

Christmas 2022

Sermon #4: Incarnation

John 1:14-18

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- December 18, 2022

Good morning, Grace! What a wonderful set ... thank you.

Sometimes there is a single salient point that can make sense out of things that feel like nonsense. Sometimes a single fact can change all of your understanding. I'm sure you've been in a situation or a circumstance where you think, *What? I don't get this.* And then somebody adds this one point and ... *Oh, now I get it. I completely understand. It's different that I thought.*

You probably saw the movie *The Sixth Sense*. Spoiler: I'm going to tell you how it ends, but you've had twenty-three years to watch the movie, so ... Anyway, it starts with a Bruce Willis character. And in the opening scene, scene one, you see him coming home from a dinner with his wife. He's a psychologist, and one of his clients has actually invaded his house. This client hallucinates, and he accuses of Bruce Willis of not helping him, but making it worse. So, he brings out a gun and shoots Bruce Willis and then shoots himself.

Wow—that's quite an opening scene. Scene two: months later, Willis has now picked up a client who's a nine-year-old boy named Cole. And Cole is having difficulty in life because of what's going on in his particular hallucinations. But it's different now. But it's subtle, though. Something's off. It's like listening to your favorite song on a piano that hasn't been tuned. Bruce Willis' wife is distant and cold, melancholy. She won't even talk to Bruce. And then, other people completely ignore Bruce altogether. Anyway, Cole confides in Willis that he is able to see dead people. He says, "I see dead people." And dead people only see what they want to see. And they don't even know they're dead.

As you can imagine, Willis is skeptical. But he comes to find out that the boy is telling the truth. He does see ghosts. And he tells the boy, "You need to go and approach them and help them through their journey, and that will cause them to be set free and move on to the next life." And Cole does that and finds a purpose of life. And the last conversation that Cole has with Bruce is that he needs to talk to his wife when she's sleeping. She'll understand. Bruce goes home and his wife is there in bed—she's sleeping. She's talking in her sleep and he lays down

next to her and hears her say, “Why did you leave me? Why did you go?” And she releases Bruce Willis’ wedding ring that she was holding in her hand. And then Willis recalls that the dead only see what they want to see and they don’t even know they’re dead. And he realizes that he’s dead. And that helps him understand who he is, and he tells his wife he loves her and sets her free so she can move on. And he moves on to the next life.

But what I’m trying to tell you here is that the entire movie, Bruce Willis is dead. And I don’t know how we’re supposed to know that except that in the opening scene he’s shot, and there’s a boy who says, “I talk to dead people,” and it’s the only person that Bruce Willis ever talks to in the movie.

But besides those two facts—the point is, once you realize that, you think, *Now it all makes sense differently. I want to go back and watch the movie again and see it for what’s true about it.*

Okay, the point is this. Today we’re looking at the lynch pin fact of the mega-story of all human history. Today we’re going to look at a single salient point that makes sense out of what we would consider nonsense in life. In God’s great plan for creation, from a garden in Genesis all the way to a throne room in Revelation, it doesn’t come together without this single point. And it’s not just the point of the storyline. It doesn’t just make sense out of all of creation. It makes sense out of who God is. It helps define Yahweh for who He truly is. It’s a single word.

Incarnation

It’s the word “incarnation.” It’s the Christian doctrinal belief that God becomes man. And it’s a radical Christian claim. It defines all of human life and experience, all of human history. It defines God, and it defines individuals. Because when a person is able to grasp aspects of the incarnation and that beauty penetrates our soul, it will alter our lives.

We’re going to look at a paragraph today that some call the pinnacle of all human thought. Who’s with me? How’s my introduction? Do I have your attention? Yeah—let’s look at John chapter 1, verses 14 through 17.

John 1:14-17

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about Him, and cried out, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me surpassed me, because He was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For 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; the one and only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made God known.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Now John bore witness about Him,”—Jesus—“and cried out, ‘This was the one of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me surpasses me, because He was before me.’”) For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given to us through Moses; grace and truth came from Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the one and only God, who is at the Father’s side,”—Jesus—“He has made God known.”

The incarnation is the doctrine that the God of the universe—in the Bible He says His name is Yahweh—He is beyond time and space—and it’s the belief that He has become human with us and dwells among us. The Word became flesh and lived among us so that we might experience the glory of God. There it is. And the incarnation is the hope of all humanity.

