

## Core 52 – Week 32 - Incarnation

One summer while in Bible college, I preached every Sunday at a small rural church in east central Missouri while living with my parents outside of Kansas City, Kansas. My dad wanted me to spend time with his elders learning about leadership and pastoral care. He also probably hoped I would listen to them better than I listened to him. My first assignment was to accompany a couple of the elders as they went to visit the dying husband of one of his elderly members. She had been a Christian many years; however, he had been involved in a cult and wanted nothing to do with the church. The particular cult he'd been involved with did not believe Jesus was the Son of God. He was just a man.

On previous visits he had become quite belligerent with any church leaders who came to visit, and he had told them to never come back again. However, after years of smoking he was now dying of cancer as well as suffering from severe emphysema. He'd been given only a few weeks to live. His wife begged the elders to make one last try. I got to ride along on this special trip.

He came out with his oxygen tank and mask, while smoking a cigarette. When he breathed he sounded like Darth Vader, which made him all that much more intimidating.

The elders tried to be as tender as they could be in their approach, but he immediately went on the attack, targeting several of our beliefs he thought ridiculous. The debate quickly centered on the birth of Christ. His main contention was that Jesus could not be both God and man at the same time. After some time of intense arguing I decided to read John 1:1-14, which contains this week's Core Verse in verse 14.

<sup>1</sup> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

<sup>2</sup> *He was in the beginning with God.* <sup>3</sup> *All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.* <sup>4</sup> *In him was life,[a] and the life was the light of men.* <sup>5</sup> *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

<sup>6</sup> *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* <sup>7</sup> *He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.* <sup>8</sup> *He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

<sup>9</sup> *The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.* <sup>10</sup> *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.* <sup>11</sup> *He came to his own,[b] and his own people[c] did not receive him.* <sup>12</sup> *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,* <sup>13</sup> *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

<sup>14</sup> *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son[d] from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

This is one of the most magnificent passages in all of Scripture. Its spiritual depth and literary elegance stand unrivaled. Its substance and style are filled with majestic beauty. John wrote this in a poetic form that, sadly, doesn't shine through in English. Many scholars believe the early church sang this as a hymn of worship.

William Barclay writes: "The first chapter of the Fourth Gospel is one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved." The early church father Chrysostom is reported to have said, "It is beyond the power of man to speak as John does in his prologue." Roger Fredrickson says, "this prologue is like standing in the foothills of an awesome mountain range catching a breathtaking glimpse of massive, snowcapped peaks reaching up through the haze."

John starts off by boldly declaring that Jesus is the Word, the *Logos*. Separated as we are by vast distances of time and culture from John, we don't realize just how bold of a claim this really is when John says that Jesus is the Word, the *Logos* of God.

When it comes to translating the Greek word *Logos*, translators run into a monumental challenge. There is no word in English sufficient to express the weight and fullness of *Logos*. You could fill a book with what *Logos* meant to those who first read these words two millennia ago.

A dictionary definition is that *Logos* is intelligent or reasoned speech – intelligent, well thought out, wise words. It is the articulate communication of intelligence or reason. It is an orderly linking and knitting together of the thoughts and ideas of the mind.

So, its meaning is far deeper than merely *word*. There were other words in the Greek John could have used if he just wanted to say *word*. There is "*Lalia*" which is an unintelligent sound, noise, or utterance. This was used for unrecognizable speech. Think "blah, blah, blah, blah."

Another word, "*laleo*" meant to speak without necessarily saying anything intelligent. Now that word might apply to me, but definitely not to Jesus. The third word John could have used is "Rhema" which refers to the spoken or written Word. This was ordinary human language. But *Logos* means so much more and that is the word John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses here to describe Jesus.

