

John 1:14-18
Exodus 33-34
Psalm 29

“The Word Became Flesh”

February 23, 2020

In Exodus 32, we hear the story of Israel’s rebellion at Sinai.

Moses had gone up the mountain to receive the pattern of the Tabernacle.

God was instructing him in the pattern of worship that Israel was to follow.

But while Moses was up on the mountain –

Israel grew weary of waiting –

and so they decided to make golden calves to worship –

and they had a big sacrificial feast –

turning aside to idolatry and sexual immorality.

At the end of chapter 32, Moses has interceded with God

and God has promised not to destroy them.

But now God is saying that he himself will *not* go with them.

(In other words – cancel the tabernacle!)

That’s where our story picks up in chapter 33...

Read Exodus 33:1-34:10, 29-35

This is a key moment in redemptive history.

God will be faithful to his promises –

there's no question about that!

But *how* will God be faithful?

Will he be a distant God who keeps his people at arm’s length?

Or will he draw near to them?

What you see in Exodus 33-34 is God’s commitment to being a God who draws near!

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 106 –

a song that reflects on Exodus 32-34

(along with several other episodes in the wilderness) –

and shows us the pattern of God’s faithfulness.

God is just.

He will not let wickedness unpunished!

But he will always draw near to those who cry out for mercy!

Sing Psalm 106

Read John 1:1-18

1. **Flesh and Glory: The Tabernacle of the Word**

The Word Became Flesh because only by the Word becoming flesh could humanity be joined to God

Verse 14 is simply amazing:

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son^[d] from the Father, full of grace and truth.

First, consider what it means that the *Word became flesh*.

We saw last time that the Word was with God – and the Word was God.

Both of those statements are crucial.

When we say that the Word is God and is *with God*

we are saying that the Father and the Son are two distinct persons.

The Father is God – and the Son (the Word) is God –

but the Son is *not* the Father – he is *with* the Father –

and he is *one* with the Father –

but he is not the Father.

But now in verse 14, we are told that the *Word became flesh*.

Why does he say “and the Word became flesh”?

He says this because *flesh* is about as low a term as he could think of!

If he had said “became *man*” that would be a nobler way of saying it.

But *became flesh* highlights the humility – the weakness – of the incarnation.

Both in John’s gospel and in John’s epistles,

flesh is a term used of weakness.

To say that God came in the flesh is to put it almost crassly:

God became a piece of meat.

In that respect, when we say that the Word became *flesh*

we are saying that God humbled himself.

But notice the point of this humiliation:

“The Word became flesh *and dwelt among us...*”

Or, probably better, “The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us...”

It means “lived in a tent among us” –

using the same word that the LXX used of the tabernacle in the wilderness

It's a remarkable thing that God has done.

God's purpose in history was to join humanity to himself.

But humanity was in rebellion against God

and the fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.

If the holiness of God came into contact with the sin and misery of man,
the result would be the destruction of mankind!

And so at Mt. Sinai,

God told Moses to build a tent (a tabernacle) so that God could dwell with his people.

Israel lived in tents as they traveled through the wilderness –

and so God lived in a tent with them –

he humbled himself to live in a tent in the midst of his people.

This was an act of *grace* on God's part.

It was grace – but not yet “grace upon grace”!

In one sense, God was *near* to his people –

but not nearly so close as he wanted!

The tabernacle where God dwelt with his people

was also a tent that excluded his people!

Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies – and that once a year –

and only through the blood of the sacrifice.

But a tent of animal hides was not the sort of dwelling that God desired.

And for that matter – a temple of stone and gold was not the point either!

Solomon built a temple for the LORD – but Solomon declared,

“Heaven of heavens cannot contain you –

how much less this house that I have built...”

But so long as sin remained – there was no way for God to dwell with man.

This is why the Word had to become flesh.

Flesh is weak.

Flesh is impotent.

But...and this is the whole point of John's Gospel....the WORD *became* FLESH

The Word has become weak.

The Word has become impotent.

And yet, when John says, "the Word became flesh"—

suddenly, something happens to flesh!

Because John doesn't say,

"the Word became flesh, and we saw his weakness and his impotence"

NO!!!!

"the Word became flesh...and we beheld his glory!

What has happened?

How has flesh become glorious?

How has weakness become strength?

Because it is the Eternal Word who has transformed this mortal flesh through his glory!

That is why John says that "we beheld his glory"!

At Mt. Sinai, the glory of the Lord had appeared at the top of the mountain.

But when Moses built the tabernacle,

the glory of the LORD left the mountaintop and came and filled the holy of holies

Now – in Jesus – the glory of the LORD filled human flesh!

He joined himself to humanity's weakness

The tabernacle theme in the OT is closely connected to glory!

