



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 1: 14-18

Winter 2021

"Veiled In Flesh"

TRANSCRIPT

Well good morning, and a Merry Christmas to all of you; a few days early, but we're continuing our studies this morning in the Gospel of John. But in the LORD's providence, it's a passage most appropriate for this time of year, this season of the year. John chapter 1, verses 14 through 18,

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ 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.'" ¹⁶ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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: 14-18

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time in it; and our time of worship this morning.

Charles Spurgeon once said, (I think this was in the first sermon he preached in the beginning of his great London ministry and he said it as a relatively young man with great insight.), he said, "I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm the

swelling billows of sorrow and grief, so speak peace to the winds of trial as the devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead." In other words, 'There is nothing more practical or peaceful or pleasurable than knowing God and pondering Him. It's our highest thought and our greatest pursuit.'

But how can we know Him? After all, the LORD said, "I dwell on a high and holy place." Paul said that God dwells in unapproachable light. Who can ascend so high beyond the cosmos? Who can enter into that light? No one. It is unapproachable. Left to ourselves, to human reason or mystical imagination, man can never know God. So God made Himself known to us. That's the good news. That's the Gospel. That's how the final portion of John's prologue, his preface, his introduction to the Gospel of John, this fourth Gospel begins: "The Word became flesh."

This is the first time that John has used this term, '*ho logos*', "the Word" since verse 1; so it recalls all that he wrote about "the Word", about the LORD at "the beginning". He was "in the beginning", John wrote—the absolute beginning: When the world and time and history began; when everything began—He was already there. He was with God; and further, He was God. He is distinct from God, and yet is God. It's a way of describing the relationship within the Godhead; between God the Father and God the Son, two of the three persons of the Trinity. It is "through Him", John says in verse 3, 'through the Word', (or 'the Son'), that "All things came into being." He is the Creator of everything.

And what John says is apart from Him—nothing came into being that has come into being. In other words, there are no exceptions to this: Everything outside of God, (who is eternal, who is un-created, everything outside of Him, outside of the Triune God), was created by Him—by Christ. In Colossians chapter 1, in verse 17, Paul tells us that He not only created everything, but 'He holds everything together.' He keeps everything in existence by the power of His will.—That's Christ.

Now that gives us some appreciation of this great statement in verse 14, because here John states that 'the Creator became a creature'; the second person of the Trinity

became a man. But John put it more bluntly than that, or as one commentator put it, "His statement is almost shocking" — "The Word became flesh." Not, 'the Word was born', or even, 'the Word had a body prepared for Him', as in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 5 but "...the Word became flesh."

But it's a word (*became*), carefully chosen by John to make an unambiguous statement about Christ; one that leaves no doubt that He, who was with God, and was God, *became* flesh and blood. As the shorter catechism states, "He took to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul." He had a genuine human nature—yet without sin. And again, that truth is at the heart of Christianity: That God became one of us and one with us; that the Creator became a creature; that He became a man.

One of the old theologians declared it, "A wondrous mystery: God has become human. He remained what He was; and what He was not—He became." When He became a man, He did not stop being God. He remained what He was from all eternity. But He did enter into a new form of existence: Not as some 'superman', but as the God-Man. He has all of the properties and powers of God, and all of the properties and powers of man. He was and will be forever, fully God and fully Man without mixing or confusing His two natures.

Now that's a lot of theology, but that's the meaning of John's words in these first 18 verses of the fourth Gospel. And it's not only the testimony of John the apostle, but of John the Baptist as well. In verse 15, he said of Jesus, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"

Now Jesus in time and history, was born six months after John the Baptist, so how did He exist before John? Some of John's audience might have wondered about that if they had known the situation. Well the answer is, Jesus is a unique man. We all begin at conception and birth. He was born in Bethlehem—but existed before that; preexisted Bethlehem. He was "in the beginning" with God—before He became incarnate.

