

The Life of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Word Made Flesh: The Incarnation

John 1:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson establishes the foundation on which the entire study of Christ's life will stand: that Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Word, fully God and fully man. John 1:1–18 is the clearest statement in all of Scripture of the full deity and eternal preexistence of Christ. Doctrinally, what is at stake is everything. If the Word was not God, then the cross is only a tragedy, not an atonement, and our worship of Jesus is idolatry. The prologue closes the door on every attempt to reduce Jesus to a great teacher, an exalted angel, or the first and highest created being. Verse 1 says the Word was God; verse 3 says all things were made through Him, which places Him on the Creator's side of the line that separates God from everything else; verse 14 says this same Word became flesh; and verse 18 calls Him the only God who reveals the Father. Help your class feel the weight of these claims before they feel the warmth of them.

At the same time, this passage is not cold theology. John writes so that we will not merely know about the Word but receive Him (v. 12). The eternal God did not stay safely distant. He became flesh and made His dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. The doctrine of the incarnation is meant to land on the heart: the God who made you came near enough to touch, near enough to weep, near enough to die. A student can affirm the deity of Christ as a fact and still keep Him at arm's length in daily life. Your aim is to move the class from agreeing that Jesus is God to walking with Him as God.

So teach this lesson on two tracks at once. Give the doctrine its full weight, especially at Questions 1, 3, 7, and 9, where the deity and incarnation of Christ are directly in view, and be ready to address gently but clearly the view that Jesus is a created being or merely a man. But keep pressing the wonder of it into the room. The goal is not only that your students would win an argument about who Jesus is, but that they would fall on their knees before the Word who became flesh for them.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 and 2, John says the Word "was with God" and "was God," and that this was true "in the beginning." What do these phrases teach us about who Jesus is in relation to the Father and in relation to time, and why would John open his Gospel here rather than with Jesus' birth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the deliberate echo of Genesis 1:1. John writes “In the beginning” on purpose, taking us back before creation. Whatever “the beginning” was, the Word already “was.” The verb is crucial: not “came to be” but “was,” a continuous existence with no starting point. Before anything was made, the Word simply existed. This is the language of eternity, and it rules out any notion that there was a time when the Son did not exist.

Then hold the two clauses of verse 1 together, because heresy always tries to keep only one. “The Word was with God” preserves the distinction of persons: the Word is not the same person as the Father, but is face to face with Him in eternal fellowship. “And the Word was God” preserves the full deity: the Word shares the very nature of God. Some have tried to soften this last clause to “a god,” but the grammar and the whole sweep of the prologue forbid it. John is not saying the Word is godlike; he is saying the Word is God.

Explain why John starts here. Matthew begins with Abraham, Luke with Adam, but John begins in eternity, because he wants us to know who this Jesus is before we watch a single thing He does. Every miracle, every word, every wound on the cross means something different once you know that the One doing them is God in the flesh. The opening verses are John’s lens; everything in his Gospel is meant to be read through them.

Bring it home with worship. The point of this towering claim is not to win a debate but to bow. If the Word is truly God, then He is worthy of the trust, obedience, and adoration we would give to no mere man. Let the class sit for a moment with the sheer fact that the One who made them has a face and a name.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eternal preexistence of the Son: He “was” in the beginning, with no point of origin (John 1:1-2)
- The full deity of Christ: the Word was God, sharing the divine nature (John 1:1; Colossians 2:9)
- The distinction of persons within the Godhead: the Word was “with” God, in eternal fellowship
- The error of treating Jesus as a created being or “a god,” which the text directly excludes
- The importance of reading the whole of Jesus’ life through the truth of who He eternally is

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between saying the Word was “with” God and the Word “was” God, and why do we need both?
- Why might John have wanted us to know Jesus’ eternal identity before showing us His earthly ministry?
- How should it change the way we pray and worship to remember that Jesus is the eternal God, not a great man who became divine?

Question 2

Student Question:

John refuses to let us keep Jesus at a comfortable distance. Where in your own thinking have you been tempted to shrink Jesus down to a great man, a teacher, or an example, and what would change if you truly believed you were dealing with the God who made you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and it works best if you let students answer honestly without rushing to correct them. Many sincere believers carry a functional picture of Jesus that is smaller than the biblical one. They may affirm His deity on Sunday and yet live Monday through Saturday as though He were a wise advisor to be consulted rather than the Lord to be obeyed.

Help them see how the reduction happens. Our culture loves a Jesus who blesses our preferences and challenges no one. A merely human Jesus can be admired and then set aside. But the God who made us has a claim on us that an admired teacher does not. The question gently exposes the gap between our confessed theology and our practical theology.

