



*"By all means,
get this book!"*
—TIM KELLER

THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Finding Your Place in God's Story

D. A. CARSON

That is to say, what he finally comes up with is a teleological vision, a vision of what happens at the end. You have to live in light of the end. That is wisdom because we will give an account to this God.

Conclusion

When we feel in our hearts and minds, as we grow older, that there has to be something more—there has to be something more satisfying, there has to be something bigger—we are right to listen to that brooding voice, because we were made for God and our souls will be restless until we know him. Those are the kinds of things that wisdom books teach us as the Old Testament barrels along in anticipation of the day when Wisdom incarnate—that is, Wisdom in the flesh—will come, when there is some final resolution between the perfections that God demands in Psalm 1 and the compromise of misconduct of our own lives, between David as a man after God's own heart and David as a wretched sinner in desperate need of God's mercy. A resolution is still coming, and his name is Jesus.

The God Who Becomes a Human Being

So far in this book I have referred only infrequently to that block of books that boast the name of their prophetic authors. I have mentioned Isaiah once or twice, and a couple of others, but that's about all.

I wish there were space to unpack them for at least a couple of chapters. For although these books contain sections that are obscure, many parts of these prophecies are among the most brilliant and intense writings anywhere in the Bible. Without me commenting on them or explaining their contexts, the following brief quotations amply illustrate the point:

⁸I am the LORD; that is my name!

I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols. . . .

¹⁴For a long time I have kept silent,

I have been quiet and held myself back.
But now, like a woman in childbirth,

I cry out, I gasp and pant.

¹⁵I will lay waste the mountains and hills
and dry up all their vegetation;

I will turn rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.

¹⁶I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;

I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.

These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.

¹⁷But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, "You are our gods,"
will be turned back in utter shame.

Isaiah 42:8, 14–17

²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . .

⁴Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give nations in exchange for you,
and peoples in exchange for your life.

⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.

Isaiah 43:2–5

Oh, that my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears!
I would weep day and night
for the slain of my people.

Jeremiah 9:1

²It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

³How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;
his dominion endures from generation to generation!

Daniel 4:2–3

There are those who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground.

Amos 5:7

²How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

Habakkuk 1:2–4

¹⁰"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands. "My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 1:10–11

Sometimes these prophetic books preserve the spiritual wrestling of the prophets themselves. Sometimes they predict the immediate future: Assyria will invade Moab but will not succeed in taking Jerusalem; Judah's alliance with Egypt is irresponsible and will backfire. Sometimes they predict a renovation of everything at the end of history, a new heaven and a new earth. And between these two predicted ends there are prophecies that anticipate the coming of God, or the dawning of a new covenant that he will inaugurate, or the coming of a new Davidic king, or the coming of God's unnamed Servant.

We must pause for a moment. The chapter you are now reading has the frankly amazing title, "The God Who Becomes a Human Being." It presupposes that this God keeps telling us, throughout the Old Testament, that he is coming. And now he does come—by becoming a human being.

In one sense, of course, the Old Testament narrative establishes that God comes to Abraham and calls him on his pilgrimage. He comes to Moses and gives him certain tasks. He comes to David and establishes a dynasty. In the Old Testament, through large swaths of the biblical books, God is repeatedly said to come.

Sometimes the coming of God means judgment. People would speak of "the day of the Lord," the time when the Lord would come, as something wonderful, a time of revival and blessing. But sometimes God says, "Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18). The coming of the Lord may bring with it the fiercest judgment. This judgment extends beyond his own covenant people to all the nations, for God is sovereign over all. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any

people" (Prov. 14:34). So in the major prophets of the Old Testament, God promises to come visit the Babylonians with judgment, or the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon with judgment, and so forth.

He also keeps promising to come with forgiveness and hope. In some of these passages there is a confusion—in retrospect, an intentional confusion—about *who* is coming. Is it God himself, or is it the ultimate Davidic king? We saw one of those passages briefly in the prophecy of Isaiah 9, in words with which many of us are familiar because of Handel's *Messiah*. This promised king will reign on David's throne—yet, as we saw, this is said of him:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.

