

John Pt 4 The Word Made Flesh

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John 1:14–18 BSB

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ John testified concerning Him. He cried out, saying, “This is He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.’ ”

¹⁶ From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

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

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.

Introduction

Last week we watched a world get offered its Maker and turn away. John told us the Word came into the world He made, and the world did not recognize Him. He came to His own

people, and His own did not receive Him. But some did. And to everyone who received Him, John said, He gave the right to become a child of God.

We also met two men named John in that passage, and we learned to keep them straight. One wrote the book. The other stood in a river pointing at somebody else. Tonight that second John steps back into the story for a moment, right in the middle of the biggest claim the prologue makes.

Because tonight John tells us what exactly people received when they received Him. And he tells us what he and the others saw with their own eyes when they did.

I. Historical and Literary Context

A. What Moses asked for

Long before there was a Gospel of John, there was a man on a mountain who wanted one thing. Moses said to God, "Please show me Your glory" (Exodus 33:18).

Exodus 33:18 BSB

¹⁸ Then Moses said, "Please show me Your glory."

God's answer should stop us. "You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). So God gives Moses the next best thing. He hides him in a crack in the

rock, covers him with His own hand, and lets Moses see His back as He passes by. Moses gets the trailing edge of God's glory, from behind a rock, with his eyes covered until the last second.

Hold that scene. We're going to come back to it more than once tonight, because John is about to answer Moses' question in a way nobody on that mountain could have imagined.

B. Where we are in the prologue

John 1 breaks into three movements. Verses 1 through 5 tell us who the Word is: eternal, uncreated, the source of life and light. Verses 6 through 13, which we studied last week, tell us how the world responded to Him: some rejected Him, some received Him. Verses 14 through 18, our passage tonight, tell us what happened next. The Word who was always there, the Word the world couldn't decide about, became one of us.

Verse 14 is the hinge the whole prologue swings on. Everything John has claimed up to this point, that the Word was with God, that the Word was God, that nothing was made without Him, now collides with the most physical, most limited word available in the Greek language. We'll get to that word in a moment.

C. The voice changes

Something happens at verse 14 that's easy to miss. Through verse 13, John has been narrating from a distance. The world. His own. Those who believed. It's all third person, a reporter describing events.

At verse 14, John switches to "we." "We have seen His glory."

That's not a stylistic choice. That's a man stepping into the witness box. This Gospel was written by someone who claims to have been there, who ate meals with Jesus and watched Him work and stood close enough to see what His face looked like when He was tired. The apostle John says almost the same thing at the opening of his first letter: what he had heard, what he had seen with his own eyes, what he had looked at and touched with his own hands, concerning the Word of life.

We already have a reason to take this seriously. Last week we talked about witness as a legal category in Scripture, the requirement in Deuteronomy 19:15 that a matter be established by more than one witness. Tonight, the writer of this Gospel puts himself on the stand.

D. The lens for tonight: what happened

at Sinai

Here's what I want you watching for as we walk through these five verses. Nearly every phrase in this passage has a direct match back in Exodus 33 and 34, the very chapters where Moses asked to see God's glory.

- Moses wanted to see God's glory. John says, "We have seen His glory" (v.14).
- God told Moses no one can see His face and live (33:20). John says no one has ever seen God (v.18).
- God had a tent built where His presence would live among His people (Exodus 25:8; 40:34-35). John says the Word "made His dwelling among us" (v.14).
- God proclaimed His own character to Moses as He passed by (34:6). John says the Word came "full of grace and truth" (v.14).
- God gave the Law to Israel through Moses at that same mountain (34:27-28). John says, "the law was given through Moses" (v.17).

John isn't picking these images at random. He's taking us back to the mountain where God said no, and showing us the moment God said yes.

E. Two audiences, two shocks

It's worth pausing to notice how strange this sentence would have sounded to the first people who heard it.

A Jewish listener knew exactly where God's glory lived. It lived in the tabernacle, then in the temple, behind a curtain, approached only by a priest, only once a year, only with blood. The idea that God's glory would now live in a man from Nazareth was not a small adjustment. It was almost unthinkable.

A listener from the wider Greek world had a different problem. In that world, the body was the thing you escaped, not the thing God would choose to wear. Spirit was noble. Flesh was the cage. Telling that listener that God became flesh wasn't just surprising. It sounded like a contradiction in terms.