Move from diagnosis to invitation. The goal is not guilt but a larger vision of Christ. When we truly grasp that we are dealing with the Maker of heaven and earth, prayer becomes audience with the King, obedience becomes glad surrender rather than grudging compliance, and worship recovers its awe. Invite each person to name one area of life where they have been treating Jesus as optional.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between confessed belief and functional, lived belief about who Jesus is
- The cultural pressure to prefer a tame, merely human Jesus who makes no demands
- The claim that the Creator has upon the creature: lordship, not merely admiration
- Awe and reverence as the proper response to the deity of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- In an ordinary week, do you tend to treat Jesus more as Lord or more as advisor? What reveals the difference?
- What is one decision you are facing right now that would look different if you fully reckoned with Jesus as God?
- What would help you recover a sense of wonder when you come to worship Him?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verse 3 says that “all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” What does it mean that Jesus is the Creator and not a created being, and how does that truth guard us against the idea that He is merely the first and finest of God’s creatures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Press the totality of verse 3. John says it twice, once positively and once negatively, so that no exception can slip through. All things were made through Him; nothing that exists was made apart from Him. If every created thing was made through the Word, then the Word Himself cannot be a created thing, or He would have to have made Himself. This single verse decisively places Jesus on the Creator’s side of the line.

Name the ancient error plainly, because it returns in every generation. Some have taught that the Son was the first and highest being God made, a sort of supreme creature through whom God then made everything else. Verse 3 will not allow it. There are only two categories in Scripture, the Creator and the creation, and the Word stands with the Creator. Paul says the same in Colossians 1:16, that all things were created through Him and for Him.

Draw out the comfort hidden in the doctrine. The One who made all things is the One who entered all things to save us. The hands that formed the world are the hands that were pierced. Nothing in your life is outside His authority or beyond His reach, because there is nothing that He did not make. The Creator is not distant from His creation; He stepped into it.

Connect creation to new creation. The same Word who made the world is at work remaking us. The power that called light out of nothing is the power that calls a sinner to new life. This prepares the class for verse 12 and the gift of becoming children of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as Creator of all things, which places Him with God and not among the creatures (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16)
- The refutation of the view that the Son is the first or highest created being
- The two biblical categories of Creator and creation, with the Word on the Creator’s side
- The authority of Christ over all things because all things were made through Him
- The link between Christ’s work in creation and His work in redemption and new creation

Discussion Prompts

- How does verse 3 by itself answer the claim that Jesus was created?
- What does it mean for your worries today that the One who made all things is the One who saves you?
- How does seeing Christ as Creator change the way you view the world around you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Verses 4 and 5 speak of light shining in the darkness. Where is there darkness in your life right now, a fear, a habit, a sorrow, that you have quietly assumed will always have the last word? What would it mean to let the light of Christ shine into that exact place?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the cosmic language of light and darkness toward the student's own heart. In John, light and darkness are not abstractions; light is the presence of God's life and truth, and darkness is everything opposed to it. Verse 5 makes a promise the class needs to hear: the darkness has not overcome the light, and it never will.

Encourage honesty about the particular darkness each person carries. For one it is a recurring fear, for another a habit of sin that feels permanent, for another a grief that has settled in like a long winter. The temptation is to assume that this part of life is simply off-limits to God, a corner where the light does not reach. The verse says otherwise.

Offer a concrete next step. Letting the light shine often begins with bringing the dark thing out of hiding, into prayer, into Scripture, into the honest company of a fellow Christian. Darkness depends on concealment; light begins its work the moment we stop pretending. Invite students to name, at least to themselves, the place where they most need Christ's light this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the light and life of the world, shining into human darkness (John 1:4-5)
- The promise that darkness cannot overcome the light, offering hope against despair
- The pattern of bringing hidden sin and sorrow into the light of Christ
- The danger of assuming any area of life is beyond God's reach

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell you about Jesus that John calls Him both life and light?
- What is one area you have quietly fenced off from God, assuming He could not change it?
- What would it look like, practically, to let His light into that area this week?

Question 5**Student Question:**

In verses 10 through 13, John says that those who received Him and believed in His name were given "the right to become children of God," born "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." What does this teach about how a person actually enters God's family, and what does it rule out?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the heartbreak of verses 10 and 11. The Word came to the very world He had made, and to His own people, and they did not receive Him. The tragedy is not that Jesus was unknown but that He was unwelcomed. This sets up the wonder of verse 12: against that backdrop, some did receive Him.

Define the new birth carefully, because this is doctrinally important ground. John says we become children of God by being born “of God,” not by physical descent (“blood”), not by human effort or desire (“the will of the flesh,” “the will of man”). No one is born into God’s family simply by being born into a Christian home or a particular nation. Entrance into God’s family is God’s gift, received through believing and welcoming Christ.

