

Champion Forest Baptist Church

Life Group Lessons 1-4

The Context Bible

January, 2014

John 1:1-8

Introduction

Many decide at some point to read the Bible. Not just one section or one page, but the entire Bible. Some do so having a certain familiarity with Scripture, knowing its divisions into the Old and New Testaments, knowing it is further subdivided into individual “books” that are in turn divided into chapters and verses. Others do not have much familiarity with it. For them, it is a book they wish to read, not unlike any other book.

A common experience arises for both the experienced and the newcomer in their reading. They will typically begin with the first page and seek to work through to the end. In short, they read it like any book. In the process, they begin with creation, work through stories of Noah and the flood, and meet the patriarchs, Moses, and read of the Exodus. Then something begins that can derail the best intentioned, most diligent and motivated reader. It is commonly called, “the Law.” There are large sections of Scripture that detail how the Israelites were to live that are to most people, what we might boldly call “boring.” This makes reading the Bible through challenging because suddenly what is read seems of little to no relevance today.

Furthermore, many who are reading the Bible are doing so as part of an interest in the Christian faith. They are either believers in Jesus as the Savior of the world, or they are interested in learning why others think him so. This motivation finds little immediate satisfaction when reading the Bible as a book cover to cover. If one were to work through three to four chapters a day, a good pace that allows Scripture to be read in a year, one does not read directly of Jesus by name until day 285! That means if this process were begun on January first, it would be mid-October before reading narrative about Jesus.

These considerations and common experiences have led to the project you have before you. This is a Bible assembled differently than most. Rather than using the church’s traditional method of assembling the books into the order that history has

delivered (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, etc.), this Bible is assembled around three core books – The Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Revelation. These three books form the basic platform of reading each day. The rest of Scripture is divided up into supplemental readings each day tied to the particular passage read from John, Acts, or Revelation.

Sometimes the supplemental readings are referenced directly by the core passage. Other times the supplemental readings are merely alluded to. Still other times, the supplemental readings simply follow a common theme, provide additional detail, or set forth a context for understanding the terminology or history referred to in the main passage. In a few rare cases, the supplemental readings are there to provide a useful contrast, so that one can more fully understand the passages.

For this reading approach to make most sense, the reader needs to know certain things going into it. Here we set forward those matters, urging careful consideration of these pages before diving into the text itself. Here we set out the fundamentals of *what* the Bible is in the sense of a collection of testaments, books, letters, etc. As a part of this, we set out information important to the formatting of this Bible. This helps the reader know when she or he is reading one type of literature (e.g., poetry) or another type like historical narrative. We also give a basic history that is conveyed in the Bible so when one reads of “Moses,” one knows who Moses is. Finally, we set out important considerations about the strengths and weakness of this approach to Biblical study.

The Bible as a “book”

The Bible is not one book that was written start to finish by one or several people. It is actually a collection of individual writings composed over more than a thousand years. The writings are broken down into two large sections commonly called the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament.” These terms are not found in the Bible itself, but were given to the sections around AD200 by a North African lawyer turned theologian, Tertullian.

The Old Testament consists of the Jewish Scriptures commonly called the *Tanak*. This name is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter from three sections of writing, the “Law” (“*Torah*” in Hebrew), the “Prophets” (“*Nevi-im*” in Hebrew) and the “Writings” (“*Ketuvim*” in Hebrew). These groups have assembled books that were originally written on scrolls. The ordering of them is traditional, but as common sense dictates, the scrolls themselves were not in any order like we have in books. The ordering came later.

Among these Old Testament writings are many different forms. Some writings take the form of historical narrative, filling in the reader on events that interplay

and inform interactions between God and the world. Other writings are poetic in form and nature, including a number of songs. Rhyming was not the unique feature that set out Old Testament poetry as one frequently finds in Western Civilization. Nor was there a specific rhythm like iambic pentameter. The hallmark of Hebrew poetry was repeated thoughts written in a parallel structure where the mirroring language adds further illumination. A good bit of the Old Testament was written in the form of prophecy. Often using imagery and strong language, these words were at times indictments of the age and at times proclamations of what might come to pass, frequently depending on the actions people took.

