

How do you feel about surprises? Do you live for that moment when you experience the unexpected?

I'm not a big fan of surprises; I would rather know something in advance than have something sprung on me at the last minute.

Because of the nature of my work, no two days are ever alike, I never know what to expect, and I've learned to adapt and change according to what's happening in front of me. That being said, I like schedules, I like to plan, I like to know what's coming in order to be as prepared as possible.

When I was younger, I would sneak into my parents room before Christmas to find any unwrapped presents that might have been bought for me. Some of you would never do such a thing, it would ruin the surprise on Christmas morning, but I was more than happy to ruin the surprise.

When my parents discovered my sneakiness, they began to wrap our presents as soon as they brought them home. But in order to differentiate between my presents and my brothers, my parents would label who the gift was for, and this forced me to bring my "A" game. I wouldn't unwrap the present, but I would begin to shake, poke and prod; much to my parent's chagrin, I was able to guess correctly with close to 75% accuracy.

My gift-guessing skills finally met their match when my younger brother came up with a new strategy. Presents continued to be wrapped and labelled, but the labels were switched in order to confuse me. When I picked up a present, I had no way of knowing whether it was really mine or belonged to someone else. As I said, I'd rather know in advance than be surprised.

This morning I'm going to invite all of you to participate in another rendition of a Dave Sattler Pop Quiz.

1. *When you encounter an unexpected change to the schedule, do you:*

- A. Go with the flow. Life is filled with surprises, who needs a plan?
- B. Ask a few questions, come up a new plan, and then move forward.
- C. Stick to the original plan.

2. *When planning your next vacation, do you:*

- A. Buy an open ended ticket, arrive at the destination, and make up the plan as you go.
- B. Buy a return ticket, book the hotel in advance, but leave room for unexpected adventure.
- C. Write your name in your underwear, draw up a morning to evening itinerary for each day, and never, under any circumstances, deviate from the plan. Fun = Accomplishing The Plan.

3. *It's your birthday and you're turning 16, or 30, or 65. You walk in the front door to discover a Surprise Birthday Party. Do you:*

- A. Gush with delight, work the room, and tell everyone that this is the best birthday ever.
- B. Momentarily exhibit shock, take a couple of deep breaths, and then begin to have fun.
- C. Turn around and walk out the door.

How many of you answered mostly "A's"? How many of you answered mostly "B's"? How many of you answered mostly "C's"?

Some of us enjoy surprise more than others, but one thing is certain, when God became human, it was the surprise to end all surprises. Over the past three weeks we have been exploring the prologue to John's Gospel, and this morning we come to vs. 14-18.

If you have a Bible with you, paper or electronic, please turn with me to John 1:14-18; if you are using a Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, our text can be found on page 860.

*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. 15 (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'")*

*16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No 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."*

This morning I'm going to simply walk through the text—verse by verse—before concluding with a reflection exercise. Let's begin with vs. 14.

**Vs. 14:** When combined with John 1:1, we have one of the clearest statements concerning the Nature and Person of Jesus. Verse 1 says, "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*"

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bible-researcher.com/logos.html>

This term "Word" comes from a Greek philosophical term that signifies the outward form by which an inward thought is expressed. One author defines Logos as having "the double meaning of thought and speech".<sup>1</sup> Think of it in the following way. Until we speak, our thoughts—though real—remain hidden; our speech reveals our thoughts. In Jesus we have the Divine Logos: the thought of God has become speech; what was hidden has now been revealed.

- In the beginning **was** the *Word*. Before there was anything, God the Son existed alongside God the Father and God the Spirit.
- And the *Word* was **with** God. A more literal translation describes God the Son as being *towards* God, or, *face to face* with God.
- And the *Word* **was** God. Simple, yet profound, and mysterious.
- And this Word—God the Son—became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

This phrase—*made His dwelling among us*—suggests a word-picture: God pitched His tent in the midst of humanity, more literally, He *tabernacled* among us. John points his readers back to Jewish history. After Israel left Egypt, but before arriving in the promised land, they journeyed through desert wilderness. Where ever they came to rest, people would pitch their own tents, and a tent would be pitched for God too.

God didn't need a place to sleep, or relief from the afternoon Sun, but this tent—the *Tabernacle*—functioned like a portable sanctuary.

