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Grace and Truth Came Through Jesus Christ
John 1:14-18

I don't know about you but I hate to break promises. I have been promising my eldest son that we'd go down to the soccer fields together one afternoon to practice and kick the ball around just the two of us for weeks, but as the day arrived for our appointment, my own week had snowballed and my time was gone.

This week I was finally able to keep my word. We went to the soccer fields and had a lot of fun. I came back exhausted. I still had a lot of work to do. But it felt good to keep my word to my son.

As we contemplate the meaning of the coming of Christ, it is important for you to know that what took place when Jesus was born was God the Father keeping His promises. Of course, unlike so many of us, unlike me, God did not get so busy that He was required by circumstance spiraling out of control to delay the fulfillment of His promise. Galatians 4:4 says, "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons." In keeping His promise by sending Jesus Christ, God acted "in the fullness of time," that is, at just the right time, at precisely the moment He had planned, in precisely the manner He intended. And yet for all that, there was a long gap between promises made and promises kept. So much so that many despaired before Christ's coming, just as many have despaired since, that God's promises are not really reliable.

As we turn to the last in our series of expositions of the opening chapter of John's gospel, the major motif, the thing that stands out is the idea of fulfillment, of promises kept. Let me show you what I mean.

First of all, look with me at verse 14. In one of the most profound statements to be found anywhere in the Bible, John writes: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

The Word of verse 1, the Word who was with God and who was God, by whom all things were made that have been made, who was with God in the beginning, this Word, God, the eternal Son, became flesh. As I said last Sabbath

morning as we sat around the Lord's Table together, John does not put this in quite the form we tend to adopt when speaking about the coming of Jesus. Customarily theologians will speak about the eternal God *taking* flesh or *assuming* flesh, and that is not an unhelpful way to speak. But that is not *John's* language. No, John is far more radical. He says the Word *became* flesh. He did not cease to be the Word, but the Word *became* flesh.

Flesh is the characteristic term the New Testament uses to describe human nature in all its weakness and frailty. The Word *became flesh*. He was utterly and fully identified with flesh. He is, even now at the right hand of the Father in heavenly glory the *en-fleshed God*. All that makes a human being human, sin excepting, became, in the moment Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin, the full possession of the eternal God. What a statement that is! In the flesh of the baby that Mary held in her arms was to be found the eternal God who made the universe and who upholds it by the word of His power.

In the run up to Christmas in 1993 the London newspaper *The Times* carried an article describing the coming of Christ in terms that capture John's point here brilliantly. The birth of Jesus is, *The Times* declared, "the shocking centre of Christian faith, which dares to claim that in the fragility and contingency of a single human life the Creator knew His creation from the inside." (cited in Paul Beasley Murray, *Joy to the World*, 131) That's it exactly! What an audacious claim! God has come to know His creation from the inside. He became flesh and dwelt among us.

But I want you to notice especially what John says next about this astounding miracle of Incarnation. He says the Word became flesh *and dwelt among us*. Literally he says the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us. In the Old Testament the great paradigm of redemption from bondage, the great model of salvation, was the exodus, when God led Israel out of slavery into the wilderness and eventually into the Promised Land. In Exodus 25:8, having rescued Israel from slavery, God commanded them to "make a sanctuary for me, and *I will dwell among them*." This sanctuary was called a "tabernacle," and the Greek Old Testament, the version familiar to John and his readers, used the word John uses here to describe that dwelling place, that tabernacle. So, whereas in the Exodus, the great Old Covenant *model* of redemption, God dwelt in the midst of His people in

a Tabernacle, so now, in the New Covenant, in the great *fulfillment* of the Exodus model, in the *real* redemption of God's people from bondage to sin and death and hell, God has come to dwell among His people, not in a tabernacle made from animal hide, but in the flesh, in the humanity of Jesus Christ. In Jesus God has come to dwell among His people. A new Exodus, a full and true redemption from slavery, was taking place with the birth of this baby Boy to the Virgin Mary.

Now this idea of God dwelling in the midst of His people became a central motif in the Old Testament scriptures. There is a recognition that the dwelling of God among His people in the tabernacle of Exodus pointed to a fuller blessing still to come. The covenant promise God had made with Israel was that He would be a God to them and they would be His people. Leviticus 26:12 puts it like this, "***I will walk among you*** and be your God, and you shall be My people." Having God among them was integral to the covenant relationship. And so the prophets speak again and again about the day when that promise will be fulfilled and God will come to reside in the fullest sense among His people.

Isaiah 7:14 speaks about the coming of one who would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us." Zechariah 2:10 says, "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming ***and I will dwell in your midst,***" says the LORD."

