

“The Word Became Flesh”

The Fourth in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: Exodus 33:12-34:8; John 1:1-18

There is a reason why Christians love advent and the Christmas season. Advent is the time of year on the church calendar when we sing about, and celebrate the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the word become flesh. It is not only a marvel to us that a virgin conceived the very son of God, but the eternal word who was God, and who created all things, took to himself a true human nature to save us from our sins. The light of the world came to save the world trapped in darkness. The creator becomes the redeemer. Although we cannot see God because his glory is too much for our sinful eyes, God has revealed himself and his glory supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation is not only the wonder of wonders, but the incarnation is the central theme of the prologue of John, and the basis for everything which is subsequently revealed in the Gospel.

As we wrap up our three week study of the prologue to John’s Gospel, before, Lord willing, we move into the body of the Gospel next time when we take up with verse 19, of John chapter one. As we have seen throughout our time in the first 18 verses of John’s Gospel, the prologue functions like the foyer to building—the prologue is the entrance to the Gospel itself. Virtually every line and doctrine in the prologue will be restated later on in the gospel. So, if we are familiar with the prologue to John’s Gospel, we’ll be prepared to understand the gospel. The prologue tells us who Jesus is—the world become flesh. The body of John’s Gospel is the record of the revelation of God’s glory.

In the previous two sermons, we have spent time considering a number of the key points set forth by John in the opening verses. In verses 1-3, we covered the familiar words from John which echo Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the creation account. *“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.”* In these verses, John establishes three fundamental Christian doctrines: First, the deity of Jesus Christ (the logos was with God for all eternity), meaning Jesus has no beginning or end; second, the fact that the logos (the word) is distinct from God is the basis for the distinction between the persons of the Father and the Son, a distinction which also underlies the doctrine of the Trinity; and finally, these verses tell us that God created all things through Jesus Christ.

Then, we took note of the fact that in verses 4-5 of the prologue, John introduces a contrast between darkness and light—a contrast which we will find throughout what follows. When using these terms in connection with the creation account (as in these two verses), darkness refers to the fact that nothing whatsoever existed before Jesus created the heavens and the earth—except the Triune God who enjoyed an eternal and perfect inter-Trinitarian fellowship. There was only darkness (nothingness) until God spoke, and in that way, John says, darkness was overcome by light when Jesus created all things.

Next, says John of the logos, *“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.”* It is Jesus who is the light, as well as the author of all life. Although John is referring to creation in these verses, it soon becomes apparent that John is also using the darkness and light imagery in reference to human sin and God’s redeeming grace. When Jesus created all things, light dispelled the darkness. But when Adam sinned, the human race was once again plunged into darkness, and darkness becomes John’s preferred metaphor for evil and willful ignorance of the truth. In fact, in chapter 3, John will tell us that people prefer to live in darkness because the light

exposes what we do, revealing the fact that we are all sinners in need of a Savior.

Dark and light then will be used by John throughout the rest of the gospel in reference to salvation from sin. As the one who created all things, Jesus (the *logos*) is now presented as the redeemer who brings the light of truth into our world of darkness, which is the horrible and universal consequence of Adam's fall into sin. So, in verses 6-8, John the Disciple (and the author of this gospel) introduces us to another John, John the Baptist, that one sent by God as the messianic forerunner who will introduce Jesus to his people, Israel. *"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."* With the coming of the Baptist, Israel has been put on notice by the heavenly court that the darkness of sin will be dispelled by the messianic light of the gospel, even as Jesus dispelled the darkness of nothingness when he created all things. The long promised covenant blessings and threatened covenant curses will come to fruition in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is God and the author of all light and life. The coming of the Baptist means the coming of the Messiah is at hand.

In verses 9-10, John begins to prepare his reader to understand the messianic mission of Jesus, a topic which John will address in great detail beginning in verse 19. Writes John, *"the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him."* Because people are sinful, we prefer darkness to light because our deeds are evil. So when Jesus (the light of the world) comes into the world he has made, Jesus is not even recognized. Those living in darkness saw the creator among them, and yet knew not who he was.

