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John 1:14-18

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IN FLESH GLORY ALIGHTS

It was Christmas Eve in 1962 when I came to understand what I really wanted for Christmas. I was 11 years old, and we were celebrating our first Christmas in the new home my parents had recently purchased. It was perched on the top of a hill, with an incredible view overlooking the San Fernando Valley. Christmas Eve was a formal occasion at our home. Everyone got all dressed in their finest attire, the table was beautifully set, and we enjoyed a festive meal with close friends. But for me this was all just preparatory backdrop to the REAL DEAL—the presents. I could hardly contain myself, waiting for the adults to finish their dinner and conversations so we could get down to the business at hand. Every parent knows well a child's impatient cry, "Are you done yet?"

But that year everything changed. Just as I was about to exhaust my parents' patience, the doorbell rang. Opening the door, I discovered several wrapped gifts on the porch. Looking up, I saw a yellow pickup drive away, the 1956 yellow Ford pickup belonging to Bob Munson. Earlier that month, my mother had hired him to do some carpentry work in our new home. With a flattop haircut and sidewall sideburns, this 6' 3" chiseled male was the complete package of a boy's dream: a former football player, truck driver, cabinetmaker, fly fisherman and deer hunter all rolled into one. He had two daughters but no sons, and he invited me to be his "helper" for his work stay at our home. For two weeks I stuck to his side like glue, fetching his lumber, writing measurements, spilling his coffee and tripping over his tools. Each morning I would stare out our front window, waiting for his yellow pickup to come into view. The appearance of that truck was the signal that my world was about to be transformed, for when Bob Munson came into our home, my world got very, very large.

Staring into the stillness of that starry night, I couldn't believe that Bob, who had little money, would buy me gifts and then deliver them to my door on Christmas Eve. I discovered these were not ordinary gifts. They were not toys or games to entertain the rich kid from the other side of town. These were "man" gifts—real tools, tools that I would learn to use during the many hours I spent alongside Bob working in his garage.

That Christmas Eve I learned that the most valuable gift we can give another human being is "presence," not presents. It was the gift of this relationship that gave me the freedom to ask God to invade my world years before I ever heard that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." So what is it like to have God's presence dwell with us? How do you define "glory" housed in a body? How can you describe it without resorting to hyperbole or cliché?

I. Igniting and Transforming Israel's Hope (John 1:1-13)

A. Hope Ignited: A New Creation (John 1:1-5)

John's prologue to his gospel certainly gets us going in the right direction. Listening to Bernard Bell and John Hanneman expound on it, I became increasingly amazed by how remarkable it is not just for its thematic content, but the way the writer shapes his metaphors to affect the soul. In his message, "Hail the Gladdening Light," Bernard took us through the first five verses:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 ESV)

After centuries of gloom and darkness, exile and political oppression, Israel's hope of restoration was a dead dream. How do you ignite hope in a people who are hopeless? The prophets often couched God's future salvation for Israel in terms of the greatest event in her history, the Exodus. Those memories once ignited could bring hope in even the darkest situations. But John goes back even further, to the beginning of creation, to the time before time, so that we can begin to comprehend the magnitude of Christ's work. The Word that was in the beginning, through which all things were created, is now among us, bringing light and life to all who believe. With profound simplicity, clarity and brevity, John casts a vision of a new creation so charged with life that it triumphs effortlessly over the darkness.

B. Hope Solidified: A True Witness (John 1:6-8)

John Hanneman then expounded the second section (vv. 6-13). The opening verses (6-8) further strengthen Israel's hopes and dreams by inserting the testimony of John the Baptist, who bore faithful witness to the light:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. (John 1:6-8)

For 400 years, Israel lived with no prophetic word. Then suddenly John broke the silence, sent by God as Israel's last prophet to anoint her final King. Jesus told the disciples that John was Elijah, whom the prophet Malachi predicted would come and "restore all things" by leading his people to repentance (Mal 4:5-6; Matt 17:11-13). John proved faithful to his calling, bearing witness to the light, "that all might believe through him."

