## Dr. David Turner, Gospel of John, Session 3, Prologue, John 1:1-18

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This is Dr. David Turner in his teaching on the Gospel of John. This is session 3, The Prologue, John 1:1-18.

Greetings, I'm David Turner. This is video three in our series on the Gospel of John. We've been looking at some introductory matters on the historical background of the text, the way we have received it, and its content and literary structure. So now we're going to begin to study the book chapter by chapter.

We have about 18 videos planned on John, the entire content of the book. So, we spend our first video on the content here today, just on the prologue, John chapter 1 verses 1 through 18, which is certainly one of the more unique and amazing sections in all of the New Testament. When we look at the Gospel of John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18, I think we can profitably compare it to how an architect might have skillfully and beautifully designed the vestibule or the atrium of a nice building.

So, when you think about how John structures his book, many of the topics that he spends a great deal of time on in the book are brought to the fore here in the introduction, in the prologue, so that just as you walk into a well-designed building, the entryway, the atrium, the vestibule sort of beckons you and invites you and welcomes you into the house or the building as a whole. So, the Gospel of John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18 does the same for the Gospel as a whole. So, if you think of a beautiful entryway to a fine home such as this or something along those lines, you begin to grasp, I think, something of what the prologue to the Gospel of John does.

Its literary function is to introduce the key themes of the fourth gospel and to interest the reader to keep reading it. So, let's think for a minute about the different key themes, and ideas in the fourth gospel and see how they're mentioned there and how they're developed slightly elsewhere. For instance, we start, as everyone knows, in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

So that text certainly tells us that Jesus had a pre-existence before he came to the world as the incarnation of the divine message for humanity. So, the pre-existence of Jesus is taught here and you think about how it comes up later on in the Gospel of John, for example, in chapter 8 where the Lord Jesus said after a dispute with some Jewish people who in some sense had already believed in him, he said before Abraham was born, I am. So clearly there was a pre-existence to Jesus that becomes part of the message of John.

The fact that Jesus is described as life and the way he later is going to say again in chapter 8, I am the light of the world and I bring life to the world. The way in which Jesus is spoken of as light and life together is interesting here and it comes up elsewhere in the Gospel. The ministry of John the Baptist is brought up here in the prologue and of course, once we get out of the prologue into John chapter 1 verse 19 we're immediately beginning to read about the ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is going to come up again quite a bit towards the end of chapter 3 and then later on in John's Gospel as a whole, I think again in chapter 5. I think the main function of the prologue theologically is to tell us that this is a book about how you respond to Jesus. We're told in the middle of the prologue that he came into his own, the world in which he made, but the world did not know him. He came into his own, his own did not receive him, but as many as did receive him he authorized them to become children of God.

We see in the Gospel of John a whole series of individuals who are impacted by Jesus and are confronted by him in various ways. Some of them do not receive him, some do receive him, and so the book essentially develops this theme of how he came into the world that he made and some of the people in the world whom he made want nothing to do with him. Others will receive him and begin to follow him as Lord and Savior.

Another big topic in John that is important is the glory of God and as we're told here in John chapter 1 is the one who reveals the glory of God in a way that Moses could only could only dream of. As we begin to read in the Gospel of John about the miracles that Jesus did, we're told immediately in chapter 2 that when he did his first miracle in Cana of Galilee, his disciples saw his glory and they believed in him there. We're told later on in the Gospel that Jesus manifested the glory of God and perhaps the most amazing part of John's Gospel in light of God's glory is where in his prayer in John 17 when he begins to pray and speak of his own relationship to the Father, then praying for the disciples and then for those who would believe through their ministries, he begins by praying along the lines that he's asking the Father to restore to him the glory which he had with the Father before the world came into existence.

So that is an amazing thing about John the way it speaks of the glory and we could basically do a whole theology of the Gospel of John just by looking at the topics that come up here in brief in the prologue. The prologue is interesting to us not only for the topics that it portrays but it's also interesting to us by the way it portrays the topics and anyone who has studied much in the Gospel of John has noticed the way in which the phraseology is laid out in ways that are very catchy. In ancient times there was a literary device called chiasm, turn it into an adjective that becomes a chiastic, the word chiastic. So, we can notice the way John has very simply written the first couple verses in terms of the vocabulary and the structure and the words he's using but the way he arranges the words focuses on the fact that Jesus is in the sense giving us who God is. So, verses 1 and 2 in Greek and we can also even see it in English, in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and God was the word and he was in the beginning with God. And so, it works out even more neatly if you look at it in Greek.

