

The Word Became Flesh, Part 1

John 1:14

© Mike Riccardi

Introduction

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.” Of course, in L.A., that doesn’t mean that snow is in the forecast. But at Grace Church, it does mean that the family center is decorated for fellowship group Christmas parties. It means you can take your family Christmas picture in front of the snowy Christmas trees on the patio. And it means that the famed Grace Church Christmas concerts are right around the corner.

And I love the Christmas season. It is, as the famous song says, “the most wonderful time of the year.” And that’s not just because of the decorations, and the traditions, and the gifts, or even the vacation and family time—which are, of course, *wonderful*, and great blessings for which we thank God. But I love the Christmas season preeminently because of the nearly month-long reminder that it is to us about the birth of Jesus our Savior—about the incarnation of God the Son. And I love reflecting on and meditating upon the miracle of all miracles that is the incarnation. The Lord has often used the glorious mystery of this truth to bow my heart in wonder—to evoke *worship* and praise for His wisdom, and love, and goodness, and kindness.

Think of it: the infinite, eternal, self-existent, self-sufficient, almighty *God* takes on the nature of finite, temporal, dependent, mortal *humanity*, into personal union with His divine nature, all without changing or shedding His divine nature! The unchangeable God becomes what He wasn’t, while never ceasing to be what He was. Sinful man had ruined ourselves by disobedience to God’s law, and our transgression against infinite holiness required an infinite punishment: eternity in hell under the wrath of omnipotent vengeance. No man could ever pay that infinite penalty. And yet no one *but* man could ever righteously offer an atonement on behalf of man. Only God Himself could ever atone for sin. And yet only man’s sacrifice would be accepted on behalf of man. No one *ought* to pay but man; no one *can* pay but God; and so to reconcile man to God, God would become man.

Jesus Christ is fully and truly man, and therefore He is able to stand in man’s place—both to bear man’s punishment and accomplish man’s righteousness. And at the same time He is fully and truly God, and therefore He is able to bear the infinite wrath of God against our sins without perishing as we would. It is the height of divine wisdom. It is the very heart of the Gospel. It is the most glorious of all of God’s works. It is the miracle of all miracles.

And because of that, the incarnation is a unique fount for our worship of God in this Christmas season. And that's what we're after. Not the quaint sentimentality of eggnog and gingerbread cookies, or Christmas carols sung for the sake of nostalgia and tradition; but the genuine passion of adoration of the Triune God, grounded upon a clear-eyed faith in and confession of the truth. Christmas is not about pacifying our emotions by giving us a false sense of comfort through what is familiar. It's about ravishing our hearts with the all-satisfying vision of the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.

And friends: that doesn't just happen. I've said it before: the heights of our worship will never exceed the depths of our theology. Doxology is grounded in theology! Our praise to God for the incarnation of Christ soars only as high as our understanding of that great mystery is rooted in the truth. And because it *is* a great mystery, there is often great confusion surrounding it as well. And sometimes, in trying to wrap our heads around an incomprehensible truth, we let unsound theology seep into our thinking—often by trying to shrink-wrap infinite truths into bite-size catch phrases. Perhaps the most famous error is Wesley's line from *And Can It Be?*: "Emptied Himself of all but love / And bled for Adam's helpless race." The Son did *not* empty Himself of all but love! He did not empty Himself of His deity, or of His divine attributes, or of the exercise of His divine attributes, or even of His divine prerogatives. And I hope to show you why.

But the great Puritan John Flavel was right when he said of the incarnation, "Great is the interest of words in this doctrine. We walk on the brink of danger. The least tread awry may engulf us in the bogs of error" (1:74). And one of the most common "bogs of error" is so emphasizing the condescension of the Son that you speak of the incarnation as the Son divesting Himself of some aspects of His deity for the sake of being truly human—as if in order to become truly human, God the Son has to become less God. Now, I understand why that's a popular thought, but deity cannot be circumscribed by humanity. The infinite cannot be contained by the finite.

