

See This Thing

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:14-18

Mark Vroegop

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") 16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:14-18).

For the last two weeks we've been looking at the Advent according to the Gospel of John. The book's aim, according to 20:31, was to help people believe that Jesus is the Christ and so that they might have life in his name. John is an evangelist who is writing a narrative apologetic regarding the life and the ministry of Jesus.

The first chapter introduces and summarizes some enormously important information regarding Jesus. John wants to frame the incarnation of Jesus in theologically significant ways. So far we've seen the following:

- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). We heard John establish some very important truths about Jesus including his self-existence, his revelation of God, his deity, his authority as creator, his ability to be the Savior, and power to conquer unbelief. In the opening verses John highlights the philosophical dynamics.
- John 1:9-13 is all about the new birth, and last week I summarized our text with this statement: God rescues rebels through regeneration. We learned about the miracle of what Jesus' transformation of sinful, rebellious people. In these verses John focuses on the spiritual dynamics.

Our text today addresses how all of this happened. John shows us the beautiful method or means by which this philosophical and spiritual reality takes place. Verses 14-18 celebrate more than the result; they lead us to marvel at "how" this spiritual reality happened. This is the proverbial "icing on the cake" because the substance and the means are both amazing. In other words, it is not just what Jesus did that is overwhelmingly beautiful, but it is also how he did it. We love Jesus for his death, burial, and resurrection but we also love him because he became flesh.

The Beautiful “How”

There are six beautiful aspects of Jesus’ method of redemption that John highlights for us in these verses, and they are connected in some way or by implication to his entrance into the world. Let’s see how beautiful they are.

1. Jesus became human (v 14)

Until this point in John chapter one, the focal point has been on the non-tangible, philosophical, and spiritual. We heard metaphors like word, light, and life. The closest we came to something tangible was the idea of being born in verse 13 but even that has a spiritual overtone. If that was all we read or heard, you might even get the impression that the gospel is just a spiritual issue.

During the time in which John wrote his gospel it was a prominent perspective that the soul or the spiritual element of mankind was the only thing that mattered. This was called Gnosticism in its secular form or Docetism in its pseudo-Christian form. The viewpoint was that since the body was bad, sinful, and lower, Jesus could not be truly human. To them it was intellectually and philosophically embarrassing to think that God would become human and die.

John must have been dealing with this at some level because both his gospel starts with a clear statement and his letter (1 John) addresses this issue very strongly. Listen to what he says:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:2-3).

So it is incredibly significant that John 1:14 says “the Word became flesh.” We learned two weeks ago that the concept of “the Word” meant in Greek philosophy the central reality of the universe. Further, we learned that in Hebrew thought it was connected to the revelation of God. So it would be very unusual and even troubling to say that this central, unifying concept and the revelation of God have now been embodied in a single human being.

It is even more scandalous to think that the Son of God becomes human with all the limitations and “lower life” elements connected to that as an infant. The weakness, humility, and irony are magnified with infancy. Becoming human or flesh is one thing; the Word as a baby is nearly unthinkable. It is willful humiliation that that creates a contrast that is almost too much to bear.

And yet this is God’s plan for redemption. In order for Jesus to save his people from their sins he had to be God and man. He had to be God so that his death would be a sufficient sacrifice, and he had to be human so that it could be applied to us. It is so beautiful!

2. He dwelt among us (v 14)

Becoming flesh was only part of the beauty of what happened in the incarnation of Jesus. A central effect of his becoming flesh was the fact that the God-man walked the face of the earth and lived among humans. God had come down; God was near and close by. He was present.

The word “dwelt” has significant meaning. New Testament scholars tell us that this Greek word was commonly associated with a Hebrew word connected to the Old Testament idea of the tabernacle. The word literally meant residence. Therefore, when a person who knew the Old Testament stories of God’s presence read this text they could not help but think of the tabernacle or even the temple. Some have even suggested that you could translate verse 14 as “...and the Word became flesh and tabernacle among us.”