Where the people stopped, God stopped too, and His tent was pitched in the centre of the camp—God dwelt in the midst of His people.

John is making a very bold statement here: the place of God’s dwelling—the place of God’s glory—is in the man, Jesus Christ.

When we think about the glory of God, we tend to think in, well... glorious and exalted terms. Glory has to do with large, impressive displays of power, holiness, and the like. And while John agrees that God’s glory can be found in the miraculous (John 2:11; 11:4), we discover that it was Christ’s experience of death on the cross that His glory was most fully on display (John 12:23-24; 13:31).

The Word became flesh. “The One from on high was born down below...Born in a stable, wriggling in straw, [He was] fully committed to life in the raw...To a world in need He did not send another, God the Son became God our Brother.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is further described as being filled with **grace** and **truth**. As I said last week, grace is the dazzling centrepiece of God’s salvation through Christ. Grace refers to God’s undeserved mercy, favour, and love. Grace isn’t merely something He gives, it’s basic to who He is. In Exodus 34:6, God revealed Himself to Moses saying, “*The LORD, the LORD, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness*”.

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<sup>2</sup> Anti-Santy Rant (vimeo): <https://vimeo.com/54075943>

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of John*, 98.

Through Jesus, we experience God’s gracious welcome; through Jesus, we also encounter God’s truth—His self-revelation; I’ll say more on this when we come to verse 18.

**Vs. 15:** The Baptist said, “*He has surpassed me because He was before me.*” The ministry of John the Baptist may have preceded the public appearance of Jesus, and yet, in Jesus we encounter the One who is fully human *and* fully God. God the Son has always existed—in the time before time; the ministry of Jesus is superior to the Baptist’s in every way.

**Vs 16-17:** “*Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”

It makes sense, doesn’t it, in light of God’s gracious nature, that we receive “*grace in place of grace already given.*” Leon Morris writes, “Grace means an ever deepening experience of the presence and blessing of God.”<sup>3</sup>

When God chose Israel to represent Him to the world, it was a grace; when God gave Israel the law, to guide her life and worship, it was a grace. But John seems to be saying that the former grace that was given, has now been eclipsed by the grace that comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace upon grace, grace in place of grace already given. And as Paul writes in Romans 8:32, “*He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all—will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*”

We are too easily tempted to doubt God’s goodness, as though He holds things back, like a Miser holds back their money. Though we complain that our way is hidden from the Lord, that He is far off and we are forgotten, our names are engraved on His hands—our moments are ever before Him.

**Vs. 18:** “*No 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.*”

A surprise is something we don’t expect, a mystery is something more. We tend to speak about mysteries in terms of an unsolved puzzle, or, a secret that has been hidden. If we just apply the right kind of pressure, exploring, investigating, the mystery will unravel.

But try as we might, we cannot eliminate mystery. Those we know best and love most remain—in part—a mystery to us. After nearly 21 years of marriage, my wife continues to surprise me, in mostly delightful ways. Even my own heart—in part—remains a mystery to me; I cannot fully explain what I desire, or do. *If this is the case with us, how much more so with God?*

T.F. Torrance is best known for his pioneering work in the realm of science and theology; Torrance was particularly fond of the mystery

surrounding the Incarnation and the Trinity.

Torrance suggested that whatever knowledge we seek, our method of inquiry needs to fit the nature of the reality being investigated. If for example we want to know the physical properties of a candle, we can use our five senses to observe things like it’s colour, smell, density, or melting point. The nature of the reality being investigated determines the method of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

*So, how does one investigate a God that is unlike us, above us, and beyond us?*

In a biblical way of thinking, a mystery is not an unsolved puzzle—it’s simply something that God has not yet revealed. Humanity is not God’s plaything, and He doesn’t keep us in the dark in some kind of power-play. He is working a plan that includes letting us know, what can be known, at just the right time.

In Ephesians 1:8-10 Paul writes, “*With all wisdom and understanding, 9 He [God the Father] made known to us the **mystery** of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment?*”

Because God is infinite and we are not, we can’t unravel the mystery of God from our end of things—no amount of human investigation can solve this mystery. Only God can reveal God.

