

God Is

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (John 3:16-17 ESV)

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8 ESV)

God Is With Us
December 27th, 2020
John 1:1-18
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to John 1.

There is a terrible – but perhaps helpful – irony in the fact that we are being forced to spend Christmas Sunday apart. Christmas, of course, is the celebration of the incarnation. It is the celebration of the glorious fact that God came to dwell with us! It is the celebration of God’s NEARNESS.

And we are being forced to celebrate at a distance. That is, to put it lightly, less than ideal.

But perhaps we can use these circumstances to our favour. Perhaps one of the reasons why God ordained this lockdown was to further heighten our understanding and appreciation of our need for God’s nearness. One of the things that we have learned over the course of this year is that there is no substitute for real, physical presence. We tried every substitute we could think of – we tried Zoom and Skype and Phone calls and drive-by birthdays and blowing kisses to senior saints through their windows – but NOTHING ever really filled the gap, did it? I would go so far as to say that – thanks to this pandemic and the plethora of substitutes we’ve tried to utilize – we are

positioned better than anyone else in the history of the WORLD to understand the importance of the PHYSICAL PRESENCE of God with His people.

So, while this isn't the Christmas Sunday that I would have planned for this church, this IS the Christmas Sunday that GOD planned for this church, and He works all things for the good of His people. Today, we are going to marvel at the glorious reality that God is with us!

To that end, would you look with me now to John 1. We have spent the last three weeks meditating on who our God is. He is the God who is triune. He is the God who is holy, holy, holy. He is the God who is love. Now, I hope we are ready to return to behold the miracle of God with us.

Please look with me now at John 1. We're going to read from verses 1-18. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ (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.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:1-18 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In John's gospel, he pulls up above the narrative of Jesus' birth and he provides us with more of a universal, theological view. John appears to be concerned with showing us a behind-the-scenes portrait of the incarnation. D.A. Carson notes:

Since Mark begins his Gospel with the same word, '*The beginning* of the gospel about Jesus Christ', it is also possible that John is making an allusion to his colleague's work, saying in effect, 'Mark has told you about the *beginning* of Jesus' public ministry; I want to show you that the starting point of the gospel can be traced farther back than that, before the *beginning* of the entire universe.'¹

Rather than emphasizing Jesus' lineage or describing the gifts of the magi, John begins his incarnation narrative all the way back before the world was ever formed. He begins his gospel with the triune God. He wants us to behold and to marvel at this amazing mystery that Jesus has come to us. The Word of God who was WITH God and who WAS God – the second Person of the Trinity who has forever existed and through whom the UNIVERSE was created – became flesh and dwelt among us!

John is inviting us to behold the glory of God with us! So, this morning, let's do just that.

Behold the Glory of God With Us

First, John invites us to:

1. Behold the unimaginable grace!

As John reflects on the incarnation, he explains:

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:16 ESV)

Interestingly, the phrase translated here as "grace upon grace" actually comes out in the Greek as "grace *instead of* grace". John is not simply saying that Jesus presents us with a big STACK of grace – almost like a big stack of pancakes. No, the idea is that Jesus has come to take the place of a previous grace.

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John (PNTC)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 114.

But what previous grace is he referring to? That meaning becomes clearer as we read the next verse:

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ **For the law was given** through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:16-17 ESV)

The grace that we had previously was the grace of the LAW.

When you think about God's law, does the word "grace" come to your mind? Because, according to John, it SHOULD! It was a gracious thing when God spoke with Moses and made His will known to us in the ten commandments. He didn't have to share that with us. He could have left us floundering in the dark, trying to make sense of this broken world. But instead, He spoke.

The law was grace.

But now, John says, the word of the law – that grace – has been replaced by the WORD made flesh! Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law and in his life, we learn INFINITELY MORE than we ever could through the law! A letter is a wonderful gift, but I bet you that you won't find a single senior in one of our nursing homes who wouldn't trade all of the letters in the world for just one physical visit. Physical, tangible presence makes all the difference in the world. The law revealed a message from God, but Jesus came to reveal God Himself! That's what John goes on to say:

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, **he has made him known.** (John 1:18 ESV)

No one has ever seen God. No one ever could. Moses didn't even see God. He *asked* to, but do you remember God's answer? God said:

"you cannot see my face, **for man shall not see me and live.**" (Exodus 33:20b ESV)

Moses couldn't reveal the Father to us, because Moses had never seen God. But Jesus HAS seen the Father, because Jesus is ONE with the Father, because Jesus is God! And that's exactly where John begins his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. (John 1:1 ESV)