Isaiah 9:6–7

In this passage, of course, we start with the Davidic king, and then suddenly he is being called "Mighty God." In other passages the direction is reversed: we begin by reading about the coming of God himself, only to learn that the coming of the Davidic king is in view. One of the most remarkable passages in this respect is by the prophet Ezekiel:

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel [that does not mean the people who keep the sheep literally but the rulers, the nobles, the monarchs as they come and go, the leaders, the priests]; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' ³You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.'"

Ezekiel 34:1–6

Then what God says in many different ways through verse after verse is, in effect, this: "I will not only judge the false shepherds. I myself will become the shepherd of my people."

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.

Ezekiel 34:10

Then he goes on to say,

¹²As shepherds look after their scattered flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Ezekiel 34:12–16

In other words, "All these false shepherds are just ruining the flock. I myself will be their shepherd." Then after saying again and again—about twenty-five times—that God himself is going to shepherd his people, that he is going to do the job himself, he then says,

²³I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Ezekiel 34:23–24

So somehow this promise of God himself coming and a Davidic king coming get merged into one.

Other promises dot the Old Testament prophetic literature. For example, six centuries before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah reports that God will make a new covenant with his people (see Jer. 31:31–34). That means the covenant already in force, the covenant established at Sinai, has become the old covenant. If the Sinai covenant has been declared *old*, in some sense or other it is becoming obsolete, as it will be replaced by the *new* covenant.¹ People steeped in such Scriptures could not help but wonder when this new covenant would dawn, and in what ways it would preserve the emphases of the old covenant, and in what ways it would outstrip them. But we can imagine the excitement, confusion, uncertainty, and hope when, on the very night Jesus was betrayed and went to the cross, he took a cup of wine during the meal he was having

with his most intimate followers, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). We shall have occasion a little later to ponder Jesus's words. For the moment it is enough to recognize some of the patterns of Old Testament prophecies that point to Jesus.

One more: in several places in the prophecy of Isaiah, God announces someone he refers to simply as "my servant." For instance:

¹Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
²He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
³A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
⁴In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.
Isaiah 42:1-4

⁴Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
⁷He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
⁹He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.
¹¹After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

Isaiah 53:4-11

It is a rather stunning fact that before the coming of Jesus, more than seven hundred years after the prophecy of Isaiah, no one clearly understood that the promised servant of the Lord would also be the Davidic king, whose coming would also simultaneously be the visitation of God. In retrospect it is easy to see that the pieces are there. One suspects that one of the reasons why people did not put it together was that it was hard to imagine how a conquering and victorious king of David's line could also be a suffering servant, somehow suffering the torments of the damned so that the damned might be justified.

Old Testament strands are coming together.

The New Testament

So we come to the New Testament. The first four books of the New Testament are often called "Gospels": Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all begin a little differently, but they all begin in some way with the coming of Jesus.

Luke's Gospel, for example, depicts an angelic visitation to a young woman named Mary, promising her a virginal conception, such that the child born in her would be called the Son of God. Then the familiar Christmas story occurs in Luke 2.

In Matthew's Gospel, the situation is looked at less from Mary's perspective and more from Joseph's perspective. Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, and then he discovers that she is pregnant. Do not forget that in that society they could not go off in a corner somewhere and have a little chitchat so that she could try to convince him that it was a miracle brought about by the power of God and she was still a virgin. In those days you simply did not have that kind of easy conversation about sexual matters before you were married. Chaperones and guardians were around all the time. But God visited Joseph as well and insisted that this was God's own doing; Mary was still a virgin.

²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will

give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1:20–21

So when the baby came, Joseph was to give the baby the name Jesus. Jesus is simply the Greek form of Joshua, and Joshua means “Yahweh saves.” Yahweh, you will recall, is the name of God in the Old Testament, connected to “I AM WHO I AM.” This God saves; Yahweh saves. From what? Joseph was to give this baby the name Jesus, meaning “Yahweh saves,” because Jesus will save his people from their sins. Occurring as it does in the first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, this crucial name announces that the rest of this Gospel is to be read as the book in which Yahweh saves his people from their sins. Every chapter of that book can be fit under this theme. The accumulated sins from the time of the fall (Genesis 3) are about to be addressed.

