

John 1:1-5 "The Need for the Incarnation"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

I love Christmas. Singing these songs that we've heard and love, enjoying these beautiful decorations. Thank you, ladies.

Mostly ladies. I think there were a couple men who helped. It's wonderful. People especially celebrating the life-changing, history-altering entrance of God into this world in human flesh. That's what we're celebrating, right? As we often do, I want us to focus for a few weeks in our sermons on Christmas. And this year we're going to use John chapter 1 as our starting point. Over the next few weeks we're going to leave John 1 and jump into a few other passages from time to time. But that will be our focus, where we'll be getting our themes.

[1 : 06] It's this glorious prologue to John's gospel. Talking about the glory of Christmas. We'll read it in a couple of minutes.

But as you'll see here in this really nice graphic that Eli made for us, the focus, the most Christmas part of these 18 verses is there in the middle.

The Word became flesh. This shocking statement that John has for us. One that no Jew or Gentile, no one would have had categories for this.

The Word became flesh. If that's true, that God became man, that the material, the immaterial actually became material and walked among us, then it changes everything.

If that happened, that can't be ignored. Nothing else could possibly be more important than that. That's why we need to spend some time thinking about the incarnation.

[2 : 14] The Word became flesh. I'll use this as a working description of the incarnation for our time together.

What the essence of Christmas is over the next few weeks. You know that Christmas means the coming of Christ, right? That's what the Word means. So we'll talk about the incarnation as the intentional entrance of the divine Son of God into our fallen world in human flesh to secure our redemption at the cost of His life because of His great love.

Nothing fancy or complicated in that, but it is glorious. We're going to look in the next few weeks at all the aspects of that description, but right now I especially want to point out the uniqueness of the incarnation.

This is a one-time event in history that we cannot replicate. The divine Son of God becoming man to accomplish redemption.

And you may say, yeah, well, we know. That's what it's all about. I say that in part because part of my heart in this series is that we would understand and learn for ourselves a few things about how the incarnation impacts our lives.

[3 : 39] How it changes the way we live. The pattern in that the way Jesus relates to people can be for the way we relate to others. Jesus is sometimes referenced biblically as a pattern for us, an example for us.

Now, that's not the point of John chapter 1. It's simply not there. But we'll see it in some other passages as we read in the next few weeks. And I want you to know something as we see that. I want you to know how important it is that we not see the incarnation primarily as an example for us to replicate. First and foremost, it is the unique, unrepeatable event by which we are rescued, not merely redirected.

So we're going to talk in the next few weeks about the sacrifice of the incarnation. What Jesus gave up. The pain of the incarnation. What Jesus endured.

The motivation for the incarnation. What drove Jesus to become flesh. And in all of those, we're going to learn important principles for our lives.

[4 : 53] How we relate to God and those around us. How in some ways, as Jesus says in John 17, 18, as God sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends us into the world.

There's connectivity there, right? There is a pattern going on. But we're going to end by coming back to the uniqueness of the incarnation.

The one and only Son of God who became man. You got that? Am I belaboring this point at this point? We're going to focus on the incarnation of Jesus.

On Him. The glory and the uniqueness of Jesus' incarnation. Celebrate it. Worship Him for it. And learn, where appropriate, how He's a pattern for us.

This morning, we'll focus on the need for the incarnation. The first few verses of John 1. I'm going to read this whole beautiful prologue this morning. Why don't we stand together and give our attention to the reading of God's holy word in John 1.

[6 : 06] This is the word of God. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through Him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

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.

[7 : 25] John bore witness about Him and cried out, This was He of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because He was before me. And from His fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.

Thus far, God's holy Word. Father, pray with me. Father, for Your Word, we give You great thanks. And we beg this morning that You would teach us, not just lessons for our heads, but that You would help us to experience Your truth, to know it in the depths of our beings, and to have it transform us that we might be different people, that we might worship You, and know You, and serve You.

To that work, we pray, by Your Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. If you've ever been on a tour deep into a cave, where they get you in the middle of the tour, and then turn all the lights out, and you can't even see your hand in front of your face, then you know what darkness feels like. My family took a trip this fall break up to Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, and went on a tour like that in this huge cave.

[9 : 05] And while we were in the dark part of that cave, at that part of the tour where they turn all the lights out, the tour guide told us the story of a man who decades ago had been on a tour like that.

And he forgot his hat early in the tour, and so he asked if he might be allowed to go back and get his hat. And they allowed him to, in fact, gave him a lantern to take with him to go back and find his hat.

And they were going to meet up later. He found the hat and went back to look for the tour group, but took a wrong turn and couldn't find them. He thought perhaps he saw them coming and thought he would see the light of the tour better if he blew his lamp out.