In using the light/darkness metaphor as he has, John has already prepared us for the tragedy of verse 11. It is sad enough to consider that Jesus was not recognized by the world he created (not the globe, but the mass of fallen humanity), but when he came to redeem his own people, the Jews, he was roundly rejected—a major theme of John's Gospel. As John tells us, *"[Jesus] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."* It was not as though the people of Israel merely didn't recognize Jesus, they openly rejected him because our Lord's own people preferred the darkness of their sinful hearts to the light of truth which their own Messiah brought to them.

But if John can explain to us why people do not believe in Jesus even though his miracles and preaching confirm that he had been sent by God, (people love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil) John can also assure us that Jesus' messianic mission did not fail. As John tells us in verse 12 and 13, *"but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."* We are not born as children of light. Rather, we are by nature children of darkness, and we will reject Jesus because we prefer to hide our evil deeds when we are confronted by the law which Moses proclaimed, and comforted by that gospel which Jesus proclaimed. We do not want to be told that we are sinners. We do not want to be told that we need a Savior. We do not want to be told that God must grant this right to us. We do not want to be told that we must believe in Jesus to become children of God.

John is perfectly clear that children of darkness do not become children of God through natural birth—we are not born as innocent before God, rather we are born guilty for Adam's sin (original sin—includes guilt and corruption). Children of darkness do not become children of God by the will (desire) of the flesh. Neither do people become children of God through an act of the human will—such as accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior as when it is mistakenly thought that sinful people still have the power to choose the light of Jesus. The Bible teaches otherwise—namely that we love and prefer the darkness of

our own sin. Sinners have neither the power to become children of God, nor the desire to do so.

No, says John, there is only one way we become the children of God, and that is through the will (or an act) of God. God must create new life (the new creation) so that we can believe. Just as the light dispelled the darkness when Jesus said “let there be” and the universe came into being, so too the darkness of our own heart prevents us from believing the gospel until Jesus speaks the word of truth and creates faith in our hearts when there had been only nothing but the darkness of human sin and unbelief. It is God who gives us the right to become children of God as we are granted life in his name as we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We cannot do this through an act of the human will, or a human decision, says John. The light of the word must overcome the darkness of human sinfulness.

This brings us to our text, verses 14-18 of John’s prologue. Before we go through the details given us by John, a word about the historical context of this section of the prologue is in order. Many scholars have noticed strong parallels between verses 14-18 of John 1, and Exodus 33-34 (part of which we read as our Old Testament lesson). Not steeped in the Old Testament, as were many of John’s original Jewish readers, we miss one of the most important points that John is making in the prologue of his gospel—Israel is currently in darkness (sin), but because of unbelief, Israel has returned again to exile in the wilderness. This is a point which would have been on many Jewish minds in the years after A.D. 70 when the Jews had been once again cast from the promised land by the Roman army when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. With the coming of John the Baptist (the messianic forerunner), and the Messiah (Jesus), a New Exodus has begun. It being led by Jesus, the new Moses.

Consider the parallels between Exodus 33-34, and verse 14-18 of John’s prologue. They are impressive.¹

In Exodus 33:14, Israel finds grace in YHWH’s sight, while in John 1:16, those in the New Exodus (the disciples of Jesus) receive grace upon grace.

In Exodus 33:20 we read that no one can see God’s face and live, while in John 1:18 it is reaffirmed that no one has seen God at any time.

In Exodus 33:23 and 34:6-7, YHWH’s glory passes by Moses, while in the New Exodus, all of Jesus’ disciples behold his glory (John 1:14).

In Exodus 34:6, YHWH is said to be loving-kindness and truth, while on John 1:14, 17, we are told that grace and truth are manifest in Jesus Christ.

In Exodus 33:7, we are reminded that YHWH dwelt in the midst of his people Israel in the tabernacle (tent), while in John 1:14, John tells us that Jesus pitched his tent among us by becoming flesh.

In Exodus 34:27-28, we are reminded that Moses gave Israel the law, a point reiterated in John 1:17.

In finally, in Exodus 34:32-35, we read of Moses as covenant mediator, while in verses 17-18 of his prologue, John tells us that Jesus is the mediator between God and man.

¹ Kostenberger, Encountering Jesus, 52-54.

So, even though we Gentiles are some two-thousand years removed from the chaos out of which John's Gospel emerged, the parallels between John's prologue and Exodus 33-34 would have not been lost on any Jew who encountered this Gospel, and who may have been considering the claims of Jesus Christ.