## I. The Jewish Concept of Logos

To the O.T. Jew 'the *Logos* of God" meant "God in action." God's Word was seen as powerful and effective. In fact, the Hebrew word that is translated as "word" refers to an action or an event rather than an idea. To say something was God's word was to say that it was as good as done. The "word of God" was equivalent to the "work of God." The Jews understood *Logos* to be God's work from creation, to revelation, to deliverance, to judgement. The origin and the course of the entire creation is directed by God's powerful Word or *Logos*.

Psalm 33:6 says, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth...For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” Isaiah 55:10,11 echoes the idea:

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

God’s word is God’s work done. All these Old Testament passages were written in Hebrew, but in Jesus’ day, the most widely spoken language was Greek, and so most of the Jews used a Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. Guess what word the Septuagint uses in all these verses that speak of God’s word in action. *Logos*. The New Testament writers use it the same way. Heb. 4:12 asserts, “*The word (“Logos”) of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*”

The *logos* of God was so closely associated with God that Jewish scholars began using the term for God. As invading armies relocated most Jews to foreign lands, they quit using their native Hebrew tongue and began using the languages of the people's surrounding them. When this happened, they quit using the name Yahweh, and began to use *Logos* as God’s name.

So, the Jewish idea of “*Logos*” is that God's word represents God Himself. It is the very expression of God, by which we know and experience Him. God's word represents His will, His thought, and His action. God's word is his point of contact with the created order. You could say that God's word is a bridge between Him and us. It is God's point of contact with humanity.

So, when John’s Jewish readers hear him say that Jesus is the *Logos* of God, think of what an astounding claim that was for them to hear.

## **II. The Greek Concept of Logos**

Greeks also viewed *Logos* as an expression of God; however, their idea of God was quite different from the Jews. The Greek concept of *Logos* began with the philosopher Heraclitus around 580 B.C. Heraclitus was an Ephesian philosopher who is famous for the illustration, “It is impossible to step twice into the same river.” He taught that the cosmos exists in a constant state of flux. Change, Heraclitus said, is constant. From moment to moment, everything is always changing.

However, he said this change was not random, aimless chaos. Change had a purpose and direction. According to Heraclitus, the *Logos* controlled and ordered the entire universe. The *Logos* formed a pattern that orchestrated everything. If you are a Star Wars nerd, think of the

Force. Undoubtedly, George Lucas was influenced by ancient philosophy in his imagination of the Galaxy far, far away.

After Heraclitus came the Stoic philosophers. They held that the *Logos* was the mind of God. It was the principle order of the universe. It was the *Logos* that made the universe a cosmos rather than a chaos.

So, imagine John's Gentile readers hearing him say that Jesus is the *Logos* of God.

Out of all the things that John could have said about Jesus, out of all the things he could have called Him, he picks this one word that was so loaded with meaning for Jew and Gentile alike, that said so much about Jesus.

Jesus is God in action. He is the fulfillment of God's will. He is here by the purpose and promise of God. He holds creation together. He gives direction to the entire universe. He is the mind of God that brings order out of chaos.

John is saying that Jesus is the perfect expression and representation of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. When the beginning happened, Jesus was already there. He's eternal. He wasn't just with God, He was God. He took part in Creation. He helped make all things. He is the light that gave birth to the universe and life as we know it.

### **III. The Word Made Flesh**

These are bodacious claims all on their own. He is claiming Jesus is equal with God, but John is just getting started. He about to make his most audacious claim yet. Jesus, who wasn't just there at creation, but He was the Creator. He helped speak the cosmos into existence, has now entered into his own creation and become a part of it.

John writes in verse 9, *"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."*

Mind. Blown.

But it gets even weirder. Jesus didn't enter Creation as the most brilliant star in space, or the most powerful hurricane to stir up the ocean into a most impressive message. He didn't enter our world a massive cloud formation to write a message in the skies. Surely, if he'd come like that the world would have known. We couldn't have missed that kind of message, but verse 10 says, *"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."*

How does God become a part of his own creation and we completely miss it? He does it by entering the world as a little baby – as a tiny, insignificant human, in a tiny, insignificant village, in a tiny, insignificant county.