So he blew the lamp out, only to find himself alone in utter darkness, stuck, no way to turn the light back on.

He sat down, and as the hours passed, he, as you can imagine, began to get pretty frantic. He thought he heard footsteps coming nearer to him and began to call out and to bang rocks together

over and over.

[10:12] And the closer the footsteps got, the louder he would bang the rocks. And nobody showed up. It was late the next day, in fact, before a rescue team finally found him.

And when they found him, they said, you know, how have you been doing? How's it going? And he said, well, people were close so many times. Were you all in this part of the cave overnight? They said, no, no one's been near here.

Those footsteps you thought you heard, do you know what those were? That was his heart. That was his own heart beating in the darkness, in the silence.

It was so confusing, so disconcerting, that he didn't even recognize his own heart beating. He was stuck. Trying to get out of the cave by himself would have ended in certain injury or death, falling into something that he couldn't see.

All he could do was sit and wait for light to come. I tell you that story because it's a good picture of what darkness feels like and is like.

[11:22] We've been talking already this morning of the darkness of our lives and the light of Christ. It's the kind of darkness that John describes Jesus bringing light into.

Jesus' incarnation is necessary. It's so needed because of the darkness of this world. That can't see my hand in front of my face kind of darkness.

Can't take a single confident step in the right direction. Darkness. Desperate for light. Look at verse 4. In him was life and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. There's in these verses a connection of light and life.

And so what we see is that darkness is quite the opposite. There's death associated with darkness. The absence of life. The Word, the light, is with God.

[12:29] Connected to Him in relationship closely. But the darkness is not. You can feel the distance from the light of life.

No connection to God whatsoever. The world into which Jesus entered was marked by the violence and debauchery and idolatry of Rome.

Having nothing to do with Yahweh, the God of Israel. In fact, it's very similar to the darkness of Babylon. In that famous prophecy from Isaiah 9, we've read a couple of times already this morning, verse 2, the people who walked in darkness there in exile in Babylon, those people have seen a great light.

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, darkness on them has light shone. The darkness of exile in Babylon featured a nation in control who was totally opposed to Yahweh and everything that He stood for.

Notice as well that feeling of distance from God was not just true for that nation, not just true for the Romans and the Babylonians. It was true as a feeling for the people of God in Babylon and in John chapter 1, right?

[13:56] They were feeling that distance from God. In Babylon, away from the promised land, feeling neglected, not knowing where to go or what to do.

By the time of the incarnation, John chapter 1, God's people have been hearing what? Silence from God for hundreds of years, generations, not knowing if He's still there, if He can still be trusted. Darkness for God's people too. Of course, darkness in the Bible involves this element of moral confusion as well.

It's not just being separated from God, but the people in power in Rome and in Babylon, they seem to do whatever they want. They live however they please.

Maybe it's okay. Where does obeying the commands of God get one anyway? Apparently not very far, they might be thinking. Perhaps right and wrong is, you know, it's more difficult to define than we thought.

[15:03] It's really quite confusing. There's a word in verse 5, the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.

Overcome. That word there means to grasp or seize something. Sometimes physically. So like it's translated here, it would mean the darkness has not overcome or defeated the light.

Sometimes it means hasn't been grasped or seized mentally. Hasn't been understood. The thought hasn't been mastered. It rejects it offhand as later in chapter 1 we're going to see the darkness just rejects the light.

Just utter confusion about what truth would even be. Sometimes that's because of willful blindness. Like what Jesus describes in John chapter 3.

This is the judgment. The light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. Why did they prefer the darkness to the light?

[16:16] Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed. Because of our willful choice of these evil deeds, I don't want the light to expose the darkness.

darkness. You're in that cave and the right way out is not just a 50-50 guess this way or that way. It's one of a million passageways will get you out but most of them you'll fall to your great injury or death.

You can't see which step has clear footing. And even if you could, perhaps you're not sure you'd want to get out that way. You've kind of grown accustomed to the darkness.

I'd rather stay safe here than risk moving in that direction. Moral confusion. Finally, perhaps the most prominent aspect of the darkness described here is its utter helplessness.

If you try to find your own way to safety in the darkness, you're only going to hurt yourself. You can provide no light. All you can do is sit there in the dark with your heart pounding and wait for light, for help to come to you.

[17:37] It's like Paul telling us we're spiritually dead, completely unable to move toward light, hopelessly stuck, right? We've got to feel the weight of this darkness in the world before the incarnation.

The darkness into which Jesus as the light of the world would come. There's no help for those walking in darkness, for those in a land of deep darkness.

No one else in the darkness can help. Sadly, it's not just the pagan nations of old or the people of God in Babylon or Rome who have felt darkness like this, is it?