C. Hope Expanded: A Universal Reception (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Isaiah further fueled Israel's expectations by making use of creation metaphors to describe the impact of John's ministry:

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together." (Isaiah 40:3-5 TNIV)

These expansive images heightened Israel's expectation that a new and greater exodus was on the way, one that would birth a universal kingdom in which all nations would worship and serve Israel's king. These yearnings had been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that, when John "appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4), the whole Judean countryside flocked to him to be baptized, believing that their repentance would signal the dawn of a new age.

D. Hope Dashed: A Massive Rejection (John 1:9-11)

But just as John leads us to the very summit of hope, our dreams are dashed by the dismal and rude reception that the King actually received:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:9-11)

The Creator entered into the very world he made and no one even knew his name. He journeyed home to the family he had birthed, nurtured, strengthened and protected for centuries, but when he knocked on the door, it was slammed shut in his face. With agonizing pathos, our King is shut out in the cold, unwelcome, disowned and homeless. This new creation doesn't look very promising. But out of this dark and depressing beginning, John reshapes our expectations in paradoxically new ways.

E. Hope Resurrected: The Seeds of a New Family (John 1:12-13)

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Though most do not receive him, the few who do welcome him and place their complete trust in him are miraculously "born of God," with all the rights and privileges of full family members. In response to the rejection by his family, the Creator-King recreates God's family with a brand new DNA.

No longer are children related by blood, nor do they come into existence by means of sexual desire or family planning. Now every birth is an act of God, as miraculous as the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah—virtual life from the dead! In the unfathomable mystery of God, that which was a crushing disappointment is suddenly transformed into a marvel of divine sovereignty and power. The surpassing glory of the few far outweighs the rejection by the majority.

John understands the mystery of seeing. Logic or propositional truth will never enable a blind man to see beyond his three-dimensional universe. No, it takes a near-death experience. John's prologue is carefully designed to do just that. First, he raises our hopes out of the dust of death; then, like a bird set free, he allows us to soar skyward just long enough to experience a few moments of weightless wonder. Then suddenly we are hit with the gravity of a dysfunctional and abusive family, spinning us out of control, pulling us earthward. Approaching the ground at breakneck speed we lose consciousness, and with it every ounce of hope. But somehow we survive the crash.

As we climb out of the wreckage we discover that we are actually more than alive, for we've crashed on the plateau of *amazement*. We still live at the same address, are married to the same spouse and working at the same job, but everything is new and different. God faithfully fulfills his promises, but in ways we never could have conceived. The only thing left to do is dance the dance of joy, for we are a new creation!

II. Beholding His Glory (John 1:14-18)

Now that John has shattered our old ways of thinking we are prepared to enter into the mystery and wonder of what he is about to unveil. As John reiterates each of his themes they become intensely personal, beckoning us into the story to behold the glory that he and the other apostles experienced as they walked with Jesus.

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. (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.') And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:14-18)

A. Glory is not where you expect to find it

The essence of the term "glory" is weightiness, honor or dignity. Used with reference to God, it speaks of the radiant splendor of his presence with us.

Israel's memory of God's glory was forged by that devouring fire and thundering smoke bellowing out of Mt. Sinai, and then the pillar of fire and smoke that travelled with them in the wilderness and eventually filled the tabernacle. Glory is that fusion of God's power displayed in the beauty of his holiness.