The Word – Jesus – was WITH God in the beginning. That is to say, Jesus is eternally DISTINCT from the Father with respect to his Person. And yet, the Word also WAS God. That is to say, Jesus is eternally ONE with the Father with respect to his Essence. We spent a whole sermon unpacking that, so that frees us up to zoom right in on John's emphasis here: When we look in the manger, we're not simply looking at one more prophet in a line of prophets. Nor are we simply looking at one more priest, or even one more king. What we behold in the manger is the ETERNAL GOD OF THE UNIVERSE! The second Person of the Godhead became a man! With THAT in mind, look again at verse 14 and try to fathom how unbelievable this is:

And **the Word became flesh** and dwelt among us (John 1:14a ESV)

How can we even begin to understand just how unimaginably gracious this is?! In week two of this series, I used the limited analogy of how – in comparison to God – we are like bedbugs. Not only are we infinitely small in comparison to Him, but we are also evil. We reject His rule and reign, and we sin against God and against one another. We are pests. We don't see ourselves that way of course because we compare ourselves to one another. One bedbug compared to another bedbug might actually look pretty formidable. But when we compare ourselves to GOD – when we behold even a glimpse of His glory and when we hold up our lives to the standard of His holy law – we recognize just how small and how rebellious we truly are.

I would consider myself to be a relatively compassionate person, but never in a MILLION years would I have sympathy for a bedbug. I certainly wouldn't ever SAVE a bedbug. And there is nothing more preposterous than the idea of me BECOMING a bedbug so that the bedbugs could murder me on a cross so that I could make a way for the bedbugs to live with me forever!

And yet, what am I in comparison to the infinite, transcendent, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, holy, holy, HOLY God of the universe? I am less than a bedbug! I am a rebellious, ungrateful NOTHING! But wonder upon wonder, John says:

the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14a ESV)

What amazing love! God with us, Emmanuel! Behold him, wrapped in swaddling clothe lying in a manger. Behold Him, the eternal God robed in our human frailty. How low was our Redeemer brought? Behold the unimaginable grace of God with us.

Second:

2. Behold the Light in the darkness

John says:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:9 ESV)

This language of light is prevalent in John's Gospel and the point of John's metaphor is simple: Jesus is the revelation of the Father. We talked at length about that last week. Jesus came to restore us into right relationship with the Father, and part of that restoration plan was that he would reveal the Father to us. He prayed:

I made known to them your name, **and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them,** and I in them." (John 17:26 ESV)

Jesus came to make the Father known. Jesus is the light that reveals the Father's will, the Father's character and the Father Himself.

This language of light was used in the Old Testament to describe God's law. For example, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, and it is a song of thanksgiving for the Law! The Psalmist simply cannot believe that God would be so gracious so as to speak to us and to teach us how to live. The Psalmist declares:

Oh how I love your law!
It is my meditation all the day.
⁹⁸Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me. (Psalm 119:97-98 ESV)

He goes on to write:

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and **a light to my path.** (Psalm 119:105 ESV)

The Law was like a lamp shining in the darkness. The Psalmist marveled at the fact that God loved His people so much that He was willing to take the time to speak to us and to teach us. C.S. Lewis, reflecting on this deep love for the law that we see all over the Old Testament writes:

Their delight in the Law is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian's delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.²

The law was a wonderful GRACE! The God who made the universe spoke to His people and said, “Here is what you need to know to live in right relationship with me and with one another.” This is obviously a very limited analogy, but Luke got another LEGO set for Christmas this year and I am very thankful for the instructions! I am thankful that I don’t need to flounder in the dark trying to make sense of that mess. The creator of the LEGOs has helpfully clarified his plan for the LEGOs. To a much greater extent, that is what the Psalmist is celebrating. He was floundering in the darkness but the God of the universe – the God who made us and who made the world – gave us the blueprint for how to live and flourish! The law was grace!

But, as we learned earlier, the incarnation is a grace ON TOP of that grace. Thus, the author to the Hebrews could write:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-2 ESV)

² C.S. Lewis as quoted in Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 50.

Jesus is the TRUE and FULL and GLORIOUS revelation of the Father! If the law was a lamp, then Jesus is the bright and glorious SUN! He is the light that breaks through even the deepest darkness. John writes:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4-5 ESV)

Did you hear that? The darkness has not overcome it.