Relational distance from God. moral confusion. Utter helplessness. Felt any of that lately?

Thought any of those things recently? Would you sometimes describe the darkness of the world in which we live as tangible, as palpable?

[18:46] I can feel it everywhere I look and everything I do. You can feel the weight of it all around you, can't you? We've been reminded daily in recent months and again this week that we live in a culture where we think we have some special kind of light, but celebrities, those lives that we follow and idolize and watch closely, sports or entertainment figures, they're openly acknowledged to be distant from God and regularly found to be empty and debased.

A culture where moral confusion is so epidemic that even the most basic issues of right and wrong can hardly be established. We can't agree on almost anything.

A culture where elected leaders, far from helping us sort through our deep confusion and see virtue and the right path more clearly, are the exemplars in many cases of this present darkness displaying and at times even defending their own corruption.

What makes it hard for us to feel this the way Israel would have in Isaiah or the Jews in John 1 is that we now within the church of Jesus Christ are shielded from all of that.

The darkness never comes in here. We're immune from those struggles. Right? Who are we kidding?

[20:24] We certainly feel oppressive darkness around us, but usually, if we're honest, we also feel it inside of us. Don't we? In some ways, we've been called to be a light in a dark world, shining the light of God before men.

But we too, even in the church, have neglected God's Word so much that He does feel distant. And the path of righteousness does seem unclear.

We too fail to love each other faithfully. Even the ones closest to us whom we have particularly promised to love, we fail to love. We too experience leaders preying on the vulnerable and demonstrating their own idolatry and moral confusion.

And so, because of these things, we ourselves often approve of the darkness. Why? Why? Just like in John 3, we approve of the darkness so that our own evil is not exposed.

So we don't have to deal with the ugly reality we see in our own hearts and in our own relationships. Or we're at times guilty of avoiding darkness, hiding our light, rather than putting the lamp on a stand where Jesus has called us to.

[21 : 40] We keep to ourselves thinking, aha, we will avoid darkness altogether. We'll just stay in here. The completely nonsensical opposite of what our Savior has done Himself and called us to do.

But some days, you look around and the darkness just feels too strong, doesn't it? Feels ever-present around us, too.

Are you starting to feel a little bit of why we need the good news of Christmas, of the incarnation? Why we need God to break in with light to our darkness?

Back in the 11th century, a theologian named Anselm asked that very question, why did God have to become a man?

In Latin, he said, cur Deus homo. Why the God-man? And he gave us a great start on the answer to that question.

[22 : 48] Now, Anselm understood this dynamic that even though men ought to be the one to make the payment to satisfy divine justice because men were the debtors, the ones who owed that debt, even though men ought to pay it, only God was capable of paying the infinite debt, of satisfying the perfect standard, and so God had to become man.

That's why God had to become man. In my words, human flesh must be divinely perfect.

That's what had to happen. God created humanity to live in this perfect relationship with Him where we trusted Him and obeyed Him and reflected His image.

He commanded us to be what? Holy. Just a little bit holy? No, as holy as He is holy. Human flesh, divinely perfect.

That's what was necessary. But then in our rebellion, we found ourselves in the darkness. Distant from this close relationship with God we were created for.

[24 : 10] Contradicting His commands. Without hope and without God in the world. Ephesians chapter 2. The darkness of this world leaves everyone alone and hopeless and helpless stuck, right?

Unless, unless light comes and finds us. Unless light moves into our darkness and shines there. and so the Word had to become flesh. The light had to come shine in the darkness. God Himself had to come find us.

Have you been there in the dark cave on one of those tours when the light comes on? Usually it may even just be one flashlight or something. It doesn't just light up a little spot in the huge empty cavern, does it?

Very quickly the light fills the entire space. The people of God failed over and over and over to be a light to the nations.

[25 : 25] And so God promised to send one to bring them light. Even more than bringing light just to God's people, that one was going to be a light that would light up and bring light to the nations.

Isaiah 49 verse 6. Not just for the tribes of Jacob and the preserved of Israel, but a light for the nations was this one who was coming to fill the entire world with light.

This is what Jesus offers to all of us. The light of life. John chapter 8. Jesus says it. He spoke to them and says, I'm the light of the world.

Here's why I came. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Later in John chapter 12, I have come into the world as light so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

That's why he came. God may seem very distant to you this morning. I know there are some of you for whom life seems purposeless and confusing and you're thinking the best way forward is to escape from it.

[26 : 56] Others of you have failed in such humiliating ways that you just feel like there's no hope for you at all. Some of you have been harmed in such dark, devastating ways that you think there's no way forward.

There's no hope for me. Others of you have felt the emptiness of success and you've gotten there and it didn't fulfill and you're feeling nothing left to live for.