It is a wonderful mystery, but it was only by becoming flesh that God could do His great work of salvation by dying for us. And only in that way, by becoming a man, becoming flesh and blood, could He reveal Himself—could God reveal Himself to us. And so He became a real, historical man. We celebrate it at Christmas. —But it's something we should *celebrate* every day, *consider* every day; Christ's incarnation, (which is two Latin words meaning "*in fleshing*"). Charles Wesley put it succinctly in his hymn, which we just sang, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity." That's John chapter 1, verses 14 through 18. It was the supreme revelation.

But not the first revelation. There was a long history of revelation preceding the Lord's birth. The epistle to the Hebrews begins by stating that fact that in the past, "God spoke to the fathers (*and*) the prophets in many portions and in many ways, (*but*) in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..." (Heb 1:1-2). God revealed Himself in a real person; with a face and with a body. God became man "and dwelt among us", John said (vs14).

Now that's an equally shocking statement because this One, who for all eternity dwelt on a "high and holy place", (Is 57:15), "in unapproachable light", (1Tim 6:16), not only entered this world, but made His home among us. And when John says, "among us", he at least meant 'among people like him'; fishermen, laborers, simple people—and lived a common life.

Now that's completely unexpected. He didn't shelter Himself, this Son of God, from the harsh realities of this world. He didn't dwell in obscurity; or live in a palace where He could have enjoyed a soft life. He was born in a stable, among animals. He grew up in a carpenter's shop among the tools of his trade. He humbled Himself by becoming a man so that men, women, people, might see Him in everyday life and know Him in that way. He became like us. He entered our experience. He dwelt among the most common of us, rubbed shoulders with us.

That is where John says, "...we saw His glory"—in the day-to-day experiences of life. And the fact that Jews, like John, should have come to believe that, believe that

'God became flesh', is amazing in and of itself. And that's evidence of the truth of the statement that he's made.

Eight of the nine writers of the New Testament were Jews. And all were taught, and all believed that there is only one God—and no human is divine. Yet they all teach that the one God exists in three persons—not three Gods, but one God existing in three persons; and that Jesus is both God's Messiah and God's Son. How is that? It's because they "saw His glory" when He dwelt among them.

Now this word *dwelt* is very revealing about the Lord's earthy life and glory. It is every bit as striking as the word *flesh*. It means 'to pitch a tent', or 'to dwell in a tent'. And that would have had special significance to a Jewish reader because this same word was used of 'pitching the tabernacle'. So the Jew would have been immediately struck by this statement and understood it as, 'He pitched His tabernacle among us', or 'He tabernacled among us'.

Undoubtedly that's the picture John wanted us to have because the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt among His people during Israel's desert wanderings; and then before the temple was built. It was where He met with them. And His presence among them was symbolized in the 'Shekinah glory'—the light that filled the tabernacle.

One of the very interesting features of the tabernacle is the way it was constructed and how its glory was concealed—hidden within it. And it was made of beautiful material. You can read the description in the Pentateuch of all that went into the building of this tabernacle: All the details of it; the silver sockets and the gold-plated boards supporting richly embroidered curtains, and a colorful tapestry that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. Its furnishings were of gold. The ark of the covenant on which the solid gold lid, the mercy seat with its cherubim, the golden lamp stand, and altar of incense. All of these were symbolic of spiritual truth: Like the mercy seat that was sprinkled with blood once a year on the day of atonement to signify that reconciliation with God, peace with God, is only through sacrifice, through the shedding of blood; anticipating Christ's sacrifice in death.

All of this was revealed in these beautiful things of wealth and color and light that was covered by a plain, unimpressive tent of goat's hair. That tent is what people saw, not the glory within. And it's the same with our Lord. In Isaiah 53 we read that, "He had no *stately* form or majesty." (vs2). His glory was veiled in the common tent of His flesh. And yet John said that as Jesus dwelt among them in that humble state, "We saw His glory."

