The Gospel of John: *The Logos*
John 1:1-3

This morning we begin our journey through the Gospel of John verse by verse, so please stand, and let us read John 1:1-2 together.

My message this morning will fall into four sections: 1) the Greek context of Logos; 2) the Jewish context of logos; 3) what John writes about the Logos; and 4) what that means and why it matters.

**I. The Greek context of Logos**

I would invite you to jump into the time machine and journey all the way back with me to the ancient city of Ephesus, to the year 560 BC, just over 600 years before the Apostle John will write down his gospel in the same city. There in Ephesus we will find a Greek philosopher known as Heraclitus. Heraclitus observed a universe that is always in flux. He was the philosopher who famously wrote that “it is impossible to step into the same river twice!” Heraclitus observed that everything is moving, constantly changing…but then he observed that the change and flux is not random or chaotic. Instead, there is order and control evident in the patterns that we can observe. The rising of the sun, the turn of the seasons, the predictable tides, the seed and the soil. There had to be a REASON for the observable patterns in nature, a REASON for the design that could be observed in all of creation. Heraclitus gave this reason a title: he referred to it as the *Logos*, the word, the reason of God. To Heraclitus, the Logos was the principle order under which the universe continued to exist (Barclay, John; 35). The Logos was also responsible for the human’s ability to think and to reason, to judge between right and wrong. In fact, writes Heraclitus, “the Logos is the judge of truth.”

Skip ahead to the third century BC, and let us consider Zeno of Citium in the great city of Athens, the leader of a philosophical movement called the Stoics. Zeno would come to fully embrace the Heraclitan concept of “Logos,” claiming that the Logos was the universal reason that can be observed in nature. The more one conformed to the Logos both in common reason and in nature, the happier one’s life would be.

Let us now skip ahead to the middle of the first century BC, just decades before the birth of Christ, and there we shall find Philo, a Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. Philo held that the Logos was the oldest thing in the world and the instrument through which God had made the world. He said that the Logos was the thought of God stamped upon the universe. William Barclay writes:

Philo talked about the Logos by which God made the world and all things; he said that man’s mind was stamped also with the Logos, that the Logos was what gave a man reason, the power to think and the power to know. He said that the Logos was the intermediary between the world and God and that the Logos was the priest who set the soul before God.

Philo, along with Plato, held that the Logos of God was there…the Logos was absolutely true…but that the Logos was also, finally, unknowable. Anything beheld on earth was corrupted, a derivative of the perfect, so there was no way to actually come to know the Logos or the God behind the Logos.
Now, hold that thought, and let us turn our attention to the Jewish context of Logos.

II. The Jewish Context for the Logos

The great scholar, William Barclay, points to several strands of Jewish thought that contributed to their context for understanding the Word (the Logos) of God.

1) To the Jew, a word was far more than a mere sound: it was something which had an independent existence, and which actually did things. Take for example the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25. Jacob tricks his blind old dad Isaac into pronouncing his blessing upon the second born rather than Esau. When Esau finds out, he is furious, but it’s too late. The blessing has been pronounced. The words have gone forth, and they have performed with power what those words had the power to do.

When we think about the Creation of the world as recorded in Genesis, everything that is came about via this formula: “And God said…” The word of God is the creating power of God. The Psalmist writes, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (Psalm 33:6). “He sent forth his word and healed them” (Psalm 107:20). “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). Again, for the Jew, the word “the logos” itself was powerful, and this notion of the Word (the Logos) of God was already a very powerful, creative reality.

2) Barclay makes another observation that I had never heard before. Apparently, for 500 years or so before the coming of Christ, Hebrew became a forgotten language. The OT was written in Hebrew, but the vast majority of Jews no longer knew the language. The scholars knew it, but not the ordinary people who largely spoke Aramaic. So, over time, the scriptures of the OT had to be translated into Aramaic, and these translations were called Targums. When the Targums were produced, those who did the translating were reticent to translate the name of God or speak of God in an anthropomorphic manner, so wherever the name of God was referenced in the Hebrew, the Aramaic translators would substitute, “the Word of God.” For example, in Exodus 19:17 when the Hebrew reads, “Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God,” the Targums read that Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet the word of God. In Isaiah 48:13 the Hebrew reads, “My hand laid the foundation of the earth and my right hand spread out the heavens.” The Targum translators hated the idea of attributing God with “hands”, so the Targums read, “By my word I have founded the earth; and by my strength I have hung up the heavens.” The point here is that “the word of God” became one of the commonest forms of Jewish expression in the century leading up to Christ’s birth. Barclay writes, “Every Jew was used to speaking of the Memra, “the word of God.”

