

# THE INCARNATION

John 1:14a

**“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”**

Merry Christmas! At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. But why do we do it every year? It's a cultural tradition and major commercial event. So many people get swept up in it all. But what does it really *mean*? When we hear the news, there doesn't seem to be much reason to celebrate. The world seems so messed up, with more and more fear, mistrust and hatred. Many want to hide from the world like a turtle in its shell. The big city of Chicago seems diverse with people from all over the world, but in reality many live their entire lives here in isolated ethnic enclaves and never get very close to people different from themselves. Even many Christians are isolating themselves, afraid of becoming unspiritual. Some are just focusing on protecting their own children. Those outside the Christian faith tend to see the Christmas holiday as a form of escape, a sentimental, materialistic, self-indulgent time. But Jesus' birth is actually the exact opposite of all this. He entered *into* this dark, scary world and broke through all kinds of barriers. John 1:14 describes it briefly, with one profound truth: the Incarnation. Today we want to think about what the Incarnation means to each of us. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

John's Gospel begins with a prologue, and it introduces us to “the Word.” As we read it, we find that the Word is not a concept, or a sound, but a person. Who is he? Read verses 1–3. So, the Word *was God*. And there's two more things about him. He was **“in the beginning,”** before the world began. And through him all things were made. So, he's the Eternal Creator God. But wait—who are we really talking about here? The Eternal Creator—he's so great, so awesome, it's hard for us even to *begin* to comprehend him. A Christmas poem puts it this way: “Our God heaven cannot hold Him/Nor earth sustain,/ Heaven and earth shall flee away/When he comes to reign...” (cf. 1Ki8:27; Rev20:11).

Verses 1-3 tell us something else hard to comprehend about him: the Word *was God*, yet he was also *with God*. What could this possibly mean? Verse 14 implies that the Word is Jesus. So actually in verses 1-3 John is describing two of the three persons of the Trinity—God the Father and God the Son. We can't fully grasp it, but by saying **“the Word was with God,”** John is telling us that God the Son existed in eternity with the Father, in perfect fellowship with him (Jn8:29,58; 10:30; 17:5).

And why did John choose to call God's Son “the Word”? Well, he's trying to tell us how much God wants to communicate with us. Hebrews 1:1,2 says, **“In**

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**the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”** God speaks to us through his word in the Bible, but the whole Bible points us to Jesus (Jn5:39). God speaks to us most fully through the person and work of Jesus, the Word. Have you ever stopped to think about it: “*God...actually wants to speak ...to me*”? What’s he trying to say? The secret is in today’s key verse, but we have to think about it carefully and deeply if we’re going to grasp it.

Let’s read verse 14a. At first it may not seem like such a big deal, but this statement is shocking. If the Word is the Creator and Eternal Son of God, how could he become flesh? Some have even said that such a notion is blasphemy. Paul calls it a “**mystery**” that “**he appeared in the flesh**” (1Ti3:16). John, an eyewitness, insists it was true: God the Son became flesh. Later he wrote, “**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us**” (1Jn1:1,2). It was mind-blowing, but it was real and true, as real and true as we can see with our own eyes and touch with our hands. To do this, God in a sense had to set aside his glory as God (Jn17:5). He’s eternal and almighty, but in becoming flesh he entered into time and space and took on our human limits. He even knew what it is to be tired, and thirsty (Jn4:6; 19:28).

So what does this word “incarnation” mean? It may sound like a hard word, but it simply means to put on flesh. It’s also come to mean to be the embodiment of something. So we say, “He’s the incarnation of greed...She’s the incarnation of beauty.” Some confuse it with *re*-incarnation—that we’ve had a previous life, and we’ll have another as a different creature. In light of the Bible’s teachings, reincarnation isn’t true, but in a way it has something to do with today’s message. Let’s think about it for just a moment. Some people find the idea of reincarnation both exciting and scary. What if I have to come back as a flea?!? If we could choose, we might like to come back as someone more gorgeous and famous, rich and powerful. Honestly, in real life most people are aggressively trying to step up, not down: Higher position, more recognition, more money, more beauty. It’s just the opposite of what God himself did. Just the fact that the Eternal Creator God became human is staggering and hard to wrap our minds around. But “the” Incarnation is the one and only time in history when God took on human form. There have been many great events, but this was the most important thing that’s ever happened. C. S. Lewis called it the miracle of all miracles.

