

# Life Group Questions

Dec 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

**Sifting Through Layers** – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe

John 1:1-5

## Note from Pastor Jonathan

Happy Advent, Life Groups!

I have a few announcements for everyone:

**WSBM Winter Courses** (<https://willingdon.org/wsbm>) are open for registration! Life Group Leaders get **50% off**. Contact me for the code. If you have any questions, ask Pastor Bryan ([bborn@willingdon.org](mailto:bborn@willingdon.org)) or Pastor Brody ([bloewen@willingdon.org](mailto:bloewen@willingdon.org)).

- Old Testament Panorama: An overview of the OT will grow your appreciation for God's grand story of salvation and the OT books that you dread reading.
- Live Your Calling: Knowing is only half the battle. We must learn how our lives fit into God's plans!
- The Book of Hebrews: Hebrews in a nutshell: "Jesus is better than everyone and everything." Gain an appreciation of Jesus, especially in light of the Old Testament.
- The Global Church and Willingdon: We are a biiiiig church, but only a tiny fraction of God's kingdom. Learn what the church looks like around the world through your brothers and sisters from all over the world.

There are a few Christmas Banquets happening at Willingdon. There's the **Men's Christmas Banquet** happening on Thursday, Dec. 12<sup>th</sup> (<https://willingdon.org/events/mens-ministry-christmas-banquet/>) and **UNITE College & Career Christmas Banquet** happening on Friday, Dec. 13 (<https://willingdon.org/events/unite-christmas-banquet/>) There are also many ILM Banquets happening! Registration deadlines are coming up soon so please share with your group members to register and secure their spots!

Operation Christmas Child is done! Thanks so much for all the boxes you've prepared. Let's pray that these gifts will go to bless children from around the world and that they will learn that Jesus loves them.

The 2025 Short-Term Missions list has been released (<https://willingdon.org/events/stm2025/>). Support them by going, praying for our team and the people we minister to, or giving financially. Talk to Pastor Ruben ([rheyn@willingdon.org](mailto:rheyn@willingdon.org)) when he comes back from our Cuba mission trip if you have questions.

God's been doing a lot of work through Willingdon Church and Austin Heights. (We just heard updates at our elder's meeting from Pastor Brett about all the work God's doing at Austin Heights and it is incredible!) If God is calling you to contribute to His kingdom by giving money, you can do so online (<https://willingdon.org/give>).

# CONTENTS

## LET'S OPEN UP (Pick Any You Like)

1. What stood out to you from the sermon?
2. When non-Christians around you mention Christmas, what do they talk about?
3. Are there any family or popular Christmas traditions that are confusing?
4. What if Santa Claus was real?

## LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any You Like)

5. What in this passage points to Jesus' divinity and why does John bring it up?
6. Respond to this passage by praising and thanking Jesus for who He is.

## LET'S GROW (Pick Any You Like)

7. What difference does it make whether John 1:1-5 is a myth/legend or a true historical account?
8. How can our Christmas celebrations declare these truths about Jesus?
9. How can you let others know the true meaning of Christmas this season?

## NOTES

### Introduction Notes on John

### Pastor Ray's Visual Layout of John 1:1-5

## LET'S OPEN UP

1. What stood out to you from the sermon?

Were there any questions that made you think or points that God used to convict you? Is there something from the sermon you'd like to share with others who didn't hear it or questions you have?

2. When non-Christians around you mention Christmas, what do they talk about?

Your neighbors, classmates, or co-workers are talking about Christmas. They're dreading Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas Is You or longing for some overpriced holiday season coffee shop offerings. Some are checked out, daydreaming of upcoming travel to visit family. Others may be hunkering down under a warm blanket with some warm eggnog while watching the Star Wars Holiday Special (<https://youtu.be/KxtSX1lg8rE>).

I hope that as we see how big Jesus is, we'll share Jesus with the people around us so they'll celebrate Him, too.

3. Are there any family or popular Christmas traditions that are confusing?

Christmas is usually a celebration of Jesus' birth, but many traditions make you wonder, "What in the world does this have to do with Jesus?" Why do we wish you a Merry Christmas but demand figgy pudding? How do

### John 1:1-5

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God.

<sup>3</sup> All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Christmas crackers relate to Jesus' incarnation? Did Santa ever face legal consequences for running over grandma (<https://youtu.be/MglwLeASnkW>)? My wife and I like to drive around to look at Christmas light displays (<https://vancouversun.com/news/christmas-lights-metro-vancouver-map-list-2024>). People put up the most random things.

