

John 1:14

Introduction

This morning we come to a verse of which I believe one commentator has rightly said: “No uninspired pen could ever have set down [these] words” (Lenski). Or should we say, “No uninspired author could ever have conceived of these words or thought to set down these words.” This morning, we come to that great mystery and truth that is central to, and lies at the very heart of, Christianity. But in order to rightly understand the mystery and the wonder and beauty of these words, we must make sure that we have grasped, and that we are fully cognizant of the *identity* of the Word.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). And now, against that backdrop, listen to these words: “In the beginning *was* the Word” (Jn. 1:1). So, in the beginning the Word already *was*. There never was any time when the Word was not. The existence of the Word is from all eternity.

“In the beginning *was* the Word, and the Word was with God.” The “Word” is not just a “supreme cosmic principle” or idea (Morris). We must not think that for a moment. Since God is a personal being the Word that was “*with*” *Him* must also be personal and relational. To say that the Word was “*with* God” can only communicate to us an intimacy of relationship, and even of oneness, of a kind that is inconceivable to us. To say that the Word was from all eternity and even just to say that the Word was with God already requires that the Word must be equal to God, partaking fully of all that the one and only, indivisible God is. And so the Apostle John writes:

“And *God*, the Word *was*.” All that God is, the Word was – and therefore *is*. The Word is God’s own self-revelation. That’s why He is called the *Word*. If the Word was not fully God He could not possibly be God’s own self-revelation. Because what or who can truly and fully reveal God but God Himself? The creation reveals God not because the creation is God—not because the creation is the eternal Word, but rather because the creation came into being *through* the eternal Word. So the Apostle John writes: “All things came into being through Him, and without Him not a single thing came into being that has come into being.” The Word is the source of all that has ever come into being, and therefore all that has ever come into being must be revealing to us—indirectly and in part, but still truly—the glory of God. Likewise, the progressively unfolding plan of redemption throughout Israel’s history in the Old Testament was not itself God—it was not itself the eternal Word, but it was still revealing God truly, even if only in part, because it was still the eternal Word who was active in this plan for the redemption of sinners like us. So we read in verses 4-5: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The activity of the Word in creation and in redemption brings us back once again to His eternal deity and Godhead. We know from the Old Testament that the work of creation—of calling into existence the things that do not exist and making from out of nothing all that is (Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3)—is exclusively the work of the God who is, as our Baptist confession says, “but one only, the living and true God.”

- Isaiah 45:18 (cf. Isa. 45:12; Jer. 27:5) — Thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Therefore, the Word who was *with* God *and through whom all things came into being* must partake fully of all that the one and only indivisible God is. Even more importantly, we know from the Old Testament that the work of salvation—of delivering and redeeming helpless and sinful man—is exclusively the work of God.

- Isaiah 43:10–12 — “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God.”
- Isaiah 45:22 (cf. Hos. 13:4) — “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”

Therefore, the Word who was *with* God *and in whom was the life that was shining as light in the darkness*— therefore, this Word must be all that the one and only, indivisible God is. What does this mean? This means that the Word is to be worshiped by us with the Father and with the Spirit as the only living and true God. This means that the Word is to be praised and adored and feared and obeyed by us *with* the Father and *with* the Spirit as the only living and true God – eternal, uncreated, life, and light; or as the ancient church confessed, “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.”

But how is it that we can even be saying these things? It’s true that in and through creation and especially in and through the unfolding plan of redemption in the Old Testament the Word was revealing God. But God had never been manifested and had never come to be fully known in the Word *Himself*. It is the Word *Himself*—not creation or even the unfolding plan of redemption—who is the supreme, the full, and the final revelation of God because it is the Word *Himself* who was “*with*” God and who *was* God. Therefore it is only in the Word *Himself* that we can know God fully – not comprehending His infinite essence, but nevertheless knowing Him fully, even unto life eternal. How, then, can we ever have this true and full and saving knowledge of God if we cannot ultimately come to see and know the Word? And yet how could it ever be possible to see and to know the Word – this one who is with God and who is God?

In verse 9 John spoke of the light “*coming into* the world.” In verse 10 we read that “He was *in* the world.” In verse 11 John says that “He *came* to His own.” In verse 12 we read of those who “*received* Him.” To this point in John’s Gospel we can only be guessing at what these words might really mean. *How is it* that the light was in the world? And so we come now to those words that “no uninspired pen could ever have set down.” We come now to that great mystery and truth that is central to, and lies at the very heart of, the Christianity that we confess.

I. John 1:14a — And the Word became flesh...

No natural man can ever, or will ever, truly be able to accept this mystery. It's an offense and a stumbling block to all the wisdom of men. So may we never be careless or irreverent with this mystery. May we never suppose that this is anything less than unthinkable apart from revelation and impossible apart from the incomprehensible, the unsearchable, the almighty power of God. "The Word became flesh."