So these are not things of John's imagination. It's what he saw. In fact, in his first epistle, 1 John, he begins that book by saying, "What we," not just John but, "we", the apostles and many others, "What we have seen with our eyes...and touched with our hands...we proclaim." And here, (John 1), he assures us that the One of whom he writes was a real person, an historical figure, and a person of great glory. "We saw His glory", just as others did. That's what he says. "He saw His glory".

John, along with Peter and James, saw the Lord's transfiguration when they were on the mountain; "...and His face shown like the sun, and His garments became as white as light." (Mat 17:2). It was as though the tent of the tabernacle were open and all the Shekinah glory shown through.

But John doesn't mention that incident, the transfiguration, in his Gospel and probably had something else in mind; what he and others saw while Jesus dwelt among them during His daily life when. As I said, 'they rubbed shoulders' and were among the people; and the things that He did and the way He responded and reacted—it was a glory that set Him apart from all men. Not glory like that of Alexander or Caesar, but a unique glory: "...glory", John says, "as of the only begotten from the Father." (vs14b). That's a significant description, "the only begotten." We're familiar with it from John 3:16. Jesus is God's "*only begotten* Son." It's actually one word. It means something like 'the one and only', or 'the unique one'. And since His Father is God, and He is God's Son, this glory is the glory of God.

In Christ, all of the attributes of God are seen. And John indicates that when he describes His glory as, "full of grace and truth." Again, those words lead us back to the

Old Testament, to Exodus chapter 33, where Moses asks God to show him His glory. (vs18). You read that and you think, "What must Moses have been thinking of?" Well, I can imagine he was thinking of something spectacular; 'I want to peek into that glory that no one can really see.' And the LORD agreed but He said, 'I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you', and said, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.' (vs19). He dispenses mercy sovereignly—but He dispenses it liberally.

Now that tells us a great deal about God's glory. Certainly it is light and power and all that we might imagine it to be, but here it is primarily His goodness. And so Moses stood on Mt. Sinai, hidden in the cleft of the rock, and the LORD descended in a cloud and passed in front of him. And as He did, he proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.", (or grace and truth.) (Ex 34:6). That's God's glory—which is His goodness.

And that's what John saw in Jesus. He saw grace; which is, 'Kindness for those who don't deserve it.' It's God's unconditional love for the sinner, His unmerited favor. He saw this glory in the miracles that He performed. His "signs", as John calls them, (Jn 20:30): Healing the lame man; giving sight to the blind; cleansing lepers by healing them; and raising the dead. They were acts of grace and mercy—not to the deserving but the undeserving.

Luke records an incident in Luke 17, in which the Lord healed ten lepers: There's a group of them and He healed all ten of them. Only one of them thanked Him. John saw grace in the everyday experiences of life. He saw it in the way He handled people, from those lepers who never even thanked Him to others. It's in the way He dealt with people; with the kindness, gentleness, love, and forgiveness of our Lord.

And he heard truth in the Lord's words; His teaching was true. But He was not only truthful in what He said, He was gracious in the way He said it. Some people are kind, they are loving and affectionate. They have grace, but truth is a little difficult for them. That is, they shade it a bit; it's difficult to be candid with people. And then there are those who are honest but stern, blunt, and not gracious. Well Christ was both. The

two were perfectly combined in Him. He never compromised the truth and He always communicated it correctly—graciously.

In chapter 8, when the Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Him, (whom they had caught in adultery), and told Him to judge her; He did so with grace and truth. He did it in a way that exposed the hypocrisy of her accusers—but without overlooking her sin. He addressed it. He called it sin, but He told her to go and it no more. He spoke truth to her. He didn't compromise, didn't gloss over her failure, but He didn't crush her with it. He was compassionate, gracious in healing and forgiving.

So in that, and many other examples, John saw, (and we see), the grace with which He invited the tax collectors and sinners to come to Him, and the truth that repelled the hypocrites, the Scribes and Pharisees. He didn't conceal or compromise the truth. He spoke it plainly, even when pronouncing wrath and judgment. He did that in a gracious manner—with tears of compassion. His life and ministry are not truth alone or grace alone, but grace and truth. And His life was filled up with that. He is “full of grace and truth”, John said.

