

# THE WORD BECAME FLESH

## John I:14

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 12, 2007

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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.  
*John I:14*

**T**he exodus of Israel was one of the great mass migrations of history, when over two million Israelites left their bondage in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> At first, this great caravan would have had a certain splendor, laden down as it was with the treasures of the Nile. But before long in the desert, the Israelites would have looked more and more like refugees: they were dirty, disheveled, and increasingly disorganized. But, even then, the Israelites possessed a glory that made them the marvel of the world. At the center of their camp was the tabernacle of the Lord, over which rested the cloud of fire that God sent to guide his people. Inside was the ark of the covenant, with the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle.

Christians are likewise unimpressive during our pilgrim journey through this desert world. But like the Israelites, the Christian Church has the glory of God in its midst. John writes, “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” (Jn. 1:14).

## THE WORD BECAME FLESH

**I**t was to make this great statement that the Gospel of John was written. John’s prologue has been telling of Christ’s coming to the

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 1:46 lists 603,550 fighting men over twenty years old. This likely indicates a whole population between 2 and 2.5 million people. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 65.

world in theological terms. He began by stating that Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God before the beginning. The Word came as a light into darkness. Now, John 1:14 tells us how this happened: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

This verse states the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary in the stable at Bethlehem. But the Second Person of the Trinity did not come into being at this birth. John says, “In the beginning was the Word,” and then at a certain time, “The Word became flesh.” God the Son – the Word – did not come to existence in his incarnation, but he became a human being in addition to a divine being. The Westminster Confession explains, “The Son of God... being very and eternal God... did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin” (VIII.1). Christ’s incarnation means that the Son of God became a human in the fullest sense, without losing any of his divinity. Paul says, “In him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Likewise, Jesus is sinless without losing his full humanity. His is uncorrupted, true humanity.

When Jesus took on our flesh he gained a human body, which enabled him to suffer death for us. Jesus also possessed a human mind and heart; he felt all that we feel, including sorrow and joy, weariness and temptation. Because of this, he is able to sympathize with us in our trials. Moreover, Jesus lived a human life in the same world in which we live. He was born and grew up as a boy. He learned a trade in his father’s carpenter shop. He had friends and neighbors; he paid taxes and was subject to the governing authorities. Because he truly lived as we live, Jesus sets an example for us to follow. These, then, are the three main reasons why the “Word became flesh”: to die, to sympathize with us, and to show us how to live.

This is the most stupendous news that could ever be reported. C.S. Lewis said: “The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man... He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.”<sup>2</sup> Paul writes, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: [God] was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16).

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Simon& Schuster, 1960), 143, 148.

We do not understand how one person can be both God and man. But the Bible shows that Jesus possesses two distinct natures – one divine, one human – without any mingling or confusion between them. The Greek mythologies spoke of gods coming down to earth for a while, until they got tired and returned to the clouds. But nowhere in the ancient world was there any idea of God becoming man, the Word taking up flesh. “Lo, within a manger lies / He who built the starry skies... Thus to come from highest bliss / Down to such a world as this!”<sup>3</sup> What does this say about God’s desire for our salvation – that he actually stepped into our world and became one of us? This shows the value of every human life, given the dignity God gave to humans above all other creatures. First God created us in his own image (Gen. 1:26), then he sent his own Son to become a son of man, so that we might become in him the sons and daughters of God.

## HE TABERNACLED AMONG US

John tells us not merely that “the Word became flesh,” but also that he “dwelt among us.” This phrase employs a verb form of the Greek word for “tabernacle” (*eskenosen*). Literally, John writes, “The Word *tabernacled* among us.” Undoubtedly John is directing us back to the exodus, when God dwelt among the Israelites in the tabernacle.

The tabernacle was a canvas structure about forty-five feet long and fifteen feet wide. It had three areas: the outer courtyard where priests made sacrifices and washed themselves before entering; an outer room (the Holy Place) housing the golden candlestick, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense; and an inner room (the Holy of Holies) containing the ark of the covenant, where God himself dwelt. Everything about the tabernacle was symbolic of spiritual realities and especially of Jesus Christ, who came as God’s true tabernacle. We should take note of some of the most obvious parallels.

First, the tabernacle was *given for Israel’s wilderness journey*. So it was for Jesus. This present world was not Jesus’ true home; he was passing through on the way to a better world to come. During his life, Jesus lived as a pilgrim: he said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Caswall, *See, amid the Winter’s Snow*, 1851.

8:20). The same is true for us through our union with Christ; we no longer belong to this desert world, but pass through it to the promised land just as Israel passed through the desert.