What shall we make of this Jesus?

John 1:1–18

John’s Gospel begins a slightly different way. It does not begin with the historical developments (Joseph, Mary, Bethlehem, the visit of the shepherds, and so forth). It begins by thinking about what the coming of the eternal Son, the coming of God, *means*. It is worth taking the time to read carefully John’s first eighteen verses, sometimes called John’s prologue:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

¹⁴The 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.

¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”)

¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John 1:1–18

We must now run through the thought of this prologue—rather too quickly, no doubt, but in enough detail to begin to sense the wonder and power of who this Jesus is and why he has come.

The Word: God’s Self-Expression (John 1:1)

The one who is coming is simply called “the Word”: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). We might say, “In the beginning was God’s self-expression [for that is what “Word” here suggests], and this self-expression was with God [that is, God’s own peer], and this self-expression was God [that is, God’s own self].” Already your heart begins to flutter; your mind wonders, “What is going on here? How can you think in these terms?” But that is what the text says. This “Word” who, as we’ll see in a moment, becomes a human being, is described both as God’s own peer (he is already with God in the beginning!) and God’s own self (he is God!).

Even the term “Word” is an interesting choice. What title or metaphorical expression should be applied to Jesus in the opening verses of John’s Gospel? I can imagine various possibilities going round and round in John’s head. But at some point John remembers, for example, that in the Old Testament we frequently read expressions like this: “The *word of the Lord* came to the prophet, saying. . . .” So God has disclosed himself by his *word* in revelation. Then perhaps he remembers Genesis 1: God *spoke*, and the world came into being; otherwise put, by the *word of the Lord* the heavens and earth were made (see Ps. 33:6). So here we have God’s *word* in creation. Elsewhere, biblical writers speak of God sending forth his *word* to heal and help and transform his people (see for example Ps. 107:20). All these things God’s *word* accomplishes: by his word, God reveals, he creates, he transforms, and John thinks to himself, “Yes, that’s the appropriate expression that summarizes all who Jesus is.” He is God’s self-expression, God’s revelation; he is God’s own agent in creation; and he comes to save and transform God’s people.

We are now on the edge of something massive, something extraordinarily important about the God who is there, the God who discloses himself in the Bible. All along the Bible has insisted on the fact that there is but one God, the God who is the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge of all. But here in the first verse of John’s Gospel, we are told that the Word was with God in the beginning, so he is as eternal and as self-existent as God; that he is God’s own peer, “with God” from the beginning, an astonishing equivalence granted what the Bible

says about the uniqueness of God; and he is God's own self, for "the Word was God." Somehow this Word is differentiable from God (he was "with" God), yet he is identified as God ("the Word was God"). A little farther down, we will be told how this Word becomes a human being, the human being we know as Jesus. That is why Christians hold that Jesus is simultaneously differentiable from God (as God's own peer) yet fully identified with God. Our minds boggle at the paradox.

In fact, to leap ahead a little, Christians have invented a word to refer to God. This one God, we say, is the *Trinity*, the three-in-one God. Not only is the Father God, and Jesus the Son is God, but the Holy Spirit is God (as we shall see). No Christian, no matter how learned or thoughtful, pretends to understand all of this completely. Historically, Christians have found ways to speak about these things without falling into silly contradictions. They say, for instance, that the Word shares one "substance" with the Father, but is a distinguishable "person." But Christians have also learned not to pretend we understand more than we do.

The evidence for thinking about God as Trinity depends on more than the first verse of John's prologue, of course. For example, in John's Gospel alone, we find an array of passages that support this understanding of God. In John 5:19, Jesus insists that he does "whatever" the Father does—something no sane mere human could ever say. In the same chapter, God shows he is resolved that all should honor the Son "just as they honor the Father" (5:23)—something that makes no sense if Jesus is not himself God. In John 8:58, in a context where he is involved in a difficult dispute about who he is, Jesus insists, "Before Abraham was born, *I am*" (emphasis added). Since Abraham had been dead for two thousand years, Jesus's claim is that he has existed for about two thousand more years than the thirty years or so of his own physical existence; more importantly, he has taken on his lips the name by which God himself is known: *I am* or *I am what I am*.