And you see, already that sounds like too much for some of you. Already you're tempted to check out. "Oh, I thought I was going to get a nice, feel-good Christmas message, here goes Riccardi with all the theology!" But that's my point! You can have frothy sentimentality grounded in heretical catch-phrases, or you can have genuine, heart-thrilling worship, grounded in truth. And while we surely can't turn these truths into artifacts for dry and academic speculation, neither can we cut our doxology off at the knees by refusing to give ourselves to properly understanding the truth of the great mystery of godliness, as Paul calls it in 1 Timothy 3.

And so, to root ourselves in the truth this Christmas season, I want to spend two sermons—both today and then two Sundays from now—mining out the treasures of a single verse: the verse that James Montgomery Boice said was "the great sentence for which the Gospel of John was written" (85). And that is John chapter 1 and verse 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.” What a wealth of truth is packed into that single sentence! Every one of those 23 Greek words was carefully chosen by the Apostle John, and almost every one of them is bursting with theological significance.

And so we’ll spend two sermons working through **seven facets of the incarnation**—as we seek to let the light of truth pass through the multifaceted gem of this great text, in the hopes of being dazzled by the brilliance of the incarnation. We’ll cover the first three facets this morning, and hope to get to the final four next time. And I’ll give them to you right up front, so you know where we’re going. We’re going to see, one, the **subject** of the incarnation: “the Word.” Two: the **substance** of the incarnation: “became flesh.” Three: the **sweetness** of the incarnation: “dwelt among us.” Four: the **splendor** of the incarnation: “And we beheld His glory.” Five: the **Son** of the incarnation: “the only begotten from the Father.” Six: the **savor** of the incarnation: “full of grace and truth.” And finally, number seven, we’ll reach into verse 16 and find the **supply** of the incarnation: “For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.”

I. The Subject of the Incarnation

In the **first** place, then, let us consider **subject** of the incarnation. John says, “And *the Word* became flesh...” Who is this Word who became flesh? Well, look back to the opening verse of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And I hope the magnitude of that verse lands on you and brings you to the adoration it was designed to. There is no bottom to the riches of that sentence.

In the first place, this Word is eternal. “In the *beginning* was the Word.” That is to say, the Word *was*—He was existing—in the very beginning of all things. In our verse, in verse 14, we learn that the Word became flesh. But the Word never became the Word. The text doesn’t say, “In the beginning, the Word came into being.” It says, “In the beginning *was* the Word.” From all eternity, before there was a beginning, the Word was existing. There is no doubt that the Apostle John begins his account of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth with the words, “In the beginning,” precisely in order to call the reader’s attention to the very first verse of the Bible—to Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” “In the beginning God” means that God was there before the beginning. So also, “In the beginning was the Word” means that the Word existed even before the creation of time. He is eternal.

Second, this Word is distinct from the Father. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God.” He was *pros ton Theon*—before the face of God—a phrase signifying intimate fellowship and relationship, even as the phrase in verse 18 underscores: this Word is “in the bosom of the Father.” Well, you don’t have fellowship with or a relationship with yourself.

These terms imply distinction. To be with someone is to not be that someone. The Word was with God.

But then, third, we learn that this Word is God. “The Word was *with* God, *and* the Word *was* God.” And that’s designed to throw you for a loop. How can the Word be with God (and therefore distinct from God) if He is God? Only if there are several *persons* who are God, but only one *essence* that is God. John dives in at the deep end, doesn’t he? He wastes no time! In this first sentence, He introduces His readers to the mystery of the Trinity—that both the God who is with the Word *and* the Word Himself are God! There are two persons subsisting in a single nature—two “Whos” subsisting in a single “What.”

In verse 14, we learn that this Word, who is God, is the begotten Son of the Father, who is God. And of course, we learn later that the Holy Spirit is also a divine person. So, the Word’s distinction from the Father, along with His eternality and His being identified as God, shuts us up to confess what the church has always confessed: as the Athanasian Creed puts it, that “the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.” It goes on, “The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.”

