

I confess, I didn't think too much of Christmas. I loved the holiday and its emphasis on Christ, but I wondered why we made such a big deal out of Jesus' birthday. Resurrection Sunday is what it is all about. Who cares when He was born? It most likely wasn't December 25<sup>th</sup>. But the years have humbled me, and reminded me that those who have gone before us were as passionate about the Lord if not more so than we are. They had Spirit led insights from which we are still benefiting. The more I dwelt on the wonder of what took place on that day, the more I am amazed at the wonder of Christmas.

"It was much that man was made like God before / But that God should be made like man, much, much more," wrote John Donne. Donne was expressing the wonder that we humans are made in God's image. (Genesis 1:27) We are so fallen and unlike the Holy One, and yet there is that potential in our design to be restored to the likeness of God. (1John 3:2) But He goes on to say that the wonder that God should be made like man is much more incredible and mysterious. (Romans 8:3)

Have you ever thought of what the eternal Son of God confined Himself to for nine months? The very One who designed the womb would now experience its shelter. But first, the Holy Spirit had to do His own creative work in that womb. In every pregnancy, an egg attaches itself to the lining of the womb and that lining somehow recognizes that its created purpose is fulfilled. An amazing organ called a placenta develops. It is neither the mother's nor the child's. In fact, it is recognized as a foreign object by the mother's body and by the child's, yet it is allowed to remain for nine months. I would enjoy evolution trying to convince us of how it evolved.

As tiny capillaries fill the thickening walls on each side of a thin membrane, the largest single cell in a body, nutrients make their way from the mother to the child without a single cell of the mother or child passing through the barrier. Yet, the child receives the nutrients and transfers all its waste to be expelled by the mother. What a picture of the Holy Spirit who delivers the spiritual nutrients from the God and convicts us to pass our waste on to the Son on the cross. And we won't even go into all the amazing things that happen to the body during the time of birth. It is nothing short of miraculous. All of this designed by the One that was about to submit Himself to the whole process.

It isn't that He had not appeared in human form before. I believe it was the Son of God who walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3:8), who wrestled with Jacob (Genesis 32:30), and passed before Moses (Exodus 33:19), who also met Joshua as the Captain of the Hosts (Joshua 5:14). (Colossians 1:15) But this was the first time He

**Commented [notes1]: Genesis 1:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

**Commented [notes2]: 1 John 3:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

**Commented [notes3]: Romans 8:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

**Commented [notes4]: Genesis 3:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

**Commented [notes5]: Genesis 32:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

**Commented [notes6]: Exodus 33:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

**Commented [notes7]: Joshua 5:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?"

**Commented [notes8]: Colossians 1:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

went through the process of birth and was confined to human form. Then the Father could say, "This day have I begotten Thee." (Psalm 2:7)

**Commented [notes9]: Psalm 2:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."

He was born totally dependent on His own creation. He was completely vulnerable for this little space of time as He learned to talk and walk. He placed Himself in the hands of a young teenage mother. Now that's a frightening proposition!

**Commented [notes10]: John 1:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> 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.

We can never fully plumb the depths of the mystery of the Word being incarnated (John 1:14), but let's consider a few more aspects. The Creator entered creation. The One outside time entered time. Of Him it can be said that He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8), and yet He grew day by day within the womb of Mary and as a young boy. (Luke 2:40) How can we ever comprehend that the Word of God became flesh? The expression of God was manifested for us to see, to learn from His example, but most of all to redeem us by the culmination of what He came to do. He came as a lamb in the manger to be the sacrificial lamb that would take away our sins. (John 1:29)

**Commented [notes11]: Hebrews 13:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

**Commented [notes12]: Luke 2:40 (ESV)**

<sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

If we were to ever understand what God the Father felt toward us, if we were ever to see how He expected us to live, He had to manifest His life among us so that we could observe it with our own eyes. John refers to the life of Jesus as "that which we have seen with our eyes". (1John 1:1) If you wondered what the Law of God delivered to Moses really meant, what it looked like to live it in the Spirit, you just had to look at Jesus. That is why He was constantly at odds with the religious system. Their rules, boxes, and formulas had so missed the mark that His life stood out in stark contrast.

