51</sup>And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

#### Understanding the Passage:

Here we have the calling of the first four disciples.

First comes Andrew. There are two disciples of John (yes, of John) who heard John say, essentially, “Stop following me. Follow *him*.” One of those disciples is Andrew. Andrew comes and sees for himself that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Christ. Like with John the Baptist, we’re given no miracle, proof, or narrative that would explain Andrew’s confession of faith in Christ. Andrew simply believes. The Gospel of John is the gospel of simple belief.

Andrew found his brother, Simon, and brings Simon to the Lord. Note that Simon doesn't find Jesus on his own. Andrew goes out and brings him in. That is discipleship, to hold someone's hand as they feel their way in the darkness for Christ. Jesus gives Simon a new name: Peter, which means Stone. Jesus sees something in Simon that the rest of us do not see. Simon will have such strong resolve that Jesus is the Christ that Simon will become the rock of the church. We're not given a clue as to what is so special about Peter. Jesus simply believes in him, just as Andrew believed in him and led him to Christ.

Third is Philip. Until now, the setting is Bethany by the Jordan River. But Jesus and the disciples are only in Bethany because John is in Bethany; they've come to hear the master preacher preach. Now it's time to go home to rural, backwoods Galilee. This time, Jesus calls Philip directly. No one leads Philip to Christ. Philip goes himself. Like many people, he had a personal encounter with Christ that changed his life forever.

Fourth is Nathanael. Nathanael asks what most any of us would ask if we heard the world's greatest human came from the middle of nowhere: Can anything good come from *there*? Towns like Nazareth are where dreams go to die; it's not where the world is changed. Nathanael judges Jesus before he ever sees Jesus, yet the same is true in reverse. Jesus judges what kind of person Nathanael is before Jesus ever lays eyes on him. Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree." Micah 4:4 says, "They shall sit under their own vines and their own fig trees; and no one shall make them afraid." It was a prophesy of lasting prosperity and peace for Israel, of a time when Israel's land would never again be threatened, and the people's fortunes would permanently be restored. For the poor and forgotten of rural Galilee, the fig tree may have been a logo for revolutionaries ready to resist the Roman empire. That means Nathanael is likely a freedom-fighter who's looking for a good opportunity to take up arms against Israel's enemies and establish a new kingdom by brute force. Jesus knows this about Nathanael before Jesus ever sees him, and Nathanael, seeing Jesus' deep knowledge about him, is blown away. He gives his life to the One who knows him intimately and deeply, the One who can offer him real change.

#### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. How are you like Andrew, the one who simply believed?
2. How are you like Simon, the one whom others believed in?
3. How are you like Philip, the one who had a personal encounter with Christ?
4. How are you like Nathanael, the one who was ready for real change?

#### **Week 1, Day 4**

##### **John 2:1-12**

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup>When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' <sup>4</sup>And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' <sup>5</sup>His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' <sup>6</sup>Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup>He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. <sup>9</sup>When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom <sup>10</sup>and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the*

*good wine until now.' <sup>11</sup>Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

*<sup>12</sup> After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

The first thing to understand is Galilean weddings. Weddings lasted several days, so there had to be enough wine for several nights of parties. This was a culture of short life expectancy, poor healthcare, and hard manual labor. It was a harsh, brief life. That made weddings all the more special: they were blips of joy in an otherwise bleak life. When a wedding happened, the bridegroom invited everyone he could arguably be related to for miles. He saved for *years* to pay for the food and wine. It was an honor to give his relatives and friends a good time before they had to resume their tough, doldrum lives. All that is to say, when the wine in today's story runs out, it was after the guests had gone through many gallons, and it marked the end of several nights of bliss and the beginning of a normal, gray, dreary week.

The six stone jars were not filled with potable water. It was dirty water from a well or stream. It wasn't intended for drinking; it was meant for handwashing. Jews were to wash their hands before touching any food that might enter their lips. We'd call that good hygiene; they'd call it keeping kosher. So when Jesus turns water into wine, it's dirty water no one should drink that was transformed into the best vintage.

The Gospel calls this a sign. It's the first of seven signs in the first half of John, what we've already said is the Book of Signs. There are no miracles in John. What the other Gospels call miracles, John calls signs. A miracle is a suspension of the natural way of things. A sign points to something beyond the sign itself.