In verse 14, we come to one of the most remarkable statements ever written. "*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.*" For the first time in the gospel, John tells us that the eternal word is Jesus of Nazareth—we assume this to be the case, because we already know something about the Gospel of John and the New Testament. But to John's original audience hearing this for the first time, this is a shocking declaration. The word is not some cosmic principle, or the eternal world of platonic forms, as many of them believed.² No, the word is a person. Given the parallel with Exodus 33-34, John is telling us that Jesus is eternal God and the second person of the Holy Trinity, and that Jesus does all of the things which YHWH did throughout the Exodus account. A Jew can only reach one conclusion—Jesus is God.

John has been crystal clear that the word always "was." The word is eternal, without beginning or end. He always "was" and always will be. But in verse 14, John tells us that this eternal word became "flesh." This will require a bit of explanation. For one thing, the verb "to become" is in the aorist tense—which means that at a very specific moment in time the word became flesh. We know from the synoptic gospels that this was the moment when Jesus took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin when the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary (who was still a virgin, and had not been with a man).

As one commentator points out, John's expression, "the word became flesh" is a blunt, almost crude way to speak. John does so to make a point, and to refute another popular first century heresy. When John tells us that the word became flesh he is taking direct aim at the heresy known as docetism (from the Greek word "seem" or "appear"). The docetic heresy teaches that Jesus is fully God, but only appeared in human form. In other words, Jesus was fully divine but not truly human. The idea driving this particular heresy is the popular Greek idea that matter is evil, so that God could not defile himself by taking upon himself a human nature (i.e., flesh). But as John so bluntly puts it the *logos* did exactly that!

If the third/fourth century heretics known as the Arians denied Jesus' deity (the Arians argued that Jesus was created by God, and who in turn, created everything else), the docetists denied Jesus' humanity. In fact, as John will tell us in his epistles, the denial of Jesus' true humanity is the spirit of Antichrist. In 2 John 7, we read, "*for many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.*" We live in an age where we are more likely to see the deity of Jesus come under attack, because many of our contemporaries do not like the fact that if Jesus is God in human flesh this makes Christianity true and all other religious claims false. If Jesus is merely human, then Jesus and Christianity can co-exist among the world's religions. But if Jesus is God in human flesh, then Christianity is true and all other religions are false.

The deity of Jesus was not under debate when John writes his gospel. The issue John faced was, "how could God, a pure spirit, be associated with matter (which was thought to be evil because material)?" In the opening words of his first epistle, John makes it perfectly clear that Jesus was no mere phantom, but was truly human. "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was*

² Morris, The Gospel According to John, 102.

with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Jesus was God in human flesh, and could be touched, seen, and heard.

This is why in verse 14 John states that Jesus dwelt among us. Literally, Jesus pitched his tent in our midst—a clear reference to the tabernacle in the Old Testament. When Jesus became flesh, he did not cease to be God. “Became does not mean ‘changed into.’”³ Rather Jesus veiled his glory with human flesh, just as YHWH veiled his glory while in midst of Israel when YHWH’s presence was manifest in tent of meeting. Because God’s glory was present there, Moses could not enter (as recounted in Exodus 40). John’s point is that in the person of Jesus Christ, God reveals his glory among his people by veiling that glory in human flesh and then dwelling among us. As we will see throughout John’s Gospel, it is the revelation of Jesus’ glory, sadly, which provokes Jesus’ own people (the Jews) to wrath.

As the only divine and eternal Son of God, Jesus is full of grace and truth. Again, John is directing us back to Exodus 33-34. As Moses sought the glory of God, God graciously granted him a mere glimpse of that glory, pronounced the divine name, and demonstrated his covenant mercy, all the while graciously protecting Moses in the cleft of a rock. As John is going to reveal throughout the body of his Gospel, Jesus’s divine glory is veiled and revealed to God’s people primarily through Jesus’ preaching and through his miracles—the revelation of his true glory while veiled in human flesh.⁴ This will become clear in chapter 2 after Jesus’ miracle in Cana turning wine into grape juice (oops) and we read this was “*the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.*” So, as Moses was given a glimpse of YHWH’s glory (because the revelation of YHWH’s glory was too much for any human to withstand) so too Jesus, glory is revealed through his miracles which show us the Jesus is truth incarnate, who came to the world he created, to rescue us from darkness—the supreme act of God’s grace.