And so, John is telling us that this Word from the Father—before He ever became flesh—was eternally existing as God, in fellowship with the Father. He tells us the same thing Paul tells us in Philippians 2:6: that Christ Jesus was “*existing* in the form,” or nature, “of God”—and in a state of “equality with God.” And in Colossians 2:9: “All the fullness of Deity dwells in” the Son. Hebrews 1:3 says that “He is radiance of [the Father’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature.”

This Word is the supreme revelation of God. Throughout the Old Testament, when God would reveal Himself to His prophets, the text describes that by saying, “The *word* of Yahweh came” to the prophet (Isa 38:4; Jer 1:4; Ezek 1:3). But then in Hebrews 1:1–2, we’re told that “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” In fact, in John 1:18, John says that no one has seen God at any time, but this Word has explained Him—literally, “has *exegeted* Him” to the world—so that Paul calls Him, Colossians 1:15, “the image of the invisible God.” The Word is the supreme revelation of God. This Word is the divine Creator of all things. Psalm 33:6 says, “By the *Word* of Yahweh the heavens were made.” As God creates the world in Genesis 1, how does He do it? “Then God *said*, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” He spoke the universe into existence by His Word—this Word that was in the beginning with God. John 1:3: “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” This Word is the Sustainer of all creation. Hebrews 1:3: He “upholds all things by the *word* of His

power.” And this Word is the Savior of God’s people. In Psalm 107:19–20, it says, “They cried out to Yahweh in their trouble; He *saved* them out of their distresses. *He sent His word* and *healed* them, and *delivered* them from their destructions.”

The Apostle John means for you to read that opening sentence of His Gospel—to hear about the eternal, divine Word from the Father—and he means for all of these glorious truths about the Word of God—Revelation, Creator, Sustainer, Savior—to come flooding into your mind. This Word is none other than God the Son: the second person of the Trinity, the eternally glorious One, equal with the Father, who was existing in the bosom of the Father for all eternity, delighting in the Father and in the Holy Spirit, and basking in the glory which He had with Him before the world was (John 17:5). Flavel calls that “a state of matchless happiness.” He says, “To be wrapt up in the soul and bosom of all delights, as Christ was, [is] a state transcending apprehension! To have the fountain of love and delight letting out itself so immediately, and fully, and everlastingly upon this only begotten darling of his soul, ... judge what a state of transcendent felicity this must be” (1:46). This One, friends—this Word from the Father, this eternal Creator Sustainer, and Savior—this one is the **subject** of the incarnation.

II. The Substance of the Incarnation

And that brings us to the **second facet** of the incarnation that we’ll address. Number two: the **substance** of the incarnation. Back to John 1:14: “And the Word *became flesh*.”

And that—after all we’ve heard so far about the Word—that is an unthinkable sentence. The One eternally existing in the very nature and glory of God, equal with the Father, ruling creation in majesty, receiving the worship of the saints and angels in Heaven—the Person of God the Son, in all the riches of His divine being, possessions, and relations—became *flesh*?

How can God *become* anything? God is pure being. His very nature is opposed to all becoming—which is to say nothing other than that He is immutable. He does not change from one state of being to another state of being. He is not in process; He just *is*. “I AM WHO I AM.” “In the beginning the Word *was*.”

And of all things to say He became: flesh? God is “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions” (2LCF 2.1). How is it anything but sacrilegious—anything but blasphemy—for John to say that the eternal Word became flesh?

Well that, friends, is the scandal of the incarnation. Flesh is not an innocent term. And John uses it purposely to show the magnificent condescension and great-hearted humility of Christ in this great miracle. It won’t be long in John’s Gospel before Jesus Himself tells us, chapter 6 verse 63, that “the flesh profits nothing.” Paul will tell us in 2 Corinthians 1:17 that the Christian minister

does not purpose according to the flesh. He says in Romans 8:7 that the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God, and in Galatians 5:16–21 that the flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to one another, and those who practice the deeds of the flesh won't inherit the kingdom of God. Most often, when we see the term flesh in the Scriptures, it's a reference to our indwelling sin.