So, what does water turned into wine point to? See the steward's words in verse 10: "you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus is the Good Wine. The "inferior wine" points to other prophets of Israel who came before Jesus. Those prophets were fine, but they weren't the finest. Jesus is the finest. And what does the Good Wine do? It keeps the joy going. Now there are six stone jars full of great wine, and the wedding party can keep going for days. What if the jars were never empty? What if the Good Wine never ran out? Then the joy would be everlasting! Jesus is the Good Wine who brings everlasting joy to those who believe. Knowing him is a life of joy. The difference he wants to make in our lives is joy. The first sign in John, then, is about Jesus' status as the finest of the prophets and his ability to bring never-ending joy.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. What is the most fun you've ever had at a wedding? Did you know at the time you were tasting the divine?
2. What brings you abundant joy in your life?
3. What are the robbers of joy in your life?

## Week 1, Day 5

### John 2:13-25

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' <sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup>After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

<sup>23</sup> When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup>But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup>and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

### Understanding the Passage:

If you've read the other Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – you may be wondering why the cleansing of the Temple is here, at the beginning of John's Gospel, instead of at the end, as in the other Gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus cleanses the Temple during Holy Week, the last week of his life and ministry on earth, and at the end of the books. Yet in John, the cleansing is not only in the beginning of the book, but at the beginning of Jesus' three years of ministry. Why the difference?

First, a refresher on the story itself. The animals in the Temple are for sale for a practical reason: every act of worship in the Temple demands an appropriate sacrifice, and if you hadn't brought your animal with you to the Temple, which would make sense if you lived in or around Jerusalem, you had to purchase your animal in the city. Over time, entrepreneurs entered the marketplace for sacrificial animals and set up shop in the Temple compound itself. They brought sheep and goats and cows and birds into the Temple and sold them for profit. It was religion turned big business.

Then there's the problem of the money-changers. Roman currency was not permitted in the Temple per the commandment forbidding idol worship. Roman coinage carried the image of the Roman emperor, who used for himself titles of "God" and "Son of God." Therefore, every coin was an idol. But people had to buy their animals, so the workaround was to exchange Roman currency for Temple currency that was only good in the Temple. There was an exchange rate with built-in profit to the money-changers, much like changing foreign currency today.

So picture it at Jesus sees it: his Father's house turned into big business. Good and honest people have come to worship God in his Father's house, but they have to pay to worship, and entire economic systems are built on the demand created by these good and honest people who are just trying to do right by God. Jesus is furious. He loses his cool, vandalizes property, and drives the animals out of the Temple.

When asked why he's doing this, he answers with a riddle: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up (2:19). Herein lies the reason for placing this story at the beginning of the Gospel. In the other Gospels, the cleansing of the Temple is a *prophetic* action. Jesus is preaching against the

Temple leadership, the entire religious establishment, and their moral failure, and his actions in the Temple are like a sermon illustration of his words against them. The same meaning is present in John's telling of the story but to a lesser degree. Here, the cleansing of the Temple is a *theological* action. Jesus is replacing the Temple with his own body. He is the new Temple. The only reason Israel has a Temple is so there's one place where the people can commune with God through sacrifice and prayer, because that one place is God's address. God lives there. Jesus is saying, "Not anymore." God lives in Jesus. Jesus is the one place where we may commune with God. Jesus is God's address. John places this story at the beginning of the book to make a theological statement: the religious system built on the Temple is passing away to make way for a new method of being with God. It doesn't happen in a building; it happens through a person.

**Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Have you ever been frustrated with church as big business?
2. What sermons would Jesus preach against our churches today? What would he say we're doing well?
3. How do you understand Jesus as the "new Temple" in your own words?

**Video Questions:**

1. What do you most want to learn about in this study of the Book of Signs?
2. Why is John so different from the other Gospels?
3. Jesus will use the phrase "Come and see" many times in the Gospel of John. How does "Come and see" help us to understand the purpose of the Gospel of John?
4. Why do you think Andrew decides to leave John the Baptist and follow Jesus instead?
5. Who was an "Andrew" to you and introduced you to Jesus? Or when were you an "Andrew" for someone else?
6. How does the first sign (turning water into wine) point to who Jesus is?
7. Why does John place the Cleaning of the Temple at the beginning of the Gospel, as opposed to the end of the book as in the other Gospels?

**Prayer requests and other notes.**