Secondly, the tabernacle was *humble in appearance*. Its outward appearance paled in comparison to the pyramids of Egypt or the ziggurats of Babylon. The tabernacle was made of canvas hides. Looking on it from the outside, you would see nothing glittering nor any great artistry. The same was true of Jesus. A hymn says, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.”<sup>4</sup> A. W. Pink remarks: “He came, unattended by any imposing retinue of angels. To the unbelieving gaze of Israel He had no form nor comeliness; and when they beheld Him, their unanointed eyes saw in Him no beauty that they should desire Him.”<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the tabernacle was *at the center of Israel’s camp*. Numbers 2:17 tells us, “The tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps.” The various tribes of Israel camped all around the tabernacle, with the Lord at their center. James Boice says, “This is highly significant in reference to Jesus Christ, for he is the center of the Christian encampment. He is our gathering place.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus must always be at the center of everything we do, everything we believe, and everything for which we hope. In Jesus Christ, God has tabernacled with us.

## BEHOLDING HIS GLORY

The tabernacle was also called the “tent of meeting.” It was the place where the people met with God and saw the Shekinah glory cloud that shined from within (*shekinah* = *radiance*). John applies this to Christ’s coming: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” Hebrews 1:3 makes the same connection, “He is the radiance of the glory of God.”

This supplies a workable definition of a Christian. A Christian is someone who sees in Jesus the glory of God. Others may see him as a valued teacher, a social reformer, or even a pitiful victim. But a

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, 1739.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 35.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Boice, *John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:87.

Christian reads the Gospels and sees glory in Jesus Christ, so that he worships him and yields his life as Jesus' disciple. This is what Andrew said to his brother, Simon Peter: "We have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). Later, when the crowds were leaving Jesus because he didn't teach what they wanted to hear, Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life... you are the Holy One of God" (Jn. 6:68-69). Seeing this makes you a Christian. The word John uses for "we have seen" (*theaomai*) has a rich meaning, including the idea of personal contact and interaction; it elsewhere is used for stopping by where someone lives to "see" them (Rom. 15:24). He means that believers commune with Christ in his glory. This is what makes us Christians, and also makes Christianity so exciting as our growing faith discovers his glory more and more.

Given what we earlier observed about Jesus' humble appearance, it may seem odd to say that we see glory in him. So what glory does John have in mind when he speaks of the glory revealed in Jesus? Many different answers have been given. Some think this refers to the Transfiguration, where Jesus was revealed in full splendor on the mount before three of his disciples. This certainly was a display of glory, but the fact that John omits it from his Gospel suggests that he has other things in mind. Others point to Jesus' miracles – his healings, his ability to feed thousands with a few fish and loaves, and his power even to raise the dead. John tells us that the miracles "manifested his glory" (Jn. 2:11), showing his divine power and sublime compassion. John devotes the first half of his Gospel to presenting what has been called "the Book of Signs," that is, a record of the miracles that pointed to Christ's glory.

But there is another answer to this question about Jesus' glory. Jesus showed the glory of God not merely through the power of his divine nature, but also in his human nature through a humble, obedient, servant life. To us, a glorious person is one who rises above the crowds, ascending to a place of wealth and prominence. But Jesus showed us higher glory. Though he had the power that created galaxies, he subjected himself to human scorn and abuse. He allowed his heart to break as he wept over Jerusalem. He allowed his body to be broken – his hands and feet nailed to a cross by creatures he had made – and he gave up his life so that we might live.

The truth is that, humanly speaking, Jesus was not very glorious. He had his moments, but what did he accomplish? Leon Morris assesses Jesus' earthly achievement: "He preached to a few people in an outlying province of an ancient, long since vanished empire. Even there he was not often in the capital, the center of affairs, but in a remote country area. He taught a few people, gathered a few disciples, did an uncertain number of miracles, aroused a great number of enemies, was betrayed by one close follower and disowned by another, and died on a cross. Where is the glory?"<sup>7</sup>

This reminds me of a character in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, whom the author doubtless intended to reflect hidden glory like that of Jesus Christ. Aragorn was a man with a weathered appearance who many considered strange and unsavory. Unknown to the townsfolk who shunned him, he had gained this visage through his ceaseless labors for their defense. It turned out that Aragorn was in fact the rightful king of all those lands, in exile awaiting the appointed time to reveal his claims. Tolkien honored Aragorn with a poem, the first two lines of which could be equally spoken of Jesus Christ:

All that is gold does not glitter,  
Not all those who wander are lost.

Jesus may have seemed to wander, but no one could have moved with a greater purpose. And though he did not glitter with gold, he bore a glory that is greater by far – the glory of humble obedience to the will of God. At the end of his mission, on the night of his arrest, Jesus prayed to the Father: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (Jn. 17:4). His was the humble glory of an obedient life.