This is so significant because the presence of God signified his compassion, his love, and his acceptance of his people. The biblical portrait of mankind’s relationship with God and even Israel’s identity was directly tied to God’s presence. Think of the following:

- The beauty of the Garden of Eden was the presence of God (Gen. 3:8), and when Adam and Eve sinned they were driven out of the garden after they had sinned (Gen. 3:24)
- As the people are delivered from Egypt, a cloud or a pillar of fire leads them (Ex. 13:22)
- The purpose of the tabernacle was to provide a central place for God to dwell among his people (Ex. 25:8)
- The Old Testament prophecies referred to the Messiah as Immanuel which means “God with us” (Is. 7:14 / Matt. 1:23)

If you fast-forward to consummation of salvation in Revelation you will see the same thing:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God (Rev. 21:3).

So to say that Jesus dwelt among us means that once again – but in a whole new way – God has come down. He has loved us. He came to us. But this time he not only **came** to us; he **became** one of us! It is so beautiful.

3. His glory was on display (v 14)

The third thing that is just remarkable to understand is that Jesus’ incarnation put the glory of God on full display. As John reflects back on the time that he spent with Jesus and the things that other people saw, he knows that Jesus manifested the glory of God to the world.

The connection between the presence and the glory of God is a common theme in the Bible. This is part of the beauty of being in God’s presence – you behold the beauty of God! 1 John 3:2 says, “...we know that when he appears we shall be like because we shall see him as he is...” In the Old

Testament when God came near, his glory was obvious. When God's presence filled the tabernacle in Exodus 40, there was a cloud by day and a fire by night. At the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8, another cloud filled the temple because "the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." Even the New Jerusalem in Revelation is described as "...coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel" (Rev. 21:10-11). So there is something special about the presence of God and the glory of God.

John goes on to add three things to his description of this glory:

- "as of the only Son" – his special position
- "from the Father" – his connection to divinity
- "full of grace and truth" – the substance of his glory

Jesus personally embodied and revealed what God is like. He is a sufficient display of the glory of God for us to know what God is like. In John 14, Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus replied:

Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (John 14:9).

Philip made the mistake that so many people make: they do not see Jesus as sufficient. You see, some might prefer fire, smoke, a gleaming city, or something else that is more glitzy, more seemingly powerful, and more triumphant. Jesus and how he displays that glory of God does not appeal to everyone. The way that he displays what God is like is often offensive, hard, and humbling. At first it doesn't seem to be very successful, powerful, or victorious. Meekness might seem like weakness. Compassion for sinners seems like compromise. Death on a cross seems like a curse. But in Jesus we see how God dismantles our preconceived and precocious ideas about victory, honor, and redemption. We see the Jesus display the glory of God and at the same time shatter of confidence in ourselves, our ideas, or our ability to be in control. And it is so beautiful.

4. Sinners receive grace upon grace (v 15-16)

In between the "full of grace and truth" in verse 14 and "from his fullness" in verse 16 is a parenthetical comment. Verse 15 is simply there as a restatement of the pre-existent authority that Jesus has as attested to by John the Baptist. John is simply reminding us that all of this talk about his physical and earthly existence should not eclipse his full deity.

John wants us to see that the fullness of Jesus results in a direct effect on those who are followers of his. To say that we receive "grace upon grace" means that everything we have is a product of a continual flood of grace. He is saying that grace is like an ocean; it is inexhaustible in terms of its ability to meet our needs. He is saying that grace just keeps coming, it never runs out, and it is far beyond our wildest dreams to even comprehend.

The hymn-writer Fredrick Leman tried to capture this image when he wrote the hymn *The Love of God*:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

*Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song.*

Once again I come back to 1 Corinthians 4:7: "...what do you have that you didn't receive?" From the fullness of Christ we have received forgiveness, adoption, righteousness, the Spirit of God, a new heart, a new motivation, daily grace, hope, assurance, peace, joy, and eternal life. From his fullness we've received grace upon grace. It is so beautiful!

5. Jesus ushers in a new day (v 17)

John now turns to a distinction between the old and the new, between Moses and Jesus, between Law and Grace. He is summarizing the contrast between the Old and the New Testaments and the Law and the Gospel.

Moses, of course, was the highly esteemed man of God who led Israel out of Egypt. He was the mediator of the Law and the likely author of the first five books of the Bible. Moses and Elijah are viewed as the two most significant prophets that God had sent. Moses was special and the Law was significant, but they pale in comparison to Jesus. According to Galatians 3:24, the Law was designed to lead us to Christ.