So, the reason for this sort of structuring of the language is to help people remember what's been said either to memorize it word by word or just to remember the gist of it using simple words but using them in a very tightly structured way. We can even look at the entire prologue to John along these same lines in a structure. Many scholars have done different approaches to this and have looked at it in ways this is sort of a simplified way that we can understand the way the gospel is structured.

So, as you know when we begin to read Jesus is portrayed as the original creator of the world who brought life and light into the world. John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus as the light was spoken of next. We're then told the light came into the world even though it was rejected by many those who received it were authorized to become God's children.

Then the way light comes into the world in verses 9 and 10 is paralleled by the fact again moving away from it that the word became flesh. John's witness is mentioned already in verses 6 through 8 but mentioned again in verses 13 and 14. And then finally Jesus as the ultimate revelator of God.

So, we see interestingly the way in which Jesus is portrayed as the one who was originally the creator and Jesus is the one who ultimately revealed. The witness of John the Baptist is mentioned twice. The light coming into the world, the world becoming flesh.

And then the heart of the prologue is the way in which the response to the word is mentioned side by side here. Many unfortunately rejected the word and still do. However, many have received the word and still do.

So, the reason why the prologue is structured this way, the way we would analyze it this way is it focuses attention on the heart of the prologue. He came into his own, his own didn't receive him but in fact, some did and those who did were authorized to become the children of God. Another way of structuring the prologue and thinking about the way it tells us the story of Jesus is by focusing on the two passages in John 1:1 and in 1:14 where we're told that the word is mentioned.

So, we notice in the main part of the prologue, the first 13 verses, that the word is the transcendent creator. The word is the giver of life and light to humans. John the Baptist bears testimony to Jesus as the light and then how Jesus came into the world as light and was rejected by many but received by some as the transcendent creator of the world.

Verses 14 through 18 sort of pick up on that and give you a theological summary of it, one of much more brief but much more intense and concentrated. So just as the word is the original transcendent creator of the universe so the word is the incarnate revealer of God. So, the word is not only a divine creator but a human being.

So, the word is the great revealer of God's full grace and truth according to chapter 1 verse 14. John the Baptist's testimony, C prime, just like John the Baptist's testimony is mentioned before. John the Baptist's testimony again and then the interesting thing about this second section of it verses 14 through 18 is the way in which Moses is brought up as the key feature there.

So, this way looking at the structure of the discourse basically tells us that the way you respond and relate Jesus to Moses tells us a lot about where you're going to end up in your religious allegiance. So, the question that really is being asked is how verses 14 through 18 then sum up the first 13 verses in terms of Jesus and Moses. So, you have to understand that in its original milieu, this was a huge question for those who were going to read the Gospel of John and think about Jesus.

What is the relationship of Jesus and Moses? Are we going to be happy with Moses and the revelation we receive from God through him or are we going to view Jesus as the ultimate revelator, the one whose revelation does not abolish Moses's but indeed adds to it and takes it to its ultimate conclusion? So, the reader as we say here at the bottom of the slide is going to have to be faced with the question will he receive God's ultimate revelation in Jesus or is he going to reject Jesus and hang out just with God's partial revelation through Moses? We begin to see this operating right away when one of John the Baptist's disciples comes to his brother and says we want you to come see Jesus.

He's the one that Moses and the prophets spoke about. Of course, later on in chapter five there's a huge disagreement between Jesus and his interlocutors in Jerusalem, and the debate is over Moses and will the real Moses please stand up as they used to say on an old quiz show. Who is Moses really going to support? Are the Pharisees followers of Moses or not? Jesus sets up a triangulation in which he says I'm with Moses, Moses is with me.

