

BEHOLD THE LAMB: SESSION 1

The Word Made Flesh

John 1:1-18 · A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of John

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: Participants discover for themselves that John opens his Gospel by deliberately echoing Genesis 1, so that the man they will follow for fourteen sessions is introduced first as the eternal Word who created all things, who became flesh and pitched his tent among us.

Catholic Touchstone: The Incarnation. The Church confesses that the eternal Son, true God from true God, assumed a true human nature without ceasing to be God (CCC 456-463). Everything distinctively Catholic in this study, the sacraments, the Mass, the Church herself, flows from the conviction that God has truly entered the material world.

What You Need to Know

The Gospel of John is the last of the four Gospels, written, by most ancient and modern estimates, in the last decade of the first century. Ancient tradition is remarkably consistent about its author. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around 180 AD, tells us that John, the disciple of the Lord, published the Gospel while living at Ephesus, and Irenaeus had this on close authority: as a boy he had heard St. Polycarp, who knew John personally. Many modern scholars debate how directly the Apostle held the pen, proposing a Johannine community or a disciple writing under his authority. The Church has not defined the question, and you should be honest about that with your group if it comes up. What the text itself claims is that it rests on the testimony of the beloved disciple, an eyewitness (John 19:35; 21:24), and that claim is what carries the weight in this study.

John does not begin in Bethlehem or at the Jordan. He begins before time. The first eighteen verses, often called the Prologue, are the overture of the whole Gospel: every major theme of the next twenty one chapters is announced here in miniature. Life, light, darkness, witness, glory, truth, rejection, divine sonship. If your group learns to hear these opening notes, they will recognize the melodies when they return.

The key term is *Logos*, translated Word. To a Greek ear it evoked the rational principle ordering the cosmos. To a Jewish ear it evoked something richer: the word by which God created in Genesis 1 (God said, and it was so), the prophetic word that comes to Israel, and Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24, who was with God at creation and came to dwell in Israel. John gathers all of this and then says what no philosopher and no sage ever dared: the Word became flesh. The Greek is blunt, *sarx*, flesh, not merely a body or an appearance. And the verb John chooses for dwelt among us is *eskēnōsen*, literally he pitched his tent, he tabernacled. Any Jewish reader would hear the wilderness tabernacle of Exodus, the tent where the glory of God dwelt in the midst of the camp. John says the glory has a new tent now: the Word has made our full humanity his own dwelling. That is why he can add, we have beheld his glory.

Verse 14 calls the Word full of grace and truth, and verses 16 and 17 unfold the fullness. This is not a loose pairing. It echoes the Hebrew covenant formula *hesed we'emet*, steadfast love and faithfulness, the

very words God proclaimed to Moses on Sinai when He passed by in glory (Exodus 34:6). Charis is not a simple lexical equivalent of *hesed*, so this is allusion rather than translation, but the covenant pair is unmistakable and John's readers were meant to hear it. And verse 18, no one has ever seen God, answers Exodus 33, where even Moses was denied the sight of the divine face. John's claim is that what Moses asked for and could not receive, we have received: the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made Him known.

One pastoral note. This session makes the highest possible claim about Jesus, and some participants will have encountered readings that soften it, especially the rendering of John 1:1 as the Word was a god. Do not dodge this. The steelman chain in Part 2 presents that reading at full strength and then lets the text itself answer. Trust the process; the strongest Catholic apologetic here is simply a careful reading of John.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Genesis 1:1-5.** In the beginning, God, light, darkness, and creation by speech. John's first words are a deliberate echo. The group will discover this themselves in Build question 2; do not reveal it in advance.
- **Proverbs 8:22-31 and Sirach 24:8-12.** Wisdom present with God at creation, delighting before Him, then commanded to make her dwelling in Jacob. Sirach even uses tent language: in the holy tabernacle I ministered before him. John presents the Word as the reality toward which the Wisdom poetry was reaching.
- **Exodus 25:8-9 and 40:34-35.** The tabernacle, built so that God may dwell in the midst of His people, filled with the glory cloud. The backdrop for *eskēnōsen* in John 1:14.
- **Exodus 33:18-23 and 34:6.** Moses asks to see the glory and is told, you cannot see my face. God passes by proclaiming Himself abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. John 1:14-18 answers both verses at once: grace and truth have appeared, and the Son has made the unseen Father known.
- **Isaiah 44:24.** The LORD stretched out the heavens alone. Held in reserve for the steelman chain: if all things were made through the Word, and God created alone, the conclusion presses itself.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Doctor of the Church, City of God 10.29