The New Testament consists of certain added writings of the early Christian church. These writings bore authenticity from the apostles, who were chosen followers of Jesus. These apostles were promised supernatural insight by the Holy Spirit to remember and teach of Jesus with accuracy and clarity (see John 14-16). These New Testament writings were generally on scrolls as well, although some of the letters could have been written first on sheets of parchment or papyrus.

Among the New Testament writings are four gospels, three of which are commonly called “synoptic gospels.” This phrase comes from the Greek term meaning “to see alike.” They are the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and contain many of the same stories. We could liken them to three of Rembrandt’s self-portraits. They all paint the same subject, but do so in tones to emphasize different aspects of the subject. Acts is an early history of the church, and then there are a selection of letters, most of which are from the apostle Paul. The New Testament closes with a book called Revelation. Written in a genre that scholars call “apocalyptic” this book relies heavily on Old Testament imagery to produce a graphic message of coming judgment and redemption.

By the time of Constantine, the Roman emperor who ruled from 307 to 337, the Bible was being issued in the form of a book, called a “codex.” This required a decision about the ordering of the books, something largely irrelevant before that time. By the 1300’s a need was recognized for dividing the various biblical books into chapters. Archbishop Stephen Langton developed the divisions used in most versions today. The verse divisions found in most Bibles today was developed by Robert Estienne in his 1551 publication of the Greek New Testament.

We have taken a great liberty at dividing up the books for reading purposes in this project. Rather than follow the generally established sections, we readily plug into each reading the relevant passages, without regard to where the chapters actually begin or end. We provide those references for further study, but are not bound by them in determining what to read when.

Our breakdown is into a daily reading pattern based on the calendar year 2014. We have targeted a measure of reading each day, with Sundays as a day of reflective reading the core text covered that week.

Basic History

Because we do not begin with Genesis, there is a certain amount of important history that the reader does not have as the texts unfold. For that reason, we urge all to use this basic historical section as a guideline in the event that one is confused over references to people or events.

Biblical history begins with God creating the heavens, earth, and all creatures including people. The first two people are Adam and Eve who are placed in a garden called Eden. After sinning against God, Adam and Eve are evicted from the garden and begin having children in the larger world outside the garden. Over time, humanity descends into sin and evil such that God decides to bring a flood, destroying all but Noah and his family. After the flood, Noah's offspring repopulate the land and the Bible history soon shifts to the story of the Patriarchs.

The Patriarchs begin with Abram, who is soon renamed Abraham. Abram is called from Ur to the area that would later become Israel and Judah with the assurance that his offspring would inherit the land. Through his offspring is to come one who would bless the world. Abraham gives birth to one son (Ishmael) through Hagar, the servant of his wife Sarah. Later, Abraham has his son Isaac through Sarah. Isaac continues to be the promised lineage for the coming one, and that lineage continues through successive generations. From Isaac's twins Esau and Jacob, the younger Jacob is chosen as the lineage carrier. Jacob is renamed Israel and he has twelve sons that form twelve tribes.

Jacob and his sons soon find themselves in Egypt through the hand of God and the caring of his young son Joseph. The Israelites stay in Egypt for hundreds of years until the persecution reaches a point where God intervenes through Moses. Moses approaches Pharaoh and after a great measure of confrontation the people are released from slavery in Egypt. Moses leads the people through the wilderness receiving the law from God along the way. Along with the law came instructions for building a tabernacle, a tented structure with an enclosed courtyard where sacrifices were held and the presence of God was manifested.

Moses stays behind and Joshua takes over leadership of the Israelites as they finally enter and begin conquest of the Promised Land. Following the death of Joshua, individuals entitled "judges" guide the Israelites until they finally decide to have a king.

The first King is Saul, anointed to his task by the prophet Samuel. After Saul failed in areas of obedience, God moved the kingship to David. David reigned until his death and was followed by his son Solomon. Solomon built the first temple to God, placing it in Jerusalem. Upon Solomon's death, the kingdom divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, called either "Israel" or "Samaria" was ruled by one line of kings eventually settling on Samaria as its capital. The southern kingdom continued to be ruled by the offspring of David with Jerusalem as its capital.

