



## The Word Became Flesh

### The Incarnate Word Series #3

John 1:14

David Sunday

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May the gift of God, the triumph of all time, amaze us still. Let's turn in God's Word to read of this marvelous mystery and wondrous gift in John 1. Let's pray as we open God's Word.

Our holy and loving Father, we pray that, by the illumination of Your Holy Spirit, what we know not may You teach us, what we have not may You give us, and what we are not would You please make us? For the sake of Your Son, our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, in Whose name we pray. Amen.

John 1:1-18 says:

<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.* <sup>6</sup> *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* <sup>7</sup> *He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.* <sup>8</sup> *He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

<sup>9</sup> *The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.* <sup>10</sup> *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.* <sup>11</sup> *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.* <sup>12</sup> *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,* <sup>13</sup> *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

<sup>14</sup> *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.* <sup>15</sup> *(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.'")* <sup>16</sup> *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* <sup>17</sup> *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* <sup>18</sup> *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! Amen.

The Gospel of John holds a favored place in the hearts of many Christians. Some of our most cherished Bible verses come out of this wonderful book:

- *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16).*
- *“... [B]ut whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.” (4:14a).*
- *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35).*
- *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12).*
- *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:10-11).*
- *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26).*
- *“In my Father's house are many rooms...And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also...I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:2-3, 6).*
- *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).*

That’s just a sampling of the many extraordinarily glorious statements we have from the lips of our Lord and Savior in this Gospel. However, there is a very real sense in which all of these statements are simply an exposition and unfolding of the truth that is contained in these first 18 verses we just read. In the prologue. John laid out all the themes he developed throughout the rest of his Gospel.

We are now going to focus on verse 14 because this is one of those verses that is so potent. In this seed is contained all the life that explodes throughout the rest of the Gospel of John, so we are going to concentrate our meditation on verse 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.”*

If you don’t have that one memorized, it would be a great verse to add to your list this Christmas season. *“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.”*

In this verse, we have the Christian doctrine, or teaching, of the incarnation. The incarnation is the most staggering event, the supreme mystery of the Christian faith. We believe in one God Who eternally exists in three Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God. They are equally and fully God, indivisible from one another, yet uniquely manifesting God in each of the three Persons. This doctrine of the Trinity is a great mystery. At the heart of this doctrine is this other great, wondrous mystery: that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, became a human being, without ceasing to be fully God. He remained what He always was from all eternity—fully God—but He became something that He was not—fully man. Now He eternally exists as the God-man. He has two natures—God and man—in one Person.

There is a big word for this. If you want to impress your grandma at lunch, you can tell her you learned this word today: the hypostatic union. That’s what theologians call this mystery. In this one Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, there are two distinct natures. He is fully God and He is fully man.

Athanasius, one of the early church fathers, said, “Christ became what He was not without ceasing to be what He was. He became what we are, that He might make us what He is. Lord of eternity, stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity to the heights of God’s throne.” Come behold this wondrous mystery as we gaze on John 1:14.

In Knowing God, J.I. Packer says:

It is here, the thing that has happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. The Word became flesh. God became man. The divine Son became a Jew. The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than sleep and stare and wiggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this. The babyhood of the Son of God was a reality.

Packer says that the more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. That’s why I love having Advent and Christmas every year. I love being able to be staggered by this wondrous, glorious truth of the incarnation. I love it, even though I cannot grasp it. So I invite you to worship with me. Worship Him as we consider three aspects of the incarnation:

1. The incarnation is the grand miracle of world history.
2. The incarnation is the great fulfillment of biblical theology.
3. The incarnation provides believers with the experience of glory.

Let's meditate on these three truths and worship our Savior as we think about these things.

### **The Incarnation is the Grand Miracle of World History**

Nothing more explosive, significant or magnificent has happened in the history of the world than this event: the Word became flesh. The Word! We heard about this two weeks ago from Pastor Leeper. Meditate with me for a moment. Way back before there was time (go back to that point in your mind if you can), there were no heavens, earth, day, night, sky, land, seas, fish, birds, animals, insects, livestock or people. There was no sin, hate, tears or death. There was nothing and yet, as John Piper says, there never was nothing. Someone has had the honor of being there first and always. He never came or developed. He simply was.