The glory of the LORD was revealed in the tabernacle.

And so when the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us –

we beheld his glory – the glory of the LORD that filled the holy of holies!

the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father –

there is that word *monogenes* again.

We saw last week that John introduced this term in the context of the new birth

"children of God who are born not of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man,
but of God"

and then he says that we have seen the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father.

John is saying that the Word is the Son of God in a unique way.

He is the only-begotten Son of the Father.

He has always been the Son of God.

The Father has always been begetting the Son.

The Son has always been begotten of the Father.

We refer to this as the doctrine of eternal generation.

It's not that at some point in the past, the Father begot the Son.

Rather, their relationship is that the Father begets the Son.

This is simply who God is!

In the one being of God, the Father begets the Son –

the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and the Son.

And in the incarnation of the Word –
the glory of God glory now fills the flesh of Jesus!
We beheld his glory – the glory of the only-begotten Son from the Father!
Full of grace and truth.

2. Grace and Truth: The Law and the Word

The Word Became Flesh because only by the Word becoming flesh could we behold the grace and truth of the Father

What does it mean “full of grace and truth”?

John explains this – somewhat! – in verses 15-17:

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.^[e] ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

In the OT, the terms are ‘steadfast love and faithfulness’ – *hesed* and *emeth*.

But *hesed* is notoriously difficult to translate!

Steadfast love, covenant loyalty –

indeed the King James translators created a new English word for it –
“lovingkindness”!

John wants us to see that the *hesed* and *emeth* that God revealed at Sinai
is revealed most clearly as “grace and truth” in Jesus Christ.

We read earlier from Exodus how Israel had rebelled at Sinai –
and God was merciful.

He did not treat them as their sin deserved.

But of course – that was the problem with the Law.

The Law revealed Israel’s sin –

and the Law included all sorts of sacrifices in order to deal with sin –
but the Law – by itself – could not reveal *hesed* and *emeth*.

After Israel’s rebellion,

every time Moses went in to speak with God,

he had to veil his face when he came out –

because of the radiance of God’s glory.

In other words, John is saying,

Yes, some grace and truth was revealed to Moses,

But the glory of God was VEILED, and even Moses could only see God’s back.

Moses received the *proclamation* of God’s grace and truth in the Law,

but Jesus Christ IS HIMSELF the *revelation* of God’s grace and truth.

This is why John calls him the WORD!

Moses received God's Word in writing – with the finger of God on stone tablets.
Moses proclaimed God's Word in preaching.
But Moses was NOT God's Word.

Jesus Christ IS the Word of God.
He IS the revelation of God's grace and truth.

Paul points out in 2 Corinthians that the radiance of Exodus 34
was a fading glory.
Just like the Law...

The Law was a good thing.
The Law was a good revelation of God's will for his people –
but the glory of the Law was a fading glory.
The Law showed us the way to live –
but it could not give us the power to live that way!

There is a way in which Exodus 34 revealed the glory of God!
Moses saw it on the mountain!
Because Moses saw God (at least as much as God could reveal of himself
without destroying him!).
But the Law could *show us* what *hesed* and *emeth* are all about –
but the fullness of that *hesed* and *emeth* – that grace and truth –
came only by Jesus Christ.

Steadfast love and faithfulness – the true and abiding glory of God
only came through Jesus Christ –
when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

In the face of Jesus, the glory of God does not fade!
And we – with unveiled face – behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
By faith, we now *see him* seated at the right hand of the Father.

But what is it that John means when he says “we beheld his glory”?
Sure, John was one of the three disciples who was there at the Transfiguration –
when the glory of God was revealed in Jesus –
but that does not seem to fully capture what John is saying here.

John's point seems much more comprehensive.
We beheld his glory – precisely in his humility.
The glory of God was revealed in weakness – in humility –
as the Word became *flesh*.

For those who have eyes to see,
the incarnation is the most magnificent revelation of the glory of God

God keeps doing surprising things!
When he led Israel out of Egypt, he lived in a tent with them.
When he wanted to defeat the Philistines,
he allowed the ark of the covenant to be captured by the Philistines,
so that God himself could go before his people
(humiliated by defeat)
and conquer his and their enemies!
So we when God takes a more astounding path of humility –
and joins humanity's weakness in taking flesh and blood –
in going to the cross in order to subdue us to himself –
and defeat all his and our enemies!

Few had eyes to see!

And that's why John speaks of John the Baptist here.
Because John the Baptist recognized Jesus –
John had eyes to see.

Luke tells us that John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were relatives.
So they may have known each other as children.