3) Finally, just as the Greeks thought of the word “logos” as both the word and the reason of God, so also the Jews thought of the Logos as both the word of God and the wisdom of God, particularly in their “wisdom literature.” For example, Proverbs 3:13-26 speaks of the wisdom of God personified, “She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. The Lord by his wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the
heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew” (Proverbs 3:18-20).

Now, the point of looking at the Greek and the Jewish context that existed prior to and leading up to John’s gospel is significant. People often ask why God would send Jesus to enter into history 2000 years ago rather than send him in 2019…why did God send Jesus when He did? I’ve just shown you one of the reasons why God’s timing was perfect. The OT prophets, psalmists, and wisdom writers were used early by God to set the stage for Jesus as the Logos of God in so many ways. And as we’ve observed, the writings of thinkers like Heracles, Zeno, Philo, and Plato prepared the Greek culture to better understand Jesus as the Logos of God. And listen church, we should give God the credit and the glory for those great thinkers as well.

Now I know it’s dangerous to quote sources other than the Bible, but the Logos serves as the light of all people, so we should not be surprised to find traces of God’s brilliance in the musings and observations of philosophers and even pagans.

In a 1944 address to the Socratic Club at Oxford, C.S. unpacked a theme that fascinated him—Pagan foreshadowing of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ: “Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians and (earlier) to Jews, also says that there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, ‘lighteneth every man.’ We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story—the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth.” God can and will use whomever He chooses to accomplish His purpose, and I, for one, am grateful for Heraclitus, Zeno, Philo, and Plato (among others) for their contributions to the quest for what is true.

III. What John writes about the Logos

Let us now consider what the Holy Spirit reveals through John’s opening verses to his Gospel: (let’s read it together) in John 1:1-3: 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.

John begins the prologue to his gospel using the very same words used in the book of Genesis, “In the beginning…” However, in Genesis we hear of what God did in the beginning. Here in John’s prologue, we learn of who the Logos was, and even who God was even before the beginning of time and space. In the beginning, says John, the Logos was. The Greek verb “eimi” is used in the imperfect tense, which gives us the meaning that in the beginning, the Logos always was an ongoing reality.

John emphasizes that the Logos was not created; the Logos did not come into existence at the beginning along with the universe, space and time. No, the Logos always was. The Logos predates any created thing. And, the Logos was with God. Here John differentiates the Logos from God to the extent that the Logos is in relationship with the one true God, yet unique in some way from the Creator God. John allows a bit of space between the Logos and God by referring to God with the definite article, so a literal word for word translation might read, “and
the Word was with the God.” The word “with” indicates “toward”…as though the Logos and the Father are facing toward each other in an eternal, face to face conversation. But then to avoid the heresy of “multiple gods,” John writes, “…and the Logos was God.” The Greek here really tells the story as to what John means in this final phrase. In the Greek construction of this short phrase, the word “God” lacks a definite article, so in this phrase John is careful to maintain that the Logos was not the God, as in the same exact God who we think of as the Father. At the same time, John is clearly not suggesting that the Word was “a god.” He is not saying that the Logos was in some way divine, a demi-god, or some emanation from God…that would require a different word and construction in the Greek. By the way, all of those heretical interpretations of Jesus were out there, particularly amongst the Gnostics. John has to be perfectly concise here to defend against the heretical interpretations that Jesus was just a man or an emanation of God or some chap who was “god-like” in some way but not God himself.

So, here in vs. 2, John brilliantly crafts the Greek to hold the tension that we’ve become accustomed to over time: Jesus is with the Father, Jesus is NOT the Father, and yet both Jesus and the Father are God. John is articulating that though the Logos and God the Father are unique in person (they exist for all eternity WITH and TOWARD each other), they are one in substance and likeness: coequal, coexisting, coeternal. This declaration of God as the unified, coexisting, coeternal relationship of Father, Son (Logos), and (as we’ll see later) the Holy Spirit is mind-blowing…it is beyond the human imagination to make up such a thing. But John’s opening prologue makes it painstakingly clear that Jesus—the Logos, was both with God and was God…and that He was always and constantly with God in the beginning.

