



WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US?

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John 1:6-18

Second Message

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“What if God was one of us?” is the title of a popular song written by Joan Osborne. The grammar is not good, and I am not particularly keen on all the lyrics, but some lines are thought provoking:

If God had a name, what would it be
And would you call it to His face
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question

If God had a face, what would it look like
And would you want to see
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints
And all the Prophets

What if God was one of us? If John were writing his gospel for today’s generation, perhaps this is how he would have introduced it. Well, God did become one of us. John, the preacher and poet, makes that clear in the introduction to his gospel: The Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God, the Word that was God became flesh and dwelt among us.

This morning we continue our study of John’s prologue (verses 1-18), which introduces the themes to this gospel. In our last study we looked at four themes: the identity of Jesus, creation, life, and light. Today we will focus on four additional themes in the introduction, those of witness, rejection of the light, divine sonship, and incarnation.

There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’” (John 1:6-8, 15, NASB)

Here the writer introduces John the Baptist. Verse one introduced a heavenly voice, the angel’s voice, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Here in these verses we hear an earthly voice: “There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness.” The author moves from the abstract to the historical.

John the Baptist is a very significant figure. All four gospels include his testimony and ministry. He is such a

well-known figure that John does not even include the label “the Baptist.” Verse 6 sounds like the beginning of an Old Testament book: “There came a man sent from God.” The O.T. has many references about people being sent from God. Moses was sent, the prophets were sent, even Jesus was sent (John 3:17). John doesn’t go to Rome to bear witness. He is found in the story of Israel, because Israel’s story involves the story of prophets, men and women sent from God.

This mention of John the Baptist introduces an important theme in John: that of testimony or witness to the light. Used as both a noun and a verb, this word occurs 47 times in the account. This is familiar courtroom language. John’s witness will be detailed in the story, but so will the witness of several others. We will hear the witness of the Samaritan woman (4:39) and the beloved disciple, the author of this account (19:35; 21:24). The works of Jesus (5:36; 10:25) and the Old Testament bear witness (5:39-40). The Father is a witness (5:32, 37; 8:18) as well as Jesus himself (18:37). We have the witness of the Holy Spirit and the apostles (15:26-27). John the Baptist’s witness centers on the supremacy of Jesus in time and importance. We have these so that we might believe.

If we are believers in Jesus, our witness is the earthly voice of the gospel. Our lives are living testimony that speak of the supremacy of Jesus: He existed before us, and he has a higher rank than any of us. We are sent into our jobs, our neighborhoods and our schools to be witnesses. This is why it is so important to know how our story connects to the story of redemption. We don’t have to be theologians. We simply are called to give an account. We never stand in the spotlight. Our story is not for ourselves but for Jesus. The goal is that all might believe and have life.

The second theme is rejection of the light.

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. (1:9-11)

John the Baptist bore witness concerning the light, but he was not the true light. False lights shining in the world attract people’s attention—everything from spiritualism to materialism. And there are lesser lights like John the Baptist and Moses that reflect the true light. These are earlier, provisional, or anticipatory lights in

the history of God's self-disclosure. Jesus is the ultimate light, the ultimate self-disclosure of God to man.

"World" is another important word, one with mostly negative connotations, in John's story. The world is not speaking of the universe, but the created order, especially human beings and human affairs that are in rebellion against their Maker (1:10; 7:7; 14:17, 22, 27, 30; 15:18-19; 16:8, 20, 33; 17:6, 9, 14). The fact that light came into the world means that it does not belong to the world, but is outside of it (8:23; 18:36). The world is characterized by darkness. However, the fact that the world was made through Jesus means that evil does not exist independent of the universe which God created.

John says that God loves the world, but that is not an endorsement of the world, it is a testimony to the character of God. God's love is to be admired not because the world is so big but because it is so bad. If Jesus is the Savior of the world (4:42), that says a great deal about Jesus, but nothing positive about the world. In fact, the world in John's usage comprises no believers at all. Those who come to faith are no longer of this world; they have been chosen out of it (15:19).