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Other places in the Bible give us even more surprising details about the Incarnation. Luke 2 says that when he was born, there was no guest room available, so he was placed in a manger—an animal’s feedbox. As a newborn infant, not only was he weak and vulnerable, but also he was poor and ignored, and born to an unwed mother. Isaiah 53 adds that he grew up like a root out of dry ground, with no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. Philippians 2 says that when he took on human form, he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and that he humbled himself. Matthew 8 says that during his adult life he didn’t even have a place to lay his head. Apostle Paul wrote, **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor...”** (2Co8:9a). When he became flesh, Jesus willingly *chose* probably one of the lowliest human experiences possible. Who in their right mind would *do* that?

And why *would* he? Isaiah 53:3a says, **“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain...”** The eternal Son of God didn’t hide; he exposed himself to being despised and rejected, and to the full brunt of human pain. Why? It was so he could understand those who suffer—especially those who’ve been despised and rejected, whose lives are filled with pain. Honestly, it can be so hard to understand someone who’s suffering. But because he became a man of suffering, Jesus understands people going through the worst sufferings—like the little child dying of starvation in Yemen, or the lonely senior citizen abandoned in a nursing home, or the humiliated Palestinian living behind barbed wire, or the fragile teenager deeply confused about his identity, or the accomplished person always despised simply because of his race, or the troubled woman abused by animalistic men, or the person ashamed of mental illness, or the one addicted to opioids, or the ambitious young man so afraid of failure—Jesus deeply understands each one. Because *he* was wounded, he *understands* those who’ve been wounded. In young people’s language, he was “woke” to human oppression, injustice and agonies of all kinds. That’s why, during his ministry, he reached out to heal the sick and diseased, all those whom society didn’t want. Jesus didn’t just identify with suffering people—it says he **“took up our pain and bore our suffering”** (Isa53:4a). In his suffering, in some sense, he experienced all our suffering.

Hebrews 2:14 says, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity...”** Verse 17 says, **“For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way...”** It emphasizes that when he became flesh, God the Son became *fully human*. He “gets” what it means to be human, including our emotions: our love of life and family, our longing to be accepted, our joys and sorrows, fears and loneliness. So, he’s so relatable. Sometimes we can be

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smart, work hard and be getting things done, but then be emotionally not present when people really need us to be. Jesus, on the other hand, is so real, not like a human machine, and he always empathizes with us. Because he's fully human, he's merciful and faithful to us (Heb2:17b; 4:15). We have many weaknesses but he never looks down on us; he's unashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Heb2:11,12). We should never feel he's too holy and we're too sinful or worthless to come to him. We can approach him with confidence to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb4:17).

Look at John 1:14a again. It says “**...and made his dwelling among us.**” As God the Son, he was the Prince of heaven, but he didn't isolate himself in a palace with many servants; he chose to live among ordinary folks. In fact, he actually *chose to live with* those who were spiritually sick (Mt9:11–13). Wow! To do that, he didn't mind being called “**a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners**” (Mt11:19). He's still concerned with “the least” among us; they're “close to his heart” (Mt25:40; Isa40:11). It shows that Jesus is our Shepherd. Throughout the world, shepherds go out into the fields to live with their sheep and stay with them as a matter of life or death. They get to know their sheep by name, meaning each one's character and needs (Jn10:14). It's always impressive when an important person goes to visit overlooked, forgotten people. But Jesus didn't just visit for an afternoon; he stayed and became one of us.

It wasn't just for some agenda; in dwelling among us Jesus affirmed our value and dignity as human beings. We're each just one of billions of people, and we're living on one tiny speck of a planet in an unfathomable universe. King David thought about this mind-boggling reality and wrote a poem to God: “**When I consider your heavens,/the work of your fingers,/the moon and the stars,/which you have set in place,/what is mankind that you are mindful of them,/human beings that you care for them?**” (Ps8:3,4) When the Word became flesh, God was saying to each one of us: “You matter to me—you may think you're just one insignificant, flawed person, but you matter greatly to me.”

Then there's the main reason for the Incarnation. What is it? A little later in chapter 1, when John the Baptist first sees Jesus, he exclaims, “**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” (Jn1:29). Jesus the Word became flesh to become the Lamb of God for us. But what does that really mean, and how does it work? When he was born, he became the only human being since the Fall who was without sin, because Jesus uniquely was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt1:18b,20b; Lk1:35). In his flesh he was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin (Heb4:15b). In fact, in him is no sin (1Jn3:5). Paul says, “**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...**” (2Co5:21a). Isaiah 53:5 says, “**But**

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**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.”** 1 Peter 2:24 applies it to our practical lives: **“He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.”**