On the night he is betrayed, Jesus says to one of his followers, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9)—which is either arrogant blasphemy of the highest order, a sick joke, or the sober truth: the closest human beings get to "seeing" God in this broken world is the Word-made-flesh, the Lord Jesus himself. Also on the night he was betrayed, Jesus insists that after he has risen and returned to his heavenly Father, he will send the Holy Spirit as a stand-in for himself, another Advocate (see John 14:15–17; 14:25–27; 15:26; 16:7–15). This Spirit, this Advocate sent from the Father, discharges a range of personal functions: he teaches, reminds people of Jesus, bears witness, convicts people, and is himself the very presence of the Father and the Son. After Jesus has risen from the dead, one of his followers, a man called Thomas, is so overwhelmed that he says to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). That Thomas, a first-century Jew, addresses Jesus this

way says something very remarkable about Thomas's increasing grasp of how the one God is nevertheless a complex God, what later Christians would call the Triune God. No less remarkable is that Jesus accepts the homage as his due—something no devout first-century Jew would do *unless he were God*.

In fact, that brings us to two more observations. First, since the time of Jesus's resurrection, Christians have worshiped Jesus as they worship God; indeed, while Christians address the Father and Jesus as distinct persons, Christians worship the Father as God and Jesus as God, and, for that matter, the Spirit as God. Second, this complex view of God as the Trinity helps us to grasp what we glimpsed earlier in this book: this is why, even in eternity past, before there was a universe, the God of the Bible, the God who is there, can be thought of as a *loving* God. For the nature of love is that there must be an "other" to love! Somehow in the very being of this one God lies the complexity that preserves love: the Father loves the Son (see John 3:35; 5:20) and the Son loves the Father (see John 14:31). Indeed, the love among the persons of the Godhead (as God the Trinity is sometimes called) becomes the controlling model that mandates how Christians should love one another (see John 17:24–26).

But now we are getting ahead of ourselves. We need to flesh out the rest of John's prologue.

What John Says about the Word (John 1:2–13)

The opening verses of John are packed with intertwined reflections on the Word, but we can easily isolate some of the most important of these.

First, the Word creates us; he is God's own agent in creation. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). That means that if we human beings are God's dependent creatures, we are no less the dependent creatures of the Word.

Second, the Word gives us light and life. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4–5).

Some books you read only once. You have a flight, let's say, to Los Angeles, so you pick up a whodunit at the bookshop in the airport, and by the time you get to LA, you have found out "who done it." You decide that this is not a book you are going to keep in your library, so you put it in the seat pocket in front of you. The cleaners take it out and you will never read it again.

Other books, of course, you want to read more than once. They are books you may even pore over, perhaps for the quality of the English prose or the brilliance of the descriptions or the characterizations. You may read such a book once for the plot and then reread it again for the pleasure of all the other touches. Any really good author of narrative writes in such a way that additional layers are peeled back when the book is reread.

The question is this: did John write his book as a throwaway tract to be read once, or is it the sort of book where he wanted it to be read again and again, with additional insight coming each time? I think it can be shown that he wrote it in such a way that he expected readers to see new things as they keep rereading his work. The first piece of evidence is found in verses 4–5 of the first chapter. If you read those verses without ever having read the rest of the book (that is, all you have read so far are verses 1–3), how will you understand verses 4–5? Verse 3: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” This is surely talking about creation. Verse 4: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.” That is, he had life in himself, and he gave life to all human beings. That was their light. Before him, there was darkness, and then he introduced light; there was the darkness of nothingness before he created everything, and after creation there was light and life. In other words, you can understand verses 4–5 entirely with respect to verse 3, and I suspect that if you were reading them for the first time, this is the way you would understand them.

But then you read verses 6 and following:

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

John 1:6–8

You start seeing how “light” now has overtones not of physical light over against the nothingness that existed before the creation. Now light has some sort of overtone of revelation or truth—light that is revealed. As you read on in the book, the same sort of moral or revelatory association with light becomes clearer and clearer. Thus we read, “people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (3:19). People choose the darkness because they are afraid to come to the light: “All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God” (3:20–21). In this context, light is not the light of creation; it is the light of revelation, of truth. By the time you get to John 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (8:12).

