

January 23, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:14 – 18

These five verses finish what many call the prologue in the gospel of John. That is, the whole gospel of John is really summed up in the first eighteen verses. Everything John has to say throughout the rest of the gospel you find in these first eighteen verses in summary. John has a very simple theme and that is to present Jesus Christ as the Son of God – to show the gift of salvation that He offers, and how men ought to respond to Him. And so in this prologue John encapsulates all this, showing His relationship to time – '*In the beginning was the Word...*', His relationship to God - '*...and the Word was with God and the Word was God...*', His relationship to the universe - '*...all things were made by Him...*', His relationship to men – '*...in Him was Life and the Life was the light of men..*' and the salvation He purchased that is accepted by some – '*And as many as received Him to them He gave the right to become children of God...*', and His rejection by others – '*He was in the world and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own and those who were His own did not receive Him.*'

And then this little section we have this morning is a summary of the summary – that is verses fourteen through eighteen revisit what John lays in one through thirteen. But the fourteenth verse really is the capstone for everything. *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.* John 1:14 **This is the center of the gospel** – The Word became flesh. The very Word of God who was with God and was God, became a man. He took on flesh. This is a staggering thought that, God, who is timeless and eternal and not limited by anything, entered time became a man, enduring the frailties and limitations of a real body, yet without the sin associated with that flesh.

Quite frankly, this is a mystery – that God became a man. It is a mystery because the Bible makes it clear that God did not just indwell the man Jesus, but He became a man. And in doing so drew humanity into the Godhead. A perfect humanity, not a fallen sinful one. Paul told Timothy that this is a mystery: *By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness : He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.* 1 Timothy 3:16. When the Bible says the Word became flesh it does not mean that for thirty-three and a half years God stopped being God and was just a man. That is God did not transmute Himself into a man. But rather like the water that Jesus turned into wine didn't give up the liquid properties of water, but instead had a new capacity. The divine Son of God was still the Divine Son of God with a perfect human nature. And so the Son of God became the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

This is a crucial doctrine for our faith. **The question here is not why did Jesus have to die? But rather how could Jesus die?** Why did Jesus have to die speaks to the crisis we all face as fallen human beings. Without a substitute, without a mediator between us and a holy God, we are all of us doomed to destruction. The penalty of sin is death and an eternity away from the presence of God. We all earned the penalty and unless there was someone who was willing to sacrifice His life in exchange for ours, we would have to pay. But not just anyone could be our substitutionary sacrifice. We see from the Old Testament that it had to be a perfect, blameless, spotless sacrifice. And that is why the Son of God came.

But that doesn't answer how **could** the Son of God die for us? By definition, He is God and therefore everlasting and eternal and deathless. The only way God could die and pay the penalty for our sins was if He became a man. Everything hinges on this. Satan thought he had God in a bind. He knew the penalty for sin and rebellion, and he knew that there would never be a human being able to pay that debt for everyone. Each person had to pay it himself, or herself, therefore no one could be saved. But God became a man! The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: *Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...* Hebrews 2:14 **So the first reason God became a man was so that He could die.** No other way.

Secondly, **God became a man so that He could identify with our humanness.** The writer of Hebrews goes on to say: and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. *Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.* Hebrews 2:17-18 And later in chapter four he says: *For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.* Hebrews 4:15

If God had not become a man, there would have been no sacrifice sufficient to save us, first of all. And secondly there would have been no way we could begin to identify with Jesus as God. A God who stands outside of time and the material world is unreachable. There is no common ground. We could not be sure of His compassion when we are hurting. We could not be sure of His faithfulness when we are unfaithful. We could not be sure His grace is sufficient when we struggle with temptation We could not be sure of His forgiveness when we fail. We need a God-man who can sympathize with our weaknesses and carry us through.

Thirdly, **God became a man so that we might have an example to follow.** *'For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps...'* 1 Peter 2:21 We need to see how this perfect Man lived and died so that we might follow in His steps. Again the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our **archagos** – author, leader, pioneer, captain of salvation: *'...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author [leader, pioneer, captain] and perfecter of faith...'* Hebrews 12:2 His life points the way for us to live our lives. Not that we do this thing on our own – notice that He is both the one who leads the way by example – author, or pioneer – and He is also the one that brings our race to perfection, completion, by the power that He Himself provides. The implication here is that our lives are His life in miniature.

And then John says that this Word which became flesh: *'...dwelt among us...'* Literally the word means 'to pitch a tent and live' Jesus, the God-man, pitched His tent on earth for thirty-three and a half years. This is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word that used many times in the Old Testament to describe pitching a tent – as in Genesis: *Abram settled [pitched a tent] in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled [pitched a tent] in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom.* Genesis 13:12 The noun indicates a 'tabernacle tent' and John uses this word consciously to conjure up an image of the tabernacle that Israel was familiar with in the Exodus, during their wilderness wanderings.

