



SIMPLE CHRISTMAS
Glory You Can Touch
John 1:14-18
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¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵(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.'") ¹⁶And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Introduction

More Americans will be travelling farther this holiday season. According to AAA, holiday travel will increase for the fifth consecutive year. Over 90 million of us will travel at least 50 miles to be with friends and family. Evidently, we're prepared to pay for it too. Families will spend more this year than last, on average \$694.

Many of you will travel this Christmas; we will, as well. In fact, travel is part of our family's Christmas routine. On Christmas morning, we will open stockings, enjoy pancakes, pack the car and then hit the road. Our trip to Indianapolis, where our families live, is only three-and-a-half hours. And we've made the trip enough times, we're used to it; in fact, we like it.

I would imagine travel has always been a part of Christmas. There is, after all, a travel story at the very heart of the Christmas story. I don't mean when Mary and Joseph went up from Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David (Luke 2:4). And I don't mean when wise men from the east came to Jerusalem after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the king (Matt. 2:1). Nor do I have in mind that night errand of the angels who suddenly appeared to the shepherds praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:13-14).

No, the travel story at the heart of Christmas is *the Son's own journey*: it's the journey of the Son into a far country.¹ It's the journey John describes in the opening verse of our passage: "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 1:14).

You see, God undertook a great journey at Christmas to overcome a great distance that stood between us. And he traveled so great a distance, so that we could see his glory; indeed, so that we could touch his glory—and be touched by it.

Double Distance from God

God became man to overcome the distance between God and man: the physical distance between us, and the relational distance; the distance of place and space, as well as the distance of the heart.

Did you know you can be distant from another person in two ways? First, there is *physical* distance, the distance of place and space. When we lived in England, Katie and I spent our first Christmas there, on the other side of the Atlantic ocean, and we certainly felt the effect of the physical distance between us and our families. Physical distance is what many of us will thankfully overcome this Christmas with the help of a car or an airplane.

But you can also experience *relational* distance with other people. This is the distance, not of space and place, but of the human heart. This is the distance created not by geography, but by a broken relationship. When this happens between friends or family members, we say things like, "I feel distant from him," or "We're not very close." And if the relationship has soured enough, we may even call it "alienation."

Children sometimes experience relational distance from their parents. Even though the kids are gathered around the dinner table for Christmas meal, they might as well be sitting somewhere on other side of the planet. Because that's about how close they are to mom and dad. They're at the table, but their hearts are elsewhere.

Spouses can also experience relational distance. In fact, husbands and wives can get themselves into a place where, while they may be sleeping in the very same bed, they're actually galaxies apart; just a few inches separate their bodies, but an infinite expanse exists between their souls. They've become, in that most ironic and sad turn of phrase, intimate strangers.

Now, fallen humanity stands at a *double distance* from God. We're separated from God by both physical distance and relational distance—both kinds of distance. Not only has "no one ever seen God," as John himself reminds us (1:18); but as the prophet Habakkuk tells us, God is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong" (1:13). That's you and me in our fallen condition!

This is why the Bible says we're alienated from God: "remember," the Apostle Paul says to a band of new believers, "that you were at that time *separated from Christ, alienated from the*

¹ The phrase is from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1, p. 158.

commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12-13).

Distant from God—distant metaphysically and morally—that’s our situation. There’s the distance of the body and the distance of the heart. There’s physical distance between us and God, and there’s relational distance. And both make it impossible for us to see God—to see his glory, to touch it, and be touched by it.

The Incarnation as Travel Expense

Sometimes we go to great lengths—and great expense—to overcome distances that separate us. What’s it going to cost you to travel to see your loved ones this Christmas? If you’re traveling at all, it’s going to cost you time. And it will probably cost you a little emotional peace because of all that’s involved in preparing for a trip, packing up, getting everything loaded and getting on your way. It will also cost you money, especially if you’re traveling by airplane.

But let me ask you a more important question: What did it cost God to become man and overcome the distance that separated us? What was the expense involved in the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us so that we could see his glory?

Because of our heavy emphasis as modern Christians on the nearness of God—that is, God’s not distant but right here with me, even in my pocket or my purse—we’re tempted to view God becoming man as no big thing; like we might view a quick trip to the grocery store for a jug of milk; back in a few minutes, no need to lock the doors; in fact, you could even leave the oven on, it’s such a short and easy trip. We’ve lost a sense of the transcendence of God; it’s all but wholly lost on modern man.

As a result, however, we’ve lost a sense of what the incarnation cost the Son. We’ve lost a sense of what it cost the Son to give up his *majesty* to be found as “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). We’ve lost a sense of what it cost the Son to give up his *wealth*, “that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). We’ve lost a sense of what it cost the Son to give up his *dignity*, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-7). And we’ve lost a sense of what it cost the Son to give up his *glory*, the glory he had in his Father’s presence “before the world existed” (John 17:5).