Now, of course, John doesn't mean to take up that connotation of the term here in John 1:14. Jesus came in the *likeness* of sinful flesh, Romans 8:3. Nothing about Christ was sinful—body *or* soul. But the term *flesh* does speak of the weakness, frailty, and mortality of human nature—something that must be overcome by the renewing work of the Spirit of God. Which makes it all the more stupefying to say that the Word became flesh. God the Son did not regard the dignity of His station—His equality with God—as a thing to be grasped, Philippians 2:6 says, “but [He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.”

And here, it's easy to become heretics without realizing it. Remember what Flavel said: “Great is the interest of words in this doctrine.” It's easy to be well-meaning, and yet to say something that, technically, if you truly believed it, would make a false Christ out of Christ and a heretic out of you. When the text says that the Word became flesh, that cannot mean that the divine person of the Son changed Himself into a human being. It cannot mean that the divine nature transmuted into a human nature. That would be to introduce change where there can only be immutability. It cannot mean that the Son exchanged His deity for humanity, or that He divested Himself of the divine nature. He is God of very God even as He dwells on the earth: He is Immanuel, *God* with us (Matt 1:23); and again, Colossians 2:9: “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” John 8:58: “Before Abraham was, I AM.” It cannot mean that the Son diluted His divine nature by mixing humanity with it, or diminished His Godhead in any way.

No, “the Word became flesh” means that the person of the Son, who had always subsisted in the divine nature, now, without ceasing to subsist in that divine nature, began subsisting in a human nature as well. The person of that human nature—the subject which acted in and through Christ's human nature—was the same person who had acted in and through the divine nature from all eternity: God the Son. Said another way: the eternal Son, who always existed in the undivided divine nature, assumed a full and true human nature into personal union, right alongside His full and true and unchanging divine nature.

As the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 puts it: “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person.” He is God *and* man. Immutable, according to His deity, and yet “increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52), according to His humanity. Omnipotent, according to His deity; the One who makes the winds and the sea obey Him (Matt 8:27), who forgives sins (Luke 5:20),

raises the dead (John 11), and grants spiritual life (John 5:21). And yet, wearied from a day's journey (John 4:6), and tired enough to sleep in the midst of a storm (Luke 8:23), according to His humanity. Omniscient, according to His deity; the One who knew all men (John 2:25), who read the Pharisees' minds (Luke 5:22), the One of whom Peter confessed, "You know all things" (John 16:30). And yet *ignorant* of the day and hour of His return (Mark 13:32), according to His humanity. The One who said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), according to His deity, and yet confessed, "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), according to His humanity.

You can't take one and leave the other! You can't say He wasn't omniscient because He didn't know the time of His return, because the same Person who *didn't* know, by virtue of His *human* nature, did know the time of His return by virtue of His *divine* nature. He is God *and* man—the human nature existing right alongside the divine nature, in the ineffable personal union of God the Son incarnate.

You say, "But Philippians 2:7 says the Son 'emptied Himself.' That must mean that, for the sake of becoming truly human, He emptied Himself of at least some of His divine attributes, or of His divine prerogatives, or of His divine *something!*" But no. First of all, the verb *kenóō* doesn't mean "to pour out." It means "to make void," "to nullify," or "to make of no effect." And secondly, the text doesn't say that the Son emptied Himself *of* something, but that He emptied *Himself*. He nullified *Himself*. He made *Himself* of no effect. The Son Himself is the object of this emptying—not the form of God, not the divine attributes, not His divine prerogatives. The King James Version captures Paul's meaning very well. It says Christ "made himself of no reputation." The NIV also gets the idea; it says He "made himself nothing." And the very next word tells us how He made Himself nothing. Verse 7: "...[He] emptied Himself, *taking the form of a slave, being made* in the likeness of men." Christ made Himself of no effect by taking on a human nature in His incarnation. He nullified Himself, not by *subtracting* anything from Himself, but by *taking on* what He was not into union with what He always was and continued to be.