"Flesh," here, doesn't refer just to physical flesh or only to a human body without a true and reasonable *human* soul. As Calvin put it, "flesh" is "the part taken for the whole [synecdoche]... the lower part includes the *whole* [nature of] man" consisting not just of a true human body but also of a true human soul. Apollinaris (in the 4th century) taught that the Word, taking the place of a human soul, simply clothed Himself in a human body. But brothers and sisters, as one commentator writes: "That which was not taken could not be healed. If [the Word] had not taken the whole man [body *and* soul], He could not have saved [our souls]" (Arrowsmith; quoted in Ryle). It's often in responding to heresies and false teachings (e.g. Apollinarianism) that we're brought to confront more clearly the true mystery of the incarnation.

"Flesh" is first of all a reference to *all* that a true human being is – to the whole human nature, body and soul. So we read in other places:

- Luke 3:6 — All flesh shall see the salvation of God.
- John 17:2 (Mat. 24:22; Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 1:29) — You have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.
- Romans 3:20 (cf. Gal. 2:16) — By works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight.

But "flesh," here, is also a way of referring to human nature specifically in its frailty and weakness as it groans under the effects of sin. The Word did not become sinful flesh, but the Word did become perishable flesh. J.C. Ryle says, "He became a man like any one of Adam's children, with a nature liable to every thing that fallen humanity is liable to, except sin." And so when we read that "the Word became flesh," we remember that this is the very "flesh" of which we also read in Scripture:

- Isaiah 40:6 — All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
- Psalms 78:39 — He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.

Jesus wept with real sorrow just like we do (Jn. 11:34-35), after fasting, He was really and truly hungry (Mat. 4:2; cf. Mat. 21:18), He was wearied from His journey (Jn. 4:6), He had no place to lay His head (Mat. 8:20), He suffered physically (Mat. 26:67; 27:26-30, 35 & 1 Pet. 2:21-23), He was distressed and anguished in His soul (Mk. 14:33-34; Lk. 12:50), and He really and truly died and was buried in the grave (Mk. 15:37, 42-47). It is because "the Word became *flesh*" in *all* that that word encompasses that He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses as one who was in every way tried and tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:14). The point here is not that Jesus was tempted by the twisted and perverse sinful lusts of our fallen nature (that would be no comfort to us at all). The point is that He experienced all the trials and temptations that are due to

our existence as weak and perishable human beings living in a sin-cursed world – because He also was a weak and perishable human being living, like us, in a sin-cursed world. Here is scope for unceasing comfort as we battle daily with the weakness of our own flesh. When Jesus said to His disciples, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat. 26:41), He was not just “preaching” to them; He was speaking as one of them – as one who knew these things from His own experience of life lived in the weakness of the flesh. He spoke as one who was even then falling to the ground and praying:

- Matthew 26:39 — “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

The writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 2:17–18 — He [was] made like his brothers[—like us—]in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

But if the Word became weak, and frail, and perishable flesh, did He then cease to be what He was before? Did He cease to be the eternal Word who was with God and who was God? Did He cease to be the one through whom all things came into being and in whom was the life that was the light of men? And the answer is, NO. Not for a single moment did the eternal Word who became flesh cease to be the eternal Word. We know this because God cannot cease to be God. But even more wonderfully, we know this because of what the Apostle John writes next:

II. John 1:14b — And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory...

Who is it that dwelt among us? Who is the subject of the verb? It is the *Word Himself* who dwelt among us. *Whose* glory did the Apostles see and behold with their own eyes? It was the glory of the eternal *Word* now revealed and manifested to us in the flesh. The Word was not changed into a human; He did not empty Himself of anything that He was before or forfeit a single one of the attributes of His deity (the kenosis heresy); but He did take to Himself a true and complete humanity, body and soul, with the result that, as one commentator says: “All the redemptive categories... thus far attributed... to the Word now apply with the same absoluteness and exclusiveness to the man Jesus of Nazareth” (Ridderbos).

We must be careful here that we don’t think of Jesus as some sort of hybrid of Deity and humanity mixed together (Eutyches; 5th century). The humanity of Jesus was not a deified humanity; it was and will be to all eternity a real and true humanity that is the same as ours. On the other hand, the deity of Jesus was not in any way a humanized deity. Between humanity and deity there will always remain an infinite gulf. There can be no mixing of these two natures.

And yet we must not therefore think of there being two separate persons in Jesus – as though there was a human Jesus coexisting side by side with the eternal Word (Nestorius; 5th century). Jesus does not speak of Himself as “we” but as “I,” and the biblical writers never speak of Jesus as “they” but only of “he.” When we worship Jesus, we do not ask ourselves whether we are

worshiping His humanity or His deity; we are simply worshiping *Him*. Our humanity and the deity of the Word—our human nature and His eternal Godhead—have been “unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably” united in the *one* person of our Lord Jesus Christ (Chalcedon). Here is mystery before which we immediately bow down in wonder, in awe, in worship. And here in this mystery, carefully fenced, and guarded, *and confessed* by the church, is the foundation of our salvation and of all our fellowship and communion with God.