**Commented [notes13]: John 1:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

**Commented [notes14]: 1 John 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-

While Pharisees shunned the "sinners", Jesus spent time with them, showing them the love and mercy of God. (Matthew 11:19) While the religious elite put rules before mercy, Jesus showed that the Father's heart was to put mercy above sacrifice. (Matthew 9:13) Imagine a Pharisee meeting the woman at the well? He would have fled as she approached. He would have feared defilement by this vile Samaritan who was avoiding others because of her sins. But Jesus demonstrated for us what the Scriptures truly mean when God invites, "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are as scarlet they shall be as white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18)

**Commented [notes15]: Matthew 11:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

**Commented [notes16]: Matthew 9:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

The religious establishment had missed what was so clear in the Old Covenant. (Hosea 6:6) While desperately trying to please God in every little rule, and hundreds of manmade ones to help them keep the rules, they forgot that the rules were for the good of mankind. They forgot that the second great command was to love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18) Jesus was showing them the Father's priorities when He healed on the Sabbath. The Word made flesh means that the heart of God, which included the laws that were to guide the nation of Israel, was demonstrated

**Commented [notes17]: Isaiah 1:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

**Commented [notes18]: Hosea 6:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

**Commented [notes19]: Leviticus 19:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

perfectly through His life. Everything He did demonstrated God's heart for man. (Deuteronomy 4:40)

His rebukes to the leadership that were misrepresenting God's Word were an effort to save them from the consequences of their erroneous understanding of what would please God. (Mark 12:24) His compassion for the least and the afflicted showed God's love was the same for every individual regardless of their status in society. His patient three years with the disciples showed that He knew the image of God could be restored in them.

He didn't have to come. It was His desire to please the Father and do His will that brought Him to the womb of Mary. (Hebrews 10:7) There was no other way to redeem us. His death showed us that He was willing to go to any length to do so. The incarnation began in the womb, went through the cross, and rose in victory, making a way for us to receive the Spirit. (John 16:7)

Since the ascension and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, incarnation has taken on a whole new meaning. Jesus promised the disciples that He would return and make His home *in* them. Paul wrote, *<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Galatians 2:20 (ESV) If it is Christ that lives and not Paul, if the church is the habitation of God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22), then the church is serving as the incarnation of Christ in the world today.

If the world is to see the love of God, they can no longer make a trip to Israel and see the life of the One that was born of the virgin. They need to see His caring love and righteousness that is not legalism, ritual, and formulas, but rather Spirit led priorities that start with loving God first and your neighbor as yourself.

John the Beloved reminds us that **we can't even really say we love God unless we love our fellow believers.** (1John 4:20) Do you know the people that sit in the pews with you? Do you know their trials and difficulties? Do you lift these up in prayer? If you do, that is incarnational living. It is no longer you, but Christ in you that is caring as much about others and their needs as your own.

Paul the Apostle was concerned about the brothers and sisters in Christ at Galatia. They had been trying to please God by doing the works they were supposed to do and had ignored the life of Christ living in them. He wrote, *<sup>19</sup> my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!* Galatians 4:19 (ESV)

**Commented [notes20]: Deuteronomy 4:40 (ESV)**

<sup>40</sup> Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time."

**Commented [notes21]: Mark 12:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?"

**Commented [notes22]: Hebrews 10:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Then I said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book."

**Commented [notes23]: John 16:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

**Commented [notes24]: Ephesians 2:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

**Commented [notes25]: 1 John 4:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

One way to look at incarnational living is Christ being increasingly formed in us. That is to express His life in more and more areas of our life. Another way to express it is being conformed to His image. It is the same concept, Christ manifest in us so that the world can see the love of God.

This tells us that it is not an overnight process. You don't say a prayer and suddenly fully express the love and life of Jesus to the world around you. You have to die daily. (1Corinthian 15:31) You grow little by little. You learn to commune with the Spirit within you. It takes time to discern His voice and distinguish it from your own. Just as a baby learns a language and to make the sounds that communicate, so we grow spiritually as Christ is formed in us.

