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John 1:1-9 English Standard Version

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Mark 13:14-25 New Living Translation

14 "The day is coming when you will see the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing where he should not be." (Reader, pay attention!) "Then those in Judea must flee to the hills. 15 A person out on the deck of a roof must not go down into the house to pack. 16 A person out in the field must not return even to get a coat. 17 How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for nursing mothers in those days. 18 And pray that your flight will not be in winter. 19 For there will be greater anguish in those days than at any time since God created the world. And it will never be so great again. 20 In fact, unless the Lord shortens that time of calamity, not a single person will survive. But for the sake of his chosen ones he has shortened those days.

21 "Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or 'There he is,' don't believe it. 22 For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. 23 Watch out! I have warned you about this ahead of time!

24 "At that time, after the anguish of those days,

*the sun will be darkened,
the moon will give no light,
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

John 3:31-36 New Living Translation

“He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. ³² He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! ³³ Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. ³⁴ For he is sent by God. He speaks God’s words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. ³⁶ And anyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God’s angry judgment.”

The eternal life that starts now.

You know that I was a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder for 35 years. I still teach one course a semester there, and several weeks ago, I was parking in a structure on campus so that I could go teach a class. I happen to have a Christian fish on the back of my car, along with a sticker that says “Iliff School of Theology” on it. I also have a cross hanging from my rearview mirror. As I was getting out of my car, a young man came walking up to my car. He was tall, thin, dark skinned, and had a full beard. He pointed at the Christian fish and said, in a friendly voice, “Hi, are you a Christian?” I said yes, I am, I’m a pastor and a hospital chaplain.” He extended his hand as he walked toward me. We shook hands. Then he told me that he didn’t want to delay me, but that he was a

Muslim and he made a practice of greeting any Christian he came across. He said that he wanted to do whatever he could to build friendship between Christians and Muslims. I smiled, and I took his hand again. I held it tightly with both of my hands. I told him that this is what I do as a chaplain when I want someone to understand that they can trust me.

Let's step aside and look at today's Bible quotes. We begin with the very beginning of John's Gospel. The first five verses of our first quote appear, in many biblical manuscripts, as lines of poetry, and given the grammatical structure of the lines as they are written in Greek, it certainly suggests that they were sung. It's thought that this might be a hymn used by the very earliest Christians. If these early lines of John's Gospel were indeed a hymn, they probably had a significant impact on the early church. These lines also, of course, set the stage for the rest of the Gospel of John.

As we've noted in the past, John's Gospel is different from the other three. The authors of the other three Gospels either start their narratives with Jesus' birth to a virgin (Matthew and Luke), or with the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mark). But John distinguishes his work right from the beginning: he opens his Gospel with a statement about the pre-existence of Jesus, whom John refers to as "the Word", "logos" in Greek. Jesus is the Word, the one who will become human

to reveal God to the world, and to fulfill the prophesy of a Messiah. And, John tells us that Jesus not only showed us the way to God, Jesus *was* God. John stresses that God is not constrained by time, and so Jesus, as the son of God, has always been in existence. John then reinforces this duality of God and Jesus. Notice that John begins his Gospel with “In the beginning”, reminding us of Genesis. Now, he continues with this Genesis parallel. Remember that in Genesis, God produces light. Jesus, we are now told, is going to offer all of us light and a new life. The world and humanity will be recreated in a sort of new Genesis, through the works of Jesus Christ.

John ends our first passage by pointing out that those Jews who thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah were wrong: *Jesus* is the Savior. What John is doing in our passage is introducing Jesus before he is born, as the one true Savior, and to end any confusion as to who the Jesus of his Gospel will be.

Today, we are in the second week of Advent. We’re looking toward Christmas, toward the birth of Jesus Christ. There is something extra compelling about the way John introduces his Gospel by introducing this Jesus-who-is-God. Listen to the next four verses of John, starting with verse 10:

¹⁰ *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.* ¹¹ *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John tells us that when Jesus came into the world, he wasn't accepted. He wasn't believed. But to people who did accept him, he transformed them from creations of flesh to creations of God. Notice that this statement doesn't promise that we will receive some great reward when we die. It's not that having faith in Jesus will save us in eternity. John is saying that if we accept Jesus, we become children of God, that we will be born of God, now. Right now.

Let's look at this issue more closely. It has to do with whether the payoff for having faith happens in the future, after death, or whether it happens right now. Consider our second passage, which is from Mark. This is Jesus speaking. He's talking of the future, of the apocalypse to come.

²⁴ "At that time, after the anguish of those days,

the sun will be darkened,

the moon will give no light,

²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send out his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

John doesn't use this kind of language in his Gospel. He doesn't focus on future punishment or the horrible events that face nonbelievers, as Mark does. John is concerned with now. His is a more upbeat message than Mark's. This is an important, core characteristic that separates John's Gospel from the other three. Consider our third passage. We are back at the Gospel of John, but now we have jumped ahead to the third Chapter. We're hearing John the Baptist talk about Jesus:

Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. ³⁴ For he is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment."

Notice two things. First, this is a positive statement. Yes, he's saying that if we reject the message of Jesus, God will be angry. But he's saying that if we believe, we will have eternal life. The focus is on God loving his son and on how we can have eternal life simply by accepting Jesus. John doesn't dwell on the

negative. He's trying to persuade, not intimidate. The second thing to notice is that John is using the present tense: *Anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life*. Now. We begin this eternal life right now, not when we die.

The apocalyptic approach, as we see in Mark 13, argues that this age that we live in belongs to the forces of evil, while the next age belongs to God. John, while he acknowledges the existence of evil, does not separate the good and the evil worlds in a temporal way. It's not evil now vs. good in the future. To John, good and evil exist together now. We're not accepting Jesus to avoid an eternity of suffering. We are accepting Jesus to have an eternal, blessed life that starts the moment we believe. The message is a promise, not a threat, and it is a message of life today, not of waiting for eternity.

One of the things we have to accept when we study the Bible seriously is that it gives differing perspectives on Christian faith. It's not so much that these varying messages out-and-out conflict. It's that different authors, whether it is in the Old Testament or the New, stress different things. One major difference is that the Gospel of John, compared to the other Gospels, focuses on a Jesus Christ who is more exalted than in the other Gospels. The term that's used in Biblical analysis is "Christology". One way of distinguishing John from the other Gospels is that John's Christology, his view of Christ, is the highest with respect to him

being holy and God-like, and of being the conqueror of evil. This is a key reason why new believers or perspective believers are often advised to read the Gospel of John first. It delivers a powerful, uplifting message about life as a Christian.

I'd like to get back to the young man with the beard who introduced himself to me in the parking structure at CU. It had snowed earlier, and it was a cold night. I was bundled up in a sweatshirt and a down jacket. I was carrying my briefcase, which had my computer and my textbook in it, and another bag with a cold drink and a snack. After I grasped his hand, he asked me if he could help me get to wherever I was going, and he motioned for me to hand my stuff to him. He was a young man, and so I figured, why not? I told him I was headed to the ATLAS building, where I teach. He took both of my bags and asked me if I was a professor. I told him yes, but that I'm retired, that I focus now on being a pastor and a chaplain.

I asked him if he was a student. He said that no, he wasn't, but that a friend of his had a disability and had trouble getting around when there was snow or ice on the ground. He said that he had told his friend that whenever it was icy or if the ground was covered with snow, to just call him for a ride. I told him that was a very kind thing to do. On a hunch, I asked him if his friend was Christian. This tall young man with a full beard said yes, he is. Then he added that he liked

the way his friend felt that God was always alive within him, carrying him through every day, despite the fact that he had to use a wheelchair. His friend, he said, had told him that his life with God lifted him up and would keep him there, all through eternity. It was then that I thought of the Gospel of John, and about this notion that there isn't a border between this life and the next. Rather, the uplifting power that we feel in this life simply carries us into the next.

When we got to my building, I took my two bags from this young man and thanked him for introducing himself and for carrying my things. He smiled and told me to have a good evening. I never even thought to ask him his name.

Personally, I have a very high Christology. That's why I have all that Christian stuff on my car, why I am a pastor and a hospital chaplain – because I'm excited about being a Christian. It's an energizing way to live. It's also why I like the Gospel of John so much. During the time of Jesus, the religious leaders known as the Pharisees did not believe that the Spirit was active in their day. Their notion of Spirit was a little different from ours; it had to do largely with being able to deliver prophecies. But it's important to note that they saw the Spirit as being inactive, almost dead. On the other hand, John tells us that the Spirit is alive within each of us. That is a critical message of John, that we are empowered right

here and now. Here's a quote from near the end of John, it's Chapter 20, verses 30 and 31:

³⁰ The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.

That's what it's all about. By believing in him I will have life by the power of his name. And my life in Jesus Christ is right here and now.