Now that's something to see in a crooked age. People today talk a lot about ‘transparency’, about ‘genuineness, sincerity, and honesty’. There's nothing new in that. One of the more eccentric Greek philosophers was Diogenes; who would walk the streets of Athens in broad daylight, holding up a lighted lamp, ‘Looking for an honest man.’ He didn't find one. Poor Diogenes; he was in the wrong place at the wrong time because that man came in the person of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of “grace and truth”. He is the light of the world. And John the apostle witnessed it in the Lord’s words and works.

But Christ came to do more than reveal great things; He came to impart them. He is the source of all our blessings. That's what John says in verse 16. "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace." He is an infinite reservoir of goodness and blessing. There's no end to the supply of it. And He fills us with it.

We've all "received" of His grace and truth; literally, we have received '*grace instead of grace*', or '*grace in place of grace*' —the idea being that there is a continuous supply of it. As one supply recedes, another replaces it. It's like the waves that continually break on the shore, one after another.

Some of you have probably witnessed that. I've had the pleasure of witnessing it more than once. I think I've mentioned this more than once but going to the coast of Maine and sitting on that rocky coast and looking out on the great Atlantic; and there below are these waves; large waves—Huge Waves!, that come crashing in on these great rocks—and the spray comes up. And then they recede and there's this foam and this turquoise blue that goes out. And then another wave comes and crashes on the rocks—and it never stops. It's constant, continual; and it has been for millennia upon millennia —constantly...That's the grace of God and how He supplies it to us.

Now that's my illustration, but I think Dr. Johnson probably had a better one more to the point; from the care that is given to a garden. And he spoke of how a gardener does that. He could speak of that with some authority because he himself was a gardener, and the son of a gardener. A gardener waters a plot of ground where he has plants. And he pours water on the ground—and he waits until it sinks into the earth. And then he pours some more until the plant is properly watered.

And in that way, the LORD is constantly supplying us with grace. That's what the LORD gives to the Christian. That's what the LORD gives to the child of God, the believer in Jesus Christ—a constant supply of grace, to the end that we are properly, constantly cared for, and kept in faith. I mean by that, *kept* believing. Your faith, from beginning to end, is a sovereign gift of God. It didn't arise from your brilliant intellect or your perceptiveness. It is a gift of God from beginning to end—and He's always supplying us with that, with the faith that we need to persevere.

Now the child of God may wander away from Him, and we are prone to do that as the hymn writer said, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love." Who doesn't know that to be true? The attractions of the world are great. The spirit of

the age has a real hold on all of us; a pull upon us. But His grace is greater; and His grace will always lead us back to Himself and lead us into the greatest blessing.

I like Leon Morris's comment, "Grace is always an adventure. No man can say where grace will lead him." No, we don't know where grace is going to lead us in particular, but what we do know is it will always be to a good place, to the best place. However difficult it may be, and however obscure that place may be in our mind, as we're going through the difficulties, we know this, that His grace will lead us to the best place. He cares for His people.

Only Christ can do that. Only He can supply this "grace upon grace". That's the reason His birth, His incarnation, was necessary. Verse 17, "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." Now the Law was not a failure; John's not suggesting that. Paul doesn't suggest that in Romans or the Book of Galatians. The Law succeeded in its purpose to reveal God's character, to reveal His perfection, and show man his own failure. It was necessary for that purpose.

The Law came in to expose our sin and make known to us our need of a Savior. But that's all that the Law could do. It's all it was intended to do—but that was all it could do. It was limited, and that's the point of the contrast that John makes here between the Law of Moses and the grace that comes through Jesus Christ. Christ gives blessing unconditionally, as a free gift, apart from works, apart from any personal merit or accomplishment. That's grace.

The Law can tell us what to do. It can't enable us to do it. It can tell us that we are guilty and we're spiritually dead, but it's powerless to give life. Christ, through His death and resurrection gives life. Again, that's the reason "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us", perfectly, so that He could offer up Himself as a sacrifice for us in our place, and in so doing pay for all our sins by His death; so that we might live.