These traditions aren't necessarily wrong, but can easily distract us from the true meaning of Christmas. Let's enjoy the fun stuff but not forget the true meaning of Christmas.

#### 4. What if Santa Claus was real?

Whether you subscribe to Mexican Santa who is friends with Merlin and fights the devil (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nkSsEc i U>), French Santa who gives kids carrots and flies on a donkey, Santa who brings Krampus to terrify and punish bad children, or Robot Santa from the year 3,000 who's too strict. What if he was a 100% real entity, alive and doing Santa stuff today? How would that change the way you see the universe or the supernatural? Would you do traditions differently, like laying out gluten-free cookies and organic milk? Since Santa's got a list of who's naughty and nice, would you be good for goodness' sake? How would you teach the next generation about Santa?

As we discuss this passage, we'll remember Jesus isn't just another fun holiday character, but a very real person.

## LET'S DIG IN

#### 5. What in this passage points to Jesus' divinity and why does John bring it up?

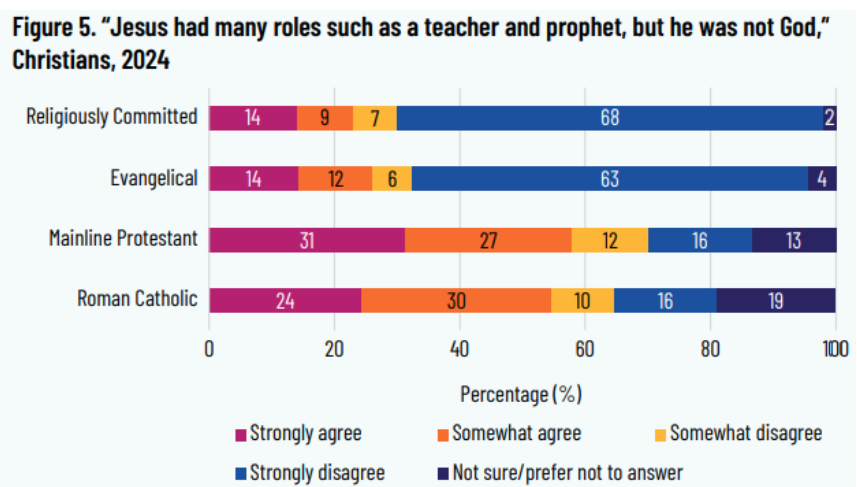
Jesus' divinity is a core tenet of Christianity. Without it, Christianity collapses. In these verses, we can see John *really* wants his readers to know Jesus is God. Somehow, so many self-professing Christians still don't believe it (<https://biblesociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Still-Christian-Report.pdf>)!

There is no way I can fully flesh out all the theology of this passage, so I'll be as brief as I can.

**In the beginning.** These words echo Genesis 1:1. "In the beginning, God ..." Jesus existed before the world was created. Many believe Jesus was a created being, most notably Jehovah's Witnesses (<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/wp20130301/when-jesus-created-why-son/>).

*Why is it important?* Some have accused Christians of promoting "cosmic child abuse". God the Father punishes His Son for something He didn't do. I also remember hearing many Christians use a train drawbridge illustration where a father sacrifices his unwitting son to save a train full of people (e.g., <https://youtu.be/uVtKCd7Fyu4>).

But in this opening line, we see that Jesus was there at the beginning when God's plan of salvation was formed (Ephesians 1:4-6). His death wasn't sprung on Him. Jesus was part of the planning team.



**Was God.** He wasn't lower than God or another God. The God at the beginning of creation was, and is, Jesus. The Jewish people thought Jesus was at best a nutjob trying to overthrow their religious system and at worst a guy pretending to be God and deceiving the people into following Him (Acts 5:33-40). Either way, He was just a guy and Christians wrongfully elevated Him to God-status.

During John's time, people worshipped the emperor. The emperor declared himself a god ("Hey guys, I'm a god now!") or the senate voted to deify them after they died ("Hey guys, Emperor Gary is a god now!"). Imagine sitting around and voting if a guy should be worshipped! John wanted his readers to know that Jesus was *always* God. He didn't suddenly call Himself God and His followers didn't think, "Hey guys, wanna' make Jesus God?"

Nowadays, Muslims agree that Jesus was a prophet born of the virgin Mary, but believe He's only human.

