

Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ

Lesson 4: Incarnation

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Phillipians 2: 5-11

People of God, so many people walk around imagining that they are the hero of a story of their own composing. We are encouraged to unrestrainedly pursue our passions and avoid anyone who ‘brings us down’. “You do you” we are told with the implied notion that ‘us doing us’ is the ultimate attainment. Not only does this modern concept of ourselves as the climax of the story reveal an underlying delusion about the nature of reality, it is also such a very feeble foundation to build a worthwhile life upon. We must tenaciously fight this tendency to cast ourselves in the lead role. We must fervently resist evaluating potentialities based on their merits in contributing to a story of our devising. We must live by faith in someone beyond ourselves.

A deep and meditative look at the Incarnation will help us. It will show us that the story we’re caught up in is not so small as to be centered on us. We have been expanding our view of the nature of existence by laying hold of the pre-existence of the Son of God. By seeing how the revelation of the Messiah progressively unfolded throughout centuries, we start to grasp that we’ve been inserted into a mega-story that is expanding across all the generations of the earth. Contemplating the nature of the true hero of the story gives us grander categories and principles by which to live. It helps us remove ourselves from the center of the stage and, by doing so, sets us free to best play our unique part. “Seek ye first, the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)

As we move from the preparatory work that was done to pave the way for the appearing of Christ, we must remind ourselves that this is not some neat and tidy children’s story. This is not an ethereal idea of some vague ‘god’ whispering pithy sayings of positivity and self-help as he floats through an undemanding existence. This story starts in ages past and it contains betrayal, a deadly serpent, faithlessness, infanticide and lots of bloodshed. It also contains a loving relationship between a father and a son, conquest, perseverance under injustice, rescue of the weak and, ultimately, vindication. God orchestrates the best story and the best stories involve trouble, uncertainty, tension, and redemption.

It all begins in the halls of eternity (Does eternity have halls?). The counsel of the wise, merciful, just, and brave eternal Persons looked down through the time that they were going to initiate and ordained events that had not yet been. They established promises to undergird the existence they were beginning and they planned the actions they would take to hold it all together. They lovingly considered each other's roles and fully embraced them even though it could be seen that adhering to the attributes of their Person would mean great difficulty and cost to themselves. Their collective power and insight was to be played out in time and space in order to display the grandeur of the eternal Persons. Righteousness, love, and faithfulness would be displayed but, in order to do that, hatred, evil, selfishness, and betrayal would be needed to provide juxtaposition. The shadow proves the sunlight.

Out of this glorious relationship and counsel, there was a desire to share that glory by initiating more relationships with beings who were dependent on the One True Source of all their content. For these beings to fully grasp the depths of the nature of love, they would need to be lost from it and be dependent on the mercy of their Maker. Love would be brighter when it came as rescue for those who broke the bonds of love. It would root love down so deep that there would be a death of the old desire which led them astray in the beginning and a reconstitution of the original existence into an even more glorious form than was previously experienced.

From eternity past, salvation flowed forth. It would be horrific and costly because the very definition of love means that breaking it results in horror and restoring it costs much. The original model of love and relationship would need to be torn in order to restore the created enactment of love and relationship. The joy that reveled in the first sunshine, the wisdom that worked together to form the systems of life, and the original love that is so pure (Prov. 8:22-31) would be separated...for a time. The Father and Son knew the cost would be severe but, as love itself, the Son stepped forth and said, "Send me."

Willingly obedient in the pursuit of honor, glory, and praise to the Most Glorious One and faithful in his mission to manifest this glory to the ones who desperately needed to behold it, the Son committed to the Father's plan and would not look back. His face was set. He would leave the privilege and delight of being in the Father's presence and venture forth to take on the weakness and dependent nature of the creatures. He would demonstrate and fulfill the original design of those creatures. He would display the power of God over the created realm, including the demons that plague the ones He loves. Ultimately, as the One Perfect Sacrifice, He displayed the costs of betrayal while illuminating how love is the principle which underlies and defines the idea of sacrifice.

Selfishness at the beginning had broken the core relationship which fueled all peace and harmony throughout the cosmos so a price needed to be paid. Pursuing a degraded view of self-fulfillment, the original man willingly chose slavery instead of living in the freedom of sonship so the New Man had to go into the stronghold of

oppression with a worthy payment to absolve the debt built up by the disloyal creatures. The blood of hundreds of thousands of firstborn calves, goats, lambs, and other animals was not a sufficient payment, but a willing sacrifice of a life indestructible motivated by love broke the chains (Heb. 9:11-15; Heb. 7:16). Selfish man had sought release from creatureliness and fell far below the original design. Thus, true love had to come to show that true freedom is displayed by giving yourself away for the good of others, even (especially?) the good of those who hate you. That freely given love then changes hate and it becomes possible for enemies to become friends (Rom. 5:6-11).

