

# The Dawning Light

Have you spent time in a foreign country totally unfamiliar to you? I remember travelling to Russia in 2013 and finding myself in a world that was completely unfamiliar to me. The language was unlike anything I had ever heard. Some of the foods were the same, but many were new to me. The cultural behaviours confused me – there was an assertiveness that was surprising to me. At one point, I had someone come and take my bags off the train and wave to follow me, and I had no idea who they were and where we were going. I simply had to trust him and follow him.

One of the practices that left me feeling awkward repeatedly was surrendering my passport at every place I stayed. As a foreigner, I had to surrender my passport at the hotel where I would stay as required by the government. I remember arriving off the plane and surrendering my passport to a customs official who disappeared with it and I didn't get it back until I had retrieved my bags. But only after a great hassle trying to explain using signs what the 10 little bottles of fluid were in my suitcase that appeared suspicious to the customs agent. Try using charades to explain maple syrup!

If it were not for a translator at various points, I would not have had any idea as to what was going on. When my translator was nearby, I could find out what was going on and how I could accommodate myself to my hosts. But without the help of a translator, I was lost in a world completely unfamiliar to me.

In a greater way, heaven is a foreign world to us. Its language, practices, and rhythms are so unfamiliar to us that it takes God sending his very own Son to us so that we could not only understand but also be brought near to him. Heaven's practices are so jarring to us that we find them both attractive and repulsive at the same time. So God sent his Son into our world to translate for us what he was doing.

John says that the Word that created all things became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth. And what is it that Jesus translates to us?

## See God Near

Before we could ever understand the ways of heaven, God knew that we needed a translator. So he sent his very own Son to be the Word of heaven to us. There is a reason John calls Jesus "The Word." He is God's Word of heaven to us. As people who have lived in darkness and sin and death, we are so accustomed to the culture of death that God's Word is a foreign word to us. We don't understand life, grace, and glory.

So God sent his own Son as a translator of the ways of heaven...but he did more than send us a translator. God did not merely send us a translator – he sent his very own Son in flesh and blood. He became like us because we could not become like him. We were so comfortable in our culture of death that God came embodied to us to show us what life and grace and glory actually looks like.

And what should amaze us about this is that a perfect, holy, pure God would come near to imperfect, sinful, unclean people like us. It's not just that we didn't understand God, we hated his ways. "His own people did not receive him," John tells us. This is how foreign the way of heaven is to us – God comes to us and we reject him.

So the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Herein is the great mystery of the Bible – that God would come and dwell near. John picks up the language of Exodus here and begins to unpack for us the greatest mystery of them all – how God could come and dwell among sinful, rebellious humanity. The Word became flesh and "took up residence" is how one translation puts it. But John has something more profound to say: the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us.

Now as much as I love camping, this picture warms my heart. I love going out into the wilderness with my canoe and tent and enjoying nature. Here, John says, God sent his Son into the wilderness to pitch his tent among us. This image takes us back to Exodus where God's people were wandering through the wilderness from slavery to the Promised Land. God had given Moses great instructions on Mount Sinai about the kind of dwelling he would have. God would live in the center of his people, but only one person could come in to his presence on one day a year to meet with him.

But now God pitches his tent among us so that we can know what God is like. He walks among us. He talks with us. He brings the life of heaven into a world of death. He does this so that we can...

## **See Glory**

And here is what John wants us to see – he wants us to see what glory is like. There are more hints in these verses that point us back to the wilderness experience of Israel in the book of Exodus that it's worth taking our time to slow down and explore them. John says that we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, full of grace and truth. In these phrases John packs in the Exodus story in a profound way.

We have to go back to Exodus 32. Moses had been gone up on the Mountain for quite some time. The people had started to wonder what had happened to him, so they asked Moses' brother Aaron to give them their gods. So Aaron gathered the gold from the people and fashioned a god that looked similar to the ones of Egypt – a golden calf – and said that this was the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt. The people worshipped the calf and were already disobeying the commands that God had given them.

## **The Dawning Light: Seeing Glory**

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When Moses came down the Mountain, he saw what the people were doing and smashed the tablets of stone into pieces, showing the people how they had broken the covenant of God. So Moses went away and began to plead with God, praying and interceding for the people. He asked God not to destroy this rebellious people but to go with them and lead them and take them to the Promised Land. And then Moses asked the Lord to do something extraordinary – show me your glory (Exod. 33:18-23). But the Lord had said that he would not allow Moses to see his face because if he saw his face, he would die. So hiding him in a hole in the mountainside, the Lord passed by, allowing Moses to see just the back of his glory as he proclaimed, “The Lord, The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” And with this, the Lord would then go with his people, dwelling among them in the tabernacle. But no one could come in and see the face of God.

But now, John says, we have seen his glory. While the glory of God was veiled at Sinai, Jesus now comes and lets us see the face of God and live. In Jesus, God’s glory is veiled in flesh, as Charles Wesley would say. God his hidden in skin and bones. But we have seen his glory. He comes and he shows us that glory brings life. Glory heals. Glory saves. Glory rescues sinners from the culture of death that they have grown so accustomed to. Glory comes and translates heaven to us.

But here is the startling thing about this glory: it is full of grace and truth. When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, the translators took the Lord’s words that he spoke to Moses in Exodus 34:5-7 and have the Lord saying, “The Lord, the Lord God is compassionate and merciful, patient and very gracious and truthful.” This is the language John uses – he uses the Greek Old Testament and tells us that Jesus comes full of grace and truth.

Here is what is startling about what glory looks like. It looks like a God who is gracious and truthful, a God who keeps his promises even when his people do not. In Moses’ day, he wanted God to go with this rebellious and disobedient people and take them to the Promised Land. And God said he would be gracious to his people and truthful to his word. And now, the Word comes to a people who reject him and he is gracious to these people and truthful to his Word.

Because this is what glory looks like: it looks like a God who comes to be with sinful people, to forgive them by drawing them near to himself. It’s a God who isn’t stingy with forgiveness, but whose anger lasts for a moment but mercy is for a lifetime.

If there was ever proof that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in grace and truth, we see it in Jesus. Martin Luther would say something to the effect that the incarnation is proof that God has not rejected his creation, not rejected humanity, not cast us off forever. God has sent the translated Word of heaven to us, and it is this: God is true to his Word. He keeps his promises. And his promise to forgive those who come to him and to never cast them out is true. There is more mercy in his heart than you or I could ever imagine.

And what this means is that he comes to us not only to translate heaven to us as the Word, but he gives us the Word and puts those words in our mouths so that we might translate heaven to the world that is unfamiliar with the language of heaven. He comes at Christmas in flesh so you can see that God keeps his promises and will never leave you, but forgive you and draw you near by coming near to you.

So do you feel out of place in this world? Do you feel like Christianity doesn't fit? Do you wonder what God is doing? He's brought his Word to you, he invites you to come near to him over and over, knowing that it takes a lifetime of his Word getting into you, translating the culture of heaven, so that you would grow to love grace and truth, and that you would take that grace and truth to others around you who cannot comprehend the language of heaven.

For he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. He comes to bring heaven to earth. He comes into the wilderness to bring you to the Promised Land. He comes to bring joy to the world!