If you don't get me you don't really get Moses. So Moses is hugely important in the Gospel of John and obviously, in the way the Gospel of John's message was received amongst the Jewish people who were obviously holding allegiance to Moses. The question is whether that allegiance in and of itself was sufficient or whether Moses himself was looking forward to Jesus in some sense of the word.

So, we can't really do the prologue. We've been talking about its overall structure but we can't really think clearly about it unless we understand who the word is or what the word is. So, we're talking now about the Greek word logos which occurs in the very first verse in the beginning was the word.

The logos is the word and biblical scholars have been trying for hundreds of years to understand the background of this word and what it means, what it meant to John's original audience, and where it was coming from. I recall when I was a student in seminary and working with a youth group in a little country church down in Indiana we received some Sunday school material to use on John which floated the theory that when John was writing his book he wanted Greeks to understand the book so he described Jesus as the logos because logos was a big part of Greek philosophy. And that's quite true in Stoic thought and I believe in Pythagorean thought as well.

The universe was believed to be a manifestation of a basic theory or thought or reason or structure and everything sort of revolved around that. So, this impersonal logos, this impersonal structure that made up the world was viewed as the heart of the world itself in this approach to worldview. So, the principle of reason or structure or logic or just the idea of orderliness in the world was then basically viewed as the most basic element in the universe in this way of thinking about the world in this philosophy.

If this is the case then what John is attempting to say by describing Jesus as the logos is that everything that these people who had this Greek worldview were thinking is basically summed up in Jesus. Everything that you thought the logos was, Jesus truly is. Another way of looking at the word logos and what it might have meant to its audience is how it was used in the Jewish culture which had absorbed some of the Greek thought, Hellenistic Judaism.

In other words, Grecianized or Hellenized Jews who were living out in the Diaspora and had absorbed to a greater extent the Hellenistic worldview than say the Jews who were living in Palestine still. In Hellenistic Judaism, the logos was viewed as the sort of personification of wisdom. So logos and wisdom were viewed as very simple and interrelated topics.

So, the Greek word logos would be connected then to the Greek word Sophia which in Hebrew would be hokmah and these things were viewed as very similar items in much of this thought. So, we look at canonical books like Proverbs chapter 8 and apocryphal books like Sirach to see this. For example, in Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified, and speaking as a feminine entity, lady wisdom is sometimes called.

And it says, the Lord possessed me at the beginning of his way before his works of old. From everlasting I was established from the beginning, from the earliest times of

the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth where there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth. When he had not yet made the earth and the fields nor the dust of the world, when he established the heavens, I was there. I was there beside him as a master workman.

I was rejoicing always before him, rejoicing in the world, his earth, and having my delight in the sons of men. So, this is a very beautiful way to describe the wisdom of God as one of his attributes and characteristics and how God's wisdom informed the way he created and maintained the world providentially. So, Proverbs, as we know, is all about wisdom and so we can understand wisdom being personified and spoken of in this way.

The problem with this understanding of wisdom and its relationship to the Logos is that if the author of John were simply looking at Jesus as a personified wisdom in this sense, the language of Proverbs 8 seems to take wisdom as God's first creation. And God's first creation wisdom is how he used this attribute to create the rest of the created entities of the world. So, in this sense, wisdom would be like the first of God's creative acts.

He created wisdom and then used wisdom to help him create the rest of the world. But if John were using this as a basis for his Christology, he must have been saying more than that because I don't think John would have accepted the fact, given what he says in the first few verses of John, that Jesus was a part of creation. Rather, in John 1, Jesus is the creator, not even the first of creation.

Similarly, in the book of Sirach, an apocryphal book sometimes called Ecclesiasticus, we have these words in Sirach 1, all wisdom is from the Lord, and with him it remains forever. Here we have it, wisdom was created before all other things. That's an amazing thing to say about wisdom, but it still says wisdom was a created thing.

The root of wisdom to whom has it been revealed? Her subtleties, who knows them? There has been one who is wise, greatly to be feared, seated upon his throne, the Lord, it is he who created her. Certainly, wisdom is crucial for us as we live our daily lives and we need wisdom. You could say God used his wisdom to create the world, but I don't think we want to say that Jesus was a created being and so that's the analogy that's being drawn here.