To Whom belongs the singular, absolute glory? John tells us, *"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 that was made."* All things came through Him and by Him, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Whether thrones or rulers or powers or authorities, all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.

The Word, the uncreated Creator of all things, Who is Christ, the eternal Son of God, was in the beginning. Pastor Dan pointed out a couple weeks ago how the book of Genesis begins with these words: *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."* And here the Gospel of John begins with these words: *"In the beginning was the Word..."* This is no coincidence. John signifies that Jesus is the new beginning of a new creation. Jesus did not just come into the world to spruce things up a bit. According to Ray Ortlund, Jesus came into the world "to bring into this tired, old world a whole new world." He came to make a new creation.

This is the grand miracle of world history: the eternal Word, Who created all things, became flesh. That is a shocking word. John could have picked a word that would have generically said the Word became human, or a man. That is true and would have been shocking in itself. John could have also said the Word took a body, which is also true and would also be shocking enough. However, John deliberately chose a word that is almost crude in its connotations. Jesus became flesh.

Do you remember what Isaiah said about flesh? He said, *"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field...The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever"* (Isaiah 40:6b, 8). This Word that abides forever became that which withers and fades. John chose a word that describes humanity at its weakest and most

vulnerable. That is what the eternal Word chose to become: humanity at its weakest and most vulnerable. In His humanity, He embraced all our human weaknesses and woes. That is the grand miracle of world history. “Lo, within a manger lies, He who built the starry skies.” Here He is. Flesh.

Even before He was laid in a manger, God became a fertilized ovum, an embryo in His mother’s womb. Listen to these words from Ray Ortlund:

He could have beamed Himself down from on high, but He entered the world through a mother’s body. He came out sticky and wet, with wrinkled skin and a red face. His first sensation may have been the smell of manure in the stall where His mother lay. He had tiny hands that would grow and work hard and be splintered on lumber, and then be ripped by nails on the cross. He had tiny feet that would learn to crawl and stand and walk and then run, not away from the Father’s will, but eagerly toward His Father’s will—all the way without holding back or hesitating even once. As He grew, He scraped His knees and bumped His head and had to be comforted.

He learned to pray and depend on the power of the Holy Spirit. He was tempted and overcame. He went to school. He learned from His teachers, concentrated hard and memorized the Bible. He worked with Joseph in the family business and became a carpenter. He got splinters in His hands. He learned the differences between various grades of lumber. He dealt with customers who were hard to please and ungrateful and short-changed Him. People whispered behind His back about His questionable birth and just because, well, He wasn’t entirely like everyone else. But He didn’t strike back when they tried to embarrass Him. God had come down in humility and true glory out of love for us, and His love made Him willing to get hurt.

John dealt with first century people who said, “This is just impossible. Someone as glorious as the eternal Word would truly become human? No way! Uh uh! Okay, we’ll grant that He seemed human, but He wasn’t really human like us.” They became known as the Docetists, out of the word that means “seemed to be.” The Docetists did not believe in the full humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because they could not fathom that grand miracle, they said it could not be true. But John said, “You are wrong. He became flesh. He was truly human.”

This is one of the great emphases of John’s theology. The early church condemned the Docetists as heretics, because they denied the full humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lewis said, “This is what’s at the heart of the Christian faith—this grand miracle. This is the miracle that all

the other biblical miracles prepare for or exhibit or result from. Every other miracle revolves around this grand miracle: that God came with skin on, with human skin.”

How do you illustrate that? Some people talk about the difference between human beings and ants. They say, “What would it be like if you wanted to identify with an ant colony by becoming an ant?” The problem with that illustration is that the gap between human beings and ants isn’t big enough to describe the gap between God and humanity. God created us. Have you ever tried to create an ant? Even think it? Have you ever said, “Let there be ants,” and there was an ant? We couldn’t do that in a million years, so the gap between us and the ants is infinitely greater than the gap between God, our Creator, and humanity.

