

## John 1:14

### Introduction

This morning we come to a verse of which one commentator has rightly said: “No uninspired pen could ever have set down [these] words” (Lenski). Or we could say, “No uninspired author could ever have conceived of these words or thought to set down these words on paper.” The words of which I’m speaking are these:

- John 1:14 — 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.

This morning, then, we come to that great mystery that is central to, and lies at the very heart of, Christianity. In order to rightly understand the mystery and wonder of these words, we need to make sure that we grasp, truly, the identity of the Word.

The Bible begins with these words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Against that backdrop, then, listen to these words:

- John 1:1a — In the beginning **was** the Word.

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.

- John 1:1b — In the beginning *was* the Word, and the Word was *with* God.

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 surpasses all our comprehension. 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:

- John 1:1c — “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 be God’s own self-revelation. 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 in verse 3:

- John 1:3 — 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, salvation history reveals God because it is the eternal Word who is active in this history for the redemption of sinners like us. So we read in verses 4-5:

- John 1:4-5 — In Him [in this eternal Word] 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 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 catechism says, “but one only, the living and true God.”

- Isaiah 45:18 (cf. Isa. 45:12; Jer. 27:5) — Thus says Yahweh, 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 Yahweh, and there is no other.

Therefore, that 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 is exclusively the work of God.

- Isaiah 43:10–12 — “You are my witnesses,” declares Yahweh, “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 Yahweh, 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 Yahweh, “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. Therefore, the Word is to be worshiped by us with the Father and with the Spirit as the only living and true God. Therefore, 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 church has confessed from ancient times: “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.”

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 not yet been fully manifested and had not yet 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—and is—God. Therefore it is only in the Word Himself that we can know God fully – not comprehending His “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” being, but nevertheless knowing Him fully and truly, even unto eternal life.

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 mean. But now we come to those words that “no uninspired pen could ever have set down” (indeed, we’ve already been confronted with such words). Now we come 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, be able to truly 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 unsearchable and almighty power of God. “The Word became flesh.”

“Flesh,” here, doesn’t refer just to physical flesh or only to a human body. As Calvin put it, “flesh” is “the part taken for the whole [synecdoche]... the lower part [flesh] includes the whole [nature of] man” consisting not just of a true human body but also of a true human soul. Apollinaris (in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) taught that the Word took the *place* of a human soul, clothing Himself in a human body. But as one commentator writes: “That which was not taken could not be healed. If [the Word] had not taken our whole humanity to Himself [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 see more clearly the mystery and wonder of the incarnation. “Flesh” is 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 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 everything that fallen humanity is liable to, except sin.” When we read that “the Word became flesh,” we remember that this is the “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 “flesh” 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 lusts of our fallen and sinful 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 wasn’t 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 (or took to Himself) 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? 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 Himself 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 not think of Jesus as a hybrid of Deity and humanity mixed together (Eutyches; 5<sup>th</sup> century). The humanity of Jesus was not a deified humanity (as if there could be any such thing); 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 (as if there could be any such

thing); 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 two separate persons, as though there was a human Jesus coexisting side by side with the eternal Word (Nestorius; 5<sup>th</sup> 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 eternal 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 bow down in wonder, in awe, in worship. And here in this mystery, carefully fenced, and guarded, and confessed is the foundation of our salvation and of all our fellowship and communion with God.

“The Word dwelt among us” 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.

And now 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 New Testament (all in Revelation, a book also authored by John) and only once in the Greek Old Testament (cf. Gen. 13:12). “And the Word became flesh and He—[the eternal Word Himself]—tabernacled [*skenoo*] among us,” as one of us. And so in this way God imparts to us all the blessings of His heaven—of His own presence with us and among us — even all the blessings of Himself. All that was only shadowed forth at the tabernacle in “promise” form has now become ours in its actual substance — in the eternal Word Himself tabernacling among us as one of us.

“And we beheld,” John says, “His glory.” The glory of whom?—Of the eternal Word. 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 Yahweh filled the *tabernacle*. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the **glory** of Yahweh filled the *tabernacle*.

What should we think of when we hear the word “glory”? On the one hand, “glory” is the visible manifestation of God’s presence, so in this sense we can think of His glory as the cloud inhabited by fire that settled on the tabernacle. But in the end, God’s true glory is not something “physical” (it’s not literal photons of light). The glory of God is the sum total of all the infinite perfections of who He is—of His infinite wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. 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 suffering and death 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 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 ‘Yahweh.’ 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 God consists supremely in His goodness – in His sovereign and unmerited grace and mercy to sinners. But of course, this 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 next chapter of Exodus:

- Exodus 34:5–7 — Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of Yahweh. Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh, 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 its fullness – in Jesus Christ. That’s why John can write:

**III. John 1:14c** — ...and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten 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.’” Here again, the glory of the Lord consists supremely in His goodness – in His sovereign and unmerited mercy and grace to sinners. (Or perhaps we should say that the glory of God is apprehended by us supremely in His goodness.)

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 as we read in the rest of John’s Gospel of His words and deeds, and of His suffering and death and resurrection. The miracle of Christmas

is that the God who said to Moses: “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live... you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:20, 23) is now the God who “has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). We can never know God in His essence, and to be confronted with God in this way would mean immediate death for creatures like we are. And yet in the “face” of Christ, apprehended by that faith that the Spirit works in our hearts, we do see fully unveiled the glory of God—the perfect faithfulness of God to Himself, and to that word of promise that He gave to us. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians:

➤ 2 Corinthians 1:20 — As many as are the promises of God, in Him [in Christ] they are *yes*.

In Jesus—the eternal Word become flesh—is fully manifested to us the glory of God—“Glory as of the only begotten from the Father, *full* of grace and truth.”

### **Conclusion**

Have you seen in this Jesus your infinitely sufficient and perfect Savior? Are you daily beholding Him and therefore worshiping Him and delighting yourself in Him?

- 2 Corinthians 3:18 — But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.
- 1 John 3:2–3 — Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not been manifested as yet what we will be. We know that when He is manifested, we will be like Him, because we will see Him [we will behold Him] just as He is.