And at the other end of the Bible, and speaking of the very end of history, the book of Revelation, in chapter 21:3, once again picks up that covenantal language: "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God.'" When John sees a vision of heaven, he sees it in terms of God ***dwelling with us and bringing His covenant promises to ultimate and complete fulfillment.***

And standing in the center of those two poles—Old Testament promise looking forward to the coming day and the final fulfillment in the New Heavens and the New Earth at the end of history, standing as the axis and pivot on which the entire drama of promise and fulfillment turns, is John 1:14. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Standing at hinge of salvation history is the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Him God comes to dwell. Because of Him the promises are kept. Because of Him Revelation 21 is not just a possibility, nor is it simply an aspiration, much less a hoped for but uncertain future, it is the guaranteed and certain destiny of all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this theme of fulfillment, of promises kept, is not confined to verse 14. Verse **14** says Jesus fulfills the Exodus symbol of rescue from slavery and of God “tabernacling” among His people. Verse **15**, however, tells us that Jesus came and fulfilled the preaching of John the Baptist. “John bore witness of Him and cried out saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, <He who comes after me is preferred before me, because He was before me.>’” In verse 14 we have the ancient covenant promise fulfilled. In verse 15 we have the contemporary witness fulfilled.

And then look down at verse 17, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Whereas through Moses God communicated His *moral* law to Israel, with all its demands and condemning power, so that overlaying the covenant promise of redemption made to Abraham was another layer of legal obligation, exposing Israel’s sin and demonstrating their need of a savior, offering blessing in the land for obedience and cursing for disobedience; whereas through Moses God gave His *ceremonial* law to Israel, with its priesthood and temple and sacrifices and all its complex rituals that symbolically pointed to the need for blood atonement and a substitute to bear the wrath of God; whereas through Moses God gave His *civil* law to Israel with its detailed case law and prescriptions covering every aspect of the civic life of Israel in their land, teaching them that they were a people set apart to God because of His redemption of them; whereas God had done all this in His law given to them through Moses, *so now*, instead of the condemning power of the *moral* law, *grace and truth*, pardoning and justifying sinners, through the Lord Jesus Christ has come. Instead of the typology and symbolism of the *ceremonial* law, *grace and truth* flow from the atoning blood of Christ on the cross as our great high priest gives Himself for sinners. Instead of *civil sanctions for a national Israel*, come *grace and truth* flowing from Jesus Christ sanctifying a people for Himself from every tribe and language and nation.

You see the great theme here of fulfillment? There is the fulfillment of the covenant promise that God would dwell in the midst of His people and take them for His own, verse 14. There is the fulfillment of the legal demands given to Israel through Moses, all of which pointed to, and prepared for, and obviated the need for Jesus Christ, verse 17. There is the fulfillment of the promise of a coming Messiah in the preaching of John the Baptist, verse 15. A major theme of John 1:14-18 is the theme of *fulfillment*. John wants you to understand that *God keeps His promises*. In Christ God was delivering on a promise He had made and renewed and ratified and pictured in symbols and dramatized in the tabernacle and explained in sacrifices and underscored the need for in law. In Jesus that promise was kept.

Well, so what? There are three implications spelled out for us in this passage arising from the fulfillment of the covenant promise in Jesus Christ. The first is a general observation and it is this: if all the covenant promises pointed forward to and looked for the coming of Christ, and they found their fulfillment that first Christmas when Christ was born in the stable, if *that is true* then there is, and has only ever been, *one way of salvation*. God does not save Israel by works and the church by grace. No, the law and the sacrifices and the priests and the temple all were given to prepare Israel for and point them to and teach them to trust in *Christ*. The Bible is a single unified whole. The coming of Christ, the virgin birth, means the Bible has *one message and one theme*. It sings on every page to the same melody line. These are they, Jesus said to the Pharisees who were searching the Old Testament scriptures, *these are they which speak of Me*. The whole Bible shouts about salvation by faith alone in *Jesus Christ alone*.

The strongest argument for the unity and coherence of the whole Bible is the coming of Jesus Christ. You can point to the Old Testament and sum it up, in the words of Mark Dever, "*Promises made*," and then point to the coming of Christ in the New Testament and say, "*Promises kept*," which means, of course, that you can *trust* the word of God, and the promises of God. It means you can trust *God*.