When God was going to come down and dwell among the people of Israel He gave these instructions to Moses:

- Exodus 25:8–9 — Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle [LXX, *skene*], and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

When John says that the Word became flesh and “dwelt” among us he uses a word that’s only used four other times in the entire New Testament (all in Revelation, a book also authored by John) and only once in the Greek Old Testament (cf. Gen. 13:12); it’s the verb form of “tabernacle.” So instead of *skene* we have here, *skenoō*: “And the Word became flesh and He tabernacled among us.” Why did the eternal Word who was with God and who was God come to dwell among us *as* one of us? So that the forgiveness of sins and the sweet fellowship with God that was only shadowed forth at the tabernacle (in the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, and the lamp and the table, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering, and the bronze basin for washing) might be known no longer in its “promise” form, but in the actual substance of its reality, the *Word Himself* become *flesh* and tabernacling among us.

“And we beheld,” John says, “His **glory**.” Immediately, we’re reminded again of the tabernacle and of the glory of the Lord that was so closely connected with the tabernacle. We read in Exodus (cf. Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10; 16:19, 42; 20:6):

- Exodus 29:43, 45 — *There [at the tent of meeting] I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my **glory**... I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.*
- Exodus 40:34–35 — *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*.*

What should we think of when we hear the word “glory”? On the one hand, “glory” is specifically the *visible manifestation* of God’s presence, so in this sense we can think of His glory as the *visible* cloud that settles on the tabernacle. But in the end, God’s true glory is not something “physical” (as if it were literal photons of light). The glory of God is the sum total of all the infinite perfections of who He is – of His own revealed character and attributes. It’s before this glory that we worship. So when John says, “and we beheld His glory,” he’s not specifically talking about His transfiguration on the mountain when “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light” (Mat. 17:1-2). John never records that event in His Gospel. He’s not talking about a single, isolated moment, but rather the whole scope of Jesus’ life. He sees the true glory of the eternal Word as much in Jesus’ suffering and death as in His resurrection and

ascension (cf. Jn. 12:23; 13:31; 17:5). There is not a single part of Jesus' life that does not show forth the glory of God, and we know that this is so because the Word became flesh. The deity of the Word was so *perfectly* united with our true humanity that to "behold" the human Jesus of Nazareth—in His words and deeds, in His sufferings and resurrection—is to behold, in all of its fullness, the true glory of God. When John says, "And we beheld His glory," we're certainly meant to think of another passage from Exodus:

- Exodus 33:18–22 — Moses said, "Please show me your **glory**." And he said, "I will make all my **goodness** pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be **gracious** to whom I will be gracious, and will show **mercy** on whom I will show mercy."

Notice how here the glory of the Lord consists supremely in His goodness – in His sovereign and unmerited grace and mercy to sinners. But of course, this then necessarily assumes all of the other attributes of God (including His holiness and justice) in all of their infinite perfections. So we read in the very next chapter of Exodus:

- Exodus 34:5–7 — The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness [LXX, 'truth'], keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

"Truth" in God is simply the reality that He is true; He is true to *Himself* and therefore He is also perfectly and unfailingly true to us in His word and promise. And so we understand now that that glory that was "only" shadowed forth to Moses on the mountain when the Lord descended in the cloud has now been *fully unveiled to us*—revealed to us in all of its *fullness* – in Jesus Christ. That's why John can write:

III. John 1:14c — ...and we beheld his glory, glory as of the one and only [Son] from the Father, *full of grace and truth*.

I love what Lenski writes: "John repeats [*glory*], investing it with emphasis, as if he would say, 'glory indeed,' 'glory most wonderful.'" And here again, the glory of the Lord consists supremely in His goodness – in His sovereign and unmerited grace and mercy to sinners.

When John says, "and *we* beheld His glory" the "we" is first of all the eyewitnesses who walked with Jesus in the flesh when He was tabernacling among us. But then that same "we" is also an invitation to us to join in beholding His glory ourselves—the glory of the Word become flesh—as we read in the rest of this Gospel of His words and deeds, of His sufferings and death, and of His resurrection. In Jesus, we see fully unveiled the perfect faithfulness of God to Himself, and to all His word and promise. Jesus Himself will say in John chapter fourteen:

- John 14:6 — "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

And the Apostle Paul writes of Jesus in 2 Corinthians:

➤ 2 Corinthians 1:20 — All the promises of God find their Yes in him.

In Jesus, we see fully unveiled the sovereign and unmerited grace and mercy of God to sinners. In Jesus—the Word become flesh—is fully revealed and manifested to us the glory of God. “*Glory* as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Conclusion

We’re going to come back to this “fullness” next week. For right now I want to close by asking: Have you seen in Jesus your infinitely sufficient and perfect Savior? Ryle writes:

“[The] undivided union of two perfect natures in Christ’s Person is exactly that which gives infinite value to His mediation, and qualifies Him to be the very Mediator that sinners need. Our Mediator is One who can sympathize with us, because He is very man. And yet, at the same time, He is One who can deal with the Father for us on equal terms, because He is very God.—It is the same union which gives infinite value to His righteousness, when imputed to believers... It is the same union which gives infinite value to the atoning blood which He shed for sinners on the cross... It is the same union which gives infinite value to His resurrection... [Here is a] subject... full of abounding consolation for all who know Christ by faith, and believe on Him.”

Have you seen—and do you see—in Jesus your infinitely sufficient and perfect Savior?