

On Monday of this week the Hamel family set up Christmas in our home. We put up the tree, brought out all the decorations, turned on the lights, turned on the fireplace for the first time this season, and really got into the holiday spirit. Then, as a surprise, we brought out a present for the kids to open, a little appetizer of a present that we hoped would get them excited about Christmas. They tore through the paper, opened it up, played with it for about five minutes, and then started complaining about it, saying they didn't like it, and didn't want it any more—just the level of gratitude that we as parents have been trying to instill in our children. We said ok, took the toy, put it back in the box, and told them we would take it back to the store. Intense crying ensued. Not the way we hoped Christmas would begin in the Hamel house. But we all know Christmas isn't about the presents and the trees, the cookies and hot cocoa; it's about Jesus.

Today, we are beginning a four month study in the gospel of John during which we will take our time on Sunday mornings and throughout the week to give our attention to the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus. We are calling this study "In the Flesh." In Jesus, God did not stay far off, he did not stay at a distance, he didn't send us text messages, he didn't make a phone call, he didn't set up a zoom meeting. He appeared. He came to us. In fact, in the very first chapter of John's Gospel, John says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). In this study we are going to see that through Jesus, God came to us in the flesh to dwell among us; through Jesus, we get to look at God in the face, to behold his beauty, his glory, and his majesty—grace and truth on ultimate, harmonious display.

John tells us the purpose for which he wrote his book. At the end of his gospel, he says, "Jesus did so many other things that didn't make it into this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). John wrote this book so that we could come to know that Jesus is the Messiah, that we would place our faith in him and through placing our faith in him, we would find life in him. That's what we hope happens through our study: that those who have not yet believed in Jesus would do so, and in doing so would find life in his name. For those who already believe, we hope that your knowledge of him would grow, that your faith in him would deepen, that your love and devotion to him would increase and mature to a place it has never been before.

Throughout the book, John gives us an up-close, intimate look into the life of Jesus. As John writes, he uses the number seven on several occasions. This book is structured around seven signs:

- Turning water into wine
- Curing the sick
- Healing the lame
- Feeding the masses
- Walking on water
- Restoring sight to the blind
- Raising the dead

Every one of these signs points to the identity, the glory, the power, the majesty of Jesus. But John also records seven "I am" statements:

- I am the bread of life.
- I am the light of the world.

- I am the door for the sheep.
- I am the good shepherd.
- I am the resurrection and the life.
- I am the way, the truth, and the life.
- I am the true vine.

Together, these statements tell us who Jesus is to the world, and who he is to us: the one who nourishes and sustains us, the one who lights the way, the one who brings us into the household and family of God, the one who cares for us, the one who gives us eternal life, the one who gives us strength for each day.

We are going to learn so much about Jesus in this study, and today, as we kick off with the first five verses in John 1, we are going to see seven descriptions of Jesus.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

1. Jesus was in the beginning. John begins his gospel with the same words used to begin the book of Genesis: “In the beginning” (John 1:1). This is strategic and brilliant at a literary level, rich and nuanced at a theological level. To kick off his book about Jesus, John is giving us a hyperlink back to the creation of the world! Many of you know that there are four different gospels, four unique accounts from the first century of the life of Christ. Mark was the first to be written and he begins his gospel by quoting a prophecy about the Messiah from the book of Isaiah, which was dated to 700 BC. Matthew’s was the second gospel. He wanted to trace Jesus’ history further back, so he began by talking about God’s call on Abraham, the father of faith, who lived more than a thousand years before Isaiah, who Mark quoted. And then Luke wanted to show that Jesus’ history goes further back than that, so he went all the way to Adam. Finally, John wrote his gospel, and although he thought what each of the others said was important, he wanted people to know that Jesus was “in the beginning.” Before anything was made, before this universe came into existence, before time began, Jesus was there. Listen to how Jesus prayed on the last night of his life: “Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). Jesus has existed for all eternity, but then after the galaxies were created and history began, the eternal one stepped into time to reveal the true nature of God to us, to rescue and redeem. Unlike everyone else who ever lived, Jesus did not have his beginning when he was born. He was in the very beginning.