Such power is indeed glorious. But John testifies that he beheld something greater. He states it in language that is shockingly unambiguous: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Eugene Peterson's translation captures its raw earthiness: "the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14 THE MESSAGE). He comments: "The same word that brought all creation into being is Jesus, who now brings a new creation into being." The One behind the universe, the one beyond our comprehension has come within reach of all human touch by becoming a baby. In this humble tent in Galilee, not Israel's temple in Jerusalem, God's presence will take up residence

and “dwell” during his ministry. Arthur W. Pink captures the greatness of such glory:

In His marvelous stoop we behold His glory. Greatness is never so glorious as when it takes the place of lowliness. Power is never so attractive as when it is placed at the disposal of others. Might is never so triumphant as when it sets aside its own prerogatives. Sovereignty is never so winsome as when it is seen in the place of service. And, may we not say it reverently, Deity had never appeared so glorious as when it hung upon a maiden’s breast!²

Pink goes on to say, “Three great ends were accomplished by God becoming incarnate, by the Word being made flesh. First, it was now possible for Him *to die*. Second, He can now be touched with the feeling of *our* infirmities. Third, he has left us an example, that we should follow *his* steps.”³

The incarnation is an incredible act by God, one that has tremendous implications for how we live. True spirituality is not found by escaping from this world, seeking ecstasy in lofty thoughts, unhindered by dysfunctional families, traffic, pollution and noise. Jesus was completely at home in the creation that he made. And as we follow him in the gospel story we discover that the manifestations of his “glory” occurred in the midst of ordinary life—at a wedding, inside Peter’s home, on a fisherman’s boat, and beside a well, just to name a few. On the other hand, the Essenes, who had sought God fervently in the isolation of the desert, never caught a glimpse of his glory.

The word to us is that we don’t have to escape our humdrum lives to experience his glory: it is right in front of us if we will but open our eyes to it.

B. Glory is not received in a flash

The paradoxes continue as John’s testimony follows immediately on the heels of “The Word became flesh.” Though Jesus was fully human, we must never forget that he remained fully God. John awards him the higher rank “because he was before me.” John is not speaking of his age (for Jesus was actually younger in years), but of his heavenly origin. In developing this theme, John’s gospel has the most prominent use in the New Testament of God’s personal name “I AM”. This name, which God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:14), had become so revered in Israel that in the post-exilic period, Jews did not pronounce it when reading the Scriptures. Instead they substituted the term *‘adonai* (Lord) or *hashem* (the Name) for the divine name I AM.

But while the Jews attempted to honor the name by restricting their pronunciation of it, the early Christians took just the opposite approach. They gloried in proclaiming the name, especially as it found new meaning in the person of Jesus. Seven times in John’s gospel, Jesus unashamedly applies it to himself, and adds a predicate to fill in the details of who he is and what he came to do (John 6:35; 9:5; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).

Did Moses give bread to Israel in the wilderness? Jesus gives the bread from heaven that gives eternal life. Was God in search of a new shepherd for Israel who would not exploit her but sacrifice his life to feed the flock (Ezek 34)? Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Was Israel’s priesthood and sacrificial system the way to God found in the Torah? Jesus opens up

a new and better way. Unlike the law, which brought death, Jesus by his death gives all immediate access to God, and then gives the Spirit that brings life. He is “the way, the truth and the life.” Did Moses come to Egypt with ten plagues of death, culminating in the death of the first-born? Jesus comes to Israel with seven signs of life. Instead of turning water (the Nile) into blood, he turns water into new wine. And instead of killing the first born, he raises the first born from the dead. He is the resurrection and the life. Was Israel once a choice vineyard that had become fruitless, producing only worthless grapes (Isaiah 5:1-7)? Jesus is the true vine that gives abundant fruit to all who abide in him.

God’s name, that elusive “I will be, what I will be,” continues to become more personal, inviting and exciting in the person of Jesus. In chapter 8, he completely removes the veil when he says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58). We may miss the implication of that statement, but the Jews who heard him did not: they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Jesus is “very God *and* very man.” What is so amazing about all this is that the revelation of the name did not occur in a burning bush or with the fiery thunder of Sinai. No, it took place in the most ordinary of circumstances—through leisurely and intimate conversations. Jesus’ way with people speaks volumes to our culture that seeks glory on the “fast track.” It takes leisure time to know God, because God is a person. I can’t tell you how many hours I spent working alongside Bob Munson in his garage, but the result of those endless hours was that I got to know the man. To this day I can still remember almost every conversation we had.