And on Judgment Day Allah will say, "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you ever ask the people to worship you and your mother as gods besides Allah?" He will answer, "Glory be to You! How could I ever say what I had no right to say? If I had said such a thing, you would have certainly known it. – Quran 5:117

*Why is it important?* Christians often treat Jesus as just a good teacher. For example, Jordan Peterson is a highly influential speaker and author. Many Christians look to him because they believe his views reflect biblical views. There's some overlap, but ultimately, he believes Jesus is there to help you be the best you (<https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jordan-peterson-and-his-useful-god/>). Jesus is a tool you can utilize for your benefit.

[As Pastor Ray noted, Greek doesn't have an indefinite article (like a/an in English). The Jehovah's Witness translation of the Bible (New World Translation) states, "The Word was in the beginning with God and was a god" (John 1:1, NWT). (Check out this article for more info: <https://www.gotquestions.org/New-World-Translation.html>.)]

**Made through Him.** God spoke creation into existence with His Word. Jesus is the Word. Jesus created Mary, whose womb He inhabited (Genesis 1:26). When we think of angels telling shepherds about Jesus at night, remember that Jesus invented angels (Colossians 1:16-17), sheep (Genesis 1:24-25), and nighttime (Genesis 1:4-5). When magi followed the star, remember Jesus invented stars (Genesis 1:14-19) and the concept of light (Genesis 1:3). Jesus didn't just hang out with random people, but beings He created and breathed life into (Genesis 2:7). When the Jewish religious leaders had Him executed on the cross, they murdered their Creator.

Non-Jewish people usually came up with different gods and gave them credit for creating the world. They made statues of these gods (idols) and worshipped them. John wanted them to know that these gods had nothing to do with creation, like Paul's message on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31).

*Why is it important?* There's so much I could say! If Jesus made everything, then everything is for Him. Our money, bodies, time, possessions, and relationships should be used for His purposes (1 Corinthians 10:31). We should depend on Him for all our needs and not act like we are in control (Matthew 6:25-34). We should praise Jesus for every good thing in our lives. He gave us eyes to see the breathtaking world He created and gaze into the faces of our loved ones. He gave us noses to smell the aromas of pumpkin spice latte and durian and pumpkin spice durian. He gave us tastebuds to indulge in Korean BBQ and jreewe (<https://www.ungerreview.com/a-glossary-of-mennonite-food/>). He gave our bodies mechanoreceptors so we can feel a friendly hug and develop ball-handling skills on the court. Thank Him for it!

**In him was life.** Jesus is the source of physical life because He gave us life and keeps the world going (Hebrews 1:3). Hypothetically if He took a break, the universe would disappear. We only exist and live because He lets us exist and live and keeps us going.

He's also the source of eternal life with God (John 14:6; 17:3). The Jewish people thought if they studied God's written word enough, they would have eternal life. They didn't realize that God's Word pointed to Jesus, who *is* God's Word (John 5:39-40). They thought they could find life by obeying God's laws, but, because of their inherent sinfulness, they couldn't. They needed Jesus' forgiveness to receive eternal life.

*Why is it important?* We (and everyone around us) *need* Jesus. Without Him, we will live an earthly life separate from God, slaves of sin with no hope without the Holy Spirit to comfort us, unable to abide in His love. We can't even serve or please Him.

Without Him, we don't have eternal life. Doomed to eternal condemnation for our sins. No good works can make up for our sins. No gods or religions can save us from God's wrath. No reincarnation/Quantum Leaping (<https://youtu.be/DjK9GJMBpt0>). We do not leap from life to life, striving to put right what once went wrong, and hoping each time that our next leap will be the leap home (Hebrews 9:27).

We need Jesus for our day-to-day *and* eternal lives. The people around us do, too.

**6. Respond to this passage by praising and thanking Jesus for who He is.**

It's good to read about who Jesus is. It's *gooder* to meditate on and process that truth. It's even *gooder* to respond in awe. So, what attributes of Jesus stick out to you in this passage? Are you struck by His power in creating the universe? Are you baffled that this infinite being decided to put everything aside and become human like us to die on the cross (Phil 2:5-8)? Are you blown away that this eternal being cares about you?

Don't rush. Take a minute of silence and let the passage sink in before you pray.

## LET'S GROW

**7. What difference does it make whether John 1:1-5 is a myth/legend or a true historical account?**

You can break it down into two columns to compare/contrast. I've included suggested prompts to process this question. Just pick a few that strike a chord or come up with your own. You don't need to do all of them!