So what then *was* His humiliation, if not being deprived of His deity in some way? Just this: that though He had every right to know nothing but manifest power and authority, to radiate the very essence and glory of deity, to receive nothing but the most exalted worship of the host of heaven—immune from poverty, pain, and humiliation—He took on a human existence, wherein He would become capable of experiencing hunger, and weariness, and sorrow, and pain, and shame, and even death. One commentator said, "He surrendered all the insignia of divine majesty and assumed all the frailty and vicissitudes of the human condition" (Harris, 579). And that's right: He didn't surrender the divine majesty itself, but He surrendered the insignia of divine majesty. Herman Bavinck said the same. He starts to say, "He laid aside the divine majesty and glory . . . in which he existed before the incarnation," and then he corrects himself: "or rather [He] *concealed* it behind the form of a servant in which he went about on earth"

(*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:432). And that concept of concealment, or veiling—that becomes a key word in understanding the incarnation. John Owen put it plainly when he said, “What did the Lord Christ [do], in this condescension, with respect unto his divine nature? ... He *veiled* the glory of his divine nature in ours” (*Glory of Christ*). And perhaps Calvin put it best when he wrote, “Christ, indeed, could not divest himself of godhead, but he kept it *concealed* for a time, that it might not be seen, under the weakness of the flesh. Hence he laid aside his glory in the view of men, not by lessening it, but by *concealing* it” (*Philippians*, 56–57). He concealed the riches of the divine majesty of the Lord of glory behind the veil of the poverty of a slave.

And so, instead of conceiving of the incarnation as a *kenosis*—an emptying—we ought to understand it as a *krypsis*—a concealment or a veiling of the glory that is the external manifestation of His nature. Christ fully *possessed* His divine nature, attributes, and prerogatives, but for the sake of becoming truly human, He did not always *fully* express the glories of His majesty—which was an infinite condescension. Free from all weakness, infirmity, decay, and sorrow, the eternal Son contemplated the riches of His pre-incarnate glory, and humbly chose to become poor (2 Cor 8:9)—to veil His glory by taking on human nature and the weakness of human flesh in order that He might live and die as the slave of all. The Word became flesh.

III. The Sweetness of the Incarnation

Well in the **third place**, having considered the subject of the incarnation and the substance of the incarnation, let us consider, number **three**, the **sweetness** of the incarnation. “And the Word became flesh, and *dwelt among us*.” The unfathomable **sweetness** of the incarnation is that the eternal, omnipresent God—whom heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain—dwells on the earth. In unspeakable mystery, the Creator enters into His creation, and the Holy One dwells with sinful man. The **sweetness** of the incarnation is Immanuel: God with us.

But the specific way the Apostle John signals this to us is just astounding. The word “dwelt,” in the original language, is the term *skēnoō*. And *skēnē*, in Greek, means “tent.” So we have the verb form of the noun *skēnē* here. *Skēnoō* literally means, “to pitch a tent.” John tells us that this Word became flesh and *pitched his tent* among us. That’s a curious way to speak, isn’t it? Why say it that way?

He uses this word because he wants his readers to recall the tabernacle—the tent of meeting—where God met with the Israelites in the Old Testament. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the term *skēnē*—“tent”—to refer to the tabernacle. And more than that: *skēnoō* is very similar to the Hebrew word for “to dwell,” which is *shākan*. *Shākan*. *Skēnoō*. They actually have the same consonants: *shākan*: s, k, n, and *skēnoō*: s, k, n. Both mean “to dwell.” And Hebrew word for tabernacle is *mishkān*, which is just the word *shākan* with an “m” in front of it.

Sometimes, when Hebrew wants to denote “place,” it puts an “m” in front of words. So, if *shākan* is “to dwell,” *mishkān* is “dwelling place.”

The Apostle John is telling us that there is an inseparable connection between the incarnation of the eternal Word, and the concept of God dwelling with His people in the tabernacle of Israel. And since he’s undoubtedly pointing us there—to help us understand the **sweetness** of the incarnation—let’s follow his intent. Turn with me in your Bibles to Exodus chapter 29. This is where God instructs Israel about the significance of this tabernacle that He’s commanded them to build for Him. This is what the tabernacle will be to the children of Israel. Exodus 29, starting in the middle of verse 42. He speaks of “the doorway of the tent of meeting before Yahweh, [...] I will meet with you, to speak to you there. I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. They shall know that I am Yahweh their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am Yahweh their God.”