But John doesn't highlight the family connection here.
Instead he focuses on the more important thing –
John bore witness about Jesus and said:

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.'")*

John was older than Jesus –
so when he says "he was before me" – we know that he doesn't just mean birth order.

No, in Luke's gospel, when John the Baptist hears Mary's voice, he leaps in Elizabeth's womb –
he leaps because he recognizes that the mother of his Lord has come.

John understood that Jesus *was* before him.
Jesus came after him in time (Jesus was born later – Jesus began his ministry later) –
but he who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.
John understood that Jesus was "in the beginning with the Father."

And then John the Evangelist applies all this to us:

¹⁶ *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* ^[e] ¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

We saw the fullness of the Word in verse 14 –
how he was “full of grace and truth” –
he was full of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God.

He was full of grace and truth –
and from that fullness we have received “grace upon grace.”

The phrase “grace upon grace” is important.
The Law was itself a gracious gift to God’s people.
It was not able to open the way into the Holy of Holies –
but it was a gracious picture of what that way would look like!
But in Jesus we have received grace upon grace!

The Law was given through Moses – and that was a kind and gracious gift!
But grace and truth came through Jesus Christ – a grace upon grace –
a grace above and beyond the grace of the Law.

And the grace of the gospel is seen most clearly in our final point:

3. The Only-Begotten Son and the Children of God

The Word Became Flesh because only by the Word becoming flesh could we become children of God

¹⁸ *No one has ever seen God; the only[-begotten] God,^[f] who is at the Father's side,^[g] he has made him known.*

In verse 18, John says, “No one has ever seen God.”

You might wonder about our OT reading – when Moses saw God!!
In Isaiah 6, Isaiah saw the Lord.

There are several other theophanies in the OT where people “see God” and live.
But God is very clear to Moses that Moses will not see God’s face.
He will only see his back.

In other words, Moses does not see God in all his fullness.
He sees only the afterglow of the glory of God!
Isaiah, likewise, only sees the hem of God’s garment – and fears for his life!

So John is correct in saying that “No one has ever seen God”

If you would see God, look at Jesus.

(As Jesus will say later in John’s gospel –
“he who has seen me has seen the Father”)

The only-begotten God, who is at the Father’s side –
he has made him known.

You can only know God aright through knowing Jesus.

Because Jesus is the only-begotten God.
Jesus is the only-begotten of the Father –
 he is the unique Son – the only one who was begotten of God
 before all ages.
We were not children of God.
We were children of wrath.
We were children of disobedience.
 But we are born again *in time* – we *become* children of God –

How can children of disobedience become children of God?
 This was the point that we saw back in verses 12-13 –
 “but to all who did receive him – who believed in his name –
 he became the right to become children of God”
 born through the will of God (not man).

How can children of disobedience become children of God?
 Only if the one who was God – and who was *with* God – comes in our flesh.
 This is why we confess that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.
 He is God from all eternity.
 And he is *with* God from all eternity.

The Father has always been Father –
 because he has always been the Father of his eternal Son.
The Son has always been Son –
 because he has always been the Son of his eternal Father!

Marvel at the great love and mercy of God!
 That he would make us partakers of the divine nature!
 That he would include us in his divine life –
 making us heirs with his only-begotten Son!

If you want to know God, Jesus is the one who has made the Father known!
And if you want to know how Jesus has made him known –
 keep reading!

The rest of John’s gospel will explore these themes!

The Word became flesh!
 God has humbled himself,
 and yet we remain proud!

I would encourage you to consider how your pride gets in the way of knowing Christ!

I know my pride does that!

So often I know what would be the path of humility –
I know what I should do to lay down my life for others...

but I am proud...
and I prefer my own selfish desires...

Keep looking at Jesus!
Marvel at the humility of the eternal Son of God!

Augustine preached on the gospel of John
to his congregation at Hippo in North Africa.

In one sermon he said:

"But that men might be born of God, God was first born of them.

For Christ is God, and Christ was born of men.

It was only a mother, indeed, that He sought upon earth;
because He had already a Father in heaven:

He by whom we were to be created was born of God,
and He by whom we were to be re-created was born of a woman.

Marvel not, then, O man, that you are made a son by grace,
that you are born of God according to His Word.

The Word Himself first chose to be born of man,

that you might be born of God unto salvation,

and say to yourself, Not without reason did God wish to be born of man,
but because He counted me of some importance, that He might make me immortal,
and for me be born as a mortal man.

When, therefore, he had said, "born of God," lest we should, as it were,
be filled with amazement and trembling at such grace,

at grace so great as to exceed belief that men are born of God,
as if assuring you, he says, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

Why, then, do you marvel that men are born of God?

Consider God Himself born of men:

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

Augustine hits it right on the head.

The Word became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace!