

God Is: Meditations on the Attributes of God

God is ... Near (John 1:14-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 24, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ Lately we've been in a sermon series on the attributes of God. And in the past four weeks, we covered the **four classical incommunicable attributes of God**. The four attributes that God uniquely possesses by virtue of being Creator. Attributes that he does *not* share (or communicate) with creatures like us, even as we are made in his image. We studied his **immutability** (God is unchanging); his **independence** (God is self-existing and self-sufficient); his **eternality** (God is timeless, not defined in temporal terms); his **omnipresence** (God is everywhere, not defined in spatial terms).
 - Now we explained earlier why it's important for us to meditate on these theological concepts. **Because it offers the needed correction to our man-centered views of God**. It provides the proper perspective. We have this problematic tendency of merely viewing God as a bigger, better, stronger, wiser, kinder version of ourselves.

- ❖ **I've said before that we tend to think about God as we imagine ants think about us**. To ants, we're like gods. We're so much bigger, so much stronger. But, really, we're made of the same stuff, and we're bound by the same limitations in space and time. In the end, ants and humans exist on the same plane. We differ – but only in degree. We're all still creatures.
 - **That's why we said before that a better analogy would be to compare the difference between God and us with the difference between Shakespeare and any one of his characters**. We differ – not only in degree – but in kind. God alone is the Author of Life. We are merely the characters in *his* story.
 - In other words, God transcends human existence. He exists on another plane. **And I hope our recent meditation on these four incommunicable attributes has helped to reinforce God's transcendence**. To deepen your conviction that God is Holy, Holy, Holy. That he sits on high enthroned in the heavens above. That God is transcendent over all creation.

- ❖ That's the high view of God we want you to have. Which is intentional, considering how it's the Advent season. **Because only until you've established a high view of a holy, infinite, transcendent God, are you truly ready to celebrate Christmas**. Only then are you ready to appreciate the immanence of God. His nearness to his people. Considering how the God on high, enthroned in the heavens above, came down to earth, enwrapped in a manger below. **That juxtaposition of God's transcendence and his immanence – that contrast is what accentuates the extent of God's mercy and love communicated in the birth of Christ**.

- ❖ This morning's text comes out of John's Gospel. I know that, normally, if you hear a Christmas message out of a Gospel, it's a sermon on one of the birth narratives in Matthew or Luke. But John offers something different. Instead of providing a genealogy or birth narrative, he offers a heavy dose of theology.
 - His goal is still the same as the other Gospel writers. **He presents Jesus as the true God who truly became a man for our salvation. Christ became a Son of Man that we might become sons of God**. That's the same message in all four Gospels.

- ❖ **But instead of giving us a manger scene, John stretches the story all the way back to eternity past.** To the beginning. Before the heavens and earth. Before anything was, there was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 - John's point is that the Christmas story should never be treated as a standalone story. It's should be understood as the climax of the One Big Story that preexists all others. **It's a story of how God seeks to be with his people, to dwell with us, to make his presence felt. It starts in heaven in preexistent glory and culminates on earth in veiled glory. Incarnate in the man Christ Jesus.**

- ❖ **So my goal this morning is to meditate on the doctrine of God's immanence but all within the context of the story of the Incarnation.** As we consider John 1:14-18, let's consider three ways in which Christ is presented: (1) He is the transcendent Word. (2) He is the immanent Word. (3) He is the revealed Word.

He is the Transcendent Word

- ❖ Now, as we just said, for us to truly appreciate God's immanence, it needs to be examined in light of his transcendence. The Apostle John agrees. **That's why before he introduces the Incarnation – before he turns to God's immanence in v14 – he begins his Gospel emphasizing transcendence.** Christ is introduced as the transcendent Word. Listen to v1, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"
 - The Greek word for *Word* is *logos*. It's an ancient term pregnant with meaning. It's largely lost on us modern readers. We don't see the significance in applying that term to Christ. But for John's original audience – for first-century Hellenistic Jews and Greeks – the connection would've been apparent.
 - *Logos* can mean a *word* or a *message*. But it can also be translated as *reason* or *logic*. **And in the ancient world, Greek thinkers would spend their time debating the *logos* of life – the reason or logic of life.** What is life all about? What is the underlying rationale governing it and holding it all together?

- ❖ There were different schools of thought back then. The **Epicureans** were the thinkers who would've embraced the idea of transcendence. But in their view, the gods were so utterly transcendent as to be inconsequential to their lives. They were like ancient deists viewing the gods as far removed and detached. So they concluded that there is no *Logos* out there. There is no reason to life. But if there is no *Logos* – no underlying logic or reason – then all we're left with is a "just do it", feel-good philosophy of life. So they indulged their desires. **That's the essence of Epicureanism: Eat, drink, be merry, and repeat until you die.**
 - Then there was a rival school of thought, the **Stoics**. They were pantheistic and would've been more favorable to the idea of immanence. Their conception of the divine – which they preferred to call the *Logos* – was considered an impersonal force found in all things. It was the animating principle of life. The Stoic's philosophy was to learn and to live by this *Logos* – this rational principle, this Divine Reason governing and holding all things together. **In contrast to Epicureans, Stoics were principled, rational thinkers, disciplined in restraining their desires.**

- ❖ Okay, now keep all that context in mind. **Because by adopting this *Logos* language when introducing Christ, John knows he’s injecting the Christian faith into this ancient philosophical debate.** And immediately, he offends the Epicureans and their deism by affirming that a *Logos* does exist.
 - **But he equally offends the Stoics and their pantheism by distinguishing the *Logos* from all creation and identifying it with the Creator himself.** Notice how John 1:1 directly alludes to Genesis 1:1. They begin the same way. In the beginning – was God. In the beginning – was the *Logos*.
 - This *Logos* is a *transcendent* Word. **It transcends all, because it preexists all, and is the very source of all.** Look at v3, “*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*”

- ❖ This is the message John wanted to communicate. This is why he didn’t start his Gospel with another manger scene. That would’ve conveyed God’s immanence. So instead he began his Gospel introducing Jesus as the transcendent Word.
 - But it must be said that the transcendence affirmed in John’s Gospel and the rest of Scripture couldn’t be further apart from the transcendence of the deistic Epicureans. To a deist, God has no hand in the governance of creation or of human affairs. **Like a divine Clockmaker, he built the clock, wound it up, to let it go its own course.** God is so utterly transcendent that he has effectively ceded his authority and sovereignty to us. We’ve taken his place. Deism deifies human autonomy.

- ❖ But biblical transcendence paints an entirely different picture. God is not distant or detached or unknowable. He hasn’t stepped away. **He hasn’t ceded his authority or sovereignty to the human self. No, Scripture is clear that God is still personally involved in creation.** He still rules all things – even as it describes him as ruling on high. Listen to **Psalm 113:4-6**, “*4The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! 5Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, 6who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?*”

- ❖ That’s the language of Scripture. **When the Bible speaks of God’s transcendence, it employs the metaphor of height.** He is the Most High (Ps 83:18). He is above all nations, all rulers, all gods (Ps 97:9). He is enthroned above (Ps 33:13-14). **But that kind of language is not meant to be taken literally.** It’s not a spatial concept. That metaphor of height is intended to invoke God’s majesty, his kingship, his sovereignty over us.
 - We want you to have a high view of God. **But we don’t want to lull you into a sense of apathy, assuming God is so high and distant as to not notice or care about what goes on in your life or about the choices you make.** That’s why any teaching on God’s transcendence needs to be taught in conjunction with his immanence.

He is the Immanent Word

- ❖ So let’s consider our second point – another way Christ is presented in John 1. He is the Immanent Word. That is John’s point in v14 when he says the transcendent *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us. In becoming incarnate, Christ became supremely immanent.