If John 1:1-5 is ...	Myth/Legend	True History
How I establish my identity:		
What gives my life meaning:		
My hope for this life:		
My hope after I die:		
My hope for my family and loved ones:		
How I plan for the future:		
How I prioritize my life:		
How I spend my time:		
How I spend time with God:		
How I tell others about Jesus:		
How I deal with sin and shame:		
How I relate to the church:		
How I relate to non-Christians:		
How I relate to "difficult" people:		

## 8. How can our Christmas celebrations declare these truths about Jesus?

Here's one suggestion, but I'm sure you all can come up with more.

**Make Jesus the focus.** I've seen lots of families (and churches) celebrate Jesus and Santa Claus side by side. We tell kids to be good so Santa will give them presents. So, the kids behave with the hope of getting the Atari 2600 Game Console or Starsky and Hutch RC Car. We also tell them that they're sinful and can't be good on their own, so they need Jesus to save them. They should also be good because Jesus wants them to obey Him. Sometimes Santa and Jesus blend together, so we try to be good so Jesus will be happy and give us stuff.

I've been at churches where someone in a Santa costume gives kids gifts during the service. Yes, it's fun, but what message does that send? Santa's ethical system is the same as God's (be good to get what you want). Santa and Jesus are the same (both fictional characters super loosely based on a historical figure).

It's OK to do Santa, but let's be clear that he's a fictional character, like a Grinch or Abominable Snowman. And let's make sure we do more things that focus on Jesus than the rest.

## 9. How can you let others know the true meaning of Christmas this season?

We'll have many interactions with others this December related to Christmas, even with non-Christians. Let's use these opportunities to redirect them to Jesus. Here are two suggestions.

**Make Opportunities to Share.** People are eager to share what Christmas means to them, even non-Christians. Ask them what they love about Christmas and what they look forward to. As they share, it gives you a chance to tell them what you love about Christmas. You can tell them how you love the lights, the weather, and the festivities, but most of all you love Jesus.

The same goes for when people talk about your Christmas plans. You can tell people about why you're attending a Christmas Eve service, celebrating Christmas with your Life Group, or serving. I'm sure they'll ask questions and you can respond with Jesus.

**Share What Makes Jesus Exciting.** Growing up, we did Christmas stuff like candlelight services and sang Christmas carols because ... well, it's what you do. And those things were exciting because ... well, it's different or fun. I loved the mood of a candlelight service and the potlucks. I especially loved being able to spend more time with my cousins and church friends. Oddly missing from my excitement was Jesus.

As you meditate on this passage, I hope you get pumped by how big and powerful and amazing Jesus is so that when you share about Christmas, you're overflowing with adoration about Jesus.

## NOTES

### Introduction to John

We're doing a series on the beginning of John's Gospel for Advent. I'll focus on today's passage. Check out Bible Project's overview of the Gospel of John (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-2e9mMf7E8>).

John wrote his Gospel (book on Jesus' life) around 90ish A.D., roughly 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Good News about Jesus had spread to many parts of the Mediterranean through Paul's missionary journeys and Christians scattered across the Roman empire.

John's Gospel was written to both Jewish and non-Jewish people so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

The Jewish people were familiar with the Old Testament and waited for God to send someone to save His people (aka the Messiah/Christ). Because of their Jewish ties, they probably learned misinformation about Jesus. Many believed Jesus was executed "because he practiced sorcery, incited people to idol worship, and led the Jewish people stray" (Sanhedrin 43a.21). John would have to correct their thinking by explaining how Jesus is not only in line with the Old Testament, but was also the same God.

Non-Jewish people (Gentiles) may have heard about Christianity, but not good stuff. Emperor Nero accused Christians of not just burning down Rome, but "hating the human race" (Tacitus, Annals 44). People thought Christians were atheists because they didn't have physical idols and didn't worship the Greco-Roman gods. John would have to explain how Christians *do* worship a God named Jesus who came because He loved the world (John 3:16).

On top of this, Christians were hated by Jews and non-Jews, often facing persecution and death. There better be an amazing reason for people to want to join a targeted minority.

And a quick refresher, this is Pastor Ray's summary of God's Word in the Old Testament:

"God's Word, in the Old Testament, is God's expression of who he is, whether through creation, revelation, or salvation. By his powerful word, things come into being, truth and wisdom are revealed, people are delivered and healed, and nations are raised up or judged."

### **Pastor Ray's Visual Layout of John 1:1-5**

I like how Pastor Ray arranged these verses to show the themes, so I've included them here.

**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 anything MADE**  
**That was MADE**

**In him was LIFE**  
**And the LIFE was the LIGHT of men.**  
**The LIGHT shines in the DARKNESS,**  
**And the DARKNESS has not overcome it.**