At the same time, the illustration doesn’t quite work because the gap between God and humanity is so much smaller. God created man in His own image. In the likeness of God, God created us. God made us to be like Him. It is a wonderful gift of grace that humanity is created in the image of God. What the incarnation tells us is that God did not abandon His creation. He became One of us in order to redeem us.

Now, think about that. Will you find any truth like this in any other religion? I challenge you to scan all the religions of the world. You will not find a doctrine like the incarnation in any other religion. It is a purely Christian doctrine. In fact, if you take this doctrine away, you don’t have Christianity anymore. Christianity is a miracle religion. It revolves around a grand miracle. If you strip away the miraculous, you don’t have Christianity. You might have some nice stories and some nice ethics, but it’s not the Christian faith anymore. This is what makes Christianity unique.

What are the alternatives? Think about that before you dismiss Christianity. Where will you find a better affirmation of the dignity of humanity than here? The Word became flesh. He became one of us. Where will you find the goodness of the created world affirmed more robustly than here, in a God Who comes down into the ruins that we destroyed in order to restore and make a new creation? Where will you find a God Who is so accessible? A God Who understands your sorrows and feels your human woe? A God Who knows your weaknesses? A God Who is able to lighten every load and knows what it is like to live in your skin? A God Who is able to save you from your sins, because He is both fully God and perfect man?

Even if you are not yet convinced that Christianity is true, don’t you find something beautiful and attractive here that makes you want to wish that it is true? Don’t you at least wish you could explore this faith more fully and realize that it is true? It is true that God became one of us. When you strip away all the sentimentality and all the trappings of Christmas, isn’t there

something in this message that makes you want to fall down on your knees and worship? This incarnation is the grand miracle!

### **The Incarnation is the Great Fulfillment of Biblical Theology**

John said the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Literally, Christ “tabernacled” or “pitched His tent” among us. In that phrase is a great distillation of biblical theology. In the Old Testament, God gave His people, Israel, specific instructions on how to build the tabernacle they were to carry with them through the wilderness journey on their way to the Promised Land. It was a humble structure, especially compared to the pyramids of Egypt or the ziggurats of Babylon. This tabernacle was very meager. It was made of canvas hides. Yet, in this humble structure, God came to dwell.

Let’s read the last paragraph of the book of Exodus. As the work on this tabernacle was completed per the instructions God had given. Listen to what Moses said in Exodus 40:34-38:

*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.*

Even though it was a humble structure, God’s glory filled the tabernacle. God’s presence was made known there. It was the sign to the people of Israel that they were being led and accompanied by this gracious God. It was a wonderful signal to them of God’s presence. Listen to what God said in the book of Leviticus. These are wonderful words. In Leviticus 26:11, God said to a sinful people, *“I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you.”*

Do you wonder, “Does God want to get near someone like me?” You know what you have been like this week. You know what you have been thinking. You know how you have acted. You may feel a burdensome sense of the disappointment of God upon your heart, but listen to what God said: *“I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”*

If that doesn’t astonish you, it is because you are not listening. God wants to walk among His people. His soul does not abhor His people. He wants to be in our midst and He wants to get close to us. But that has always been a problem, hasn’t it? How can a holy God get close to sinful

humanity? The clean cannot dwell with the unclean. The holy cannot exist among the unholy. How can this dilemma be resolved?

In 1 Kings 8:10-11, after the people had settled in the Promised Land and it had fallen to King Solomon to build a magnificent temple for the Lord, we read: *“And when the priests came out of the Holy Place [after the ark of the covenant was brought into the temple], a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.”* And they fell flat on their faces in the presence of that glory.

Then, in verse 27, Solomon prayed, saying, *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”* How can God get close to us?

In the early chapters of Ezekiel, as the sins of the people rose to high heaven and the stench of their sins filled the nostrils of God, there is an elaborate description of how the glory of the Lord departed from the house of the Lord. God removed His presence. But listen to what God said by the end of Ezekiel, in 37:27-28: *“My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”*

At the end of the Old Testament, in Zachariah 2:10, we read these words: *“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord.”* The Apostle John had all of these things in his mind when he spoke these words in John 1:14: *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* This was the fulfillment of biblical theology.

