

Grace and Peace Came

That You May Believe

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Bible Text: John 1

Preached on: Sunday, September 15, 2013

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Please open your Bibles to John 1 and these verses that we have read together this evening. One of the things that this first chapter of John does for us, this prologue to John's gospel, is to address something of the lostness and aimlessness that is characteristic of so many people in the world today. Back in the 20th century when most of us were born, A. E. Houseman, the poet, wrote this:

“The sun is up and up must I,
To wash and dress and eat and drink
And look at things and talk and think
And work, and God knows why.”

What he was doing is summarizing some of that aimlessness and that lostness that characterizes the world. It's described by John in this prologue as the darkness, the darkness that grips the minds and hearts of so many people. And what John is arguing as he reports to us the events of Jesus' life and what Jesus has accomplished, is that with the arrival of Jesus Christ, the reality, the true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He says that in verse 9, just as in the beginning there was material, physical darkness and that darkness was dispersed by God when he said, “Let there be light and there was light,” so now in this new creation, God is addressing a darkness that is internal and is spiritual and by the arrival of Jesus, the Word that he has described in verse 1, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God and the Word through whom all things were created that have been made,” the arrival of this one has been to disperse the darkness altogether and bring light into the hearts and minds of men and women and boys and girls resulting the realization or the reality of their becoming the children of God in verse 12.

Then John comes to the punch line in verse 14, what does he mean by the light came into the world? What is that? Is that kind of some enlightenment, some vague Buddhist enlightenment or Confucian enlightenment or whatever it is? What is this enlightenment? Was it that somehow or other we woke up to some realities that we'd been missing all along? And John puts it in the most concrete language that he can find, “the Word became flesh.” This stuff of which you and I are made, flesh, reality, the kind of thing you do when you're shaking my hand, flesh touches flesh, this thing that wraps us around

our personality, that is at this moment dying and one day will die. This flesh. “The Word became flesh.” I was going to say concrete reality. Some of us are as hard as concrete because you’ve been working out and your muscles are strong. But reality, this reality, the Word became flesh.

Dorothy Sayers who wrote so many detective novels but who also was a Christian, says about that description these words thinking about what happened, what John is describing as having happened when the Word became flesh. She says this: “This is the only real thing that has actually happened in the entire history of humanity. This is the only real thing that has happened and this thing is not dull or drab or depressing and this thing is not something you can easily dismiss. This thing is the drama. This thing is the reality.”

It is exhilarating. The Word “God became flesh,” he became a human being.

“Low within the manger lies,
He who made the starry skies,
He who enthroned in heights sublime,
Sits among the cherubim.”

He’s come down here. How low has he come?

“Lo, who is he in yonder stall?
At whose feet the shepherds fall.
‘Tis the Lord the King of Glory,
‘Tis the Lord wondrous story.

At his feet we humbly bow,
Crown him, crown him.”

Well, John says the Word became flesh and then he goes on to say what his own personal testimony of himself and of the apostles, those who knew this Word made flesh, have to say about him. We began to look at this last time. There are three things he says here: first of all, he dwelt among us; secondly he says, we have seen his glory; and thirdly he says, from his fullness we have all received.

He dwelt among us. Last week we saw that that word “to dwell” is a word that means to tabernacle. It’s the usual word for the tabernacle or the tent that was used by Israel in the wilderness during their wilderness wanderings. In fact, that is in John’s mind because right throughout this prologue from beginning to end, he is reflecting on the book of Moses, what we call the Torah. He is quoting it for example, in chapter 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word,” right at the very beginning of the Bible, “In the beginning God.” He’s quoting from the Torah. A little later on he’s going to say, “The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” So he has the Torah, he has what we have in the first five books of our Bible, he has that in his mind.

In those first five books you find Israel in the desert and God is telling them how they may have an ongoing relationship with him. They are to have this tabernacle; they are to build it according to the pattern that God reveals. God is the architect; he gives them architect's drawings; they are there in the law of Moses. They are to build it exactly according to the instructions that God has given and so they create it, they build this tabernacle and God says, "That's where I'm going to live. That's going to be my earthly address. If you want to see me, you come there. You want to meet with me, you come there. You want to get close to me, you come there. There is going to be the place of sacrifice. That is going to be the place I will meet with you. That's the place where my law will be kept and will be heard. That's the place where I have communion or fellowship or relationship with you just as I met with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the day. Every day, meeting with them, having a relationship with them. This is where I will meet with you, with Israel, the tabernacle."