Even the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* wouldn’t even be a wonderful life if it didn’t end in everyone in town singing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”:

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail, the incarnate deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.*

Emmanuel means “God with us.”

The Word

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son (begotten) from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And I understand that it's easy to connect Christmas with family and presents and some time off from work. That's not what Christmas means. John is going to tell us here that the meaning of Christmas is God in a body—Yahweh as a baby. That's the doctrine. Verse 1:14 says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory; the glory of the only Son, begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The Word in flesh ... in Greek those words are literally touching each other. They are right next to each other—“word flesh”—side by side. Word—that means Jesus is the voice of God. He is the revelation of God.

Application #1: To Know God

And if you want to know God, you have to know it through Jesus. You can know about God like you can know about George Washington. I just know facts about him. He's never spoken with me, I don't know him. And you can't know God unless you have had Jesus speak to you through your Bible. Those red letters are His words. The Word is flesh. He is the ultimate revelation of God. He is the clearest expression of who God is and what He is like. If you want a relationship with God it will be through Jesus Christ, because He is God. The Word—flesh.

Application #2: God Becomes Approachable

Flesh—he doesn't even say He's human here. He says that He's meat. And the most difficult part of the incarnation for us to grasp, the reason it feels like it's a contradiction (instead it's a paradox), is because of this dramatic contrast between the nature of God and the nature of flesh. Word, flesh, God, body, the infinite, omni-powerful God that created all things has now become vulnerable. The transcendent Word is now approachable. What?

Christianity is radically different from every religion in the world right here—Christmas incarnation. The great I AM—even His name—“I AM that I AM”—and people say that one of the reasons that He says, “I AM that I AM” is because he’s not dependent on anybody. *I am the uncaused cause. You can’t define me. I am completely independent of all things created.*

And then He hears our cries and comes and becomes like us as a tiny infant, completely and utterly dependent. The independent becomes dependent. The Word becomes fragile. And it’s not like He came at the risk of being killed; He came with the full knowledge that His purpose was to be killed, to know death, because that’s the cost of sin.

Application #3: God Understands Us

And so, certainly, one of the applications for the incarnation is in understanding that God understands us. He understands life as a human. He’s transcendent, but He’s become immanent. And when we talk to Him (and we should talk to Him regularly about all things) it’s because He is the great counselor, because He know what it’s like to be us. We sing in the Christmas carols one of the titles that’s given to the prophecy of the Messiah coming is “Wonderful Counselor.” And how does He become a wonderful counselor? Because He’s like us.

Hebrews 2:17-18

For this reason Jesus had to be made like man, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

It clearly says that in Hebrews chapter 2: “For this very reason Jesus had to be made like a man, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people.” He had to be a person to make atonement for people. “Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.”

A wonderful counselor is a person that has overcome a malady that we have—they’ve had it, but they’ve overcome it. And you go to them, and they say to you—that man or woman

says, “Oh, I understand exactly what you’re going through.” And we can say that about Yahweh because of Jesus becoming like man, that He would become a faithful and merciful High Priest, because He knows what it’s like to suffer in temptation, and so He’s going to help us with that as well.

It’s easy to see in Jesus the God of all creation, transcendent, majestic, out there, other. But also, we have this revelation from the Word that He has been tempted, that He’s been hungry. He’s been lonely and isolated, He’s been persecuted. He’s suffered injustice. He had to face fear. He was separated from the Father.

So, the point is, do you feel betrayed? Jesus knows how you feel. Do you feel persecuted? He’s been there as well. Loneliness—a depth of loneliness that goes into despair? Jesus says, *Yeah, um-hmm*. We know that God knows what that is like because Jesus became like us. And so, the incarnation calls us to call upon Him and say, *Look, I’m going through this or that, and You know what that’s like*.

And some of you are thinking, *Well, what about when we cry out to Him in a way that is absolutely desperate for the life of someone that we love, or for something that we need God to say yes to, and God responds with “No, you’re going to have to live this out”?* Does Jesus know what that’s like? He does. In the Garden of Gethsemane He appeals to the Father: *If there’s any way we could save all of mankind without me being isolated from the love of the Father, without being crucified on that cross, let this cup of suffering pass*. And the Father comes and says, *No. You drink that cup all the way to the bottom*. So, He even knows that.