Do you want to see God’s glory? First of all, it’s not where you’d expect to find it. And secondly, if you want to find it, you’ll need to invest time—extensive time, leisure time, conversational time.

C. How will you know if you find it?

After the incident of the golden calf, Moses felt uncertain that God’s presence would continue to accompany his people into the land. God tried to assure him of his commitment, but to no avail. Unconvinced, Moses continues to negotiate until he finally has enough courage to put the ultimate card on the table. He asks God, “Please show me your glory.” God responded that no man is able to see his face and live. But he offers to place Moses in the cleft of the rock and “pass by” him while he covers him with his hand. After he has “passed by,” God will take his hand away and Moses will see his back. Riveted in suspense, we can hardly wait to discover what Moses will “see.”

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod 34:5-7)

After Moses survived the terrible, blazing, all consuming light “passing by”⁴ him, we are not told what he saw, but what he unmistakably heard: “The Lord, the Lord... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” Make no mistake; God is just, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the third and fourth generation. But when it comes to his loyal love and faithfulness to his covenant, his grace is unlimited—to the thousands!

Loyal-love (the Hebrew term is *hesed*) is at the very center of God’s glory. And John says that with the coming of Christ, they beheld that glory, full of “grace and truth” (the equivalent to the Hebrew expression “steadfast love and faithfulness”). What Moses was privileged to catch a glimpse of, Jesus has fully made known (*exegeted*), for he is the “only-begotten” Son who was with the Father from eternity and eternally lives in the “bosom” of the Father.

Follow Jesus in the gospel and this is the glory that surprises everywhere he goes. Consider how amazed the disciples must have been when at Jacob’s well they witnessed his loving words wash over an abused Samaritan woman who had burned through five marriages. In but one conversation the new and greater Jacob transforms Samaria’s worn-out hag into the new Rachel, who gives birth to scores of spiritual children overnight (John 4:39). Was it for this glory that Isaiah sang out?

**“Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child;
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous
Than the sons of the married woman,” says the LORD. (Isa 54:1)**

Yes, this is true glory: glory where we least expect it, glory revealed in natural conversations, and glory that sheds the love of God in our hearts. But we must ask, “What is the price for such glory?”

D. Glory at what price?

The last conversation Jesus has regarding his glory is with his Father as he contemplates the cross. “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (17:1). “Glory” frames and pervades the prayer. Jesus seeks it not just for himself, but also for his Father and his disciples. This is the glory that comes through death, one that radically redefines every concept we had of glory.

Jesus takes the brightest word in our vocabularies and plunges it into the darkest pit of experience—violent and excruciating death. Everything we ever associate with glory has to be recast: We have entered into mystery.⁵

This is what John means when he says, “We beheld his glory.”

What would you like for Christmas?

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 87. I have leaned heavily on Peterson’s wonderful insights in pgs. 86-107.

² Arthur W. Pink, “Exposition of the Gospel of God, Christ the Word Incarnate, John 1:14-18,” www.pbministries.org/books/pink/John/john_03.htm.

³ Pink, “Christ the Word Incarnate,” www.pbministries.org/books/pink/John/john_03.htm.

⁴ “passing by”—Mark 6:48 says that “He came to them, walking on the sea; and he intended to pass by them.” Robert Gundry observes that this verb “‘passing by’ indicates a parade of divinity such as characterized Old Testament theophanies (Exod. 33:19, 22; 34:5-6; 1 Kgs 19, 2 Kgs 23:3,4).” After Jesus gets in the boat he says, “Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50). The simple I AM (the revelation of the divine name) puts everything to rest (Isa 43:16).

⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 102.