We tend to think that glory requires the pomp and glitter of this world – gold medals, trophies, great stock portfolios and showy houses. But God shows us through Jesus that real glory is not like that: it does not depend on pageantry and show. Real glory is seen in humble service out of devotion to God. Morris says of Jesus:

Where people needed help, he helped them. Where there were sick, he healed them. Where there were ignorant folk, he taught them. Where there were hungry people, he fed them. All the time, he was seeking the needy. He did not haunt the palaces of kings and governors. He was not

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 22-23.

found in the high places of the earth... All his life he was among God's little people, those who in one way or another felt their need. And wherever there was need, he was found doing lowly service. That is what Christ came to do. And that is glory.<sup>8</sup>

This means that we, too, can lead glorious lives. We do not possess his divine power to perform miracles – although we do have great power in prayers offered in Jesus' name. But through the Holy Spirit, as Christ lives in us, we have power to deny ourselves, serving sacrificially out of God-given love. We, too, can help. We can heal. We can teach. We can feed. We can take in the lost. We can bind up broken hearts. Through faith, we can be Christ-like, bearing his glory before the world.

The story is told of two brothers named Taylor. The older son set out to make a name and achieve glory for his family. So he entered politics, served in Parliament and became a man of considerable power. The younger brother turned his back on worldly glory, having seen the greater glory of Christ. He went to China, spending his entire life bringing the gospel to that land. His name was Hudson Taylor, and when he died his name was revered on every continent by all who loved the Lord. One writer tells of looking for information about his politician brother. Years afterwards, his encyclopedia listing provided no information about his high offices and achievements in Parliament. It read only, "The brother of Hudson Taylor."

This is how it is for God's heroes. If you read the "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11, you will find the names of people who were nobodies in the world but great in the eyes of God: Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samuel and others. Many were persecuted and even put to death. "They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of [them] the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:37-38). But because of the humble obedience of their faith, they achieved a glory the world can never reach. Hebrews 11:16 says, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God." That is glory, and we can have it, too.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

## FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

John concludes this great verse, saying, “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Here are two specific aspects of God’s glory that Jesus revealed: his grace and his truth.

I mentioned a number of ways in which the tabernacle symbolizes the Lord Jesus, but one that I omitted is that the tabernacle was where the sacrifices were made to atone for sin. From the time of our first parents – Adam and Eve – God had revealed that the wages of sin would be death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). Sin is not just a little dysfunction among ourselves; it is a violation of God’s law and an offense to his perfect holiness. Therefore, sin must be punished with death. But in his grace – his unmerited mercy and favor – God has provided a sacrifice to die in our place. This was symbolized at the tabernacle, where bulls and sheep and goats were brought to bear the punishment the peoples’ sin deserved. Those sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus Christ, whose cross is the true tabernacle, revealing the grace of God to sinners by his death on the cross.

The cross was the greatest display of the glory of God’s grace. On the very brink of his entry into Jerusalem, starting the final countdown to his crucifixion, Jesus said to his disciples, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). Jesus was not talking about the Hosannas that would greet his entry. The people were looking for him to be glorified by an ascent to military and political power.

William Barclay writes, “By *glorified* they meant that the subjected kingdoms of the earth would grovel before the conqueror’s feet; by *glorified* He meant *crucified*.”<sup>9</sup>

To the world, the cross was the most shameful of all things. It involved physical torture, personal humiliation, and a cursed death. This was God’s way of showing us the true shame of our sin. But because the perfect Son of God died in this way *for us*, the cross displays the grace of God to the highest glory of his name. I mentioned earlier that a Christian is one who sees the glory of God in the person of Christ. But now we see that it is especially by seeing the glory of God’s grace in the cross that we are saved. Is the cross your

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<sup>9</sup> William Barclay, cited in Morris, 25.

glory? Is it your hope? Is it the place where your sins were put away and God's glory shines into your heart? Unless you have believed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins, there is no heavenly glory for you, but only the shame of the guilt you will eternally bear. Paul speaks for every Christian heart when he exclaims, "Far be it for me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

Jesus first glorifies God's grace to us, but then he leads us into the glory of God's truth. This is yet another feature of the tabernacle: it was the place where God's Word was revealed. The tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept in the tabernacle. And Moses came there to receive God's Word for the people.

Once, Moses asked for a more intimate revelation: "Please show me your glory," he said (Ex. 33:18). God replied, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). But Jesus Christ is a better tabernacle. "The Word became flesh" so God could show us his face. Paul says, "God... has made his light shine in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

People ask, How can we know God? We answer, Jesus Christ came into this world to show us the glory of the truth of God in a human face. Therefore to reject Jesus is to reject the truth about God. But if we receive Jesus, we come into the knowledge of God for the salvation of our souls.

Moreover, Jesus left us his Word in the Bible. It, too, is now our glory. We hold in a book the truth of God in all its glory, provided for us through the ancient prophets and the apostles of Jesus Christ. If we have seen God's glory in the face Christ, and if we have received God's grace at the cross of Christ, then let us love and desire the knowledge of God's truth through the Word of Christ, so that we might glorify God through our lives of humble, obedient, and Christ-like service.

God is calling you to do that. God is calling you to minister, feed, teach, visit, heal, and witness in Christ's name with the particular gifts and opportunities you possess. Are you answering that call? If you will, through faith in Christ, God's own glory will rest upon your life, and the glory of the Savior Jesus Christ will shine out from you.