A rapid succession of evil kings led to the downfall of Israel, the northern kingdom. During the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser, the Israelites were taken away and the land was resettled with foreigners. Judah continued for several more centuries before being subjugated by Babylon and its emperor Nebuchadnezzar. The Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon for 50 years before the Persian conquerors of Babylon allowed the Jews to return and resettle the land. During this time, Solomon's temple that the Babylonians had destroyed was allowed to be rebuilt.

Jews continued to occupy Judah through the conquest of Alexander the Great and the eventual Roman domination.

Study Considerations

This approach to Scripture offers several advantages to trying to read the Bible through cover-to-cover. With this approach, one is not overwhelmed with ten months of background information to the life of Christ and the church, before reading the Christian message. Instead, one finds the background material being offered in conjunction with the material it supports or explains. This approach also brings an element of readability into sections of Scripture that are often difficult to digest.

There are several shortcomings to this approach that are important to consider as well. Some stories and scriptural passages are relevant as background for multiple stories, yet since the overriding purpose of this is to read through the Bible in one year, those passages can only be used once. Another warning comes from the manner in which the passages are divided to best fit where needed. This almost always removes the passage from its immediate context, and so it is never a fully adequate way to study a passage for meaning.

That said, one will be surprised to discover how handily the Old Testament serves to introduce and explain the fuller meaning of New Testament passages. And so we begin.

Overview of the Gospel of John

John's gospel differs significantly from the synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow the same basic gospel design. Each has the geographical ministry of Jesus starting in Galilee and making his way to Jerusalem where he is crucified and resurrected. Each brings out the same basic miracles and events in the life of Christ, and each delivers many of the same teachings and sermons of Jesus. Each does so while providing a slightly different emphasis or perspective, tailored to their respective audiences.

Not so the Gospel of John. In John, we see a noticeably different approach. John tells about multiple trips in and out of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus' ministry. (In the synoptics, we are not told of Jesus ministering in Jerusalem until the very end of his time on earth – Matthew 20; Mark 11; Luke 19.) In each of the synoptics, Jesus stays in and around Jerusalem until his crucifixion. John, however, has Jesus in Jerusalem clearing the temple and attending Passover as early as chapter two! Jesus then goes back into Galilee in chapter four, only to return to Jerusalem in chapter five. In chapter six, Jesus is back in Galilee, but in chapter seven Jesus returns to Jerusalem. John also differs from the synoptics by presenting different miracles and giving different teachings. Even when John does reference events that are covered in the synoptics, he adds an additional layer of theology onto them.

The early church recorded historical information that makes great sense with John's distinct approach.¹ Irenaeus (c.140-c.202) wrote of his memories interacting with Polycarp (c.70-c.156). Polycarp hailed from Smyrna (modern Turkey), near the area of Ephesus where church history teaches that the apostle John lived and taught in the later part of his long life. Thinking of Polycarp, Irenaeus wrote,

I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching,

¹ Some scholars dispute whether the apostle John wrote the Gospel of John. We will discuss that in a later lesson.

having received them from eyewitnesses of the ‘Word of life,’ [a Johannine term] Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures.²

At another place, Irenaeus placed John as the fourth gospel, writing,

Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.³

Time wise, this would place the Gospel of John several decades after the dates implied for the synoptic gospels. The history is consistent with what one reads in John. John gives the impression of a work that came substantially after the other gospels. It reads like the writing of one supplementing the prior gospel accounts with additional matters that are not only factual additions, but are well thought out theologically. It is the developed writing one might expect later in time than the less theological synoptic gospels. This substantiates the early church writer Clement of Alexandria who was quoted saying,

But, last of all [after Matthew, Mark, and Luke], John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual⁴ Gospel. This is the account of Clement.⁵

Understanding this history makes great sense not only of the additions in John’s gospel, but also the deletions. There was no need in John’s gospel to recount the baptism of Jesus, it was in the already public synoptic gospels. Similarly, the calling of all twelve apostles, the temptations, and much of the material included in the synoptics were not included in John.