The light came into the world to bring illumination to every man. This little phrase stirs up quite a discussion. Enlighten means to "to shed light upon, to make visible, to bring to light." John is talking about the mystery of human choice. The light reveals the darkness of the world to every man. Both salvation and judgment are made visible, and every person either accepts or rejects the light. The true light comes into the world, it shines on every man, and it divides the human race. He came to the world and the world did not know him. He came to his own, meaning either his own creation, i.e. his own home or his own people, or Israel, his own people (probably both are true), and his own did not receive him. Here we see the theme of rejection which underscores the entire gospel story.

The fact that there is light and darkness means that we have a choice. The world lives in darkness and cannot see. When people get a glimpse of the light they walk away because they love the darkness more than the light (3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35-40, 46). Sometimes Christians too love the darkness. In John's story, many people, primarily religious people, the Jews, will reject Jesus. God's biggest problem in the O.T. was his people. And God's biggest problem today is still his own people, the church. Getting the church to walk in the light, to believe as an ongoing choice, is no easy matter.

The third theme is acceptance and sonship.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (1:12-13)

The idea of sonship is the center of the prologue. Many people reject Jesus, but some will receive him.

Even if God's own people do not accept him, there will be a believing remnant. This remnant will have the right of access, the right to become the covenant people of God, the right to become God's children.

Paul uses the word "son" to describe the relationship that believers have with God. However, John reserves that term for Jesus and uses the word "children" instead. Jesus is a son in a sense that we will never be. But the concept is the same for both Paul and John. Sonship or becoming a child of God is at the heart of the whole thing. John will develop this theme throughout his story to convey what it means to be the true children of Abraham (8:39) and the true family of God (11:52).

Becoming a child or a son of God has nothing to do with human activity. This birth is not of blood (plural), or the will of flesh, or the will of man. Humanly speaking, this is impossible. Becoming a child of God is the work of a new creation. It is Spirit, not flesh. New birth is strictly an act of God. Being born into the family of God is quite different from being born into a human family. Heritage and race, even the Jewish race, are irrelevant to spiritual birth. Jesus will talk about this at length with Nicodemus in chapter 3.

What does it mean to become a child of God? First, it means we have a home. This is one of our greatest longings. We leave home looking for home. We stay home and pretend it's home. We work hard to make ourselves a home. We seek to find a place and a family where we belong, where we can be known, where we can experience joy. At some point, most of us feel lost, lonely and homeless. When we become a son or daughter of God, we have a home.

Being a son of God is more than a label. It has to do with our nature, our character. As a son I bear the image of my father, both physically and spiritually. (As I grow older, I am amazed at how much I am beginning to look like my father and my oldest brother.) John's question is, Do we look like a son of God or not? Is this our identity? Is this what we believe? No matter what life looks like, do we continue to reflect light and life, grace and truth? The Jews thought God was their father, but Jesus said their father was the devil, because that was the character they displayed. Physical descent from Abraham is of no significance if one does not reproduce Abraham's faith.

The final theme is the incarnation.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (1:14)

A. The incarnation means that God became a man

The incarnation means several things. First, it means that God became a man. The word comes from the Latin. It is made up of the two words "in" and *caro*, meaning flesh. Incarnation means "being in flesh." The Word, who was both with God and who was God, became flesh. He took on our full humanity, save only our

sin. God “made himself known at last in a real historical human person: when ‘the Word became flesh,’ God became man.”¹

B. The incarnation means God’s presence and glory among his people

Jesus “dwelt among us.” He pitched his tabernacle, or lived in his tent among us. This recalls the tabernacle where God met with Israel before the temple was built, and the tent of meeting, where God “used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks with his friend” (Exod 33:11). “Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:9-11).

John is making a clear link to Exodus 33 and 34. The consonants of the Greek word “dwelt” (1:14) are the same as the Hebrew word *shekinah*, which denotes the presence and glory of God. The “tent of meeting” was where God dwelt with his people and where his glory was seen (Exod 40:34-38). The same glory had filled the temple of Solomon (1 Kgs 8:10-11). Ezekiel had seen the glory depart from the Temple (Ezek 11:22-23). After Judah returned from exile, they rebuilt the temple, but God’s glory did not return. However, Israel lived in hope and expectation of the promise of Zechariah: “‘I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,’ declares the LORD” (Zech 2:10).