Like all created beings, all we can do is re-configure pre-existing created things. We do nothing *ex nihilo*. This is still a noble pursuit, this re-arranging of existing matter, but it's a whole different game than what we see when we ponder the power of conjuring and bringing forth from nothing as was done by the Alpha at the beginning of time.

Other than matter, God also created and initiated time. The One who existed outside of time then willingly stepped into it and subjected himself to its ravages. This is the great role reversal. This is an ineffable shifting of paradigms and it devastates our fleshly notions of human and divine interactions. At the beginning, the couple in the garden could not resist the temptation to think that "you will be like God." (Gen. 3:5). In greed and lust for power they leapt off the cliff as they thought they were ascending to divinity. And throughout time, descendents of this first couple have been grasping at the idea that humans can up their status to that of the Creator. Soothsayers, gnostics, and false prophets nurture this foolish thought by teaching us to detach from materiality and 'look within' to find the godliness that they say is inherent in all of us. Selfishly and foolishly we want gods in our own image and we want them to be us.

And what does the True God do in response? He reveals Himself as the Descending One. As we're clambering to elevate our own status, He draws near to rebellious creatures, clothes us, and spares us the death we deserve. Instead of demanding that we ascend, He reveals to us that His plan is justification through a purchase that comes completely at a cost to Himself. While man devises self-righteousness in our own minds, God willingly takes on the nature of a creature to demonstrate His compassion and to walk the road that we could not walk. God becomes man.

Having conjured up an idea of God that is after our own fallen notions, even when He comes in service and in righteousness, we fail to recognize Him. Or worse, we consciously reject the perfect manifestation of God's character standing before us. We, in our flesh, want a dramatic, flashy ruler. A violent and overtly aggressive god is what we envision. Because we ourselves are vain, pompous, and arrogant, this is what we imagine for a desirable king.

So when the Son comes from the Father's side, we mock, jeer, reject, doubt, misunderstand, and kill. The image of God made clear is offensive to our fallen sensibilities. A God who serves His creatures? That seems weak. A God who is physical and engages with the material world instead of floating serenely above it all? Doesn't He know how dirty and trying it is to be in this world? A God who suffers? We respond with "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" (Luke 23:35)...then we'll believe.

But He doesn't save himself. He goes all the way and gives all away. This is true godliness. This is the true nature of the eternal God and the glory of it is startling when we are given eyes to see.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit looked down through time and saw the trouble that would befall man...and they felt mercy. They saw us scoffing and raising our fists and propping ourselves over one another and over Them...and they had pity. The creatures that were perfectly "very good" (Gen. 1:31) when inaugurated into the cosmos had fallen so far, but God remembered and loved us. In His love, He set in motion the plan to bring us back out of our stupor and show us the Truth in a way that far surpasses what we could have seen without the Fall. This is the majestic mystery of '*felix culpa*', the fortunate fall. Self sacrifice motivated by love...what is greater than this?

So the story played out in time and space (which was written before time and space existed) is now reaching the high point. This is what all the subtle (and not-so-subtle) foreshadowing has meant to get us ready for. The Rescuer comes from the Father. And again we see the patient and instructive nature of God. The Messiah does not appear fully-formed, moving right into the act of redemption. There are preparations, prophetic revealings, heralds of the arrival, and supernatural signs confirm that something unique is happening. The stage is being set. The pace of the narrative quickens. We sit up on the edge of our seats and take notice. A case is laid out that, when seen in rearview, is undeniable about the nature and purpose of this Child.

He comes humbly. Pomp is reserved for the earthly kings. This King has nothing to prove and wants to show His power through weakness to make it all the more powerful. And the world has no space for this King to be born so He is born in a barn. A young woman and a humble carpenter are granted the task of shepherding the Shepherd. Yet this humble birth inspires pilgrimages and is accompanied by angelic proclamations.

And evil suspects something. Evil can abide vainglory and showy, fleeting displays of power, but humble confidence and servant love grates at evil like nothing else. Evil unleashes from a desperate ruler who tries to hold on to his illusion of control and a generation of babies is slaughtered. This is no neat-and-tidy children's story. Evil knows that something is up. The stars have shifted. God is on the move.