The great American entrepreneur Warren Buffett is said to be worth something like 47 billion dollars. Among other things, he owns lots of successful restaurants and fast food chains, including our family’s personal favorite, Dairy Queen. I understand he bought the Dairy Queen franchise because he liked the ice cream; evidently, there are some advantages with being a billionaire.

The Word becoming flesh is like the billionaire, Warren Buffett, giving up his billions to become a part-time, minimum wage employee at his own Dairy Queen, in the little out-of-the-way town of Syracuse, Indiana, having to don one of those crazy DQ hats and serve dip cones and Dilly Bars to little league baseball teams for the rest of his life.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.

Hail the incarnate Deity!

Pleased as man with man to dwell.

Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Hark! The herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King!"

The Cross as Travel Expense

But the incarnation wasn't the only travel expense. Nor was it the most costly. No, the crucifixion cost the most; the Son's death was the most expensive part of his trip into the far country.

Never was he subject to such ignominy as then; never did he suffer so much pain in his body, or so much sorrow in his soul; never was he in so great an exercise of his condescension, humility, meekness, and patience, as he was in these last sufferings; never was his divine glory and majesty covered with so thick and dark a veil; never did he so empty himself, and make himself of no reputation, as at this time: And yet never was his divine glory so manifested, by any act of his, as in that act, of yielding himself up to these sufferings (Edwards, *Works Vol. 19*, p. 576).

What did it cost the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world? It cost him that which is most precious to us all; it cost him his own life. More than that: it cost him unbroken fellowship with the Father, as he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), bearing the full weight of divine wrath for sin upon himself.

Never, never, never, never, never, never—never a greater cost! Yet never a richer display of glory—"glory," John tells us, "full of grace and truth"—never a richer display of glory than there, at the cross, where the Savior did die.

Mild He lays His glory by

Born that man no more may die

Born to raise the sons of earth

Born to give them second birth

Hark! The herald angels sing

"Glory to the newborn King!"

Glory You Can Touch – And Be Touched By

The problem with distance is that it doesn't allow for touch. Whether you're two miles away or two thousand, distance means you cannot touch another person: shake their hand, give them a hug and exchange smiles.

So, too, with relational distance. There's a lack of touch as well. Because the last thing you want to do in a broken relationship is reach out and touch the other person—with a handshake or a hug or even a kiss.

Yet glory you can touch—this is the gift God has given to the world at Christmas. It's a gift we didn't ask for; none of us did. But it's a gift we all needed, each and every one of us.

The Word became flesh to overcome the distance that separated God and man: the physical distance of place and space, yes; but, more importantly, the relational distance of our alienation from God because of our sin.

God went to extreme lengths to meet the need of human beings; even to the point of moving into our own neighborhood, and cleaning up our mess—the mess fallen humanity has made for ourselves, and the mess we've made of ourselves.

This simple truth is what thrills the John the Gospel writer's heart, as it did his whole life. He never fully recovered from the joyous shock of the Word becoming flesh. Even at the end of his long life, he still could wax eloquent about God being made manifest to us, as he does in his first epistle:

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—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:1-4).

Conclusion

Some of you will travel great distances this Christmas. Perhaps you already have: you've travelled the red-eye flight all the way from southern California or the return flight from Spain and your semester abroad. And you're going to do so in order to see those you love and be seen by them; indeed, to touch them and be touched by them.

As you travel this Christmas, whether you're excited or not, let it remind you of the journey of the Son into the far country. In fact, let your own travels serve as a parable to you, and perhaps to your family, of what God has done in sending his Son into the world that we might

see his glory. This will no doubt enrich your whole travel experience, and it may even cut back on some of the grumbling!

Also, be challenged by the example of the Son, who went to such great lengths to overcome the distance that existed between us and God. And let that challenge you to not go another Christmas with relational distance between you and anyone else. Some of you need to cover some ground relationally with another person this Christmas; perhaps the person sitting next to you this morning: a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a mother or father, your husband or your wife. Learn from the one who traveled so far to reach you, and let the Word that became flesh lead you across the chasm that separates you from this other person.

Similarly, don't let distance, or any other obstacle, get in the way of sharing the grace and truth of the incarnation with others this Christmas. Let the One who is himself so full of grace and truth empower you to *be* both grace and truth in life of others, so that they might see his glory shining in and through you this Christmas.

Finally, let us all embrace—and rejoice in—what God has done in Christ, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Regardless of the great distances some of you will travel this Christmas, none will travel the same distance the Son has that first Christmas. Were we to circle the globe a thousand times, were we to build a rocket and fly into outer space, even then we would only have taken a first step to match the distance the Word had to travel in order to become flesh.

“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). He has done it, so that we might see his glory; indeed, that we might touch—and be touched by—his glory at Christmas.

Amen.

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