John then states that “all things were made through Him, and not even one thing that was made came to be without him.”

Remember, the Gnostics did not believe that God could get his fingers dirty with matter, so John is being very careful to articulate that Jesus was the active agent at creation. Notice that John very carefully states that all things were made THROUGH the Logos…not BY the Logos. That may be hair-splitting, but I think it is significant. The Father is the Creator…all things were spoken into existence through that simple phrase, “And God said…let there be light, and there was light…” right? But here’s the picture: whenever God SAYS something, it is the WORD that accomplishes the task. God the Father is behind all of creation, but God the Logos is the active agent that accomplishes the will and purpose of the Father. Think about all the times that Jesus says exactly that: “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me.” “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment I is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” “The works that the Father has given me to accomplish are the very works that I am doing.” God the Father directs, the Word accomplishes the will of the Father. They are always together, never apart…they are One.

Ok, we know what John has written, let us continue now to ask, “What does it mean, and why does it matter?”

IV. What it means and why it matters
So what does it mean that Jesus is the Logos who existed from the beginning with the Father, as God, and that all things were made through Him? And why does it matter? Thousands of pages have been written on what this passage means.

Let us first glean what this means from other sources in the New Testament. As Paul unpacks the mystery of Jesus as the eternal Son of God who coexists in oneness with the Father, he writes to the church in Colossae:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Listen to how Paul holds this tension that John articulated in John 1. Paul writes that Jesus is the very image of God, and yet He is the “firstborn” of all creation. Do you feel the tension? Don’t let that term “firstborn” throw you, by the way…Paul isn’t suggesting that Jesus was “born” to the degree that there was a time when He didn’t exist. Firstborn is the term used for the oldest brother, the preeminent one among all others, second to the Father…and yet when we look at Jesus, says Paul, we see the Father. The Son was with the Father at creation, says Paul, because all things were created through him and for him.

Here’s why that matters. Too many people tend to think of Jesus as an afterthought, or that God lightened up a bit when Jesus came along as in comparison to the God of the OT. But listen to what both John and Paul are saying: God has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What we observe in Jesus is the way God always is, always was, and always will be. As Paul just said to the Colossians, “For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” When we see Jesus, the very nature and character of God is revealed.

That makes sense, right? The WORD reveals. How do we reveal the deepest thoughts, the deepest truths, the deepest aspects of our character? We use WORDS. Words reveal things that remain hidden without words. The Word of God, the Logos, the Son…reveals who God is. We don’t have to guess; we don’t have to make up our own gods or our own reasons for the way things are.

Listen to how the writer of Hebrews captures the nature of the Logos:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power,

Once again we see that the Father and the Son are unique in person and even in role. The Son comes as the final spokesperson for the Father; the Father delights in the Son and appoints Him
the heir of all things; and the Father speaks creation into being through His Word; the Son! And yet the Son is the very radiance of the glory of God with the exact imprint of God’s nature; and God the Father upholds the universe by the LOGOS of his power…by His Word, the Son!

The picture of who Jesus is remains very consistent throughout the New Testament. Jesus has always been, even before the beginning. He was always existed with the Father, and He has always been God, such that all things were created through Him as the agency of God’s Word…God’s power which speaks things into being.

Let me conclude with one final take away, and we’ll pick up here next week.

No matter who you are, you have a Logos. In other words, you have a functional “reason” regarding the way things are, some philosophical starting point that helps you to “hold it all together.” As we’ve seen, people have been observing the order in the universe, the unique nature of the human mind and our ability to discern right from wrong…and they rightly came to the conclusion that these observations demand a REASON. So, believe it or not, we all have a reason. But not all of our reasons are “reasonable!”

For instance, I think it is unreasonable to believe that the order we find in DNA just accidentally made itself over billions of year through time and chance. I think it is unreasonable to believe that the whole universe accidentally hangs in a precarious, perfect balance to allow life to exist on this planet. I think it is unreasonable to look at the human eyeball and conclude that “random chaos” accounted for that.