Dr. Boyce who was pastor here in his commentary points us to the various elements of the tabernacle in Israel's history. It was to be a place at the very center of the camp so that all of the tents were to be arranged around this central location. The tabernacle was to be at the center of the people of God. It was to be the one focal point that brought everybody together, that kept everybody thinking the same and acting the same and in relationship to one another and to their God. The law of Moses was placed in the ark, the ark of the covenant, there in the Holy of Holies at the very center of the tabernacle, the place that no one else was allowed to go except the high priest once a year. In there, the law of God, the law of Moses was placed. It was put there and on the ark which was the footstool of God, once a year the high priest was to go in there and he sprinkled on the top of that ark of the covenant, in between the two cherubim that decorated the top of the ark, he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice and there he met with God. He wasn't able to look at God but he was there to meet with God on behalf of Israel. In fact, on his breastplate and on his shoulder were etched the names of all the tribes of Israel and ceremonially the high priest was bearing the burden of Israel on his shoulder and in his heart, bringing them to God and offering a sacrifice on their behalf. God dwelt there. God spoke there. Sacrifices were made there. Israel worshipped there. All of it happened in the tabernacle.

Now John is saying, "When the Word was made flesh, God came to live in a tabernacle not made with skins in the desert, not made with bricks on Mount Zion, but made in human flesh." God dwelt in Jesus. He is now the center of the worship of God's worshipping people. He is the depository of the law of God. It is now the law of Christ. He is the one who made in his own body, the final sacrifice for sin. He alone brings us close to God. God meets with us in Jesus. We draw near to God in Jesus. Our spiritual location as Christians is in Jesus and we worship God in Jesus. He dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory. We have seen his glory. That's what John reports to us, "glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." "The glory" was a word that was reserved only for God in the Bible. Sometimes it talks about God as "the glorious one" or God is described as "the glory of the world." It's hard, in a sense, for us to know what glory means. Glory has to do with the visible sight of something, the

manifestation of something so if we were to turn the lights out here, number one, I wouldn't see you and I wouldn't be able to see my notes and you wouldn't be able to see me. That would be a good thing, I mean, me not being able to see you. But if we turned out the lights here, we would know that there were lights there. We could look and we could probably make them out; I think we'd be able to see these things that hang down. There used to be a big thing that hung down here but it's long gone but we know that they were there for there are little round holes. But you really only know what lights are for when they're switched on. The light we see is a manifestation of the light bulb. The glory is a manifestation of God; it's God letting us see something of himself. I mean, God is everywhere; God is in the entire universe; wherever you are, God is there; in the most remote part of the universe, God is there. But where God is personally present, where God is more imminent, where he's close to us, in the Holy of Holies, in the center of the tabernacle and temple, he is closer to people than anywhere else on earth and now John says he is at his closest in Christ. In Christ.

In the old days when the tabernacle was there and then later the temple, God gave the people a visible manifestation of his presence. They didn't get to see God, of course, because God is invisible; God is a spirit. You don't get to see God and live, that's what the prophet said. But God showed that he was there. He showed us that he was there by coming and descending on top of the tabernacle and later the temple, as a cloud, a great cloud that came and settled on the Holy of Holies. During the day it was a cloud, at nighttime the cloud burned with fire. It was a spectacle. In those 40 years they were wandering in the wilderness, it was the cloud of glory that led them through the wilderness. It went before them; it showed them where to go and when it stopped, they stopped. When it settled, they settled and whenever they built their tabernacle in which to worship, it rested on the Holy of Holies.

Now says John, "When the Word was made flesh, when he dwelt among us, we saw his glory. We didn't see a cloud or fire, we saw a person. We knew it was God because we saw the glory of God manifested physically by the things that he did," as he will go on to tell us. When Jesus turns 500 gallons of water in 500 gallons of Chateaufort-du-Pape at the wedding of Cana of Galilee, we're told they saw his glory. I wish he would turn this into Chateaufort-du-Pape. They saw his glory. When he walked on the water, they saw his glory. When he fed 5,000 men plus women and children, maybe as many as 10,000 people with a little boy's picnic lunch, they saw his glory. When he raised a dead man to life again, they saw his glory. And what was even more incredulous for the apostles when they saw him stripped naked, bleeding, pinned to the cross and dying, they said, "We saw his glory." And when he was raised from the dead in a resurrection body and ascended into heaven, they said, "We saw his glory."