And then, for 30 years or so. God patiently moves toward fulfillment. The Redeemer grows and experiences all the stages of life. He learns obedience (Heb. 5:8) and is sustained in His humanity by the daily provision of the Father, just as we are. He lives the plight of man and is able now to perfectly sympathize (Heb. 4:15). He felt the physicality of Creation. He rejoiced in it and mourned at the effects of its fallenness. Out of love, he set His face to the cross and, from that love, he had joy which helped Him endure unimaginable suffering (Heb. 12:2). He walks the narrowest path to show humanity's original intention.

“He was Adam done right. Loosen your jaw and begin chewing, this gristle is tough. Adam, living in his story rightly, would have done the same...He would have looked at Eve, seen her curse, seen her enemy, and gone after the serpent with pure and righteous wrath. He would have then turned to face the pure and righteous wrath of God Himself (that Adam had just imaged), and he would have said something quite simple, something that was said by another, thousands of years later. ‘Take me instead.’” (Death By Living by N.D. Wilson)

I sit and ponder an analogy. I search for a comparable story to tell or sufficient words to convey all this. I, a fallible and dependent creature, fall short...but I won't stop trying. With my thoughts, affections, words, actions, ambitions, and worship I must keep trying. Nothing else is worth it. Nothing else will sustain me in the face of uncertainty and evil. The story is still unfolding and I have a part to play. However very small and inconsequential, it's the part I've been given and I give it back to the Maker to do with it what He will because what he wills is far greater than my own designs.

In the next three lessons, we will attempt to look more into how all this took shape and how to rightly think about the nature of Jesus in His incarnation. We will talk about the divine nature of Christ which, as we have seen, is eternal and was at work for thousands of years before the incarnation. We will look at how this divine nature took on flesh. We'll wonder at the fact that these two natures were perfectly intact and perfectly distinct, yet perfectly united in one Person. Each nature complete, not in two separate persons, but in one glorious Person. But we must begin with wonder or we'll be lost. If we come critically and proudly, our eyes and ears won't work, much less our hearts.

This most glorious truth of the humble servant God is repulsive to the materialist analytics who turn up their noses and pronounce opinions of what they think it should have been like. It also confounds the nebulous mystics who resent their own bodies and are always turning inward for escape. God turned outward and gave up divine position to get dirty while rescuing fools. The eternal God took on flesh and dwelt among us. He was born to die. In love. What a gracious, beautiful God!

Prayer (based on a sermon by B.B. Warfield entitled '[The Example of the Incarnation](#)'):

Almighty God, thank you for sending your beloved Son in the fullness of time. Thank you that Jesus took no account of himself, but emptied himself and took the form of a servant. Thank you that He was led by His love for others into the world, to forget Himself in the needs of others, to sacrifice Himself once for all. Self-sacrifice brought Christ into the world and we worship you for the glory of your work of redemption.

We pray that self-sacrifice will lead us, His followers, not away from but into the midst of others. Wherever others suffer, lead us to be there to comfort them with your truths. Wherever others fail, lead us to stoop to lift them up. Wherever others succeed, lead us to rejoice with them. Lead us to forget ourselves in our service to you and others.

Thank you that you are not a God who is far off, but you are near. We call on you in truth and we pray that you would shape our desires rightly and fulfill our deepest desires. We love you above all else.

In Jesus name, amen.

Song of the week: *The Road, The Rocks, and The Weeds* by John Mark McMillan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peyMYiY-qoc>

Lyrics:

Come down from the stars
Show your human scars
Tell me what it's like to believe
Through my Christ haunted thoughts
That the losses you bought
Are the nights that you peopled with your
dreams

Well, I've got no answers
For heartbreaks or cancers
But a Savior who suffers them with me
Singing goodbye, Olympus
The heart of my Maker
Is spread out on the road, the rocks, and the
weeds

Come down from your mountain
Your high-rise apartment
And tell me of the God you know who bleeds
And what to tell my daughter
When she asks so many questions
And I fail to fill her heaviness with peace

When I've got no answers
For hurt knees or cancers
But a Savior who suffers them with me
Singing goodbye, Olympus
The heart of my Maker
Is spread out on the road, the rocks, and the
weeds

And Aphrodite would not weep
Nor Zeus would suffer for the weak
But have you come to stand inside my pain?
And all the things I've begged you for
Eternity and evermore
Are hidden with me here beneath the rain

So shall I plant sequoias
And revel in the soil
Of a crop I know I'll never live to reap?
Then sow my body to my Maker
And my heart unto my savior
And spread me on the road, the rocks, and
the weeds
Spread me on the road, the rocks, and the
weeds