I know for a fact that some of you right now are starting to feel like your lost at sea, and you're drifting further and further away from safety. But John is reminding us right here that no matter how dark it gets out there, this light will always break through! Jesus is the lighthouse that will forever and always cut through the night.

God knows that this sin-scarred world is a dangerous place to live. He knows that the devil is prowling about like a lion seeking to steal, to kill and to destroy. He knows that the darkness can sometimes feel overwhelming. So God Himself descended into the darkness. He descended into the deepest depths of the darkness. He bore the curse of sin itself upon His shoulders.

And guess what? THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME HIS LIGHT!

Are you in the dark, Christian? Hold onto Jesus with all of your might! Hold onto the one who has already walked through and who has come out victorious on the other side! Behold the light of the world! Hold him high for all to see. Tell your neighbors in the darkness that there is light and life and that his name is Jesus!

That leads to the last thing that we see in our text today. John invites us to:

3. Behold the invitation

Commentators generally agree that this introduction to John's Gospel was likely written as a chiasm. Basically, you can think of it like a sandwich. The first section and the last section are related and say something similar. The same is true all the way through until you finally make your way to the center of the passage, and that center verse is like the bullseye that John wants to

highlight. If that theory is true and if this passage was written as a chiasm then the center of this chiasm – the bullseye of this introduction – is found in verse 12:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12 ESV)

In John's gospel, he wants us to see that the incarnation – God with us – is God's rescue plan for His people. Jesus is the way home. He is the only hope that broken sinful people have of a restored relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus said exactly that. He said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

What we learn in John's introduction is that not everyone responds to this light in the same way. We read:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, **yet the world did not know him.** (John 1:9-10 ESV)

The word translated here as “world” is the Greek word “kosmos” and, for John, it generally carries a negative connotation. He doesn't use this word to simply describe our planet – he uses this word to describe “the created order in rebellion to its Maker.”³ To say that God came into the world is akin to saying that God left His glorious throne and entered into the midst of the mob that was crying out in rebellion against Him.

Jesus came to dwell among the sinners and the rebels – the people like you and me. He healed the sick. He showed mercy to the poor. He lifted up the downtrodden and the oppressed. He obeyed the law right down to the very last letter. He showed himself to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

³ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John (PNTC)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 123.

those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2 ESV)

The light came! He came to his people, Israel. He proved himself time and time again to be the one that they had been waiting for. The prophecy in Isaiah goes on to say:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV)

In Jesus' life, he proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the one that his people had been longing for! Jesus was the son who would be called Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God! And yet, as John writes:

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:11 ESV)

By and large, Jesus was rejected by his people. They had grown comfortable in their situation. The religious and political leaders loved their power and influence, and the people loved their pre-conceived ideas of a saviour who would wage war with the Romans. The light came into the darkness, but they did not receive him. The light exposed them – the light revealed that they would have to change – and so they closed their eyes and turned away. The exact same thing happens today.

As we behold Jesus – God with us – he shines a light into all of the dark corners of our hearts. In our flesh, we want a comfortable, affirming love. But Jesus blazes with an uncomfortable, purifying, HOLY LOVE. For this reason, many today even in our churches close their eyes to the light and opt to walk in the darkness that they've grown comfortable with.

Tragically, that is a common response to God with us. But, at the heart of this introduction, John extends an invitation:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12 ESV)

Friends, there is nothing that I want more for you than this. You don't need to wander in the darkness anymore. You don't need to live estranged from your Heavenly Father anymore. He has come to you. He has done the unthinkable! He entered right into the deepest darkness SO AS TO BRING YOU HOME!

Today could be the day that your identity is forever changed. You who have been living as an enemy of God – as a stranger to the Father – can become a child of God.

Maybe you're asking, "How? What do I need to do? How do I earn that?" Well, here's the good news: Jesus already "earned that" for you. He has paid for your sin. He has lived the life of obedience that you couldn't live and he is ready to freely give to you the eternal life that he earned for you – he is ready to make you a child of God! Therefore, Jesus says:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe in the gospel.** (Mark 1:15 ESV)

Repent. You've been trying to do life your own way for long enough. You've hurt others, hurt yourself, but most importantly, you've sinned against God. Repent. Turn away from that life and commit to living God's way.

And believe. Believe that Jesus is enough. That his coming was enough. That his obedience was enough. That his sacrifice was enough. That his word is enough. That he is your only hope, your only boast and your only confidence before the Father.

to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12 ESV)

Behold, the glory of God with us! This is our hope! This is the joy of Christmas! And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.