And I've had the privilege of seeing some of you in all of those situations hopeless and stuck and with no way forward and to find God show up to see Jesus bring light and meet you in those dark places and bring life and to see you rejoice in that.

Jesus says no matter how thick the darkness you feel he brings light and life into that darkness.

That's the message of Christmas that Jesus has come to be the light of the world that whoever knows him will have the life of light in you.

[28 : 22] Will no longer walk in darkness that there is something on the other side of where you are right now that there is deliverance from that pain and hopelessness that you feel.

Because Jesus comes as a man who has a perfect relationship with God. The word was with God. The word was God. And all through the life of Jesus it's not just in his birth we see him and we hear him talking with the father seeking the glory of the father always doing the will of his father. He loves and trusts him as we were always supposed to. No relational distance. Absolute intimacy and knowledge and trust. That's why Jesus has life and light.

And then he provides the perfect righteousness. He lives as a man. Human flesh being divinely perfect. Keeping all the father's commands.

Always obedient even in the great temptations. Even in the agonizing situations. All the way to the cross obedient. He has come to do the will of the father and to finish his work.

[29 : 35] John 4 34. This is why we need the incarnation. We needed someone to come do that for us. The perfect obedience. The perfect relationship that we were created for.

Except it gets even better than that. God because Jesus doesn't just come to show the way. He doesn't just walk in and say here's how you can do it. Here's how you can relate to God.

Here's what obedience looks like. He doesn't merely show us how to relate to God. And how to obey the father so that we could maybe find our way to light and life.

No. He is the help that we really need. Because of our utter helplessness. That's why there's hope for every one of us.

No matter how thick the darkness you feel is, there's hope because of this. I want you to imagine for a minute that you're that person stuck in the darkness of the cave.

[30 : 37] You're utterly helpless. Just imagine you've fallen down to this place and broken both of your legs. Is it any use to you for someone to show up and say, hey, I know the way out.

If you climb up this really tall rock face and get to the top of it and turn left and go down that passageway about 500 yards and then, that's no help to you at all.

In fact, it's almost just heaping a heavier burden on you, taunting you that you can't do and get out the way that you've been told you could.

Those kinds of directions are not enough. Imagine you're lying there in utter darkness, stuck on the floor of the cave and all of a sudden the ceiling of the cave starts to shake and pull apart and light comes crashing in and a rescue team reaches down and plucks you up and pulls you up into the light.

light. That's the vision you need to have in your head of what the incarnation is. See, Jesus has broken through heaven and earth to come into your darkness and not just shine a little light in the corner, but to come flooding in with light to grab you, to rescue you and bring you into light and life.

[32 : 05] Not merely to show us where rescue can be found, but truly to rescue us, to give us that perfect righteousness, to restore that perfect relationship with our Father.

Did you know you could know that? Did you know as you trust Christ that's the relationship that He's invited you into? He's done all that we were supposed to do and He comes to restore true life to those of us stuck in the death of darkness.

Not to put a heavy burden on already confused and helpless people, but to give you life. In fact, God breaking in to be the light in the darkness is not over yet.

He rescues so thoroughly that He brings life forever as the eternal light. Isaiah tells us what it's going to be like. Chapter 60, darkness shall cover the earth in thick darkness.

The peoples, we know that condition, but the Lord will arise upon you and His glory will be seen upon you and nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.

[33 : 16] Where's the light coming from? The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light, but the Lord will be your everlasting light and your God will be your glory.

Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself, for the Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of mourning shall be ended. There's hope.

Those dark days are over. John actually sees a picture of it in Revelation. Here's what it's going to be like. The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb.

By its light will the nations walk. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. That's how great this light is. An eternal light for the people of God and all the nations who in the midst of their darkness cry out even today for the light of Jesus, the light we know only he can offer. it's for us, yes. And it's for all the nations. May Christmas remind you of something.

[34 : 36] May you remember when you think of the incarnation and you think of Christmas that there is a light powerful enough and passionate enough to break into whatever darkness you feel no matter how thick it is.

Would you remember that there's hope because of that? That there's life on the other side of where you are because the light has come in and broken into our darkness. And would we not rest until we have shared the good news of that light with every nation and every person who needs to know there's hope in Jesus.

Let's pray. Jesus, thank you. You have broken into the darkness for us to find us.

Come now, day spring. Come and cheer our spirits by your advent here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Jesus, we need you to come. We know what that darkness feels like. Many of us feel it weighing us down this morning and we beg that you would come and we rejoice that you have come.

[35 : 58] Might we glory in the light that you have given us and might you come again quickly, Lord Jesus, to bring us into your eternal light where you are our light and you are our life forever.

Thank you. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.