In verse 15, John repeats his point in verses 6-8. “*(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.’”)* The Baptist is that one sent by God to declare that light has come into the darkness, but that as the messianic herald, it fell to John the Baptist to announce that the events of Exodus 33-34 were about to repeat themselves, this time in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. As the eternal word (logos), Jesus pre-existed John (he was before me) and that Jesus surpassed John, the greatest and last of the Old Testament prophets (he ranks before me). It was the Baptist’s role to announce that God’s glory will be manifest once again.

In verses 16-17, John fleshes out in more detail the statement made in verse 14 that Jesus as God in the flesh is the manifestation of grace and truth. Here John says “*for from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” The word “fulness” has great significance in later Gnostic writings, but here John uses the term in the simple sense of “that which fills.” Jesus is the infinite source of all the blessings we receive, in this case grace upon grace. As YHWH was the source of any grace (covenant favor) the Israelites received, so now the eternal word made flesh is the boundless source of grace received by the people of God. Grace is not a substance (as taught by the medieval theologians), but ought to be understood as God’s

³ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 49.

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 128-130.

“graciousness” toward us. John’s point is that grace cannot run out. Grace has no end, nor any limit.⁵

When John contrasts Moses and the law with grace and Jesus Christ, he is contrasting the old covenant (specifically that form of Judaism practiced throughout Palestine and the Mediterranean world during the time of John) and the new covenant, which is now established in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁶ It is in and through the coming of the light of Jesus, that Christians now see in Moses (the law) the shadow of that glory presently revealed in Jesus Christ. John is not saying that Moses and Jesus are at odds with one another (a misapplication of the distinction between the law and gospel), but that the law (Moses) points us ahead to the grace which God reveals through Jesus Christ (who was hidden in the types and shadow of the law). To put it simply, Jesus is the fulfillment of everything promised in the old covenant. Therefore, Jesus is superior to Moses and the Sinai Covenant.

Continuing to develop the parallel between Exodus 33-34 and the ultimate revelation of YHWH’s glory in Jesus Christ, in verse 18 John comes to the climax of the prologue. “*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*” In Exodus 33:20, YHWH says that no one may see me and live. Yet, throughout the Old Testament we read that people did see God (Exodus 24:9-11 comes to mind). Now John tells us who and what it was that these Old Testament saints actually saw. They saw the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ, who revealed himself in ways appropriate to human existence. But make no mistake about it, no one can see God as he is in himself. Anyone who claims otherwise is a liar or self-deluded. God is utterly transcendent (other than) and as pure and perfect Spirit is completely beyond any human comprehension, unless and until he reveals himself to us. As John Calvin so aptly puts it: “When [John] says that none has seen God, it is not to be understood in the sense of the outward seeing of the physical eye. He means generally that, since God dwells in inaccessible light, [God] cannot be known except in Christ, his lively image.”⁷ This is why Christian theologians insist that the transcendent God can only be truly known through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the supreme revelation of God.

Having come to the end of his prologue, John has made it clear to his reader that with the coming of Jesus Christ, the eternal God has revealed himself in a particular time and place, and in and through a particular person. It is Jesus Christ, the word become flesh, who makes God known to us. In fact, as we will see in the coming weeks, there is no way to know and experience the grace and truth of God apart from Jesus Christ! In Jesus’ preaching and miracles, God reveals his glory. As so as Herman Ridderbos so eloquently points out, in verse 18, the circle of the prologue is now complete. “No one, of all the witnesses to God, has witnessed to God like the one who has from the beginning with God and was God. No one ascended to God but he who descended from him (John 3:13). He who comes from above is above all and bears witness to what he has seen and heard (John 3:31). That is the great thrust of the prologue, and it keeps returning in the Gospel. It is only in the light that we can understand what the Gospel will from this point say about the coming and work of Jesus Christ.”⁸

⁵ Morris, The Gospel According to John, 110-111.

⁶ Morris, The Gospel According to John, 111.

⁷ John Calvin, The Gospel According to St. John, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 25.

⁸ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 59.

In the prologue to his Gospel, John has prepared us to understand the messianic mission of Jesus. Now that we are familiar with John's prologue, we know who it who will appear in the wilderness, begin calling disciples, and reveal his glory through his preaching and miraculous signs. And we also know why these things were written: *"So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life ain his name."*