Hold together what John holds together: receiving and believing. To receive Him is to believe in His name, and in the rest of Scripture this living faith takes hold of Christ in trust, repentance, confession, and baptism into Him (Galatians 3:26–27; Romans 6:3–4). Guard against two errors here. One says we earn our place by heritage or merit; the other says faith is a bare mental agreement that never takes hold of Christ in obedience. The new birth is God’s work, received by a faith that genuinely lays hold of Jesus as Lord.

Bring it to the present. Becoming a child of God is not a distant theological idea but the most personal reality available to any human being. Ask the class to consider whether they have received Him in this living sense, or merely grown up near the things of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new birth as God’s gift, not the result of human heritage, effort, or desire (John 1:13)
- Becoming a child of God through receiving and believing in Christ (John 1:12)
- Living faith that lays hold of Christ in trust, repentance, confession, and baptism (Galatians 3:26–27)
- The error of assuming salvation comes by family, nation, or upbringing
- The tragedy of knowing about Christ while never receiving Him

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between being born near God’s family and being born into it?
- Why does John rule out “blood,” “the will of the flesh,” and “the will of man” as the source of new birth?
- How would you explain to a friend what it means to receive Christ rather than merely admire Him?

Question 6

Student Question:

Verse 12 turns on the word “received.” It is possible to admire Jesus, study Jesus, even talk about Jesus, and still never receive Him. What is the difference, and what would receiving Him look like in a way that reshapes how you live, not just what you believe?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question follows naturally from the previous one. Many people have a relationship with information about Jesus rather than with Jesus Himself. They can discuss Him, even defend Him, without ever having welcomed Him as Lord of their lives.

Draw the contrast concretely. Admiration keeps Jesus at the level of an interesting figure; receiving Him opens the door of the whole self to His rule. To receive a king is to hand him the keys. Help students see that receiving Christ is not a one-time transaction to be filed away but a daily welcoming of His lordship into the actual rooms of their lives, their money, their relationships, their secret thoughts.

Make it practical. Ask what it would look like this week to welcome Christ into a specific room they have kept shut. The aim is to move belief from the head into the hands and feet. A faith that has truly received Christ will show itself in obedience, in repentance, and in love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between admiring Jesus and receiving Him as Lord
- Receiving Christ as an ongoing welcome of His rule, not merely a past event
- Faith that expresses itself in obedience, repentance, and love
- The danger of a relationship with information about Jesus rather than with Jesus

Discussion Prompts

- What is one “room” of your life you have been slow to open to Christ’s rule?
- How can you tell the difference between admiring Jesus and actually following Him?
- What would change this week if you welcomed Him as Lord of that specific area?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 14 says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Why is it essential to our salvation that Jesus was both fully God and truly human, and what comfort and what call does the incarnation press upon us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson alongside Question 9, so give it room. The incarnation means that the eternal Word, without ceasing to be God, took on a real human nature. He did

not merely appear human; He became flesh. He grew, hungered, wept, and bled. Yet He remained fully God. Both must be held, because both are necessary for our salvation.

Explain why both natures matter. Only a true human could stand in our place, live the life we failed to live, and die the death we deserved. Only God could bear the weight of the world's sin and conquer death. A Savior who was only a man could not save us; a Savior who only seemed human could not represent us. In Christ, God and man are joined, and that is why He alone can be our Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

Draw out the comfort. The word translated "dwelt" carries the idea of pitching a tent, an echo of God's presence with Israel in the tabernacle. God came to camp among His people. He knows weakness from the inside. When you pray, you pray to One who understands hunger, exhaustion, temptation, and grief, not from a distance but from experience (Hebrews 4:15).

Then sound the call. The incarnation is not only comforting; it is summoning. The God who came near calls us to come near to Him, and to follow the pattern of self-giving love that brought Him down to us. The One who left glory to dwell among us calls us to lay down our pride and our comfort for the sake of others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The incarnation: the eternal Word truly became flesh while remaining fully God (John 1:14)
- Both the full deity and the true humanity of Christ as necessary for salvation
- Christ as the one Mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5)
- The comfort that our Savior sympathizes with our weakness from experience (Hebrews 4:15)
- The call to imitate the self-giving love displayed in the incarnation

Discussion Prompts

- Why could neither a merely human savior nor a savior who only seemed human accomplish our salvation?
- What comfort do you find in knowing that Jesus understands human weakness from the inside?
- How does the incarnation call us to live toward the people around us?