John’s gospel is the mature and ripened gospel of reflection that comes naturally after fifty years or more of preaching and living the Christian faith. John’s gospel shows a depth of perception, a fluency with Hebrew thought and Scripture, and a

² Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xx.5-6.

³ *Against the Heresies*, iii.1.2

⁴ The Greek *pneumatikos* references something spiritual in the sense of pertaining to God. This is not to be taken as something less than true. Carson suggests “symbol-laden.” Carson, D. A., *The Gospel According to John*, (1991 Eerdmans), at 29. I might suggest the idea of “spiritual” in the sense we would today call a “theological gospel” meaning that it speaks of events in a spiritual sense, or a sense of how it pertains to spiritual matters like Paul used the word in 1 Corinthians 3.

⁵ Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xiv.7.

ready usage of Greek thought. Yet in spite of all these impressive themes and an equally impressive architecture to the book, the Greek of John is hardly elegant. The writing style works well to communicate the message, but it is not the flowing literary Greek found, for example, in Luke. This is an interesting set of factors that fits well with the idea of John or someone similar writing (or dictating) the gospel. It has incredibly well-developed theology, well-nuanced ideas, and yet is written in very common language, rather than the flowing Greek of more elegant literature.

As we work through the Bible using the Gospel of John, we will see John's strong usage of Hebrew themes and language. The Old Testament serves well as a reading companion to illuminate many of John's points that can easily get lost on the reader. We see this as quickly as the first verse, and it runs throughout the gospel to the very end.

Week 1
(Jan 5)

John 1:1-8

The Theme from Creation

Genesis 1

In John's gospel, we have a running echo of Genesis that is found in the words of the gospel as well as the structure. John chapter one begins with the same phrase as Genesis one found in the Greek version of the Old Testament. We read both in English as "In the beginning..." In Genesis, the next word is the verb "created" followed by the subject who did the creating, "God." In John, we have "In the beginning" followed by the verb "was" and then the noun "the Word." Genesis one continues to tell *how* God created. God created all things into existence by speaking them into existence. God *said*, "Let there be light." God *said*, "Let us make man." It was the word of God that brought all things into existence. It was the word of God that gave structure and meaning to the world as we know it. It was the word of God spoken and expressed in the beginning. No Hebrew could have read John's gospel and not understood that John was echoing Genesis and the word God used to bring forth life and meaning on this world.

Genesis 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός
John 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος
A comparison of the first phrases in Genesis and John shows the similarities	

The thrust of John's opening is not simply to remind one of Genesis. It is to show the pre-incarnate Christ co-existent with the Creating God. Calling Christ the Word, John explained that he was already present at Genesis 1:1. He was present with God and as God:

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 was not any thing made that was made (Jn 1:1-3).

It helps us unpack John's significance given to Jesus when we consider the other Old Testament passages that are associated with God as Creator.

Psalm 136

In this Psalm, we are told to give thanks to God because "he is good" and because "his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 136:1). This is shown in God's deeds like creation, which evidence that God "alone does great wonders" (Ps. 136:4). Those wonders, John tells us, are to be linked to Jesus as well. In Jesus, we witness one who was present and doing the works of creation, but also one who would become that greatest deed and cause for thanks. Jesus becomes the incarnate picture of God's "steadfast love" that "endures forever."

Isaiah 40:12-40:31

Isaiah used creation to contrast the smallness of nations and people. "The nations are like a drop from a bucket" or "dust on the scales" (Is. 40:15) compared to the one who "measured the waters in the hollow of his hand" (Is. 40:12). In Isaiah, creation is an indicator of God's unsurpassed greatness, but also God's unique purposes and insights. Isaiah asks,

Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? (Is. 40:13-14).

This is profound as we apply this principle of creation to Jesus. John will unfold the ministry of Jesus as one that not only was not done in consultation with man, but as one that man did not even understand. Jesus knew a justice that surpassed the justice of the people. Jesus possessed knowledge of God and insights into God's character that were not understood.