So from this passage we learn that the tabernacle will be a place of fellowship: it is “in the presence of Yahweh, where I will meet with you,” verse 42. It will be a place of revelation; God will speak to them there. It will be a place that is consecrated by His glory, so Yahweh will condescend in His glory and His presence will sanctify His people. Verse 44 says that it will be the place of priestly ministry, so it is also the place of propitiation, where God’s wrath against Israel’s sin will be temporarily appeased by the sacrifices offered by the priests. And in verses 45 and 46, He says that the reason He brought them out of Egypt—the aim of their redemption from slavery—was so that Yahweh would dwell among His people and would be their God.

And then, at the end of the book of Exodus, in chapter 40, when the construction of tabernacle is complete, with all of Israel watching, God takes up residence with His people as He promised He would. Exodus 40, verse 34: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.” Now Yahweh descends upon His dwelling place, upon His tabernacle. The glory descends in such a way that not even Moses, who had gone into the cloud before at Sinai, who had seen Yahweh’s glory such that his face shone among the people—not even he could enter into the tent! What an amazing scene! This is God declaring: “I am *with* My people! I now dwell among them!”

And, verse 36, “Throughout all their journeys whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would set out; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day when it was taken up. For throughout all their journeys, the cloud of Yahweh was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel.” The cloud of God’s glory residing on God’s dwelling place would lead God’s people

wherever they would go. Almighty God, whom the heavens cannot contain, dwells with His people in glory, in His tent.

But the nature of tents is that they're temporary. And so eventually God takes up residence in the temple that Solomon builds. The glory of the Lord fills the temple in 1 Kings 8, just as it does in the tabernacle, and all that was true of the tabernacle becomes true of the temple. This is the way in which God fulfills the promise of Leviticus 26:11–12: “I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.” It's glorious!

There's just one problem: *Israel* is a faithless people. Israel so profanes the sanctuary of God by their idolatry, their covenant disobedience, their lawbreaking, that after centuries of patient pleading, God determines to bring judgment upon them by giving them into the hands of their enemies. We don't have time to go through all the history, but it all comes to a climax in Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11, where the people literally bring idols into the temple of God to worship *them*—to commit spiritual adultery with them, as it were right before Yahweh's face, right into that place of fellowship, and revelation, and consecration, and atonement, into the place where His glory dwells! And we'll speak in more detail about this next time, but the result of that is that the glory of God's presence departs from His temple, He delivers Israel into exile, and the temple is burned to the ground by the Babylonians.

But at the very same time, He sends His prophets to promise them there will be a New Covenant that He will make with them. And by virtue of that New Covenant, He will rescue Israel from their exile, save them, and once again dwell with them. Jeremiah 31:33 says, “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days. I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” And in Ezekiel 37:23, He says, “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all *their* dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.” And verse 26: “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. *My dwelling place* also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.” Through this New Covenant, God will once again set His sanctuary in the midst of His people! He will make His dwelling place—His *mishkān*—to be among them!

And from the moment those promises were made, Israel anxiously hoped in their fulfillment, longing for the temple to be built again. And after 70 years God does regather them out of exile, and puts them in their land, and has them rebuild the temple. But Zerubbabel's temple pales in comparison to Solomon's. Ezra 3 tells us that the old men who remember the first temple look at

this new temple and they weep while everyone else is celebrating. And we have no record of God's glory filling Zerubbabel's temple the way it had in the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, and in Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8. And after the last prophet Malachi, there were 400 years of silence from God. God didn't speak to His people for four centuries!

And then, after all that time and all that waiting, wondering when the Lord would return, and speak, and dwell among His people once again, a baby is born to a virgin in a manger. And the Apostle John comments on that birth and says, "The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us." The eternal God—God the Son, the ultimate self-disclosure and perfect revelation of God, the Creator of all things—*tabernacled* among us! In the birth of Jesus—in the incarnation of God the Son— what Christmas is all about—is that Yahweh Himself is descending from heaven and is pitching His tent to dwell among His people!