He’s a wonderful counselor because the Word became flesh—incarnation.

We Can See God’s Glory

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son (begotten) from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Another purpose for the incarnation that we can see in this passage here is so that we can see the glory of God. Look what it says again in verse 14. Watch for that. “And the Word

became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Old Testament readers and Jewish scholars would look at this and be dumbfounded, because it says that we have beheld the glory of God. They would say that the glory of God is the most potent, dangerous circumstance that you ever put yourself in. There is no place more devastating in all of creation than the very presence of the holy God. And so, how could that possibly be happening in our lives? Well, it says here in this passage that we do that when we have an encounter with Jesus. This passage is more than likely hearkening back to an experience that Moses has with God in Exodus 33 and 34. Some of your study Bibles will actually reference that—they’ll tell you to go back there.

Let me tell you about that story. In Exodus 33 Moses has come back right after the golden calf incident when he throws the Ten Commandments down and those rocks are shattered. He’s back negotiating for the health of Israel and he’s given the second set of Ten Commandments. And after that exchange Moses says this to God. They’re still close at this point. He says, “God, show me Your glory.” He’s begging for that experience. And Yahweh says to Him, “I will show my goodness to You. I will have my goodness pass before You. I will state my name in Your presence.” But He says, “You cannot see my face because no man can see my face and live.”

Exodus 34:6-7

And God passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished ...”

And so Yahweh, to accommodate Moses’ request, says that He’s got to put Moses in a safe place. There’s a crevasse in these two giant rocks and He puts Moses there. He says, “Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to walk by you and I’ll put my hand over your face. And I’ll say my name—Yahweh, Yahweh, good and loving God, compassionate”—those sorts of attributes—

“and then after I pass I’ll release that and you can see me from behind, but that’s as good as you’re ever going to get. That’s the only way you’re going to survive this event.”

Scholars will say that John is referencing that and saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of that longing. He’s the experience of the glory of God. The highest longing of our souls is to be in the presence of the holiness of God. We have that with Jesus. The yearning of our spirits is to see the face of God, and John says that Jesus is the face of God. That’s what the incarnation is about. It is the Word made flesh, and now we can behold its glory. And we can live and we can survive it.

Jesus Is God in All Fullness

And how does that happen? It says in verse 14, “... glory as of the only Son (begotten) from the Father.” He’s inserted the word “begotten” there to make sure you understand, that we know, that He’s not similar to God—He’s the absolute essence of the Father—same essence—all grace, all truth. They are equal. You can actually see that He’s equal with the Father, equal with the Son, because there’s an exchange that takes place in John chapter 5 where that’s put out there in front of men and women to understand the theology of that.

John 5:16-17

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute Him. ¹⁷ In His defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working.”

In John chapter 5, Jesus heals a man at the pool of Bethesda, and it’s on a Sabbath, and so Jesus is being persecuted for doing miracles on the Sabbath. And how does Jesus defend himself? Watch this. In verses 16 and 17 of chapter 5, it says, “Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute Him. In his defense Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working.’”

John 5:18

For this reason they tried all the more to kill Jesus; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

Because He's said His Father is God, this is highest of all treason. This is ultimate heresy. And if you don't believe me, look at how they respond and what they say. "For this reason they tried all the more to kill Jesus; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making himself equal with God." And so, they pick up stones to kill him—as they should have. Because if you say Yahweh is your Father, it means that you are equal with that Father, the begotten Son.

So, in Jesus we see the glory of God in Jesus doing only the things that God can do. Jesus creates and recreates. Only God can do that. Jesus will be the judge of all mankind. Only God does that. Jesus is going to forgive people. Only God can forgive. So, He does. Jesus will allow people to worship Him. You can only worship God, Yahweh, because He is.

God's Glory: Full of Grace and Truth

So, we see that Jesus is revealed as equal and of the same essence of God, but here's what we want to see as well. We see what God is like, we see the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and how they deal in our own lives. We might not be able to relate to His deity, but look how God addresses children in the life of Jesus, like very few people have in all of history. He exalts them. He gives them equal respect. He lifts them up.

Look how he deals with people who have handicaps. Look how Yahweh negotiates with people who are outsiders. Look how Yahweh even treats a soldier from an occupying army that is not Israeli. Look how God thinks about corrupt religious leaders that are teaching things about God that are just lies. That's what you learn about how Yahweh works in our midst, that Jesus is full of grace, and this is how Yahweh responds when He's full of grace.