Isaiah asked if there was anyone who could be compared to "the Holy One" (Is. 40:25). The answer is "no one." John emphasized no differently with one exception. Jesus could be compared to the Holy One because Jesus *was* the Holy One! Jesus was there at the beginning and nothing was made without him. It is Jesus, then, who appropriately "gives power to the faint" (Is. 40:29), and renews the strength of those who wait for him (Is. 40:31).

Psalm 104

In this Psalm, God as Creator calls forth from his people blessings and songs of praise. The glory of creation reflects the idea that God is clothed with splendor and majesty. Nature answers to God, not the other way around. God's many works evidence the wisdom of God. Nature is built in a way where it tends to itself. Water sates thirst, food stock grows, trees plant themselves through seeds, seasons and time march on regularly, animals breed and both consume food and become food. This reflects a world put together with unbelievable wisdom and insight. As the Psalmist breaks into praise, he sings that the "glory of the Lord" would "endure forever" (Ps 104:31).

John let's us know that Jesus was part and parcel of this creating wisdom. In Jesus, we are seeing the one who created and sustains the world. We are seeing a human picture of the "wisdom" of God. We see the "glory of the Lord" that will endure forever. We can see Jesus and join the Psalmist in proclaiming,

Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord! (Ps 104:35).

Job 38-42:6

Job is a fascinating book where the fallout from spiritual warfare destroys much of Job's life. His health is shot. His children die prematurely; his wealth evaporates. Job's wife and friends alternately urge him to repent of his own sin or to curse God and die. Job does not see his sin, nor does he view it right to curse God.

In the process of trying to come to grips with his most pitiful circumstances, Job begins to make some accusations against God. Job wished he could "find" God, as if God was hiding! Job said he would then lay out his case before God and get answers (Job 23:1-5).

Finally toward the end of the book, God comes out and answers Job. God used his own creation as evidence that his ways should be beyond Job's challenges. Job had no real ability to stake claim on understanding and knowing God and his thoughts (Job 38-41). Job's words are "words without knowledge" (Job 38:1). Job then backs away a bit when God challenged him, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" (Job 40:1-5). As the Creator, God demonstrated an independence and a wisdom with which Job could not contend. This is the same authority that Jesus brought as he came into the world.

Job finally thinking through the Almighty's creative works repents. Job answers,

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).

This strong message echoes in John's proclamation of Jesus not only in the beginning, but that all things were made through him. Not only does it invoke a recognition that Jesus is beyond our challenge, but even stronger, it warns us as we go through the gospel account of Jesus that as Creator, we know "no purpose" of Jesus "can be thwarted."

The Theme of Light and Life

John wrote that in Jesus was "life," and that life was the "light" of men. This light "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:4-5).

On its own, this picture makes perfect sense. Anyone who has been in a dark room and turned on a light has seen that in a battle, light always triumphs over darkness. Darkness never wins that contest.

John takes it a step further, however, because he is using themes that are well founded in the Old Testament.

Psalm 27

In many ways, this Psalm evokes truths that become most apparent in the life, ministry, and work of Jesus. This Psalm begins acknowledging that the Lord is both "light" and "salvation," as well as the "stronghold" of "life" that removes "fear" (Ps 27). That is Jesus. As light, Jesus brought salvation into darkened, sinful lives. As life, Jesus secures and holds an eternal life for those who place their trust in him.

The Psalmist make his one request and goal, to

dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon
the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple (Ps 27:4).

John will explain in his gospel that Jesus brings his followers into the house of the Lord. In Jesus, we gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. We see God's love manifested in the midst of hatred, ignorance, hostility, selfishness, and other dark sins. We will see next week, how Jesus becomes a physical truth of the temple, and in that sense, one who lives in Jesus, lives in the temple.

The psalm ends with an affirmation that the Psalmist will "look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13). This was done and is done in looking upon Jesus. The light and life of God who walked this earth shining salvation and eternal life.