You could say that the incarnation took place on that starry night so long ago in order that we might live incarnationally to the world around us. Jesus knew that in one lifetime He could never meet everyone on the planet. That is why He gave us the plan of discipleship and demonstrated it with His own 12. As we begin to grow in Christlikeness, we should be following His example of discipling others. Though we should know the needs in our fellowship and be concerned about them all, we will realistically only have time to be deeply involved with a few of those lives. God will lead you to the right ones at the right time. It happens naturally as you follow His leading. (2Timothy 2:2)

Please understand that this is not a 1, 2, 3 program. It is life. It is Jesus in you. It takes time. Sometimes we fail and our flesh gets in the way, but Jesus never fails. He is building a relationship with you, and like all relationships, they grow over time. We must take the time to be still and listen. (Psalm 46:10)

We are working toward encouraging and equipping mentors in the church to disciple others, but if it is just a program it will be simply another program that doesn't do anything in the light of eternity. It must be the love of Christ in us, incarnational love through us, for without Him, we can do nothing! (John 15:5)

I realize that this is not your typical Christmas message, but it is the message of Christmas. The Word became flesh in order that He might be incarnated in you. That is to say that the life of Jesus might be manifest in your mortal body. (Romans 8:11) As the Apostle wrote, *11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.* 2 Corinthians 4:11 (ESV)

Is it possible for the life of Christ to be manifest in you, for people to see God's love in you? According to the Apostle Paul it is indeed. People will see His love expressed

**Commented [notes26]: 1 Corinthians 15:31 (ESV)**  
<sup>31</sup> I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!

**Commented [notes27]: 2 Timothy 2:2 (ESV)**  
<sup>2</sup> and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

**Commented [notes28]: Psalm 46:10 (ESV)**  
<sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

**Commented [notes29]: John 15:5 (ESV)**  
<sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

**Commented [notes30]: Romans 8:11 (ESV)**  
<sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

through you if His life is in you. They will see a preference for the Spirit over the rules and formulas and mere works. They will see genuineness that is more than you could muster on your own. And you will find yourself reacting and feeling strangely unfamiliar as you share the heart of Christ for others. It's exciting, but it can be a bit frightening, like losing control, like the wind. (John 3:8)

Sometimes I get discouraged at how slow this process is in me. I want to see more of Christ's life flowing through me. I know some of you do too. I need to focus on hearing His voice, on surrendering my will, and feeling His heart. I wish it was an overnight change, but we must realize how far we have come too. People are seeing Christ in many of you. And don't forget the promise of Romans 8:29: *29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* (ESV) God has predestined you to be conformed to the image of His Son. Don't give up or be discouraged. It is His work, and He is a master craftsman. (Philippians 1:6) Keep pressing forward and doing those things that you know help you progress in this incarnational direction.

Christmas is a time that we thank God for the greatest gift of all, Jesus, our Savior, the Lamb of God that takes away our sins. But if we stop there, we miss the next step. We miss the rest of the plan. He saves us not simply so we can go to heaven. He saves us to touch lives through us.

This morning I've spoken of going from the incarnation to incarnation in us. I hope you'll look at Christmas from now on in a new way. I pray every Christmas will remind you that Jesus wants His life to be expressed through you. He wants to touch others through you like He did when He was walking among us. That is the witness that is life transforming.

The focus of the baby in the manger, as a gift from God to save us from our sins is essential. But don't stop there. We must go on to see that the world today needs to see His life manifest in you and me. They need to see an example of a godly life, and they need to see the Word lived out by the Spirit. God can reach people without us, and He does, but His desire is to be manifest in you and me. He wants to reach out through us to touch a hurting world in need. Will you let Christ be formed in you?

#### Questions

- 1 Go over Donne's poem.
- 2 What happens to the womb lining when a fertilized egg attaches?
- 3 How could God say, "This day I have begotten you"?
- 4 Go over some of the mysteries surrounding the incarnation?
- 5 What does the incarnation teach us?

#### Commented [notes31]: John 3:8 (ESV)

<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

#### Commented [notes32]: Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

- 6 Give examples of how Jesus' life clarified God's heart.
- 7 How can people see and experience the love of God today?
- 8 What does Galatians 4:19 teach us?
- 9 What is incarnational living?
- 10 Can the life of Christ be manifest in you?