Both listeners hit the same wall in the first four words of verse 14. And John doesn't soften it for either one of them.

II. Verse 14, "The Word Became Flesh"

John 1:14 BSB

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Four words carry more weight than almost any other sentence in the Bible. Let's take it apart piece by piece, because every phrase here is doing work.

A. "The Word became..."

Watch the verb. In verse 1, John told us the Word *was*. Was with God. Was God. That's the imperfect tense, the language of something that has simply always been true, no starting point, no beginning. In verse 3, John told us that everything else *came into being*. That's a different verb, the language of things that didn't exist and then did.

Now, in verse 14, the Word *became*.

That's John's third verb for the Word, and it's the strongest one yet. Not "was." Not "came into being," the verb reserved for creation. *Became*. For the first time, something changes about the Word Himself. The eternal, uncreated Source of everything that exists takes on a form He did not have before.

This single verb rules out two mistakes people have made about Jesus for as long as the church has existed.

The first mistake says He only seemed human. Under this view, Jesus was really a spirit the whole time, and His body was something like a costume, a projection people could see but that wasn't fully real. John will not let us go there. He doesn't say the Word appeared as flesh or was disguised as flesh. He says the Word *became* flesh. Later, in his first letter, John makes this a test of true teaching: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 John 4:2). If a teacher denies the real, physical body of Jesus, John says plainly, that teacher isn't from God.

The second mistake runs the other direction. It says that when the Word became flesh, He stopped being what He was, that something of His deity got left behind or diluted in the process. John won't let us go there either. Hold that thought for a few minutes. When we reach verse 18, we'll find this same Word, now in flesh, still called God, still at the Father's side. Becoming flesh added something. It didn't subtract anything.

B. "...flesh"

Of every word John could have picked, he picked the plainest, most breakable one available.

He didn't say the Word became a man, though that's true.

He didn't say the Word took on a body, though that's true too. He said flesh. Flesh gets hungry. Flesh gets tired. Flesh bleeds, and eventually flesh dies. It's the word for what we are at our most fragile and temporary.

You've probably heard this verse read every December for most of your life, and that familiarity can work against you. So really think it through tonight. The One who spoke galaxies into place, who never had a beginning, chose to become something that gets tired by the end of a long day. Something that can be hurt.

And notice what John doesn't give you here. No manger. No shepherds. No star. Matthew and Luke will tell you how He arrived. John isn't interested in that story. He takes you straight from eternity to this single, staggering word, and lets it stand on its own.

C. "...and made His dwelling among us"

[Language note.] The word translated "made His dwelling" comes from the Greek word for a tent. Literally, John is telling us that the Word pitched His tent among us.

That's not a random image. It's the exact image Moses was living inside back on that mountain. God told Israel to build Him a sanctuary, "so that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). Once it was built, the cloud covered the tent of

meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled it so completely that Moses himself couldn't go in (Exodus 40:34-35). God's presence didn't stay on the mountaintop. It came down and pitched itself in the middle of the camp, surrounded by tents that belonged to ordinary, flawed, complaining people.

John says the Word did the same thing. He didn't take up residence in a palace or a temple. He pitched His tent among us, in the middle of our ordinary, flawed, complaining lives.

If you were here for our Revelation study that might sound familiar, it should. Revelation 21:3 promises a day when God's dwelling place is with man, when He will live among them for good. That's the same tent language, at the other end of the Bible.

D. "We have seen His glory..."

Glory, in the Old Testament, wasn't an abstract idea. It was something you could point to. It was the weight of God's presence, visible, often as light or cloud, filling a space so completely that a man couldn't stand in it.

John doesn't leave us to guess what he means by glory in this Gospel. He tells us himself. At the wedding in Cana, when Jesus turns water into wine, John writes that Jesus

"thus revealed His glory, and His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11). That's John's own definition, in his own words. Glory is what happened when people watched Jesus and could tell they were looking at something more than a man.

An interesting note: John never once records the moment on the mountain when Jesus' face shone like the sun, the scene Peter, James, and John saw and that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe. It's tempting to assume that's what John means by "glory" here, but he never points us there. Let John's own Gospel define his own word. And by the time we reach the second half of this book, that word starts attaching itself to a place nobody would expect. Keep watching for it.