One beautiful picture—this is Yahweh God and a former prostitute that has been touched by the forgiveness of Jesus. She crashes a religious type of meeting with all the right kind of people, including Jesus. She comes in and falls down at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ. She is

weeping with happiness. Her tears are washing the feet of Jesus. She dries those same feet with her hair because she has had dignity returned to her. She has even been granted honor from Yahweh, God in the flesh—Yahweh, full of grace.

Yahweh, full of truth—Jesus, full of truth. He fulfills the absolute obedience to the righteous declaration of the Father, the righteous will of the Father. And no one can find sin in the life of Jesus. When He's standing before Pilate, he says, "I find no basis to bring any charge against Him."

One of the men on the cross next to Jesus rebukes the other man and says, "This man is clearly innocent."

The Roman centurion that's overlooking and supervising the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—after Jesus has died and the ground shakes—the Roman guard (centurion) says, "Surely this is the righteous one. Surely this is the Son of God."

No one can find sin. Even death has no claim on Jesus because death could not find a sin that He would have to pay for. And so, death couldn't keep Him in the grave.

That is the fullness of the truth of Yahweh.

John 1:16

For from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

And all of that is so that in verse 16, "For from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace." The incarnation of God becoming flesh--His life, His death, His resurrection, the God-man—in that fullness we receive all of that fullness—grace upon grace. The moral perfections of Jesus Christ are given to us—grace as a gift. All other religions go right here at the incarnation to die, because they can't offer this—only Christianity. All of the fullness of Jesus Christ has been received. We have received it. It's perfect tense—it means it's done. It's complete. It's a perfect verb.

Ephesians 1:3

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Paul puts it like this—he’s more verbose: “Praise be to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing that is in Christ.”

Grace upon grace, gift upon gift. Every other religion says that if you do these activities you just might have an audience with the deity. No one knows this for sure. But Christianity, because He has done those things and you have received those as a gift, you’ve already been given that status. Now go live your life to the glory of God.

John 1:17

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

Verse 17 says, “For the law was given to us through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The law from Moses didn’t help us. The law is the problem, and Jesus is the solution. He’s the solution, and it says that’s because of grace. And I’ve said that grace means gift. If you earn a gift, it’s not a gift anymore, it’s a salary. So, this changes the way you see God. If you look at Yahweh like a schoolteacher or a coach or a boss, where you do a lot of good things and you get merits or grades or whatever, that might make you a better person. But that will not get you to endure being in the very presence of God. That requires a gift of righteousness that comes from Jesus’ death and resurrection. That’s a gift upon gift, grace upon grace. And you can only have that in Jesus—the very glory of God.

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side (bosom), He has made God known.

And we see the very glory of God in Jesus Christ. Look at verse 18: “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side”—at the Father's bosom—“Jesus has made God known.”

The incarnation—one pastor put it like this—the incarnation is like baby talk. It's God making himself knowable and accessible at the simplest levels, at the most endurable ways. Because we can't endure what Moses experienced. That would destroy us. But we get to see the face of Jesus and live, because God provided that.

What I like about this is, look at the picture John uses to help us understand the intimacy that Jesus has with the Father and that we have with Him. You have to know this about John—John's nickname in the gospels is “the one who Jesus loved.” At the Last Supper there must have been a pause in the action, but John is right next to Jesus and then just lays his head—a grown man lays his head on the chest of Jesus, on his Bosom. And that's how close John was to Jesus. John is trying to explain to us what that's like in the eternal state of the Trinity, and he says that Jesus is at the Father's bosom, a place of honor and favor and unity and safety. That's who Jesus is. That's the glory of God revealed. And we get to experience that.

The Incarnation Alters History

This incarnation of Jesus Christ has absolutely altered history. You can't look at human history the same. And what's interesting is that if you look at the life of Jesus, what do we know about Him, really? A thirty-three-year-old man, and we know pretty much about three years of His life in ministry and one day as a teenager. We don't have any of His writings. The only writing we know about that He did was in the dirt—it was brushed away. And of the three years of ministry—that's a thousand days—we don't have a thousand days of His teaching and life. If you total up the amount of hours in the Gospels it comes out to about fifty-two days total. And those aren't full days—those are snippets and short stories and a paragraph now and then. And yet ... and yet... He altered all of human history.