Question 8

Student Question:

John says that in Christ we have seen "grace and truth" together, full and undivided. Where do you tend to drift, toward a grace that excuses everything, or a truth that crushes without mercy? How does looking at Jesus reorder the way you treat yourself and the people around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the formational heart of verse 14. Jesus is described as full of grace and truth, and the wonder is that He holds perfectly together what we tend to split apart. We lean one way or the other. Some of us soften truth until it says nothing; others wield truth like a club and forget mercy.

Help the class see Jesus as the integration they need. He never compromised the truth, yet He was the friend of sinners. He told the woman at the well everything she had done, and He offered her living water. Grace without truth is sentimentality; truth without grace is cruelty. In Christ they are one.

Apply it in two directions. First, toward the people around them: do they extend grace to others while still speaking truth, or do they collapse into flattery or harshness? Second, toward themselves: do they receive God's grace, or do they live under a crushing perfectionism that grace was meant to lift? Invite them to name which way they lean and ask the Spirit to form the other in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the perfect union of grace and truth (John 1:14, 17)
- The danger of grace without truth (sentimentality) and truth without grace (harshness)
- Imitating Christ in dealing graciously and truthfully with others
- Receiving God's grace rather than living under crushing self-condemnation

Discussion Prompts

- By temperament, do you lean toward over-softening truth or toward forgetting mercy?
- Where do you see Jesus holding grace and truth together in the Gospels?
- How might your closest relationships change if you grew in the direction you lack?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verse 18 declares, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." How does this verse present the full deity of Christ, the eternal Son who alone reveals the Father, and why does it leave no room for treating Jesus as merely a great prophet or a created being?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it deserves the most careful handling. Verse 18 forms a bookend with verse 1. The prologue opened by calling the Word God; it closes by calling Him "the only God, who is at the Father's side." The best manuscripts read "the only God" or "the only-begotten God," a stunning phrase that affirms the Son's full deity while distinguishing Him from the Father.

Unfold “who is at the Father’s side.” The picture is of intimate, eternal nearness, the Son resting against the Father’s heart, knowing Him perfectly. No prophet ever had this. Moses spoke with God, yet was not permitted to see His face. The Son does not merely report about God from the outside; He comes from the Father’s very presence and shares His nature.

Show why this excludes the lesser views. A great prophet can tell us things about God; only God can truly make God known. The verse says that the One who reveals the Father is Himself God. This rules out the idea that Jesus is merely an inspired man or the highest created being. Combine verse 18 with verses 1, 3, and 14, and the case is airtight: the Word is God, He made all things, He became flesh, and He alone reveals the Father. Be gentle but unflinching here; this is the truth on which the whole study stands.

End in worship rather than mere argument. The purpose of establishing the deity of Christ is not to defeat opponents but to fall before Him. The unseen God has made Himself known in a face we can look upon. To know Jesus is to know God, and that is the greatest gift the prologue offers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full deity of Christ as “the only God” who is eternally at the Father’s side (John 1:18)
- Christ as the unique and final revealer of the Father, surpassing every prophet
- The bookend of verses 1 and 18, framing the whole prologue around Christ’s deity
- The refutation of the views that Jesus is merely a prophet or a created being
- Knowing the Father truly only through the Son (Matthew 11:27; John 14:9)

Discussion Prompts

- How does verse 18 echo and confirm verse 1?
- What is the difference between a prophet telling us about God and the Son making God known?
- Why is it good news that we can see the invisible God in the face of Jesus?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole prologue, the Word who was God, who made all things, who became flesh, who is full of grace and truth, and who makes the Father known. Name one specific way you sense the living Christ inviting you to know Him more truly and follow Him more closely as a result of this lesson.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole prologue and turns it toward life. Resist the urge to add new content; instead, help students name something specific. A vague resolve to “appreciate Jesus more” will evaporate by Tuesday. A concrete response will take root.

Invite them to connect the doctrine they have studied with a particular step. For one person it may be returning to worship with genuine awe rather than routine. For another it may be opening a closed room of life to His lordship, or extending grace and truth to a difficult relationship, or finally receiving Christ in obedient faith and baptism rather than merely admiring Him from a distance.

Close the lesson by reminding the class that the same Word who was in the beginning is present with them now. This study is not an exercise in ancient history; it is an encounter with the living God who became flesh for them. Encourage them to write down the one thing they sense Christ asking, and to return to it through the week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from knowing about Christ to knowing and following Christ
- The value of a specific, concrete response over a vague intention
- The living presence of Christ with the believer now, not merely in history
- Spiritual formation as the goal of doctrinal study

Discussion Prompts

- Of everything in the prologue, which truth landed most heavily on you, and why?
- What is the one specific step Christ seems to be inviting you to take this week?
- Who might you tell about that step so they can encourage you in it?