E. "...the glory of the one and only Son from the Father"

Here's a place where comparing translations pays off. The BSB calls Jesus the "one and only Son." Open a King James or a New King James in the room tonight, and you'll find "only begotten Son" instead.

That older wording has caused real confusion. Some people have argued that if Jesus was "begotten," that means He was produced, brought into existence at some point, the way a son is produced by his father. If that argument were

true, it would put Jesus back in the category of things that "came into being" in verse 3, the created category, the very thing John spent his first five verses ruling out.

Here's how to test that argument. The same Greek word behind "only begotten Son" in verse 14 shows up in exactly one other family relationship in the New Testament: Isaac, Abraham's son. Open a King James to Hebrews 11:17, and you'll find the identical phrase, "his only begotten son." The BSB makes the same translation choice there that it makes here, and calls Isaac "his one and only son."

But Abraham had another son. Ishmael was born years before Isaac and was very much alive when Abraham took Isaac up the mountain. So whatever this word means, it plainly doesn't mean "the only son who was ever born." It means something else. It means the unique son, the son of the promise, the one in a category by himself.

That's exactly what this word is doing in John 1:14. It isn't a claim about when the Word began. It's a claim about how unique He is. This is the same kind of correction we made in Session 2, when we looked at the "firstborn" language in Colossians and found that Scripture uses it as a rank, not a birth order. Here it's the same lesson.

F. "...full of grace and truth"

Go back to the mountain one more time. After God agrees to show Moses His back, He passes by and does something remarkable: He announces His own character out loud. "The LORD, the LORD God, is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

[Language note.] The Hebrew words behind "loving devotion and faithfulness" are *hesed* and *emet*, a pair that shows up together again and again across the Old Testament to describe God's covenant love and His utter reliability. Most scholars see that same Hebrew pair standing behind John's Greek phrase "grace and truth." John is reaching back to the words God used to describe Himself at Sinai.

Here's the point. At Sinai, that character came to Moses as a voice from behind a cloud, on the far side of a mountain nobody else was even allowed to climb. In Jesus, that same character walked through villages, sat at tables, and touched people other people wouldn't touch. What Moses only heard proclaimed, John says he watched. Grace and truth, in a body, at his dinner table.

III. Verse 15, John the Baptist's Testimony

John 1:15 BSB

¹⁵ John testified concerning Him. He cried out, saying, “This is He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.’ ”

John interrupts his own sentence. He's in the middle of the biggest claim in the prologue, full of grace and truth, and he stops to put a witness on the stand.

This isn't the first time the Baptist has shown up mid-thought. He already appeared back in verses 6-8, before John had said a word about who Jesus actually is. Now he appears again, right after John says it. That's not an accident. Verse 14 gave us the writer's own testimony: "we have seen." Verse 15 gives us a second one, and it comes from a completely different man.

The testimony itself is a riddle on the surface. The Baptist says the One coming after him has surpassed him, because He was before him. But Luke tells us John was born roughly six months ahead of Jesus. By any normal math, "after me" is correct and "before me" is backward.

Unless the Baptist isn't talking about birth order. He's talking about the same claim John opened this whole book with: the Word was already there, before anything else had a beginning. A man standing waist-deep in the Jordan River is making the exact claim John made back in verse 1.

IV. Verses 16-17, Fullness, and a Name

John 1:16-17 BSB

¹⁶ From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

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

A. "From His fullness we have all received..."

Listen to the word "received." You heard it last week, in verse 12, describing what happened to everyone who accepted Jesus. Now it shows up again, describing what those same people got once they did. First you receive Him. Then, from Him, you keep on receiving.

"Fullness" is the word for a container that's completely full, with nothing missing. Paul uses the same idea in Colossians, where he says all the fullness of God dwells in Christ bodily. John and Paul are making the identical claim from two different angles. Jesus isn't a small supply that gets rationed out carefully. He's a full one that never runs out.

B. "...grace upon grace"

Picture standing on a shoreline. A wave comes in and covers your feet. Before it finishes pulling back, the next one is already on its way, and behind that one, another. That's the picture in this phrase. Grace, then grace on top of it, then more.