But He also went beyond the Law of Moses in revealing to us the person and the character of God. John says simply in verse 18, "He has explained Him." That's the

conclusion of John's prologue, his introduction to this fourth Gospel: Christ is the great revealer of God. But he begins the statement with a reminder of man's inability to know God. "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*."

Now it's true, there were appearances of God in the Old Testament—theophanies and visions. God, as we considered earlier, allowed Moses to see Him pass by on Mt. Sinai. But He also warned Moses, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" (Ex 33:20). What Moses saw on Mt. Sinai was what F. F. Bruce called, "The afterglow of the divine glory." But he did not see the essential being of God, who dwells in "unapproachable light", until Christ came. And in Him, whom Paul called "the image of the invisible God", (Col 1:15), people saw Him. "He has explained *Him*", John says.

Now that word *explained* is the word from which we get the word *exegesis*, which means basically, *interpretation*. So it's been said, 'Jesus is the exegesis of God, the interpretation and explanation of God.' And He was absolutely, uniquely qualified to be that; to explain God because, as John says, He "is in the bosom of the Father." He has the closest relationship with Him, the closest possible relationship any being can have. He is one with Him. He is "in the bosom of the Father." He knows the mind of the Father, and He revealed Him, explained Him; which means, through Christ, we are able to know the person and character of God.

And that's the highest knowledge there is. No greater knowledge than that. No theoretical physicist has that kind of knowledge. No one; no philosopher, no mathematician, no, any characterization you want to give, no 'anyone' knows Him in that way. That is the highest knowledge there is; and it's what Spurgeon said 'Comforts the soul, calms the billows of sorrow, and speaks peace to the winds of trial. '

But it's ours only through Christ. Apart from Him there's no knowledge of God; He's beyond us. We are separated from Him by sin; and infinity. In Isaiah 57:15 He said, "I dwell *on* a high and holy place," but He added the amazing words, "and *also* with the

contrite and lowly of spirit..." In a sense, I suppose, that applied to Christ: He was 'lowly of spirit'. He humbled Himself to become flesh, to become one of us.

He humbled Himself, He emptied Himself unto death, even death on a cross, to reveal the Father, and to save us by dying in our place—and actually, as John will go on to explain, or as Jesus Himself will state in chapter 12, that death is His glorification. He speaks of it as being glorified. So the revelation of God's glory is seen in its fullest extent at the cross of Christ, where the justice and holiness of God met the grace and the love of God. And there, at the expense of His own life, the righteous One died for the unrighteous. There we see the great glory of God.

And God was with Him; His Father was with Him through all of that. And when a person humbles himself or herself, becomes lowly of spirit by recognizing their guilt and their need of the Savior, and trusts in Him, then God dwells with them and never leaves them.

So if you've not done that but want this greatest of knowledge: want the knowledge of God, knowledge that is personal, as well as intellectual, to have a personal relationship with the God of the universe, and if you know that you are a sinner and in need of a Savior, then look to Him. You'll have that knowledge. Recognize your own sin, and your own need. Believe in Him, and you will have that personal relationship. Come to the Father through the Son by trusting in Christ as your Savior, the one who suffered for sinners so that all who believe in Him would have forgiveness and everlasting life. May God help you to do that.

And you who have, (I hope it's every one of you), you who have, rejoice in this relationship you have, this knowledge you have of Him. He'll never leave us. And praise Him for that. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank You for Your goodness to us, this great text of Scripture, that in the time we have is not enough time to expound it. But what a wonderful thing. That the

Word became flesh. The eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity humbled Himself, emptied Himself to become one of us, and dwelt among us, and rubbed shoulders with us, with people, and revealed Your goodness and grace. And then, of course, that grace and truth, the glory of it was revealed most especially at the cross of Christ, where He died in our place. We thank You for that. Thank You for the salvation we have in Him. We thank You for the salvation which is attributed altogether to our great Triune God. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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