What is the glory of God? It's a manifestation of who God is, of what God is like and what John is saying is this: that when the Word was made flesh and he dwelt amongst us, we saw what God is like. We saw what God was like. That was always what they were expecting. That is always what Israel was expecting. Isaiah the prophet puts it like this, "Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you for behold darkness shall cover the earth, thick darkness the people, but the Lord will rise

upon you and glory will be seen upon you and nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.” John is talking for his fellow disciples and he says, “We have seen his glory.” His doxa is the Greek word translating the Hebrew word kavod, the manifestation of the glory of God.

The significant thing for Israel is this: that glory cloud that rested on the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple rested there for hundreds of years right up until the point at which God sent the Babylonians to attack Judah and Jerusalem and they demolished the temple. And Ezekiel, in a vision, he’s in Babylon serving there by the Chebar Canal and you can read about it in Ezekiel 1. But there in a vision, God enables Ezekiel to see the glory of God, this manifestation of glory departing from the temple, going up the Mount of Olives and hovering, as it were, on the Mount of Olives and then in a kind of high-tech, sci-fi way, zooming across the desert 600 miles to where the people of God were in exile in Babylon there by the Chebar Canal.

The glory departed and when 70 years later they returned to Jerusalem and they rebuilt the wall and they rebuilt their homes and eventually they rebuilt a temple, the people wept. They wept. They wept not just because this temple wasn’t anything like the previous temple of Solomon, they wept because the glory didn’t turn up. The glory never came back. The glory didn’t put in an appearance until, until a teenage girl gave birth to her first-born child and as his tears and cries were heard, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and John and the eye-witnesses beheld his glory. That’s what John is teaching us here.

He goes on to say, “We’ve seen his glory and his glory,” he says, “was the glory of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.” Now, if you’ve been following the exciting episodes so far, this is the third episode in this series, you’ll know that up to now actually, we haven’t been told that this is Jesus. John has introduced this eternal being as the Word who gives light and life and so on; he’s the Word. Now we’re told he’s the Word made flesh but now the Word is described as the Son. We’re being told something else, in fact, he won’t call him the Word anymore. He’s done with that. He’s got us to this point. He now wants to tell us something more about this being who was with God and who was God and through whom everything was made that was made. He is the Son of the Father and the believer who cannot see the glory of the Father sees in the Son the glory of the Father as of the Father. Meaning this: what can possibly be known and seen of God by these mortal human eyes is seen in God the Son.

People sometimes say, “There’s more to God than what’s in your book. More to God than you Christians or Jews are aware of.” Of course there is. God fills the universe. You couldn’t find enough books to capture all that there is to know about God but all that we need to know about God to know him, has been revealed through Moses and ultimately through Jesus because in Jesus, this one of a kind Son, that’s I think the best translation, the one of a kind Son, this Son par excellence, this unique one, this Jesus. In fact, the word used there is the word that used back in Genesis 22 of the relationship between Abraham and his son Isaac when God comes to Abraham and says, “Abraham, I want you to sacrifice your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.” God is rubbing his nose

in it, "I want you to give your one and only son." It's as if God is setting us up here to understand what he will sacrifice. Paul says in Romans, "God spared Abraham's son but he did not spare his one of a kind, his only Son, Jesus, whom he loved."

The language of love, the pathos of love, is in the language that John uses here, the only, one of a kind, in the heart of the Father, Son of God. In the rest of John's gospel, you discover that this one of a kind Son came into the world because God so loved the world that this Son was with the Father before the foundation of the world, that he had come from the Father; that he sees the Father; that he hears the Father; that he receives stuff from the Father; that he's the only one through whom we can come to the Father and he's able to say, "I and the Father are one." One in nature; one in purpose; one in intent; one in eternity; one in deity; one in power; one in wisdom.

We have seen his glory. The Apostle Paul has a little statement here that helps us and it leads us into the next statement that John makes, "For in him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily." Now says John, here's the third thing, "From his fullness have we all received." What does it say about his fullness? It says he was full of grace and truth. Once again, we're into just the language that comes straight out of the Torah, out of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. John is just riddled with it here. You can't understand the prologue to John's gospel without knowing the book of Moses. He is quoting from it everywhere and he's quoting from it right now. In the book of Exodus, for example, when he talks about God, he talks about the lovingkindness and truth of God. In other words, the covenant faithfulness of God; the God who is full of love towards his people; the God who is absolutely trustworthy and true and dependable towards his people; the lovingkindness and truth of God. Lovingkindness shown by God; grace shown by God generously and freely. It is love, lovingkindness freely given to unworthy offenders.