Now go back and re-read John 1:4–5: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness [i.e., of corruption and rebellion], and the darkness has not overcome it.” Now you have another set of overtones. Here the light is revelation and truth from God, truth that is overcoming the darkness of moral corruption and ignorance.

So should verses 4–5 be read in the light of verse 3 or in the light of verses 6–8? Which is true: the Word as the agent of physical life and light at the time

of creation, or the Word as the one who brings revelation and transformation, overcoming moral darkness?

The answer, of course, is both. We are *supposed* to read it both ways. That is the way the Gospel of John has been written: the more we read it, the more we see new connections that are there in the text. The same light that brought life to the creation brings eternal life to this world of corruption and death.

Third, the Word confronts and divides us:

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world [i.e., the world that he had made], and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own [i.e., his own home], but his own [i.e., his own people] did not receive him.

John 1:9–11

Most people did not look on Jesus and say, “Ah, you are finally here: the light of the world.” Many were puzzled by him. Some were repulsed by him because even if they did see the light, they were ashamed in his presence and preferred the darkness to the light. So his very coming did not guarantee a universal revival with everybody turning to him.

Some did receive him; they believed in his name:

¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent [it’s not just natural children who are in view], nor of human decision [from sexual intercourse] or a husband’s will [assuming he’s taking some sort of primary role in the conception], but born of God.

John 1:12–13

These people are not simply humanly born. They are also born of God. (That is a theme we will come back to in the next chapter.) They are different because God has done something new in them. There is a new creation. There is a new birth. He is starting something over in them, and they truly believe who Jesus really is.

The Word Becomes Flesh (John 1:14–18)

“The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). That means the Word became a human being. This is what Christians mean when they speak of the *incarnation*, literally “the infleshing.”

This Word became something that he wasn’t. He already existed; he was God’s own agent in creation, but now he becomes a human being. And this human being, as the rest of the chapter shows, is Jesus. John’s Gospel does not tell us that the Word merely clothed himself in animal humanity, or pretended

to be human, or coexisted with a man called Jesus. Nor does it imagine that all of God is exhausted in Jesus (for then Jesus would not have had a heavenly Father to whom to pray!). The language is exquisitely precise: the Word became flesh; the Word, without ceasing to be the Word (and therefore God's own peer and God's own self, as we have seen), became a human being. Small wonder that Christians across the ages have referred to Jesus as the God-man.

Yet John's interest in the incarnation is not abstract or merely theoretical. Immediately he adds a few more lines to make us recall an Old Testament passage we have already read. Recalling that Old Testament passage will enable us to understand a little better the *significance* of the truth that the Word became flesh. The Old Testament passage is Exodus 32–34, which we looked at in chapter 4. Those chapters from Exodus detail what happens when Moses comes down from the mountain and the people are in an orgy of idolatry. Moses prays before God and wants to see more of God's glory:

¹⁸Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

¹⁹And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Exodus 33:18–20

The verses before us in John 1:14–18 pick up five major themes from these chapters in Exodus. You know what happens if you quote a line or two from a book or film that everyone around you knows: the entire scene comes back to mind. For whatever reason, my son has a formidable memory when it comes to movies, and so you simply drop in one line and he will happily describe the entire scene. For people steeped in the Bible, as many of the first readers were, something similar takes place when you quote a line from the Bible. So if you know the Bible like that, then when you read through John 1:14–18, your mind is going to go back to Exodus 32–34 because of five specific allusions in the John passage to the Exodus passage. *And that is what unpacks the significance of the truth that the Word became flesh.* Let me show you.

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John 1:14–18

1. TABERNACLE AND TEMPLE

"The Word became flesh and *made his dwelling* among us" (1:14)—the expression I have italicized is literally "he tabernacled among us." You cannot help but remember that the tabernacle is what God set up at the time of Sinai, a tabernacle with this special Most Holy Place where only the high priest could enter on behalf of himself and everybody else once a year with the blood of the sacrifices. It was the place where sinners met God, the great meeting place that brought together a holy God and rebellious human beings. That is what the tabernacle was, until the temple superseded it. Now we are told that when the Word became flesh, "he *tabernacled* among us." Again, in John's next chapter, Jesus insists that he himself is the ultimate temple of God (see John 2:19–21), the ultimate meeting place between human beings and God. It is as if he were saying, "If rebels are going to be reconciled to this holy God, they must come to him by means of the temple that God has ordained—and I am the temple."