God does not abhor us; He walks with us. He dwells with us. The word there is very humble. It literally means He pitched His tent among us. You might think that means it is temporary, but it is not. The only other time in the New Testament where this type of phrase is used is in the book of Revelation where it speaks of a permanent dwelling. Listen to these words from Revelation 21:3: *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.’”* You could translate that: *“Behold, the tent 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.”*

If I come and pitch a tent in your backyard and say I want to live there, I’m telling you I want to get close to you. I’m going to need to have many dealings with you. I don’t have running water or heat. I may come into your house a lot. I’m going to use your facilities, sit at your table and we are going to get to know one another. That is what it means for me to pitch my tent in your backyard. I’m telling you I want to know you and be close to you.

That is what God is telling us through Christ, the eternal Word, coming into the world and becoming flesh. He became human. He is a God Who wants to spend time with us and have many interactions with us. He is also a God Who is near, not simply transcendent and far. He is both.

### **The Incarnation Provides for the Experience of Glory**

This is what the human heart longs for. We are insatiable glory-seekers. We look polished and well-behaved, but, inside our hearts, we are longing for the resplendent. We are longing to behold something that knocks us off our feet; something that thrills our souls with rapture; something that captivates our imagination and minds to such an extent that it transforms us and makes us the people we are not right now. It makes us glorious. It restores to us what we lost when we sinned in the Garden. We lost God's presence in the Garden. He said, "You are going to have to leave My Garden. I can't bear to dwell among you." We lost our glory, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."* (Romans 3:23). We long for the restoration of that glory.

In the Old Testament, Moses prayed to God, "Please, show me Your glory!" God said to him, "You can see Me from behind, but you cannot see My face. If anyone looked at My face, he couldn't live. He would die" (Exodus 33:1-23).

John said, *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory..."* That which was from the beginning we have looked at, touched and beheld with our own hands and eyes. In 1 John, he said, "I am writing these things to you so that we may have fellowship with one another and fellowship with God, so that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:1-4).

This is the highest joy the human heart can conceive: to behold true glory. Angels long to look into these things. If you called a convocation of all of heaven's most wise and glorious angels and said, "You have a thousand years to come up with a plan to restore fallen humanity to the heights of fellowship with God in His presence so their sin is forgiven and glory is restored." At the end of those thousand years, the angels would have said, "God, I don't think we can do it. I don't know how You can do something so great and so marvelous." Peter said angels long to look into this great salvation (1 Peter 1:12). The greatest saints could not have conceived of a salvation like this.

What is God like? He is a God Who wants to be known and He says, "This is what I'm like. I am like Jesus. I am a Christ-like God." Jesus said, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). God wants to be known. He wants to be experienced. He wants to be enjoyed. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen glory as of the only Son from the Father, the one-

of-a-kind Son. The same words are used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for Isaac. We have seen the one-of-a-kind Son from the Father. What is that glory like? That glory is full. It is bursting full of grace—kind acceptance of sinful people—and truth.

Athanasius, an early church father, said, “It is only on the cross that a man dies with his arms out-stretched wide, as if to say, ‘Come to Me. Come to Me.’” Jesus Himself knew that His highest glory would not be seen in the manger of Bethlehem but in what lay ahead, just beyond the manger, at the cross of Calvary. Thankfully, the glory does not end in the manger.

Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
The cross be borne for me, for you.

(“What Child is This?” by William Chatterton Dix, 1865)

And there on the cross He died, so that our sins could be forgiven; so that our dignity could be restored; so that our fellowship with God could be opened wide.

We have seen this glory, John said. Have you seen this glory? Can you think of anything better than this? Your dignity is restored and affirmed. The Word became flesh. Your access to God is assured. And He dwelt among us. Your highest joy is satisfied. We have seen His glory.

Dorothy Sayers said, “We may call this doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating. We may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish. But if we call it dull, then what in heaven’s name deserves to be called exciting?” There is no better news than this.

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