2. Jesus is the Word. To grasp the depth and meaning behind this phrase John uses to describe Jesus, we have to understand how this phrase was used by the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. John says, “In the beginning was *the word*” (John 1:1, emphasis added). This phrase “the word” in Greek is “logos,” and it was used by the Greek philosophers like Heraclitus in 500 BC, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle after him, then by Philo and numerous others closer to the time of Christ. The Greeks were constantly trying to understand what element or essence held the universe together—what gave life meaning and purpose, what governing principle or truth ruled over life on earth—and as they tried to articulate that fundamental reality, that ultimate truth, they called this “the logos,” which is translated “the word.” Hebrew thinking also gravitated to this word. They looked to Genesis where they read that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God said let there be light. He said let there be water and land and vegetation. He said let there be stars and the moon and planets in the sky. He spoke and said let there be fish to swim in the sea and birds to fly in the air and creatures to roam on the ground. They called this “the dabar,” which is translated “the word.” The word is the personal, powerful, creative force that brought the world into existence. In addition to this, “the word” came to be used to describe the wisdom of God or the law

of God; “the word” was used to describe God revealing himself to humanity, and was also used to describe humanity speaking back to God in prayer and praise. “The word” was the bridge between heaven and earth, between divinity and humanity. John, knowing all this, knowing how the Greeks used this phrase, how the Hebrews used this phrase, bundled up all the meanings together and said, let me introduce you to my friend Jesus. Jesus is the word. Jesus is the logic behind the universe. Jesus is the personal, creative power behind creation. Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth. Do you want to know what holds everything together? It’s not a force; it’s a person and his name is Jesus.

3. Jesus was with God. Here, John is helping us understand the nature of God, the inner workings of the Trinity. He says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” Jesus, from all eternity, has been with God the Father. Later in this chapter we see this in greater detail when John says, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). That phrase, “in closest relationship with the Father,” is literally, in the original language, “in the bosom of the Father,” meaning next to the chest of the Father. Think about who in your life, who in the entire world, is close enough to you to come approach you and come that close to you at any time. If you’re married, probably your spouse; if you are a parent, probably your children; if you are a grandparent, probably your grandchildren. Only to the people you are closest with in the entire world would you say, “I want you right here.” That is the relationship that God the Father shares with God the Son. And remember, God the Father and God the Son don’t have bodies, so it means that for all eternity, their souls have been wrapped together. They are one in heart, one in mind, one in purpose, loving communion, coordinated creativity, identical values and plans. Jesus will say later in John 10:30, “I and the Father are one.” For all eternity, Jesus has been with God.

4. Jesus is God. John takes us even further and deeper into the identity and majesty of Jesus and says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This is a truly unique doctrine to Christianity. It’s part of what sets Christianity apart from the other religions of the world. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs all believe in some sort of divine presence—there is a god who should be honored, worshiped, and obeyed by humans. But only Christianity teaches that God comes near, that the same God who created the world, at just the right time in the history of the world, punched a hole in the universe, climbed into the universe he made, and condescended to enter our human experience. The eternal one became subject to time. John is telling us that Jesus of Nazareth, the one who lived and walked among us, the man he spent years with and traveled with and ate meals with, the one he joked around and laughed with, this really, truly, completely human person is also divine—God in the flesh. People could look at Jesus in the flesh and see part of his nature: they could see the undeniable reality of his humanity. But if you had the eyes to see what was really going on, you would see not one nature, but two: Jesus was not only fully human, but he was also fully divine. This was the Son of God, the eternal one, walking among us. No other religion in the entire world asserts this about its founder. The Bible tells us the Messiah’s name is “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.”

5. Jesus is the creator. John continues to expand his teaching about Jesus: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). As God, Jesus is the one who made the world. The word that you see used here for “made” appears three times, which means John is repeating something three times in a single sentence to get us to look and pay attention! This word in the Greek is “ginomai,” and it means to generate, to bring something into existence, which is how Jesus made the world. This week the Hamels baked cookies. We didn’t bring cookies into existence, but we took already existing ingredients, stirred them together, and warmed them up. We “baked” cookies, we didn’t “make” them. We have a family member who is building a house right now. The builders are taking concrete and lumber, pipes and shingles, granite and copper and compiling them together in a certain way to construct a home. They are building a home, not making a home. Jesus made the universe. He did not

take existing matter and form it into something new. There was a time when there was nothing, then God spoke, and something came from nothing. This is what theologians call “creation ex nihilo,” which is Latin for “creation out of nothing.” God the Father is the architect of creation; God the Son is the agent through whom the world was made. I love how Glen Scrivener put it: “Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. Atheists believe in the virgin birth of the universe. Choose your miracle.” Everyone has to believe something that requires faith. We place our faith in Jesus, the one the Scriptures say created the world.