2. GLORY

"We have seen his glory," John writes, "the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). "We have seen his glory"? What was it that Moses asked for?

¹⁸Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

¹⁹And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you."

Exodus 33:18–19

John plays with this theme of glory right through his book. In John 2, for example, when Jesus performs his first miracle—he turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee—we are told at the end of the account that the disciples saw his glory: "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory" (2:11). The others saw the miracle; the disciples saw Jesus's glory. In other words, they saw that this was a *sign* that signified something about who Jesus was; they saw his glory. This kind of use of "glory" is repeated in John's Gospel. Then eventually you get to John 12, where Jesus is to manifest God's glory by going to the cross (see 12:23–33). So where is God's glory most manifested? In God's goodness—when Jesus is "glorified," lifted up and hung on a cross, displaying God's glory in the shame, degradation, brutality, and sacrifice of his crucifixion, and by this means returning to the glory he shared with the Father before the world began (see 17:5).

The most spectacular display of God's glory is in a bloody instrument of torture because that is where God's goodness was most displayed.

It is good to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus," but we must also sing, "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame"—

because there God displayed his glory in Christ Jesus, who thus became our tabernacle, our temple, the meeting place between God and human beings.

3. GRACE AND TRUTH (LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS)

We are still reading John 1:14: "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*" (emphasis added).

When he intones who he is before Moses, who is hiding in that cave in Exodus 34, God describes himself in a variety of ways. Included among them are the words "abounding in [or full of] love and faithfulness" (34:6). In Hebrew, the pair of nouns translated "love and faithfulness" are equally appropriately rendered "grace and truth," which is the way John renders them. God displays himself not only as the God who will punish sinners but as the one who is "full of grace and truth" and forgives. Now John, reflecting on who Jesus is, this Jesus who manifests God's goodness, his glory in the cross, says that Jesus is "full of grace and truth," the grace and truth that brought him to the cross and paid for our sins.

4. GRACE AND LAW

John adds, "Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given" (1:16). That is exactly what the text says—but what does it mean? It does not mean "grace on top of grace" or "one grace after another," like Christmas presents piled up under a Christmas tree, one blessing after another. It means we have all received a grace in place of a grace already given. What does that mean? The next verse tells us: "For the law was given through Moses [which takes us back to Exod. 32–34]; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). In other words, the gift of the law was a gracious thing, a good and wonderful gift from God. But grace and truth par excellence came through Jesus Christ, not in the display of glory to Moses in a cave but in the display of Jesus and the bloody sacrifice on the cross. The law covenant was a gracious gift from God, but now Jesus is going to introduce a new covenant, the ultimate grace and truth. This is a grace that replaces that old grace. It is bound up with a new covenant.

5. SEEING GOD

"No one has ever seen God," John reminds us (1:18). Isn't that what God said in Exodus 33? "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). Now John adds an exception: "But the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). Do you hear what this text is saying? Do you want to know what God looks like? Look at Jesus. "No one has ever seen God," and God in all of his transcendent splendor we still cannot see until the last

day. But the Word became flesh; God became a human being with the name of Jesus; and we can see him. That is why Jesus later says to one of his own disciples (as we saw earlier in this chapter), "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Do you want to know what the character of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the holiness of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the wrath of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the forgiveness of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the glory of God is like? Study Jesus all the way to that wretched cross. Study Jesus.

Concluding Story

It may bring things together if I conclude with a story I have told on a number of occasions. My first degree was in chemistry and mathematics at McGill University in Montreal. Somewhere along the line I befriended a wonderful Pakistani gentleman. He was twice as old as I was. He had come to McGill to do a PhD in Islamic studies. (McGill had, and still has, a very fine Islamic institute.) He had left his wife and two children behind in Pakistan, so he was lonely. Over time I befriended him. After a while it dawned on me that he was trying to convert me to Islam. I thought that I should return the favor, but I soon found myself out of my depth in debate, for he was a trained Muslim theologian while I was studying chemistry.