Most of us live as though grace is something we received once, at the start, and have been spending down ever since. So when we fail again, we wonder whether the account is empty. John says the opposite. It comes "from His fullness," and a fullness doesn't run out by being given away.

Go back to Exodus 34:6. God described Himself to Moses as "abounding in loving devotion and faithfulness." Abounding is an overflow word. Moses heard that God overflows. John says he watched it happen. Grace upon grace is what abounding looks like when it's poured out on real people.

Those who received Him kept finding He had more to give.

C. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Read this sentence carefully, because it's easy to mishear. There's no "but" in it. Not in the Berean Standard Bible, not in the King James, not in the English Standard Version. John doesn't say the law was given, but then grace and truth came, as if the second half corrects the first. He just says both things happened.

Notice the two verbs. The law was *given*, handed down through a man standing between God and the people. Grace and truth *came*, in person, needing no middleman at all. That's the real contrast here. Not law against grace, like two enemies. A gift delivered by a messenger, compared to the same kind of gift now delivered by the sender Himself.

Go back to the mountain one more time. The same chapter where God announced His own character to Moses, the one we've quoted twice tonight, is the same chapter where the law was written down and given to Israel (Exodus 34:27-28). Both gifts came out of that one mountain. John is telling us that Jesus is what the first gift was always pointing toward. Not its replacement. Its fulfillment.

D. The first time Jesus is named

One more thing about this pair of verses, easy to read past. For sixteen verses, John has called Him the Word, the Light, the one and only Son. Verse 17 is the first time anyone in

this Gospel says His name out loud: Jesus Christ.

Let that land for a second before you move on. The eternal Word who spoke creation into being has a name you can say. He has a name your kids know. He has a name people used to call Him across a room.

V. Verse 18, The Unseen God Made Known

John 1:18 BSB

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

We're back where we started tonight. Moses asked to see God's glory and was told no one can see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20). Verse 18 is where John finally answers that.

A. "No one has ever seen God"

This sentence has an obvious problem... The Old Testament seems to say the opposite in several places. Jacob names a place Peniel, "face of God," because he said, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (Genesis 32:30). Exodus 24:10 says Moses and the elders "saw the

God of Israel" on the mountain. Isaiah opens his sixth chapter by saying, "I saw the Lord, seated on a throne, high and exalted" (Isaiah 6:1).

So which is it? Has anyone seen God, or hasn't anyone?

John himself gives us the answer, later in this same Gospel. Looking back at Isaiah's vision, John writes that Isaiah "said these things because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about Him" (John 12:41). Isaiah thought he was seeing the Lord seated on His throne. John tells us plainly who that was. A few chapters earlier, Jesus said something nearly identical about Himself: "not that anyone has seen the Father except the One who is from God; only He has seen the Father" (John 6:46).

Put those together, and a pattern falls into place. Every time anyone in the Old Testament saw God, whether Jacob at the river, the elders on the mountain, or Isaiah in the temple, they were seeing the Son. The Father Himself has never been seen by human eyes. But the Son has always been the one making Him known, long before Bethlehem. Paul says almost the same thing when he calls Christ "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

That's not a new idea for this room. It's the same conviction behind the Angel of the Lord appearances taught in the Jesus In The Old Testament series: every time God shows up in a body or a voice in the Old Testament, in ways too close

and too personal to be a vision alone, we're looking at the Son before His birth in Bethlehem. Tonight, John gives us the verse that explains why that reading holds together. Nobody has ever seen the Father directly. Every glimpse anyone ever got came through the Son.

B. "...but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father's side"

Notice the tense. "Is at the Father's side," present tense, spoken after everything John has just told us about the Word becoming flesh. Taking on a body didn't pull Him away from the Father. He is still there, even now.

Hold onto that phrase, "at His side." Later in this Gospel, at the last supper, we're told the disciple Jesus loved was reclining at His side. The same nearness the Son has always had with the Father, He now offers to the people who follow Him.

C. "...has made Him known"

The Son is the explanation. Not a partial one, not a hint, the explanation. If you want to know what God is actually like, this verse tells you where to look. Later in this book Jesus will say it even more directly: whoever has seen Him has seen the Father.

D. A note on your Bibles

If you're holding an older translation tonight, you may have noticed something. This verse doesn't read the same in every Bible and the difference isn't the kind we've talked about before.