Augustine recounts that a Platonist philosopher of his day used to say that the opening of John's Gospel deserved to be written in letters of gold and displayed in the most prominent place in every church. The pagans could recognize the grandeur of the Word who was with God. What they could not accept, Augustine observes, was the scandal that follows: the Word became flesh. The Prologue is where philosophy runs out of road and only faith can keep walking.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), Doctor of the Church, Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homily 2

Chrysostom marvels that these thunderclap opening lines come not from a philosopher trained in Athens but from a Galilean fisherman. He tells his congregation that John speaks from heaven itself,

uttering a voice louder and clearer than thunder, and that everything the Greek sages groped after, this unlettered man declares with authority. For Chrysostom this is itself evidence: no man invented the Prologue; it was given.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373), Doctor of the Church, On the Incarnation 54

Athanasius compresses the whole purpose of John 1:14 into one sentence, quoted by the Catechism itself in CCC 460: the Son of God became man so that we might become god, that is, sharers in the divine nature by grace. The Word did not assume our flesh as a costume but as a rescue. He took what is ours to give us what is His. Every sacrament your group will ever receive is this exchange continuing in time.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 456-460.** Why did the Word become flesh: to save us, that we might know God's love, to be our model of holiness, and to make us partakers of the divine nature.
- **CCC 461-463.** The Incarnation as the distinctive sign of Christian faith: belief that the Son of God truly assumed our humanity.
- **CCC 241-242.** The Church's confession, drawing directly on John 1:1, that the Son is the Father's eternal Word, consubstantial with Him.
- **CCC 291.** The New Testament reveals that God created everything through the eternal Word, citing John 1:3.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

The Lamb (title thread). Planted this week only as a question on Take-Home 1: participants write a sealed guess about why Jesus will be called the Lamb of God. They hear the title itself next session (1:29). Do not explain it. The full resolution comes in Session 13, when John's Passion account quietly lines up Passover lamb details around the cross.

Light and darkness. Planted in 1:4-5. Develops in 3:19-21 and chapters 8-9, and lands with terrible economy at 13:30, and it was night. Just note the vocabulary this week.

Beholding glory. We have beheld his glory (1:14). Develops at Cana (2:11, he manifested his glory) and inverts at the cross, which John presents as the hour of glorification. Do not resolve; only plant.

Tabernacle and temple. *Eskēnōsen* (1:14) begins a thread that runs to the temple of his body (2:21) and to the blood and water from the pierced side (19:34).

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Genesis 1 echo on their own and can articulate why John begins before creation.

2. Participants can state from the text itself that the Word is eternal, distinct from the Father, truly God, and the Creator of all things.
3. Participants encounter the tabernacle background of dwelt among us and connect the Incarnation to God's desire to dwell with His people.
4. Participants hear the strongest version of the Arian reading of John 1:1 and watch the text answer it.
5. Participants write their sealed guess on the Lamb of God question and commit to the week's practices.

Time Note (90 minutes)

Opening prayer and Win, 15 minutes. Build, 55 minutes. Send, Live It This Week, and closing prayer, 20 minutes. If running long, the pre-chosen cuts are, in order: the Dig Deeper box on Wisdom literature, Build question 5 on John the Baptist (recover it next session, which centers on him), and the second Send question. Do not cut the steelman chain or the sealed guess; both carry weight for the rest of the study.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader prays aloud: Father, before anything existed, your Word already was. Tonight we open the Gospel of John asking for one grace: that we would not merely read about your Son but behold his glory. Open the Scriptures to us, and open us to the Scriptures. We ask this through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (open the conversation)

1. When you hear the word God, what image or feeling comes to mind first? Where do you think that picture came from?
2. Think of the best opening line of a book or film you know. What makes a great opening work?

Transition: Tonight we read what might be the most audacious opening in all of literature. John had three other Gospels in circulation before him. He chose to begin somewhere none of them dared.

Build (inductive discovery)

Have someone read John 1:1-5 aloud, slowly. Then ask:

Question 1. Without interpreting anything yet, what words does John repeat in these five verses? Just list them.

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Word (three times in verse 1 alone), God, life, light, darkness, beginning, made. John writes with a tiny vocabulary on purpose. Each repeated word is a thread he will pull for twenty one chapters. If the group lists the words, they have already done the first act of inductive reading: noticing before interpreting.

Question 2 (live discovery). In the beginning. Somewhere else in your Bible, a book opens with those exact words. Find it, turn there, and read the first five verses of that book side by side with John's first five. What do the two passages share?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Genesis 1:1-5. Let the group find it; most will know, but the act of physically setting the pages side by side is the point. Shared elements: in the beginning, God, light, darkness, and creation happening through speech. God said, let there be light. John has noticed that in Genesis, God creates by speaking, and he gives that speech a name: the Word. John is rewriting Genesis 1 with the curtain pulled back. Before anything was made, the Word already was.

Press gently: notice the verbs. Created things were made; the Word simply was. John never says the Word came to be. The Word has no beginning.

Question 3. Stay in verse 1. John makes two statements about the Word that sit in tension: the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What does each half claim? Why might John need both?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The Word was with God: the Word is distinct from the Father, a someone in relationship, face to face with God. The Word was God: the Word is not a second, lesser deity but shares the one divine nature fully. Hold both and you are standing at the doorway of the doctrine of the Trinity. Drop either half and you fall into an old error: drop the first and Father and Son collapse into one person; drop the second and the Son becomes a creature. The Church spent her first centuries defending exactly this verse, and the group is about to see why.

Steelman: The Word Was a God?

BUILD THE STEELMAN FIRST: present this at full strength

Tell the group: some sincere readers, most prominently the Jehovah's Witnesses in their New World Translation, render the last clause of verse 1 as the Word was a god. And they have a real grammatical observation behind them, so let us give it its full weight. In the Greek, the first mention of God in verse 1 has the definite article, the God, while the second does not, just god. So, the argument runs, John himself signals a difference: the Word is divine in some sense, a mighty one, the first and greatest creature, through whom God made everything else, but not the eternal God Himself. This reading claims to protect monotheism and to take the Greek seriously. Ask the group: if that were true, what would change about everything else we believe? Let them feel the stakes before you answer.

Question 4 (press from the text, live discovery). Now read verse 3 aloud. According to John, how much of created reality was made through the Word? Then send half the group to Isaiah 44:24 and have them read it to everyone. What does God say about who was with Him at creation?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Verse 3 is total: all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. John closes every loophole. If even one created thing exists that the Word did not make, verse 3 is false. So the Word cannot be a creature, because then the Word would have had to make himself. Isaiah 44:24 tightens the vise: I am the LORD, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone. If God created alone, and all things were made through the Word, then the Word is not beside God as a helper creature. He is within the identity of the one God.

On the grammar: Greek often drops the article here, a weighty though not mechanical signal on a predicate noun placed before the verb, and the force is qualitative. A fair rendering of the nuance is: what God was, the Word was. The same Gospel removes all doubt in its final chapters, when Thomas falls before the risen Jesus and says, my Lord and my God (20:28), and Jesus blesses rather than corrects him. John opens and closes on the same confession. That is deliberate architecture, and the group will see the far end of it in Session 14.

Question 5. Read verses 6-8. John has been soaring among eternal things, and suddenly: there was a man sent from God, whose name was John. Why interrupt a cosmic hymn to introduce a man? What one word describes his role, and why does the author immediately clarify what the Baptist is not?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Testimony saturates the two verses: he came for testimony, to bear witness, and again to bear witness. The Baptist's entire identity is testimony: he came to point. The clarification, he was not the light, may suggest that some in the first century still gave the Baptist undue prominence. Watch this become a pattern in John: every great figure and every great gift exists to point beyond itself to Christ. Next session is entirely about this man, so plant the interest and move on.

Question 6. Read verses 9-13. The true light comes into the world he himself made, and verse 11 says he came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to those who did receive him, what does verse 12 say he gave? And how does verse 13 say that happens?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Power to become children of God, and verse 13 insists this birth is not natural descent, not blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but birth of God. Being a child of God, for John, is not automatic to being human; it is a gift received through believing in his name. File this away: in two sessions Jesus will tell Nicodemus what this birth of God concretely involves, being born of water and the Spirit. Do not jump ahead; just make sure the group registers the phrase born of God, because John is planting it here on purpose.

Question 7 (live discovery). Read verse 14 aloud twice. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek verb behind dwelt literally means pitched his tent. Now send the group to Exodus 40:34-35. What was the tent, and what filled it when it was finished?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The tabernacle, the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled it, so thick that even Moses could not enter. Now reread John: the Word tabernacled among us, and we have beheld his glory. John is claiming that everything the wilderness tent was, the localized dwelling of God in the middle of His people's camp, Jesus now is, in flesh. The glory did not rest on a building this time. The eternal Word himself took a true human nature as his own, body and soul, without ceasing to be God, so that the glory now shines out from a human face. This is the verse the whole Catholic sacramental imagination grows from: God saves us not by lifting us out of the material world but by entering it. And it is why Catholics genuflect toward the tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament dwells, the tent-word made permanent to this day; the name is not an accident.

Question 8 (live discovery). Read verses 16-18. Verse 14 called the Word full of grace and truth; here John says we have all received from his fullness, grace upon grace, and then contrasts the law given through Moses with the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ. Send the group to Exodus 33:18-23 and 34:6. What did Moses ask for, what was he told, and what two qualities does God proclaim about Himself as He passes by?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Moses asked to see God's glory and was told, you cannot see my face. As God passes by, He proclaims Himself abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, in Hebrew *hesed we'emet*, which is the covenant pair John echoes as grace and truth. So verses 17 and 18 are not anti-Moses; they are the answer to Moses' prayer. What Moses begged for on the mountain and could not receive, the sight of God, has now been given: no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the

Father, he has made him known. The law was a true gift through Moses. The Giver Himself has now come in person.

DIG DEEPER

Wisdom's tent. If the group has energy, read Sirach 24:8-12 aloud, where Wisdom, present with God from eternity, is commanded: make your dwelling in Jacob. Sirach even says, in the holy tabernacle I ministered before him. Israel's sages personified God's Wisdom and imagined her pitching a tent among the people. John announces that this poetry was prophecy, and the tent is real. This is also a quiet gift of the Catholic canon: Sirach is one of the deuterocanonical books, and the Prologue leans on it.

Synthesis question. One sentence each, no theological vocabulary allowed: according to John 1:1-18, who is Jesus?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Let every person answer; do not rush this. You are listening for the two poles the Prologue holds together: truly God, the eternal Word who made everything, and truly here, flesh, in a tent of skin and bone, visible glory. If someone says something like, the One who made me came to live with me, the session has landed.

Send

1. The Baptist's whole job description was witness. If a friend asked you this week why you are doing a Bible study, what would you actually say?
2. The Word entered the ordinary, flesh, a tent, a camp. Where in your ordinary week do you most need to remember that God is willing to dwell?

Live It This Week

- **Pray the Prologue.** Take John 1:1-18 at three verses a day, slowly, aloud if you can. Do not study it; sit in it. By Friday you will have prayed the whole overture.
- **Bow like you mean it.** This Sunday at the Creed, when the congregation bows at the words and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man, make the bow deliberately, remembering: he pitched his tent among us.
- **One act of witness.** Do one small Baptist-sized thing this week: mention the study to one person, or tell someone one thing you noticed tonight.

Closing Prayer

Leader prays aloud: Lord Jesus Christ, eternal Word of the Father, you did not despise our flesh but made it your tent. Pitch your tent again this week in our homes, our work, our friendships. Give us the Baptist's joy of pointing to you. And as we begin this journey, teach us, step by step, why you are called the Lamb. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

MEMORIZE THIS WEEK: John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (RSV2CE)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or referenced in Session 1, in order of appearance. Flag these in your Bible before the session.

- **John 1:1-5** · opening reading, repeated words, the Word with God and the Word as God
- **Genesis 1:1-5** · live discovery, the deliberate echo: beginning, God, light, darkness, creation by speech
- **John 1:3** · all things made through him, first press of the steelman chain
- **Isaiah 44:24** · live discovery, the LORD stretched out the heavens alone
- **John 20:28** · leader reference only, Thomas' confession as the Gospel's closing bracket; do not read in session, it resolves in Session 14
- **John 1:6-8** · the man sent from God, witness
- **John 1:9-13** · the true light, his own received him not, children of God born of God
- **John 1:14** · the Word became flesh, tabernacled, beheld his glory; memory verse
- **Exodus 40:34-35** · live discovery, the glory fills the tabernacle
- **John 1:16-18** · grace and truth, Moses contrast, the only Son makes the Father known
- **Exodus 33:18-23** · live discovery, Moses denied the sight of the face
- **Exodus 34:6** · live discovery, steadfast love and faithfulness, hesed we'emet
- **Sirach 24:8-12** · Dig Deeper, Wisdom commanded to dwell in Jacob, and ministering in the holy tabernacle (24:10)
- **Proverbs 8:22-31** · leader background only, Wisdom at creation
- **Exodus 25:8-9** · leader background only, that I may dwell in their midst
- **CCC 241-242, 291, 456-463** · Catechism connections