- ❖ Now it's fair to say that John probably borrowed the language of the *Logos* from the Stoics. But he wasn't trying to equate Christ with the Stoic's *Logos*. **No, by adopting this language and applying it to Christ, John is undermining their view of the *Logos*.** Remember, their *Logos* amounted to nothing more than a rational principle governing all of life.
 - **So here comes John in v14 making an emphatic claim that the *Logos* is not some immaterial, impersonal principle but a material, personal person.** The *Logos* has a name. He's called Jesus. He's the Underlying Logic, the Divine Reason, the ancients argued about. **When we say Jesus is the "Reason for the Season" – that's a far more profound statement than we tend to think.**
 - And this Reason, this *Logos*, became flesh. "*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's word choice is intentional. He didn't say that the Word became a man (*anthropos*). Or the Word became a body (*soma*). **No, he specifically chose the word flesh (*sarx*).** **Wherever you see that word used in Scripture, it usually carries a connotation of creatureliness.** Flesh emphasizes our creaturely weakness or frailty in contrast to the Creator's imperishable nature (Isa 40:6).
 - This is why the use of *flesh* is significant. If you read old Greek mythologies, you'll find examples of **Zeus** or **Apollo**s becoming an *anthropos* (man) or taking on a *soma* (body). But they were only appearing in human form or slipping into a human body like a disguise. **They were never said to have become *sarx*. That would've been too crass for a divine being.** It would've been too beneath them to become flesh.
- ❖ But that's what John is claiming about the Son of God. "*The Word became flesh*" doesn't mean Jesus slipped into a human body that he could take on and off. **He wasn't masking his divine glory behind flesh. The Incarnation means he laid aside his glory to become flesh.**
 - Jesus is the Second Person of the Godhead. In the beginning, he was with God the Father and he was God himself. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. **God is one being who eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** Each person is fully God and fully possesses the glory of God.
 - And yet in becoming flesh, the Son laid aside the glory he shared with the Father before the world existed (Jn 17:5). **Now that doesn't mean he laid aside his divinity.** In becoming flesh, he didn't become less God. There was no subtraction in him. But an addition of a human nature. In the one person there are two natures: one fully divine and one fully human. God in the flesh.
- ❖ Look back at v14, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" **That's word for dwelt (*skenoo*) literally means to pitch one's tent.** It's used in the Greek OT (*Septuagint*) to describe the tabernacle (Ex 25:9). During Israel's wilderness years, they pitched a tent, called the tabernacle, in the center of camp. And at the end of every day, that's where the *Shekinah* glory of the LORD would come down and rest (Ex 40:34). The tabernacle is where Moses would meet with God. It represented God's presence. God's nearness. His immanence.

- ❖ John chose his words carefully. **In saying the Word became flesh and dwelt (or *tabernacled*) among us, he's comparing the incarnate Jesus's flesh to Israel's Tabernacle** (Jn 2:21). In the OT, God came near and took up residence among his people. At first in a hide-covered tent and then a brick-laid temple. But now he's come even closer and in a far more intimate way. He's come as a flesh-and-blood person.
- ❖ John goes on to say that – in this new Tabernacle, in the flesh of Jesus – “*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” That's an amazing statement. **It's saying that even though he laid aside his glory to become flesh, there's still a glory to be seen when you look at Jesus through eyes of faith.**
 - If you were looking at Israel's tabernacle, it would appear to you as just a tent made of animal hide. It had no decorations or adornments. You would think there's nothing glorious about it. It's just a tent. But that's where you'd be wrong. **Because in the seemingly humble and ordinary – dwelt the greatest glory.**
 - The same could be said of the person of Christ. You look at him lying in a manger – and you see an ordinary baby. You look at him preaching on a hillside – and you see a good moral teacher. You look at him healing the sick and feeding the poor – and you see a noble social reformer. **But it's only when you look at Jesus through eyes of faith do you see the glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**
- ❖ And v16 continues that thought, “*For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*” To receive grace upon grace suggests a succession of graces. As if an old grace were being replaced by a new grace. Grace upon grace.
 - And what might that be referring to? The answer is in v17, “*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” **So the grace given through Moses (in his case, the Law) has been replaced by the new grace that comes through Jesus Christ (the Gospel).**
- ❖ **It's fascinating that the Law of God is described as a means of grace.** Let's be honest, it doesn't normally feel like grace. When you read the Mosaic Law – when you consider its commands and demands – do they sound like grace to you or more like a burden? **If the Law feels like a burden – like a heavy yoke – then apparently you're reading it wrong.**
 - The Law is grace to you. It's just not enough grace. **The Law is not sufficient to reveal the *fullness* of God's glory – the fullness of his grace and truth. For that, you'll need Christ in the Gospel.** Saving grace and saving truth only come through Jesus Christ.
- ❖ That's the reason why the Divine Reason, the *Logos*, became flesh and pitched his tent among us. That's why he came near. That's why he became supremely immanent in the person of Christ Jesus. **He came to fulfill – and to make fully known – the grace and truth of God's great love for sinners like us.** A love put on display both in the way Christ *bore our flesh* in his Incarnation as well as in the way *he bore our sins* in his Crucifixion.