6. Jesus is the life. John goes from generally telling us that Jesus is the creator of the universe to telling us very specifically that Jesus is the author and source of life. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (John 1:3-4). It’s one thing to create the universe—rocks and dust, water and gas, matter and elements. It’s an entirely different thing to create life. Even scientists who hold to the big bang theory, who say there was an explosion 14 billion years ago that formed the universe as we know it, still have no idea how the combination of hydrogen, helium, and lithium that combusted was able to generate living beings. How does non-living matter generate life? There are no legitimately good answers in the science books, but there is an answer in the Bible. Life originates in and life springs forth from Jesus Christ. And life not only begins in Jesus, it finds its continuous source from Jesus. Listen to how this is conveyed in Hebrews 1:2-3: “In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (emphasis added). The world in general and life in specific was made through Jesus, and Jesus continues to sustain all things, to make living possible. A few weeks ago, we held a marriage conference here on a Saturday. We had over 1,000 people in the building. Just minutes before the last session was to end, the power went out. Completely. To the entire building. No lights. No microphone. Nothing. Someone a block or two north of us thought it would be a good idea to run their car into a power line. The entire neighborhood went dark. If we don’t have power coming into this place, everything turns off. The same is true at a global, even a universal level—everything and everyone everywhere finds its life in Jesus. And one really neat element in John’s gospel is the word for life he chose. Greek has three words for life: bios, psuche, and zoe. “Bios,” as you can probably deduce, describes biological life—a tree is alive, we are all alive, our hearts are beating, our blood is pumping; it’s physical. “Psuche” is used to describe soul life. We are more than just physical beings, more than a collection of molecules. We have souls that can connect with God, souls that will live on even after our biological lives are over. “Zoe” is a very important Greek word that describes divine life—the quality of life that supersedes our routine experiences and allows us to take hold of the transcendent. Our Bibles often use the phrases “abundant life,” “eternal life,” or “life to the full” to translate this word. And John says all those things are found in one and only place: Jesus.

And that leads to the final truth: **7. Jesus is the light.** This is a theme highlighted constantly throughout the gospel. John uses this word for light sixteen different times in his gospel. Almost every time the word “light” is used it is juxtaposed with darkness. The same is true in this passage. John begins his gospel by telling us not only that Jesus is the light, but also that his light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:3-5). The Bible recognizes the reality between good and evil, between truth and deception, between right and wrong. Heartbreakingly, because of human sin and our rebellion against God, the world has become a very dark place: poverty and crime, disease and death, racism and discrimination, unscrupulous government and wars. Into that disorienting darkness, God sent his son. Later in the gospel Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness” (John 12:46). Jesus is the light; his appearance expels the dominion of darkness.

I love to hunt. One of the best parts of hunting is getting out into nature well before sunrise, when the stars are still at their full brilliance, but when you can't see much of anything, and then sitting in perfect stillness as the black turns to a deep, dark blue, then red, orange, and yellow begin to emerge on the eastern horizon, then the sun slowly emerges and displaces the darkness and the world wakes up. That's what the arrival of Jesus has done for the world. Darkness had an oppressive reign. But Jesus appeared and brought light to all mankind.

What does John want us to know about Jesus as he begins his gospel? Jesus

- Was in the beginning
- Is the word
- Is with God
- Is God
- Is the Creator
- Is the Life
- Is the Light

This is why we celebrate Christmas. God spoke about this through the prophet Isaiah and said "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This is who he was talking about! When the virgin Mary gave birth to the Messiah, when he came into the world through her womb, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). That is the right response to Jesus coming into the world.

My kids opened a present last week, gave it a little attention, then got disinterested in it and gave their attention to other things. We face the same risk today: to see the gift of Jesus, pay a little attention, then get on with our other commitments and priorities. This Christmas season, let's slow down, let's give our undivided devotion to Jesus, let's ponder his majesty, his greatness, and his glory, and let's treasure the gift we've been given.