He came as one of us. This is what theologians call the incarnation. God became flesh. John 1:14, our Core Verse says,

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Mark Moore points out in the Core 52 book that if you've grown up in the church, you have heard this truth over and over again, so you may have forgotten how outrageous it truly sounds. We forget how ridiculous Christmas really is.

This is the biggest point of contention between Christianity and every other faith tradition. Mark Moore writes:

How can the eternal God squeeze into such a small package? . . . for many, it's unthinkable that God would reduce himself to a human being.

How do you fit infinite wonder, glory, and power into a five pound sack of flesh and bones? Preposterous. And yet it is this very miracle that makes our salvation possible. How do you save people? By becoming a person and solving their unconquerable problem.

Mark Moore points out that the wonder of the incarnation of Jesus tells us three very important things about God.

### **God is Near**

First of all, God is near. God is not distant or far off. God is not busy with something else. He won't put you on hold and leave you to talk to an automated answering system.

God is near. He present with us. The incarnation tells us this. In verse 14 where it says he made his dwelling among us, it literally says in the Greek that he "pitched his tent among us." Jesus said, "This is my neighborhood. These are my people. This is where I belong."

When you are curled up on your bed in a ball of tears and snot and you cry out to heaven, the logos of God, the word made flesh assures us that God is near. He's right there with you.

### **God is Love**

Secondly, the incarnation tells us that God is love. The only thing that explains why Jesus would do what he did, why he would take on human flesh and enter the world as one of us, is that He loves us. Only love could do such a thing.

Paul writes in Romans 5:8, *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

### **God Suffered**

A third thing the incarnation tells us is that God can suffer. In most religions, the gods are beyond human experience. They are untouched by human events.

However, when God becomes flesh, this changes everything. God doesn't just understand you. He doesn't just get you. He's been you. He's experienced life in human flesh. He's experienced all that we experience. He knows our human foibles and limitations. He knows each and every human emotion...intimately. He knows weakness. He knows pain. He knows loss. He knows fear. He knows tears. He knows what it is to be tired, lonely, hungry, thirsty. He's been through it all.

But Jesus' suffering wasn't random. Jesus became one of us, so he could suffer as one of us, so he could pay the price for us as one of us. His suffering brought us hope, healing and forgiveness. His suffering opened the door for us to become like him. Think of that. He became like us so we could become like Him.

I finished reading the verses from John 1 and closed my Bible. We both fell silent unsure of what to say next. The old man drew in another deep, Darth Vader breath through his oxygen mask, and then asked this question, "If Jesus was born the son of God, Where was he before He was born?"

I thought he was asking where was Jesus for all of those thousands of years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. I was going to share with him all of the passages that talked about Jesus in heaven with God, and how Jesus was there at Creation. I lead off with this statement, "Before his birth, Jesus was with the Father in heaven. When it was time for Mary to conceive, Jesus left heaven, and willingly entered her womb as a baby.

Before I could build my case, though, which was genius, I'm sure, he stopped and interrupted me, "Do you mean to tell me that the spirit of the divine Son of God left the throne of heaven and entered into an unborn baby? You see his question wasn't really, "Where was Jesus for all those thousands of years?" it was "Where was Jesus while Mary was pregnant?" He never imagined that God would be in the form of an unborn baby.

I explained, "Yes, that is exactly where Jesus was. He was in Mary. We went to Luke 1 and examined the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary about how she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This crotchety old man's eyes filled with tears, he fell to his knees, and he began sobbing uncontrollably. He began praying for forgiveness. "O Jesus, please forgive me. All of these years I did not see who you really were. I did not know. I did not understand, but now I see that you are truly the son of God, please forgive my sins."

The man came to church with his wife for the first time that Sunday, and was baptized into Christ. He died in Christ a couple of months later after I went to school.

Do you know the God who became flesh for you?