And so, throughout history God had made Himself known—to Abraham and Sarah, to Hannah and Samuel, to David, the prophets,

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<sup>4</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 51.

to Anna, Simeon, Mary, and Joseph. But in Jesus Christ we have the ultimate word concerning God.

At the centre of Christian orthodoxy is the confession that in Jesus Christ we do not see God pretending to be a man, or God in a man, but God **as a man**. God the Son became flesh, so that God could be known.

*So what has Jesus made known about God?* While Israel fully expected God to come and put things to rights, they expected God to come at end of history; they expected God to come in power, bringing mercy to Israel and justice to the nations. They didn't expect God to become flesh, let alone to come in weakness and humility.

It was all so unexpected that most people missed it, or denied that it could be true. In John 1:10-11, we read, "**10** *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11* *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*

In Jesus we see a God who became human so that He could bear our weakness, disappointment, sin, shame, and death. In Jesus Christ we discover a God who loves.

In the earthly ministry of Jesus, He most commonly referred to God as Father. God is not a cold, distant, angry, or unforgiving Father; He's a loving, forgiving, faithful, and generous Father.<sup>5</sup> God loves the world so much that He sent His one and only Son into the world, not to condemn, but to rescue and save.

When we look to Jesus, we not only see God, we also see a vision of our destiny—Humanity 2.0.

Human beings were made in God's image, created for relationship with Him, and invited to participate in His project of cultivating of the earth. But while we have been made for relationship, ironically, humanity is marked by division, strife, and envy. We live in God's good world, but because of sin, the world is profoundly broken and we along with it.

The solution our brokenness is found in the Incarnation. If we think that God doesn't have a clue about how hard life can be, or what it's like to suffer loss, to be hurt, misunderstood, and rejected, look no further than the Lord Jesus Christ. He didn't live a privileged, sterilized, human life; Jesus stepped right into the muck and mire. The Creator drew near as Redeemer—God has acted through Jesus to restore what has been lost through sin, to reclaim the image of God in humanity; Jesus is the Truly Human One.

And so, *if you want to know what humanity is meant to be, look to Jesus.*

By becoming human, without ceasing to be God, Jesus took our broken, sinful, humanity upon Himself, and in the power of the Spirit lived a vicarious human life—the One for the Many. His obedience regained what was lost through humanity's rebellion. By becoming human, without ceasing to be God, Jesus became both Priest and Sacrifice.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Luke 15:11-32.

All of the humanity's hopes—for peace with God and one another; for forgiveness; for healing; for wholeness—all of these hopes have been gathered up in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The life He lived, He lived for us. The death He died, He died for us. His resurrection is a foretaste of our own resurrection, and the place He now dwells—with the Father and Spirit—waits to receive us. Isn't this good news?!

What God planned from the very beginning, the coming of Christ, unfolded at the just the right time. And we, who look with eyes of faith, can see that God knew what He was doing. God's faithfulness, on display through Jesus, inspires faith as we consider our present and future.

**Conclusion:** Perhaps in recent weeks or months, you've been brought face to face with the unexpected—you've been surprised by something (either good or bad). You may find yourself these days in a situation that is veiled in mystery—you don't understand what's happening or why.

In the Incarnation we discover that God can be found in surprising places. At the cross we discover that beauty and redemption can come from pain and loss. Through His death, we find life, and if that is true, then surely Jesus can work all things for our good, even the painful things in our lives.

When we look to Jesus, we see God as He is. "*Veiled in flesh*, [God we see], *Hail the incarnate Deity, Pleased as man with us to dwell*,

*Jesus, our Emmanuel.*"<sup>6</sup> God has come to be with us, and I want to invite you to turn to Him today.

As I conclude this morning, we're going to enter into a time of silent reflection for a few minutes. If it's helpful, you can reflect on one of the following questions:

- In this past year, what has Jesus revealed about Himself, or yourself, that you've never considered before?
- In this past year, what has Jesus transformed, or healed, or restored that you didn't think possible?
- Where are you seeking His transformation in the year ahead?

#### **Silence**

#### **Prayer**

#### **Worship**

#### **Benediction**

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<sup>6</sup> This lyric is taken from the Christmas Carol, *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*.