He is the Revealed Word

- ❖ Through his humble life and sacrificial death, Christ was the perfect revelation of God's grace and truth to us. That's what's conveyed in our third and final point. Christ is presented as the Transcendent Word, the Immanent Word, and the Revealed Word. **Jesus makes the unseen God seeable – the unknown God knowable.** Listen to v18, "*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*"
- ❖ No one has ever seen God. That's not because he's super elusive – because he's really good at hiding from us. **It's not because he dwells above on unreachable mountain heights or resides below in inaccessible ocean depths.** Again, that would be to assume God exists on the same plane as us. That's why we stressed earlier that God is not just an infinitely larger version of us.
 - If that were so, then it wouldn't be accurate to say that God is unseeable. Because even the tiniest of ants can still look up and see us gigantic humans walking the earth. **That's why we said earlier that the better analogy is to compare God to the Author and we are the characters in his story.**
 - None of Shakespeare's characters have ever seen him. In fact, they don't even know he exists. Macbeth doesn't know who Shakespeare is. Hamlet has no relationship with his Author. There's no way. It's impossible. **Unless of course, Shakespeare were to ever write himself into the story. If he became a character like us.**
- ❖ But don't you see? That's what Christmas is all about! **The Incarnation was the Author's way of writing himself into his own story.** The Word became flesh. He dwelt among us.
 - God is not the kind of Author who remains distant and unknown, transcendent and inaccessible. In love he came near and made himself known, seeking a relationship with us. But when he came to his own, his own did not receive him (1:11).
- ❖ In this story, we have gone astray. We have rejected the *Logos* of life. We've rejected the Author. **We've spurned his authorship and authority and have tried to write our own story as we want to tell it.** That's the essence of our human sinfulness.
 - God has every right to close the book on us. **But instead, he wrote himself into the story and penned his own death.** He could've written himself into the story as a mighty warrior or a regal king with great power at his disposal. He could've compelled our obedience by sheer force. But instead, he gave himself the role of a Servant who lays down his life for others. And the role of a Lamb who is sacrificed to take away the sins of the world (1:29)
- ❖ **The Christmas story reveals the infinite extent of God's love. And yet our tendency is to doubt it. We tend to question the limits of his love.** Maybe it's because we keep falling into the same sins and destructive patterns. And we wonder if perhaps we've disappointed him one too many times. Maybe we've crossed the line. Maybe we've reached the limit.

- ❖ **But then you're reminded of the heights of his transcendence and the depths to which Christ descended to be imminent with us.** Which tells you that there is no limit to his love. There is no line you can cross that takes you beyond its reach.
 - **If he descended so far to such lengths – to be so near to us – then why would you fear that you've gone too far?** You can never stray too far from the Immanent Word of God. Let that be a word of encouragement for those of you who feel far from the Lord right now. Don't settle for this state you're in. You can do something about it. You can draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (Jas 4:8)

- ❖ Brothers and sisters, I'm not surprised if some of you feel tired and weary during this holiday season. Many of you feel burdened. Like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. I want to invite you to rest this Christmas Eve.
 - **And to remind you that the Author of Life – who is writing the Story you find yourself in – has already finished the book.** He's already written the ending and given us a preview. Spoiler alert: He comes back. And he brings all of heaven in tow. His kingdom will come in all its fullness. His will will be completely and perfectly done. On earth as it is in heaven. So as we celebrate his First Advent this weekend, let's rest in peace as we faithfully await his Second Advent. Come, Lord Jesus, come.