The coming of Christ is, if you like, a cosmic laboratory experiment in which God has proven the reliability of His own character for all who care to examine the data. Which means for some of us, when Jesus says "do not worry

about what you will eat or what you will wear... seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well,” *we have a basis outside of our own complex and trying circumstances for trusting God and taking Him at His word.* We can point to the fulfillment of ancient promises, we can point to the whole panorama of God’s saving plan, sweeping across the ages, and then turn to the details of our own lives with confidence that the God of covenant faithfulness, whose Word never fails, can be utterly trusted in our own case, too. *Fight worry by faith in the promises, and bolster faith in the promises by remembering that Christ was born of Mary and the promises were fulfilled.*

The second implication arising from this theme of fulfillment can be found in verse 14 and verse 18. Ask *John* the so what question. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Well, so what, John?

What is his answer? Look at the text. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us *and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.*”

“Beholding the glory” may not strike you as terribly impressive until you see what John is really telling us. Verse 18 explains the point, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” Now while there is absolutely no dispute among scholars over the *meaning* of this verse, there is a good deal of discussion about some of the ancient manuscripts which have slightly different versions of it. One textual tradition is reflected in our translation, the New King James Version, and reads: “the only begotten Son...” has declared God to us. But the consensus of scholarly opinion prefers another, older version. This version is even more striking. It reads, “The only begotten *God*, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

The meaning in either case is the same—Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, He is very God of very God, begotten not made of one substance with the Father. *That* is the one who took flesh and dwelt among us. But the implications of that, according to John, are that, because God became man in Christ, the invisible God has been declared to us. John has *seen His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father.*

No one has seen God at any time. But the only begotten God who in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. That word “declared” – He has declared him- is as we’ve seen before the word *evxhgh, sato*, (*exegesato*) from which we get our word “exegesis.” To exegete a text is to explain it by unpacking the meaning of the words. Jesus, John is saying, is the exegesis of God. He unpacks God for us. His glory is revealed to us in Him. You cannot otherwise see God. But in Christ God is available to us.

Because of the baby born in Bethlehem, ordinary people, sinners trusting in Christ, you and I—we can know and access and commune with God, really and personally and truly, in the Lord Jesus. If you would know God, *you must go to Christ*. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. God is unveiled to sinners *only in Jesus Christ*. Looking at *Jesus* we see *God*.

And finally the third great implication that flows from this theme of fulfillment really provides the means by which we are able to know God in Christ at all. It is this great note of grace that sounds throughout the passage. Alongside the theme of fulfillment and the theme of revelation is the theme of grace.

Those three themes all come together, of course, in verse 14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” There is *fulfillment*. “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the father.” There is *revelation*. “Full of grace and truth.” There is *grace*. Then the grace notes in the passage sound again in verse 17, paired this time only with the note of fulfillment. “The law came by Moses; *grace and truth* came by Jesus Christ.”

And the theme of grace sounds again, singly this time, in verse 16, “And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” That word “for” there (grace *for* grace) is the Greek particle *anti*-which indicates something replacing something else. John is saying that we have received grace *in place of grace in place of grace in place of still more grace*. Grace flows in an unending abundance from the Lord Jesus Christ, so that for every circumstance and every context, for every need and every fresh challenge, for the details of your sin and the weakness

of your flesh, for the frailties of your body and the limitations of your understanding, for the all the peculiarities of your own situation, and the great universal needs that perennially plague the human heart, there is nor can be any lack of grace in Jesus Christ. “My God,” Paul can say as confidently as John, “will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory *in Christ Jesus.*” Philippians 4:19: Jesus is a repository and store house of grace available for sinners. Faith is the key that unlocks that great treasury. Go to Christ and find grace in place of grace in place of grace, grace abounding even to the chief of sinners.

That is what we need this Christmas most urgently, you know. It’s not more *stuff*. It’s *grace*. Grace simply means the favor and blessing of God, addressing with the deepest problem of our nature: *our sin*. That grace is ours through Jesus Christ by whose cross such grace was purchased. Instead of wrath, grace is ours. Instead of the condemnation of the law, grace is ours. Instead of being shut out forever from the presence of God, beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is ours. How? By means of the Cross. Christ died that instead of wrath we might enjoy grace, and instead of the outer-darkness, we might receive the beatific vision.

What we really need this Christmas is not more stuff, is it? It’s not even the closeness and love of family, as important as that is. What we *really* need this Christmas is a faithful God, whose promises we can rely on. One who never fails and whose faithfulness knows no bounds. The coming of Christ is the proof that such a God is to be found. He can be found in the Baby of Bethlehem and on the Cross of Calvary. There the promises were kept, the heart of God was revealed, and grace upon grace upon grace for all the needs of our souls was purchased for rebel sinners.

Amen.