Again, if Hellenistic understanding of wisdom is typified in Sirach, and there are others we could cite here if we were to go on if the author of John was alluding to those motifs in these texts, he certainly wanted to say Jesus was not simply that, but was more than that. In other words, what you think of as wisdom is met and superseded by Jesus, who is not merely the first of God's creation, he is the creator. For this reason, I think perhaps we need to go beyond the idea that John was simply using the logos to speak to Greek philosophers or to those who had been influenced by it, or trying to reach Hellenistic Jews who had an elevated understanding of wisdom.

It seems to me that perhaps we need to bring in another aspect of this that makes a bit more sense, that he is actually speaking of wisdom in the sense of which it's used in the Hebrew Bible. I'm using the word Tanakh here, which is an anachronism, excuse me, not an anachronism, I just lost my word, a word that is used using the first of other words to make it up. So, we have the Tanakh, the Torah, we have the Nevi'im, the prophets, we have the Ketuvim, the writings, so that's how we get the word Tanakh.

So, the Tanakh is simply a way that Jewish people speak of the Old Testament, an acronym, I guess is the term I was looking for a moment ago, it came to me finally. So, in the Hebrew Bible, God created the world by his word, and so we have that in Genesis as well as in other texts such as Psalm 33 and in Isaiah. So, we look at these texts briefly just to make sure we understand it.

God spoke the world into existence in Genesis chapter 1 verse 3. God simply said, let there be light, yehi or, and sure enough, or there was light. So, we see this several times in the book of Genesis that God's speech is active, God's speech is performative, when God says something, something happens, and so his word, his speech is a creative force in the world. Psalm 33 reflects on this to a degree when it says, by the word of the Lord, the heavens were made and by the breath of his mouth, all of their hosts.

And he says that this is how God does business, God speaks and it comes to be, God commands and it stands firm. Later on in Isaiah 55, we read, my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts are higher than your thoughts. Later on, after using the analogy of precipitation to show that God gets results from his providential precipitation upon the earth, he goes on to say in that analogy, just as the precipitation causes things to sprout, makes things happen, so by analogy, my word will be which goes forth from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty without accomplishing what I desire and without succeeding in the matter to which I send it. In this sense then, Jesus is the word of God in the sense that he is the creative breath of God, he is the one who shows the message of God in a personified way, in a powerful way, who performs all the will of God. So apparently, when we think about these three ways of understanding the background of the Logos and John, we're probably not thinking of these as mutually exclusive options.

It could be that when John was writing, I think he was writing primarily with this understanding of the word in the Hebrew Bible as in the forefront of his mind, that he knew that when he described Jesus as the word of God, as the creator, that people would be associating it with these texts in Genesis and Psalm 33 and Isaiah 55 and others that we could go into. But in addition to that, I'm sure that John would not have objected had people reflected on the way Proverbs 8 and related texts in the Apocrypha such as Sirach had spoken of the word and wisdom as relating to God's manner of creation. And even in Greek philosophy, the idea is that there is, in a sense, a word, a wisdom, a principle that holds the world together.

I think these things are not antithetical necessarily to what John may have had in mind and he may have intended to pick a word that would have related to a very wide audience in different ways as long as people understood that Jesus superseded all these other uses. So, let's speak now not so much about the background but to the foreground of this question and deal with the way the word is understood in one particular Bible translation of some controversy associated with the Watchtower Bible Association and their translation, the New World Translation, they translate John 1-1 that the word was a God. So, when we read John 1-1, we are confronted immediately with something of a mystery.

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, but here's the hard thing to understand, and the word was God. So how can God, the word, be with God and be God at one and at the same time? Orthodox Christian teaching on this matter related to the doctrine of the Trinity has come to understand texts like this to say that Jesus is indeed a distinct person. He's not the same person as the Father and the Spirit, but he is a unified entity with them.

So, we have three distinct persons in the Trinity and we have one unified essence of God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit. However, the understanding of the Watchtower Association and their New World Translation is somewhat different. In the beginning, the word was and the word was with God and the word was a God.