And why is that? Because He is the glory of Yahweh revealed. And that's all we need to know. And when we understand that incarnation—when that gets inside of us—when the beauty of the incarnation pierces our soul, it absolutely, completely changes the essence of our spirit. And then we want to change everything around us to experience something like what we had in an audience with the glory of God. In other words, we're changed, and then we start changing. He rules with truth and grace and we start trying to rule everything with truth and grace.

What happens when people come into an encounter with this incarnation? How many songs have been written about the glory of God in Jesus Christ? I mean, just think about that. Or the paintings throughout human history—are not the most beautiful ones those depicting Jesus doing something that an incarnate God would do? The libraries--the books that have been written about Jesus would fill libraries around the world. And the most marvelous buildings that will take your breath away are built to the glory of God because of Jesus Christ, Word/flesh.

The rebirth in a human being cause us to want to have rebirth in the human experience. Christians bring civilization to chaos, and have been doing this for two thousand years, in truth and in grace. If you look at the history of education, you're going to see a dominant influence by believers from preschool all the way to the highest levels of education, because of the glory revealed in Jesus Christ is what's motivating them.

In the context of bringing all grace to the world, look at how many hospitals there are in almost every continent in the world. All that's left is Antarctica that I know of. Counseling centers, relief organizations, all seem to have a cross on them in some way, because we want to bring all grace to the world because that doctrine has pierced our souls.

Christmas is about the Word becoming flesh, the glory of God that Moses could not endure, and that we experience because Yahweh disguised himself as a baby. And there are only three ways to rationally live your life in light of these truths. There are only three ways to respond to Christmas.

One—this is right from G. K. Chesterton—people have been using this for a hundred years almost. Jesus is a man that is going around telling people that He's the Creator, that He's the Judge, that He's the Forgiver; He allows people to worship Him because He says that He is Yahweh, the glory of God revealed.

And if He says He's that and He's not, He could be crazy, because you have to be crazy to say those sorts of things. And if He's crazy you just need to acknowledge that and disregard whatever else He says.

He might actually believe it and He's a liar. He's insanely power-driven, He's wicked and evil. And if that were true about Jesus, then run away. Don't have anything to do with Him. Whatever He says to do, do the opposite.

But what if He's not lying? What if He's not crazy? If He is who He says He is, then the only logical response is to take everything that we are, everything that we have, and run and throw it at His feet and say, "Command me. You are my King. I am Your servant. I will do whatever You want."

In other words, if the incarnation is true, it's all or nothing. There's not room for you to like—I like the teachings of Jesus—nope. You can't. *I'm a fan of Jesus. I'm going to pick and choose what I'm going to respond to.* It's not there for to be taken. If He's who He is, then we just say that every choice is *What do I do to make the very most out of trying to glorify God with my life?*

He's either a liar or He's evil, and so all my choices are about personal comfort. Or He's telling the truth—"and the Word became flesh"—and everything is a means to an end to glorify God. That's what Christmas means. Before you stop and pause and think about, *Oh, my, complete surrender*—could Yahweh have made himself any more approachable, any more understandable, any more vulnerable, than to come to us as a baby whose crib is a cow feeding trough. He's making it easy. He's a servant king. He's a good, good Father.

And so, on Christmas, this single word that changes the meaning of life, history, God, and our souls, is the word "incarnation." And it demands absolute surrender. So, this Christmas, what do say that we all surrender ... to Jesus, the Word that's flesh?

Would you join me in that prayer?

Oh, dear God, what this says about You and the extent of Your love, the limitless, boundary-less attempts that You have to make things right between man and Your holiness; that You would so love us that You would send Your only begotten Son, that whoever would believe in Him would have eternal life and would not perish. And while we can't completely grasp or begin to understand this incarnation, we know enough to know that You understand us, and we come to

You with our needs and our concerns and our cries. And we know enough to know that You should be worshiped and obeyed. And we come to You this Christmas with maybe a better understanding of who You are, so that we might understand who the Trinity is through the face of Jesus, the glory of God revealed.

And we celebrate that. We enjoy and marvel at Your beauty and love. Let that love transform us, that we might live our lives in full truth and in full grace, just like You. May we become like Christ in all of our life. We pray this in Jesus' name. And everybody said, Amen.