In short, Jesus was wounded in his flesh so that we might be healed. Later when Thomas touched the wounds in Jesus’ body he was healed of his doubts (Jn20:24-29). Likewise, when we look intently into the meaning of his wounds, a miracle happens in our hearts. He heals us of our doubts, our pride, our bitterness, our anger, our hatred, our grudges. He also heals us of our slavish desires for sin. People think sin is enjoyable, acting like it’s not a problem, like there are no consequences. But sin definitely has consequences. When we violate God’s moral and ethical laws, we make ourselves spiritually sick. We get enslaved; we hurt others and alienate ourselves from God; the guilt can be like a prison. Jesus became flesh to get us out of that prison. He became flesh to heal us and restore our relationship with God. Because he became flesh, because he bore our sins in his body, because he shed his blood to forgive and cleanse us, we sinners can draw near to the Holy God, and he can make his dwelling with us forever (Heb10:22; Rev21:3). This healing, this restoration with God, is our hope in this hopeless world. Recently so many young people have lost hope in our government. But this is our real hope—to be deeply healed by the Lamb and to worship him for ever and ever (Rev5:12,13).

But the Incarnation is also grounded on this earth; it shows us how to relate to other people (Php2:3,5; Ro12:16). It challenges us to humble ourselves to make friends with people very different from us. To do this, we’ve got to put aside our pride and prejudice. We’ve got to do our best to try to understand people, especially their hearts. It requires learning how to really listen. There’s a new book coaching business people on how to be successful in an increasingly robotic world; it’s called *Humility is the New Smart*. Even secular people are finding how effective humility is! So we shouldn’t just be enjoying the beauty of the Incarnation; it should challenge us to make practical life choices: where we live, what we eat, how we speak, how we use our time, who we associate with. It might be even more important than knowing all the right things. Honestly, it’s hard to always intentionally be pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone to relate to others in humility. But Apostle Paul, who may have been the greatest missionary, wholeheartedly embraced this incarnational lifestyle. He said he was willing to become like a Jew to win the Jews, or like a Gentile to win the Gentiles. He said, **“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some”** (1Co9:22b).

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Being incarnational is more than just learning skills or techniques. Jesus the Incarnate Word is inviting us, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”** (Mt11:28–30). He’s inviting us to be in a personal relationship with him and learn his gentle, humble heart. Why do we get so weary and burdened? Partly it’s because life has so many demands. But really it’s because we have a sinful nature, and because we have to live among other people who also have a sinful nature. The brutal truth is, our sinful nature makes us selfish, proud, prone to gossip, and merciless, just to name a few of our vices. Honestly, it ruins marriages, families and co-working relationships. Being like this and living among people like this can be so exhausting and demoralizing.

But whenever we come to Jesus, the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us, we find rest for our souls. Why? Because he’s so gentle and humble in heart. His humble, gentle heart is like a spiritual oasis. In his humility the Bible calls him **“the God of all comfort”** (2Co1:3). Even with all our weaknesses, burdensome problems and sins, he *welcomes* us, saying, **“Come to me, and I will give you rest.”** Through his birth God is inviting us to turn from this restless world, come to him and find true rest for our souls. As we learn his gentle, humble heart, it transforms our inner person to actually become more like him. When our heart is proud, we’re restless. But when our heart becomes humble like his, our souls find true rest.

He’s also inviting us, **“Take my yoke upon you.”** It’s actually how we really learn from him—not through theories read in books but through the real life experience of being yoked with Jesus. But what *is* that? What’s his “yoke”? Literally it’s a wooden cross piece fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to a cart or plow they have to pull. It’s a metaphor for the mission God the Father gave Jesus the Son. It’s the mission of saving people from their sins by being with them (Mt1:21, 23). Jesus who said, **“Take my yoke upon you”** is humbly inviting us to share in his mission. Pulling a cart through a yoke may seem strenuous and burdensome. But Jesus promises, **“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”** It’s a miracle, but it’s his humility that makes it so. And he’s doing most of the pulling; we get to help only by his grace. When we live for our own ego, we get so burdened and restless trying to impress people. But when we take Jesus’ yoke, we find that it’s easy and light. Working together with Christ isn’t heavy; it fills us with joy.

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The Incarnation has many meanings, but ultimately it shows us God's great, initiating love. In our sin we ignore God and act like he doesn't exist. But he came to us anyway. He came to us first. He came to us when we were wrong and lived like his enemies. He came so humbly to show us how much he loves us. Can you believe that he loves us that much? 1 John 4:9,10 says, **“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** No matter who we are or what we've done, all we have to do is open our hearts to his love. And when we experience his love, he calls us to love others the way he loves us. He calls us to love humbly and to love first, even when we're not loved back.

So as we celebrate Christmas, amidst all the decorations and the presents and the cookies and the relatives, let's think about the core meaning, the Incarnation—that God our Creator became flesh to understand us, to value us, to be with us, to save us, to love us, and to show us how to live a beautiful life like his.