It is a view of this Bible translation that since the Greek text does not use the definite article to describe Jesus, in the beginning, was the word and the word was with God and the word was the God, the word the does not occur in Greek there, that you must in English translate the word was a God. Anyone who has really looked at Greek very long knows that this is a huge mistake and that there's not quite a one-to-one correspondence in the way you translate Greek into English in this way. The Watchtower translates it in this fashion because they believe that Jesus was God's first creation and I think they have the understanding that Jesus was some sort of a big shot angel in the Old Testament, perhaps Michael, and that later on in New Testament times the former archangel Michael became a human being and came down to be God's first agent in doing creation and one of that.

Interesting how they also translate verse 18, no one is seeing God at any time the only begotten small g God who is in the bosom of the, and they give a little note there in brackets position, who is in the bosom with the father is the one that has explained him. Again, they do this because they think that you cannot capitalize the word g in describing God unless you have the article ha with the Greek word Theos in the New Testament. However, anyone who's translated much in the New Testament knows that this is not really the case.

So, what they seem to be saying here is that the only way that you can really understand that Jesus is capital g God would be if you had the word the in front of his name every time it appeared. In orthodox Christian understanding of course this is not only something that can't be explained from Greek grammar but also something that can't be held just from the language of John 1 itself. As you notice with me if we look at John chapter 1 verse 1 it says in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

He was with God in the beginning through him verse 3 all things were made without him nothing was made that has been made. So if we just stop right there and notice what the text is saying, it's saying through him all things were made without him nothing was made. Of course, if we take the translation of the Watchtower the New World Translation we're going to be taking that we're going to have to re-read verse 3. Verse 3 should have said through him all things were made apart from him without him nothing was made except him because Jesus would have been made and he would have been one of the created beings itself.

So, Jesus created everything else but he himself was a created being. That's simply not what verse 3 says and Greek grammar does not support this translation. So what we find with John chapter 1 verse 1 in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God is simply this that we have this thing that theologians call the Trinitarian Triangle.

So, we have this in Latin in this particular version I thought I would stretch you a bit here and just do that in Latin instead of English. Everybody needs a little Latin to get by, don't they? No? So, we have pater filios spiritus sanctus the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and as you may have already guessed all three are deus that is to say God. Est simply means "is" non-est means "is not."

So, the person of the father is distinct from the person of the son and is distinct from the person of the holy spirit yet all three of them in nature are truly divine are truly God. This seems to be what John 1 verse 2 is affirming when it states in the beginning was the word and the word was with God. To say the word was with God is to say the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are not the same person they are distinct entities.

But to go on to say as it says in John 1 that the word was God is to say that the father is God the Spirit is God and the word the son is God as well. So, we're not saying that we find the fully developed doctrine of the trinity in John chapter 1 obviously we're saying that John chapter 1 is a key passage that has influenced Christian thinking about Jesus and about the trinity through the years. So, what we're saying here when we say the word was with God is probably best expounded by the expression the word was an intimate relationship with the father in verse 18.

Notice it says there is the one and only son who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with God. The word there is a word that is often translated literally as the bosom. It can refer to the hollow place in a shoreline where there's a little cove or a bay just a depression and perhaps it's likened to the hollow made when you raise your arms to hug someone.

So, the one and only God who is himself God is in closest relationship with the father. That I think would be John's own commentary on what he meant in chapter 1 verses 1 and 2. He was with God in the beginning. He was not a God.

He was truly divine. The father, son, and spirit then exist in what has been called by theologians a parachoretic relationship with each other. Parachoresis means a community relationship.

This means that what one person of the trinity does the other two are involved with as well. So, we don't have a tri-theism, three gods doing their own things. We have one God eternally existing in three persons doing the work of our redemption together and we are invited then as the redeemed people of God to join them in that mission.

Moving then to another matter in John chapter 1 we want to think about the relationship of this passage to the Old Testament and where the language of John chapter 1 verses 14 through 18 comes from. John 1 verses 14 through 18 says the word became flesh and we beheld his glory. Speaks about how no one has ever really seen God but Jesus has made him known.

Jesus who is at the side of the Father, who is in intimate relationship with the Father has made him known. Jesus is full of grace and truth according to chapter 1 verse 14 and grace and truth came by Jesus Christ in chapter 1 verse 17. All that wording seems to be anticipated by the relationship of Moses to God back in Exodus chapter 33.