Psalm 36

In this Psalm, darkness is contrasted with light. The “wicked” live lives oriented to sin, proud of their own insight and without fear of God. God, on the other hand, is full of steadfast love and righteousness. God provides in abundance for his children, sheltering them and providing a refuge.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light (Ps 36:9).

This sets God up as the reference point for a perspective that is true, not deceitful. John tells his readers that Jesus is this life and light. Jesus reveals sin for what it is, and points the willing to the way of life. Jesus evidences the steadfast love of God that gives eternal security to those of faith.

Psalm 119:105-112, 129-136

Psalm 119 is a composite Psalm, meaning that it can be seen as 22 related Psalms. Each of the 22 sections of Psalm 119 is set up as an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each section has all of its verses beginning with the appropriate letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So, for example, Psalm 119:1-8 has eight verses that each start with the Hebrew letter “*aleph*” (א), the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

Verses 105-112 each start with the Hebrew “*nun*” (נ). These verses speak to God’s “word” as a lamp to one’s feet and a “light” to one’s path (Ps 119:105). The Psalmist is struggling with events in life, but knows that life will come from the Lord. The route for the Psalmist is to carefully walk in the ways of God’s word.

John’s gospel echoes these ideas in profound ways. John explains that Jesus *is the* Word of God. Jesus is the light that shines into our difficulties, showing us the way. We are to look to him and learn to walk in his ways.

Verses 129-136 each start with the Hebrew letter “*pe*” (פ), pronounced like the English “pay.” Here the words of God again are told to give “light.”

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple (Ps 119:130).

This is what we have in Jesus as the Word. As his life unfolded, it brought a light that does not take a rocket scientist to appreciate or accept. It is a simple trust that is seen in a child.

1 Jn 1:5-1:10

In addition to his gospel, we have letters written by John. Not surprisingly, they use many of the same words and phrases and explain his thoughts in a more didactic or teaching sense. 1 John 1:5-1:10 exemplify this.

John taught the “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5), which then allows one to see that without question John saw Jesus as God. God and Jesus are not “a” light. They are the pure light that has no darkness. Jesus was not a good man. He was not a great man. He shone forth God’s perfection.

John then applies this truth to the believer. We are to live faithfully trusting in the truth of who Jesus is. We confess our sins and receive forgiveness. We do not parade as ones who are perfect on our own. We are not the light; we reflect the light.

Colossians 1:11-14

Here Paul set into his prayer life, as well as his theology, the concept of Christ bringing the believer out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light, which is the kingdom of the Son. This deliverance comes with redemption, with the forgiveness of sins. Christ was not merely coming to earth to point the way to from darkness to light, he came to make the way, redeeming people from darkness to light.

John the Baptist

John set out an introduction to John the Baptist as one who was not the actual light, but one who attested to the light. John was one who brought other people to the light. Jesus had many people “ripe” for belief as people who had been convicted by the ministry of John the Baptist. We get more insight into this by looking at the synoptic gospel accounts, as well as Isaiah’s prophetic promise of John’s ministry, written 600 years earlier.

Luke 1:1-1:25, 39-80

Luke wrote his accounts after researching from eyewitnesses. Luke was a physician, as such, would be one of the few men in Jewish society who was comfortable talking with women. We lose track of this because we see Jesus and Paul so readily talking to women as well as men. Yet Jesus and Paul were rare in this way. (Interestingly some today view Paul as a chauvinist, comparing him to

21st century standards of language and behavior rather than those of his day. In fact, he was much the opposite.)

Luke was able to interview people, much like a doctor takes a history to help in diagnosis. His gospel account references names as he readily gives sources for his knowledge that others missed. Not surprisingly, it was Luke the doctor who got the information on Jesus' virgin birth. (It is easy to envision. John: "Now, exactly *how* did you get pregnant without ever having had relations with another?").

Similarly, the birth of John the Baptist piqued Luke's interest and made his gospel history. John was born to a couple (Zachariah and Elizabeth) that had been unable to have children. Much like Abraham and Sarah with Isaac, or Hannah with Samuel, God worked his child of promise into the lives of this couple. Zachariah believed he would father a child that lately about as well as Sarah. While Sarah laughed, Zachariah just challenged the angel bringing the news.