And yet, when asked for a reason for the way things are, huge numbers of people these days will say, “time and chance.” Which is to say, “there is no reason.” There is no Creator, there is no plan, there is no purpose, there is no design, there is no hope, there is no good and no evil, there is nothing but cold, impersonal matter plus time and chance…and in the end, everything we can observe is just chaos that has the appearance of order. I don’t have enough blind faith to deny what I can observe…like Heraclitus, Philo, Plato, Zeno, and so many others throughout time, I cannot deny that there is order, design, morality, beauty, good, evil, love, and many other evidences that demand a REASON.

Then there are those who make up their own reason…they have become armchair philosophers, and in the vein of the Greek philosophers before them, they assume there is a REASON, but they assume the REASON cannot ever be known. Many post-modern people operate on this kind of philosophy, so they appeal to “the Universe” as the REASON. I remember watching a sitcom called, “How I Met Your Mother” for a couple seasons, and the postmodern characters were constantly saying, “I think the Universe is trying to tell you something.” “The Universe has a plan for your life.” “I thank the Universe for all my friends.” For many people in our society, the Universe has become this unknowable, cosmic “logos” that sounds incredibly similar to Heraclitus, Philo, and Plato…but the anonymity of their “logos” remains conveniently non-committal. Furthermore, people who think this way have fallen into pantheism, or what Francis Schaeffer called, “paneverythingism.” If everything in the Universe is god, then we really don’t have a god…which means we really don’t have a reason. We cannot appeal to a book to prove the source of a book. At some point, we must appeal to an Author, right? The Universe cannot
provide a reason for a universe, the universe can only bear witness to the fact that it exists. The universe will stink at providing the REASON that we are all looking for.

Still others in our post-modern society have come to believe that we can actually BE our own reason…our own logos. For many people in our culture today, feelings determine their ultimate reality. They don’t have a higher reality that they bow to…they don’t appeal to God or the Universe…they simply appeal to their own feelings, their own thinking, their own desires as though their feelings, thoughts, and desires are authoritative, accurate, and capable of providing a REASON for the way things are.

Listen friends, all of human history is centered around one person, and one person only, and His name is Jesus. And there’s a reason for that. Jesus, the Logos of God, is the only intellectually satisfying REASON for the way things are. He was in the Beginning with God, and He was God, all things were created through Him and for him, and He is the hope of the world, the savior of souls, and our one and only King.

Jesus is the Logos—not the universe, not your friends, and most certainly…not your feelings. Should we set aside Jesus as the logos and place our confidence in some other “reason” for being, the results are pretty predictable.

Because here’s the truth: we stink at being our own Logos. No human being is qualified to be self-determining. No human being can give meaning to a body, or define sexuality, or account for the order of the universe based on their feelings, their desires, or even their best thinking. And quite frankly, it’s quite depressing and exhausting to even try. So after a while, we will look to others to play “logos” for us. We will count on others to define the “reason;” we will look to others to make sense of it all. And that is dangerous…more dangerous than you could possibly imagine. Germany in the 1930’s was bankrupt, jobless, and demoralized. The church had become watered down with Darwinian philosophies, and Jesus, the LOGOS, was set aside. Then along came a man with great charisma, and he provided the “logos” for those who were desperate for an answer. Hitler took the role of Jesus…he gave his people meaning, he promised them redemption and salvation—something to live for, something to die for, a raison d’etre. He used his WORDS and propaganda to brainwash an entire nation. And the result was catastrophic. Study your history church: in the absence of the true Logos, a false logos will fill the vacuum…it is the history of totalitarianism in every generation. I will come back to this theme in the weeks to come, but nothing could be more important than embracing the Logos who was in the beginning, He was with God, and He was God. The Logos has a name: his name is Jesus. He is the only one who can make sense of the world we live in. He is the WORD made flesh; He is the creative power of God who helps us to see who God is and how God has always been. God has ALWAYS loved you. You are not an accident; you are not irretrievably broken; you are not a freak; and you are not a machine. Your body and your spirit are both part of his image in you, and He LOVES you just as you are. We know this is true because Jesus, the Logos, became flesh and dwelt among us…He showed us…and he understands.

You don’t have to play god anymore. You don’t have to bear the pressure of writing your own narrative or defining your own reality. God has a plan…and it’s a good plan…and you can find rest in His arms for your weary soul. Let’s pray.