Note the striking parallels: the old tabernacle was a temporary dwelling place for God until the Israelites got to the land of promise and built the temple. It was not even a fixed temporary dwelling, but moved from place to place when God told them to move. Jesus' ministry in the flesh was temporary, lasting only until He accomplished His mission at the cross that built the real temple of God in spirit, and He was constantly on the move, following the guidance of His heavenly Father, crossing and re-crossing Palestine during His stay. The old tabernacle was unattractive and humble in appearance, built out of plain boards and cloth and skins. Nothing like the grandeur of Solomon's Temple. And the testimony of Jesus was that: *'...He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.'* Isaiah 53:2

The tabernacle was God's dwelling place, and it was there between the cherubim on the mercy seat of the ark that He made His throne. And during the time that the Word tabernacled among us, God had His dwelling place there. And just as the tabernacle was the place where God met with man – **it was called the tent of meeting** – Christ Himself is the place where man now meets with God. And John tells us that Jesus Himself testified that *'No man comes to the Father except through Me.'* John 14:6 The old tabernacle was also where the Law of God was preserved in the Ark of the Covenant. And the testimony of Jesus was that He said: *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets ; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.* Matthew 5:17 And in the Psalms it was written of Him: *'In the scroll of the book it is written of Me. I delight to do Your will, O my God ; Your Law is within My heart.'* Psalm 40:7-8

The tabernacle was also the place where sacrifice was made and worship happened. In the outer court stood the brazen altar on which the sacrifice was slain. It was there that blood was shed and atonement was made for the sins of the people. It was there that the Israelites brought their offerings to worship God and priests ministered in the court. And so it was with our Lord. He fulfilled in His own person the real sacrifice for sin – His body nailed to the cross, which was the altar on which His blood was shed and complete atonement was made for sin. And it is by Him that we offer the sacrifice of praise to God as it says in Hebrews. *'Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God...'* Hebrews 13:15

John was consciously conjuring up a picture of Christ as the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament spoke, and in so doing was saying, 'Look at Jesus, look at the God-man, look at the Word made flesh – He is the reality of all the Scriptures speak.' You want to know God? Know this Christ. God pitching His tent as it were in our backyard should tell us that He wants to be close with us, to interact with us. If you go to a place and build a palace with a wall around it, you don't really intend to be that close with your neighbors. But if you come to my house and pitch your tent, you are probably going to use my espresso machine to make your coffee and probably eat at my table, and watch my television. **The meaning of the Word became flesh and tabernacled among is that God, in Christ, came close to us.**

And John said, 'This is the Jesus we saw': '*...and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father...*' Strangely enough, John is the only gospel where this story, the story of seeing the glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration is not told. But John was there – he saw Moses and Elijah and Jesus, he saw the glory of Christ revealed and he heard the Father's voice from heaven saying: '*This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.*' Mark 9:7 It was a glory of the only begotten from the Father. '**Only begotten**' does not mean in any sense that the Son of God had to be born. Rather it has the meaning of unique, one of a kind. The same term is used of Isaac, the unique son of Abraham in the Old Testament. John labors the point that He was the Word of God pre-existing before anything else.

Because **everything centers in Christ**. The Old Testament points to Him in all the types and shadows – the New Testament reveals Him in the gospels and epistles – and John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Him: *John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'*" John 1:15 John's estimation was that even though he was chronologically older by six months than his cousin, Jesus stood above him because He was the pre-existent Word of God.

And it was a glory that was '*...full of grace and truth*'. This is very significant. The glory that Christ had was not only the glory of the essence of God – but it was a glory that was filled with grace and truth. Jesus Christ is the grace of God coming to us to do in us what we could never do – be holy and blameless and acceptable in His sight. And Jesus Christ is the truth of all that the Old Testament promised – the fulfillment of all the types and shadows of the tabernacle and the temple and the sacrifices and the law of God. He is full of grace and truth. As John goes on to say: *For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.* John 1:16 When we come to Christ, what we receive is all of God. In Colossians we read: '*For in Him*' that is in Christ '*all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form and in Him you have been made complete.*' Colossians 2:8-9 Marvelous staggering thought!

For the Law was given through Moses ; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. John 1:17 Here John is contrasting the giving of the Law by Moses and the coming of grace and truth through Christ. In the Old Testament the Law was given from God through Moses and said 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not' and in so doing simply exposed the inability of man to keep any part of it. Grace did not come with the law – that is the power to do the law was not with the law. The truth was there, the law is truth. But grace did not accompany the law. **But in Christ, grace comes together with truth in the person of Christ to not only tell us what the law requires but to fulfill the requirements of the law in us.** The law says love God supremely and love your neighbor as yourself. We're not sure we even like God, much less love Him, as much as we love other stuff, and we're pretty sure we don't love our neighbor. So grace, through Christ, comes to fill us with love for God and love for our neighbor.

This does not mean that before Christ came grace was nowhere to be found – otherwise no one would have been saved. Back in Genesis chapter 6 we read: *Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually...But Noah found favor [grace] in the eyes of the LORD.* Genesis 6:5, 8 Truth was there, grace was there, it just didn't come with the law. The law provided no power to do what we should do. But in Christ grace and truth appeared together. And it was Christ who made the invisible God, visible: *No one has seen God at any time ; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.* John 1:18 Here John come full circle from verse 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* John 1:1-2 The Son of God who is God, came to explain or declare – **to exegete** – God. Exegesis is what we do each Lord's Day – we explain the Scriptures so that we get understanding – to make the word accessible. **Christ came to make God accessible to us. He is the Word made flesh.**

Our gracious God and Savior,

We thank You this morning for the Word made flesh. Precious Christ, our hearts are overwhelmed with the love and grace You demonstrated by leaving Your glory and coming to live and die among us so that You might bring us to the Father. All our mercies come through You, the Living Word, who designed, purchased, promised and effected them. You have made the invisible, unapproachable God visible and near to us, and we are staggered by the immensity of this thought. Incline our hearts to this Word and let our love for Him break the bondage of every other affection and bring us to God. Let this Word pierce through cold and hardened hearts and awaken faith. Gracious Father, inform our minds and shape our souls according to Your Word, making us into the image of Your dear Son, the Word of God made flesh. May we be those whose delight in You through Jesus Christ, cause us to spread this joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the powerful and life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.