The angel pronounced muteness upon Zachariah to last until John's birth. Zachariah was also told how to rear John. Although John was born to a priest father and a mother who descended from priests, the concern was not to rear John as a priest. The focus of instruction was on John abstaining from strong drink or wine as he lived filled with the Holy Spirit. John was set to go in the spirit and power of Elijah leading the people to the Lord.

Mary the mother of Jesus was a cousin to Elizabeth, the mother of John. Mary was pregnant with Jesus and Elizabeth with John when Mary went to see her cousin. As Mary entered the house, the baby John within Elizabeth jumped in joy, with the Holy Spirit attesting to Jesus through John, even before birth. Elizabeth was past childbearing age, and was much older than Mary (who would have been in her teens). Not surprisingly, Elizabeth gave some marvelous wisdom to her younger cousin blessing her for the baby she carried. From this we have "Mary's song," a marvelous song attesting to God's greatness.

In due course, John was born, Zachariah regained his speech, and a path was set for John's life as a precursor to the light of the world. Luke also included Zachariah's prophetic song that sang of the coming Messiah, and the fact that Jesus would "give light to those who sit in darkness" as well as guide "feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:29), harmonizing the words and concepts used by John in describing Jesus.

Mk 1:1-1:8 and Isaiah 40:1-5

History teaches that Mark recorded Peter's gospel.⁶ Reading Peter's proclamation of the gospel to Cornelius in Acts 10, certainly lends additional credibility to the historical record. Peter's presentation reads like a miniature version of the Gospel of Mark in Acts 10:37ff. Peter began with John the Baptist, as does the Gospel of Mark, ending with Jesus resurrected and appearing to witnesses.

Mark (Peter) set out the prophetic promise of Isaiah 40:1-5 seen as fulfilled in John the Baptist. John was God's messenger. His message was one of repentance that prepared the way for Jesus. John used baptism to help direct the people to see the need for washing sin as a part of repentance. This was something that would become a hallmark of the church.

John drew a large following of people impressed with his earnestness and his message. Yet John never allowed it to become the "John the Baptist Show." For him, there was a constant push for people to realize that after him, would come one mightier than him, one whose sandal John was not worthy to stoop down and untie. While John baptized with water, Jesus would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:1-3:17

Luke used the same Isaiah passage as Mark when describing the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke added more of the message of John, giving content of some of his sermons. He urged people to live holy lives rather than rely on their heritage as children of Abraham. Their birth was not to their credit or control, but how they lived was personal choice. That was the attention that would focus people on Jesus. If people do not realize their sin, they have no need for a savior.

⁶ The early church was unanimous that Mark authored the second gospel, emphasizing that Mark took the task of writing Peter's stories and recollections securing Peter's preaching of the gospel. The fuss of the early church was over whether Mark wrote it with Peter's permission, acquiescence, at Peter's request, or even after Peter's death. Papias (c.60-130) wrote,

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatever he remembered. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.14-17).

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) also confirmed Mark as recording Peter's proclaimed gospel message, but not at Peter's request, just with Peter's awareness:

The Gospel according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome, and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the Gospel he gave it to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it. (*Ibid.*, at 6.14.5-7).

Irenaeus wrote that Mark recorded Peter's gospel after the death of Peter, while Origen (c.185-c.254) thought that Peter had instructed Mark to write the gospel. (*Ibid.*, at 5.8; 6.25).

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 1

1. John places Jesus at the beginning – at the beginning of the world as well as well as every beginning. What does it mean that Jesus was thoughtfully present at the start of every moment in your life?
2. Jesus as the light and life is a lamp to your feet. How does Jesus illuminate to you how to live and thrive in the midst of your interaction with the world?
3. John the Baptist was set out as one to ascribe glory to God by pointing to Jesus and preparing people to receive the gospel. How can your life help others prepare for the gospel, even if you do not speak to them the actual gospel? What traits of John's are transferable to you and I?