Grace and truth. Truth here has the idea of trustworthy, faithful, unwavering. That's the kind of God that's revealed in Exodus and this is what they found in Jesus except that in Exodus they are being told about the trustworthiness and the lovingkindness of God but here embodied in flesh. Here is grace and truth. Here is the lovingkindness and trustworthiness of God in a person, in Jesus. The loving covenant and faithfulness of God finds its ultimate expression in this one of a kind Son and John says, "We have seen his glory."

Again, he's using language taken from Exodus. Moses would one day come to God and he says, "Show me your glory. I don't want very much." Moses was like that. You know, he didn't want very much; he just kind of went for it. He said, "This is about the highest thing that I'll ever get. This is the vision to beat all visions. This is the thing to see of all the sights. I've seen the pyramids and they were pretty impressive." They were the most impressive thing on the face of planet earth in those days. Moses says to God, "I want to see your glory." God says to him, "No way, Moses." It wasn't Jose, but no way, Jose. "No way, Moses. You don't get to see me and live." That's the deal. "You don't get to see me and survive it. But I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll let my goodness pass before you. I'll let you see something." So Moses goes into this cleft in the rock, you remember the

story, he's there and God passes by. The spectacular presence of God passes by and there's lightning and thunder and light displays and all kinds of stuff and Moses is there and God puts a covering so that Moses can't see it and only after it's passed by does God take the covering away and say, "Come on out and see." And he comes out and he sees the afterburner of the glory of the presence of God. Get this: there is God and there is God's presence and there is the manifestation of God's presence, his glory, and there's the afterburner and there's Moses. Moses only sees the afterburner of the presence of God.

Here's John and his friends and they say, "God gave us to see more than Moses saw. God gave us to see more than Moses could have experienced." What was it that Moses heard as God passed by? Do you remember what Moses heard? The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there and proclaimed the name of the Lord and the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." The Lord proclaimed that to Moses. John says, "We saw his glory. We saw steadfast love and faithfulness enfleshed in the body of Jesus Christ."

Verse 17, "For the law was given through Moses." He's not rubbishing that; that was the revelation of what God was like. That God is full of grace and truth but he says, "Now in person, grace and truth have turned up. They've arrived in their presence in Jesus Christ." He's the summation of the Torah. He's the completion of what was partial and limited then. He embodies what was confessed by Judaism. There is both a contrast and a comparison. He's saying that Christ is the final and complete revelation of God to humanity, greater than Moses, just as the one that Moses saw was greater than Moses. Then he says about us, "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, steadfast love upon steadfast love." It just keeps on coming. All the time we're recipients of grace upon grace upon grace upon grace just as the waves come crashing over and over and over and over again on the seashore. Grace upon grace all the way through until we get to glory.

Our Christian lives are all about the grace of God. Get that. Grace to meet every need. Grace to match every challenge. Grace to overcome every obstacle. Grace to cleanse every sin. Grace to restore every repentant backslider. Grace to renovate and restore the world one day. Grace upon grace.

Here's his punch line: "No one has ever seen God; the only God," that's Jesus. It's also the best translation. "The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." The Greek word means "to exegete." When I exegete a passage of Scripture, I tell you what's in it, I open it up. I make clear what is in the text of Scripture, I exegete the text. Jesus is the exegesis of God. You look at him and you see what God's like. You see him forgiving the prostitute, that's what God's like. You see him touching the unclean leper, that's what God is like. You see him raising the dead, that's what God is like. He exegetes God perfectly and he shows us that God is full of grace and truth.

So, at the heart, you see, what John is teaching us in this opening prologue and I promise this is the last time we'll look at it. Three weeks in the same passage is probably enough for you. But we could go on forever but in this opening prologue, what John is doing is he's putting front and center and central in Christianity this reality, in the language of Bishop Moles: "Christianity is Christ." Christianity is Christ and everything is wrapped up in him.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that in your mercy you have given us your word that we might know the Word made flesh, the word of God the Father. We pray, Lord, tonight as we come now to the table that we would have communion with you and we'd have fellowship with you, we'd feel that you are here, that you, Father, are coming by the Spirit and bringing the Lord Jesus close to us, that he would be the Host and we would be the guests; he would be, by the Holy Spirit, the heavenly meal we eat, sustaining us, keeping us for man cannot live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the life of God. Father, I need you and we as your people, we need you. Come close to us, we pray, and may the Lord Jesus, your Son, be known to us in the breaking of the bread. In his name we pray. Amen.