Do you see it? Jesus is the fulfillment of the tabernacle and the temple! Just as the glory of God filled the tabernacle, so now the fullest expression of God's glory is in Jesus. Just as everyone who sought God had to go to the tent of meeting, so now everyone who seeks God must go to Jesus. Just as the tabernacle was the place of condescension, where God met man (Exod 33:9), so now Jesus is where God condescends and meets man. Just as the tabernacle was the place where God's people are consecrated for service, so now Jesus is where God's people are consecrated and sanctified. Just as the tabernacle was the place where God spoke to His people, so now in these last days God has spoken to us in His Son, Jesus. Just as the tabernacle was the place where atonement for sin was made and God's wrath was satisfied, so now Jesus is where atonement is made and is where God's anger against sin is satisfied. Just as the tabernacle was the place where Israel worshipped God, so now the "hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24) for they will worship Him in Jesus, and in Jesus alone. "To meet God, to talk with God, to worship God, you no longer come to a building[—or a *tent*—] . . . made with human hands. You come to Jesus." (Storms 226). *Jesus* is God's dwelling place!

Conclusion

"Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!" "O come, let us adore Him!" Oh I pray that this causes you to worship God for His infinite wisdom. I pray that you are moved to awe and adoration at the thought that the Word—the Eternal One, with God, God Himself, the agent of the creation of all things, the life and the Light of the world—became flesh and tabernacled among sinners!

This, I say, is the **sweetness** of the incarnation: God with us! And if you're in Christ, if you have a drop of the divine life animating your souls this morning, isn't that the bottom of your joy? Isn't the heaven of heavens for you to have God *with* you? Don't you sing with eager longing,

“And on that day, the Great I AM, / the Faithful and the True, / the Lamb who was for sinners slain / is making all things new. / *Behold, our God shall live with us* / and be our steadfast Light. / And we shall e’er His people be: All glory be to Christ!” Is that not the song of your heart, believer?

Well, you know that that’s nothing but a paraphrase of Revelation 21:1–5, where we read about the New Heavens and a New Earth, where the One who sits on the throne says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And it says, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,”—listen to this—“*Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men*, and He will *dwell* among them, and they shall be *His people*, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.” O friends, that is Heaven! That is Paradise itself! Why? Because God Himself will be among us! He will dwell among us! And we’ll be His people, in perfect love, in perfect joy, in perfect fellowship, for eternity—for ages upon ages without end!

And if that is the bottom of your joy—if that is your Paradise—lay hold, dear believer, of the heaven you may enjoy now. Because of Christmas. Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Because even now He dwells *in* us, Ephesians 3:17—He dwells in our hearts through faith. Lay hold of “the riches of the glory of this mystery..., which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.” Because all the fullness of deity dwells in Christ the Word, and because Christ dwells in us as His people, He has birthed a little New-Jerusalem in each one of our hearts. Through the veil of His flesh He has brought us into the *most* holy place—into the very presence of God Himself. And the ineffable God dwells with us!

And dear sinner—you, the unbeliever among us, who is yet a stranger to God’s grace—what more lovely a thought is there with which I could entice you to come to Christ this very morning? What greater measure of staggering blessings could you require to hear before your heart leaps out of your chest to lay hold of the riches of such a Savior? He is God Almighty, clothed in the weakness and frailty of your humanity, so that He could stand in your place, bear your curse, and conquer the sin and death that you are enslaved to.

“Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. ... Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” And propitiation He *made* when He bore in Himself the fullness of the wrath of God on the cross—the very wrath that your sins deserve, the wrath that will break over your head for

eternity in hell, unless you turn from your sins, renounce confidence in your own goodness to take you to heaven, and put all your trust in this glorious Savior for the forgiveness of your sins and the righteousness you need to *dwell* with this Holy God.

Don't miss Christmas, dear sinner. Turn from your sins, trust in Christ, and be saved. Sing with the Christmas carol: "O holy Child of Bethlehem / Descend to *me*, I pray; / Cast out my sin, and enter in, / Be born *in me* today."