The Law could only bring judgment. It was useful in that it was wonderfully hopeless. The Law only brought truth. It revealed sin and even made it come alive to new levels. The Law exposed how bad mankind is in light of God's holiness (see Romans 7).

But Jesus brings grace and truth. He tells us who we really are. He fulfills the Law, and he calls us to obey the intention and the heart of the Law. What's more, he provides the ability to obey from the heart while declaring over us that we've completely kept the Law through him.

That is why when you stand before God, you will never be able to talk about what you've done. Your only hope for forgiveness and a new life is **through** Jesus. Everything comes through him. The Law is good but it is not ultimate. The Law is helpful, but it cannot save. Jesus ushers in a new

day by fulfilling the Law, paying the penalty of the law, granting his obedience to those who didn't deserve it, and calling them to follow him. Grace and truth came through Jesus. It is so beautiful!

6. Jesus revealed the invisible God (v 18)

John's introduction of Jesus has now come to its climax and conclusion. This is what John has been driving toward since he began in the first verse: Jesus who was fully God and fully man has made the invisible God visible. As the Word, the life, the light, and the God-man, Jesus has made God known. He has bridged the gap between a holy God and sinful mankind.

John draws this great prologue to a close by reminding us that no one has ever seen God. Now there are some who have seen glimpses of him, but no one has seen God in his fullness. And John's point is that Jesus reveals this fullness of God. To see him is to see the Father.

He then reaffirms the deity of Jesus and his relationship with the Father. The translation is a bit awkward: "...the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). John is reaffirming the position of Jesus as fully God.¹ And he is affirming his close relationship to the Father – that there is a close affection between them.

All of this culminates in the powerful truth that Jesus has given humanity a full account of what God is like. This text tells us that God has now fully revealed everything we need to know. Jesus is completely sufficient! In him we have the full disclosure of what we need to know about God, and in him we have the ability to be fully known and loved by God. Jesus reveals what God is like and he reconciles us to God. He has made God known! It is so beautiful!

The Rest of the Story

Remember, this is the introduction to the rest of John's gospel. So this prologue, this text, and the fact that Jesus became flesh have implications for personal living. Let me give you a few:

1. Jesus died in your place

The most important and central reason why this is important is simply that by taking on humanity, Jesus was able to take your punishment, to take your penalty, and to be your substitute. He paid for your sins. He absorbed the wrath of God for you. You should have died. You should have been punished. He took the place of those who receive him. Jesus died in your place.

2. Jesus really understands

He took upon himself all the weaknesses and limitations of being human and living in a broken world. He knows what it is like to be tempted, to feel pain, to be disappointed, to be discouraged,

¹ Other manuscripts render this text as "the only One, who is God" or "the only Son" or "the only begotten Son."

and even to be afraid. And because of this, you can come boldly to him in prayer. He really understands.

3. You have everything you need to be godly

2 Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” In other words, Jesus is sufficient. He is full of grace and truth. You lack nothing that you need to honor God and follow him. Circumstances may change. Difficulties may come. People may be very evil. But you lack nothing to grow and become like Jesus.

4. Following Jesus is not only “what” but also “how”

Finally, I was struck by the fact that Jesus not only worked out redemption, but he entered into it personally. What’s more, he entered in a great cost to himself. What he did was not only amazing. But how he did it was also amazing. The “what” of Jesus is remarkable, but so is the how.

And I think that this is one of the real unique distinctions of the Christian faith. And it is the appeal of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2 that we are to do nothing from rivalry or conceit... that we are to look out for the interests of others while having the mind and attitude of Christ.

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Wives are to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord. Children are to obey their parents in Lord. Employees are work heartily as unto the Lord. Bosses are to be mindful of their accountability to the Lord. Single adults are to use their singleness to glorify the Lord. In whatever we do, we are to do it as unto the Lord.

Jesus became a man in order to purchase our redemption. Who? Jesus. What? Redeems people. How? Through the humiliation of becoming human.

Therefore, the call from this text today is behold the beauty of the incarnation and to celebrate this season not only on the basis of **what** he did – but to marvel and meditate on **how** he did it.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us!

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