Two weeks ago we compared how different translations word the same Greek text, choices translators make about how best to say the same thing in English. That's normal, and it's one reason it's worth owning more than one translation.

Tonight's difference is a different kind. It isn't a translation choice. The copies themselves disagree. Some of the oldest Greek manuscripts we have of this verse read "the only God." Others, copied later, read "the only Son." Two different Greek words, not two different ways of saying the same word.

Here's why that happens, and it isn't a secret the church has been hiding. We don't have the original page John wrote on. Nobody does, for any book of the Bible. What we have are thousands of handwritten copies, made over centuries, and scribes occasionally introduced small changes as they worked, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. That's simply what it means to preserve an ancient book by

hand for two thousand years. It's also exactly what our church has already taught: the original writings were without error, and the copies aren't perfect, which is why we compare them so carefully.

So what do we do with a verse like this one? We look at the evidence. The earliest and best copies we possess read "the only God." The reading "the only Son" shows up later. When scholars weigh a case like this, one rule of thumb carries real weight: a scribe copying by hand was far more likely to soften a startling line into a familiar one than to invent a startling line out of a familiar one. "Only Son" is the comfortable reading. "Only God" is the one that would have made a copyist pause. That points toward "God" being what John actually wrote.

But here's the part I want you to walk out with tonight. This verse isn't holding up the whole building by itself. Whichever reading is original, nothing changes about what you believe. Verse 1 already told you, in language no manuscript anywhere disputes, that the Word was God. This variant doesn't put that in question. It just means one verse, out of the thousands in your Bible, has a small, well-documented difference between the copies we have.

Keep this in your back pocket. Later in this book we'll run into a much bigger textual question, one that actually changes how a whole passage gets handled. When we get

there, the same way of weighing evidence will still help.

E. The bookend

One last thing before we close this passage out. Go back to the Mark series for a second. Remember the word "inclusio," the old writer's trick of putting your source or your theme at both the beginning and the end of a section, like bookends holding everything between them in place.

John does that here. Verse 1 told us the Word "was with God." Verse 18 tells us the Son "is at the Father's side." Same relationship, stated at both ends of the passage. Verse 1 also made the claim that raised the whole problem this passage has been solving: if the Word was God, why has no one ever seen God? Verse 18 is where that question finally gets answered.

And if the earliest reading is the right one, there's one more layer to it. The word "God" would sit at both ends of this section, verse 1 and verse 18 alike. The prologue opens and closes on the exact same claim.

VI. Core Truths

- God came in person, fully human and still fully God. Nothing was subtracted when the Word became flesh.

- His presence doesn't hover at a distance. It moved into the middle of ordinary, unfinished lives.
- The character God proclaimed at Sinai, compassionate, gracious, loving, faithful, is the same character that walked through Galilee.
- The Law was a real gift that pointed to a greater one. Jesus is what it was always aiming at.
- No one has seen the Father except through the Son. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.
- Differences between manuscripts are real and worth naming honestly. None of them touches what we believe about who Jesus is.

Closing

Moses got the best look at God that anyone had gotten up to that point in the story, and it still wasn't much. A crack in a rock. A hand covering his face until the last second. God's back, passing by, and nothing more.

But listen to what God did while He passed by. He didn't just show Moses a shape or a light. He spoke. He said out loud who He is: compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,

abounding in loving devotion and faithfulness. That's the moment John is quoting when he says Jesus came full of grace and truth. The words God used to describe Himself to Moses are the words John reaches for to describe Jesus.

So here's the question worth asking honestly tonight. What do you actually picture when you picture God? For a lot of people, even people who've been in church their whole lives, the honest answer is someone strict. Someone keeping score a little more closely. Someone you'd rather not disappoint, watching from somewhere far off.

John says you don't have to guess anymore, and you don't have to reconstruct Him from a crack in a rock. "We have seen His glory." The disciples ate meals with Him. They watched how He treated people nobody else wanted to touch. They watched Him tell the truth without ever once being cruel about it.

There is no harsher God hiding behind Jesus, waiting for you somewhere further up the mountain. He is the Father, made known. If you want to know what Moses asked for and never fully got, stop looking at the mountain. Look at Jesus.