Go back and read Exodus 33 we see that Moses is meeting with God in the tent of meeting and as he comes back to visit the camp his face is still glowing because he has been basking in the glory of God as it were. Yet Moses in this situation feels

inadequate for the task in front of him to lead God's people. So, he says to God show me your glory.

He wants to have a greater apprehension and understanding of who God is that will enable him to show God to and tell the people who God is and will equip him to lead the people. So, God says to him you can't see my face because no one can see me and live but I will show you my back. Now this is an interesting concept, isn't it? I'm not sure how Old Testament scholars are going to explain all this today but how do you see God's face let alone his back? I take it that's something that I've been told is called an anthropomorphism speaking of God in human language and instead of seeing God full on face to face and really catching the full vibe and aura of his persona all of his glory Moses is permitted to see just a glimpse just a bit of God sort of described figuratively of catching a glimpse of the back side of God.

So, in Exodus 34, Moses hides God in the cleft of the rock as it were, and speaks of himself as a God merciful and gracious abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He is a God who is rav hesed ve emet. It's very likely that John's language here is that Jesus is play race full of xaritos, grace and aletheia, truth is meant to intentionally go back and speak of God in the Old Testament and remind people of what God said he was to Moses Exodus 34 6. If this is the case then everything that Moses longed for please show me your glory we have seen in Jesus Christ.

Please show me your glory we have seen his glory. Moses was not able to see the face of God and live yet Jesus is the one who has shown us who the Father is and he takes that so seriously that in chapter 14:9 he said why do you ask me about the Father if you have seen me you have seen the father. So, Moses got to catch a glimpse of God's backside as it were.

Jesus is the one who is as one translation does it he is at the father's side or he is in the most intimate relationship with the father. So, God is one who abounds in grace and truth and Jesus is the one who is fully manifested that God. So we could take the time we won't do right now to go and look through many verses in John which speak a great deal about the terms that we're looking at here and give it to us in more depth so that we would be able to get a great deal more out of this and understand it even better.

So, when we look at the gospel of John then perhaps this is the sort of thing that we had in mind with Clement of Alexandria when he said that the other gospels presented the physical side of things the outward form the soma if you will and what we have in the gospel of John is a pneumatic approach to Jesus a spiritual approach a spiritual gospel. In other words, what we have in Jesus Christ is what the saints of God in the ancient times only long to see and they were able to catch glimpses here and there of God and certainly they did in the Old Testament. Moses certainly gave

us the grace of God when we read chapter 1 verse 17 it says law came by Moses that's certainly not there to disparage Moses or to disparage the law.

It would make not a lot of sense to say the law came by Moses but as some translations and many expositors say but grace came by Jesus because if law is a bad thing it wouldn't do much good to say Jesus was better than something that was bad. This text says the law came by Moses doesn't put a conjunction in there in the Greek it just leaves it empty law came by Moses grace truth came by Jesus. It's not to say that Moses did not experience God's grace and truth he did according to Exodus 34 6 but he did not experience it as fully or as completely or as clearly as we can now experience it as we read about Jesus on the pages of scripture.

So, when we say the law came by Moses we're saying that the law as Paul said in Romans chapter 7 was holy and just and a very good thing but that what we have in Jesus is an even better thing it's the ultimate revelation of God. So, we don't make Jesus look better by making Moses look worse indeed the better Moses looks the better Jesus looks because as Moses was partial Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. Saint Chrysostom spoke of it like this he who became the Son of Man who was God's own son in order that he might make the sons of men to be children of God for when the high associates itself with the low it does not touch its own honor at all instead it raises up the other from its excessive lowness.

So, it was with the Lord by no means did he diminish his own nature by his condescension but he raised us who had always sat in disgrace and darkness to unspeakable glory. We beheld his glory go as the one and only son of the Father full of grace and truth.

I hope you have appreciated and learned from this discussion of the prologue to John's gospel and I assure you many of the themes that we've talked about here rather briefly will certainly come up in later times in the videos in more detail.

Thank you.

This is Dr. David Turner in his teaching on the Gospel of John. This is session 3, The Prologue, John 1:1-18.