In the O.T., God dwelt with his people and God’s people would see his glory, which was his presence. Now John is saying that God’s glory has returned in the person of Jesus. Glory is a key word in John’s gospel. In Jesus, God is present once again among his people. In Jesus, there is a new exodus. There is exodus imagery all throughout John’s gospel. And now the place where we encounter the presence of God is the church. God dwells with his people through the Spirit. When two or three gather in his name, God’s presence is there. God “moved into the neighborhood,” to use Peterson’s phrase.

Isn’t this what we want, the presence of God? We can argue theology, we can argue the existence of God, but we want God’s presence in our lives. We want to know that God is with us. Frederick Buechner has a great word for us here:

We all want to be certain, we all want proof, but the kind of proof that we tend to want – scientifically or philosophically demonstrable proof that would silence all doubts once and for all – would not in the long run, I think, answer the fearful depths of our need at all. For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going,

but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages about himself in the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God’s existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God’s presence. That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get.²

When we are diagnosed with cancer we don’t want to be able to prove God’s existence, we want him near. When we lose a loved one we want God to be with us. In the midst of our confusion, struggles and questions, the thing that matters most to us is that we are not alone. And when we gather as a church family, the most important thing is to sense God’s presence with us. That is when we worship.

God’s glory is his presence, but it is also something else. When Moses asked God to show him his glory in Exodus, God responded by saying: “And He said, ‘I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion’” (Exod 33:19). Moses was then instructed to make two stone tablets, like the first ones that had been destroyed, and to ascend the mountain to meet the Lord: “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth’” (Exod 34:5-6).

God’s glory is supremely his goodness, and the nature of his goodness is lovingkindness and truth, i.e. grace and truth. God’s glory is filled with grace and truth. It is the expression of his compassion and mercy, his faithfulness to his covenant people. John will talk about Jesus and how the grace and truth of God is expressed through him, God’s only begotten Son. Perhaps grace and truth are life and light seen from the point of view of the believer. The incarnation means that God’s presence, his glory and his goodness is real and visible with his people.

C. The incarnation means that grace replaces law

For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (1:16-17)

There are several interpretations for what John means by the words “grace upon grace.” I take it to mean that there is grace that is instead of, or replaces, a former grace. The law was an expression of God’s grace to his people. However, that earlier display of grace is superseded by the grace and truth realized through Jesus

Christ. Jesus is the full expression of God's grace. John's story will include a great deal of discussion about Moses and the law. Jesus will say that he is the new Moses. We cannot live under both law and grace, Moses and Jesus. We have to make a choice.

D. The incarnation means that we can see the Father

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (1:18)

Up until this point in history, no one could look at the face of God and live, not even Moses. Again, this takes us to the exodus story, where God said to Moses: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Then the LORD said, 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen'" (Exod 33:20-23).

Moses saw the afterglow of the divine glory; Isaiah reacted in horror upon seeing the hem of God's garment (Isa 6:5). The O.T. assumption is that God cannot be seen or, more precisely, that for a sinful human being to see him would result in death. But now God can be seen in the Son. The unique, special, one and only Son of God has broken the barrier. He is in the bosom of the Father. They are intimate with one another. Verse 18 brackets nicely with verse 1 to close out the prologue. The Word is the Son who was "with God" (1:10) and "in the bosom of the Father" (1:18). Only God can ex-

plain God. That is what John is saying. Jesus, the God man, now explains the Father. He "exegetes" or narrates God. If we want to see God, we can look at Jesus. Jesus does everything that the Father does.

What does all this mean for us? God became flesh to reveal the glory and the grace of God, a greater grace than had ever been known. But it means that God must also become flesh in us. The incarnation has to be fleshed out in each of us personally. It has to be real. In Jesus we have seen that there is a new beginning, a new creation, a new exodus, a new Moses. But all that has to work itself out in our lives. John will say that we won't get it by being a Nicodemus. We get it by being a woman at the well or a prostitute caught in adultery or a blind man who receives sight. We can never have the new without throwing out the old. We can't just "play" church and think we know all the answers. If we truly want the presence of God we have to allow ourselves to be broken and to bleed. That is why John continues to ask over and over again, Do you want life? Do you want grace? Do you want God's presence? Do you believe?

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 40.

2. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 47.

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