I remember walking with him one night down Mount Royal along University Avenue to Pine Avenue to catch a bus. He had agreed to come to church with me. He wanted to see what it was like. As we walked, he asked me, "Don, you study mathematics, yes?"

"Yes."

"If you have one cup and then you add another cup, how many cups do you have?"

Well, I was taking some mathematics courses, so I said, "Two."

"If you have two cups and you add another cup, how many cups do you have?"

I said, "Three."

"If you have three cups, and you take away one cup, how many cups do you have?"

I said, "Two." So far I was hitting on all cylinders.

So he said, "You believe that the Father is God?"

"Yes." Uh oh, I could see where this was going.

"You believe that Jesus is God?"

"Yes."

"You believe that the Holy Spirit is God?"

"Yes."

"So if you have one God plus one God plus one God, how many gods do you have?"

I was studying chemistry, not theology. How was I supposed to answer that? The best I could do was say, "Listen, if you are going to use a mathematical model, then let me choose the branch of mathematics. Let's talk about infinities. Infinity plus infinity plus infinity equals what? Infinity. I serve an infinite God."

He laughed good-naturedly. That was the level of our discussion and friendship. About November it suddenly dawned on me that he had never read the Christian Bible. He did not own one; he had never held one in his hands. So I bought him a Bible. He asked, "Where do I start?"

He did not know how it was put together. He did not know about the Old Testament and the New Testament; he did not know about the Gospels. And I did not know what to suggest to him. So I said, "Well, why don't you start with John's Gospel?" I showed him where it was, right after Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Coming, as he did, from Asia, he did not read books the way I would read a book. (How many pages can I get through tonight? The more the better!) No, he had a style of reading that proceeded slowly with many pauses for reflection, rereading, and wondering. And the passage he was beginning to think about was John's prologue.

That Christmas I brought him home to my parents' home, who at that point lived on the French side of our capital city, Ottawa, in a place called Hull. It transpired that my father had heart problems, and my mother and I spent most of our time in the hospital. My dear friend Muhammad was largely left on his own. By the end of that Christmas break, Dad was recovering nicely, so I asked to borrow the car so I could take Muhammad to see some of the sights in the capital city. We went here and there, and we ended up at our Parliament buildings. In those days there was much less security than there is now. We joined one of the guided tours—thirty of us being led around the buildings—to the rotunda at the rear where the library is, to the Senate chambers, to the House of Commons, to the rogues gallery of Canadian prime ministers from Sir John A. McDonald down, and so forth.

We finally returned to the central foyer, which is circled by some large pillars. At the top of each pillar is a little fresco where there is a figure, and the guide explained, as he pointed from one figure to the next, "There is Aristotle, for government must be based on knowledge. There is Socrates, for government must be based on wisdom. There is Moses, for government must be based on law." He went all the way around. Then he asked, "Any questions?"

My friend piped up, "Where is Jesus Christ?"

The guide did what guides do under such circumstances. They simply say, "I beg your pardon?"

So Muhammad did what foreigners do under such circumstances. They assume that they have been misunderstood because of their thick accent, so he articulated his question more clearly and more loudly: "Where is Jesus Christ?"

Now there were three groups in the foyer of the Canadian Parliament listening to a Pakistani Muslim ask where Jesus was. I was looking for a crack in the ground to fall into. I had no idea where this was coming from.

Finally the guide blurted out, "Why should Jesus be here?"

Muhammad looked shocked. Picking up a line from the Bible verses he had been reading, he said, "I read in the Christian Bible that the law was given through Moses but that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Where is Jesus Christ?"

The guide said, "I don't know anything about that."

And I muttered under my breath, "Preach it, brother."

Do you see how it looked to Muhammad? He was a Muslim. He understood about a God who has laws, who has standards, who brings terror, who sits in judgment over you, a God who is sovereign and holy and powerful. He understood all of that. But he had already been captured by Jesus, full of grace and truth, who displays his glory profoundly in the cross and becomes the meeting place between God and sinners because he dies the sinner's death.