

The Revealing Word

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[0 : 00] Well, would you turn with me to the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 14 through 18. That's page 833 in the Pew Bible. Let me pray as we come to God's Word together.

Our Father in heaven, as we come to your Word written, help us to behold your Word incarnate, our Lord Jesus. It's him that we really want to see.

It's his glory that we want to behold. So help us, Lord, to do that by your Holy Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right, let me read John, chapter 1, 14 through 18.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 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.

[1 : 09] For 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. In his book, *Simply Christian*, N.T. Wright tells this parable in one of his chapters.

There was once a ruler, a dictator, who wanted everything in his country to be thought through and worked out according to a strictly rational system. Nothing would be left to chance.

But this ruler, this dictator, noticed one day that the water sources around the country were erratic and in some cases quite dangerous. There were thousands of springs of water, often in the middle of towns and cities.

They could be useful, but sometimes they would cause floods, and sometimes they got polluted, and often they burst out in new places and damaged roads and fields and houses. So the dictator decided on a sensible, rational policy.

[2 : 17] The whole country, or at least every part where there was any suggestion of water, would be paved over with concrete so thick that no spring of water could ever penetrate it.

The water that people needed would be brought to them by a complex system of pipes, and we would even treat the water with some chemicals and keep the people healthy. With the dictator controlling the supply, everyone would have what they needed, and there wouldn't be any more nuisance from these unregulated springs.

Well, for many years, the plan worked just fine. People got used to their water coming from the new system. It tasted a bit strange, and sometimes they would look back longingly to the bubbling streams and fresh springs they used to enjoy.

And many of the problems didn't go away. It turned out the air was just as polluted at times as the water. But on the whole, the people praised the dictator for his forward-looking wisdom. A generation passed.

All seemed to be well. Then, without warning, the springs that had gone on bubbling and sparkling beneath the solid concrete could no longer be contained.

[3 : 31] In a sudden explosion, they burst through the concrete that people had taken for granted. And water shot up everywhere, through the sidewalks and in the middle of the roads, through the floors of their shops and homes.

Water came shooting from all directions. Some people loved it. At last they could get water without depending on the system. Others were dismayed. Especially those who ran the water pipes.

Where would all this lead? Well, this parable is meant to tell the story of the Western world for the last few hundred years. For the past two or more centuries, philosophical and cultural currents have tried to pave over spirituality or religion or transcendence with a thick layer of concrete.

Pack it down. Keep it away. Only give it a very small, controlled place in our private lives. But on the whole, just keep it buried. But the concrete couldn't hold.

The deep human longing for spirituality, for transcendence, keeps breaking through. For many years, sociologists thought that religion would eventually die out. That we just wouldn't need it anymore.

[4 : 50] But now those confident predictions are seen to be foolish. The thick concrete of materialism just couldn't hold. And now the springs of spirituality are bursting forth from every corner.

The human heart longs to be in touch with something greater and something deeper. Of course, for many people in the West, that does not mean a return to traditional religion, does it?

Religion still seems stuffy and cold and boring, but spirituality, a way to connect with transcendence and meaning, that is alive and well. Just walk through the aisles of Barnes & Noble long enough, and you'll stumble across the section filled with books about meditation and mindfulness, about mind and body and spirit.

our age is an age hungry for something more than the old, concrete, layered world of the 19th and 20th century rationalism could provide.

And you know, in that hunger, there are no shortage of options today. And there were no shortage of options in John's day either.

[5 : 58] The Apostle John, who wrote what we just read, spirituality in the first century was alive and well, just like in the 21st century. Now, in John's day, there were sort of the classic options.

You know, there was good old paganism with lots of gods, each god with his or her own sphere of influence. You could pick a few of your favorites based on your tribe or your profession, and you could hope they would give you some kind of control or blessing in this life.

And then, on the other hand, there was good old Platonism. The gods were sort of out there in their own sphere, and the trick was to escape this messy material world and to go dwell there. But alongside these kind of classic options, there were some more up-to-date versions.

In the place of good old paganism, there was Stoicism. Which sort of held that the divine, you know, it wasn't located in individual gods, but rather there were divine forces within us and the world.

And if you could just align yourself with them, with the right mindset, then you would actually achieve sort of proper peace now and maybe even union with that divine when your life expired.

[7 : 12] Stoicism wasn't actually far off from a lot of spirituality today, when you think about it. But then in the first century and into the second century, there was also Gnosticism, which was sort of a revamped Platonism.

In Gnosticism, what matters about humans is sort of their secret inner core, that you have a real self, deep down, buried down, that needs to be identified and allowed to express itself.

And this real self is often quite different from your outer person, your physical person. And if you can find this inner spark, this secret inside of you, then you'll really be connected to the divine, to the transcendent.

And you know, a lot of spirituality today is highly Gnostic. We sort of anxiously try to find our true self and our physical bodies give us no indication of what that might be, we think.

So what does the Gospel of John have to tell us when it comes to this whole human impulse for spirituality?

[8 : 16] Well, John puts the whole question on a very different footing. He says in verse 18, no one has ever seen God. All of our human attempts to reach God or connect with God or break through to God, they don't work.

We can't possibly cross the divide between the finite and the infinite. The gap is just too great. You know the play Hamlet?

It's sort of like imagining Rosencrans and Guildenstern, two characters in that play, searching the castle, stalking the graveyard, marching all over Denmark, trying to find Shakespeare.

No matter how hard they try, they aren't going to find the author of the play. No one has ever seen God, John says.

Keep looking. You won't find him. But what about all of our human impulses for spirituality? Is John just paving more concrete over the wild springs deep in the human heart?

[9 : 25] Ah, keep reading. No one has ever seen God. The only God who's at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Humans cannot reach up to God, but God can reach down to humans. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern won't ever break outside the play to find Shakespeare in a pub in Stratford-on-Avon, right?

But Shakespeare might choose to write himself into their world. And that's what John is trying to tell us. The impossible human longing to see God, to know God, the impossible human longing that bubbles like a spring under the concrete of our late modern world and takes countless shapes and forms from yoga studios to mindfulness seminars.

This impossible human longing has finally actually become possible. Why? Not because of anything you or I have done or could do, but only because of what God has done.

God in Jesus has made himself known. He's written himself into the play. In fact, the Greek word that John uses here for make known at the end of verse 18 and other places in the New Testament means to tell a narrative or to narrate.

[10:51] So we might say that Jesus is the narration of God. God speaking his own self, his own story, right into ours. Do you see how this makes Christianity very different than other spiritualities?

You know, nearly every other approach to spirituality says, if you want to see God, then you have to make yourself more like God. If you want to get in touch with the transcendent, here's a set of practices that will change you and align you with that transcendence.

If you want to see God, well, here's the secret to become more like God. Here's the path up. Here's the path in. Here's how you, a finite human, can get up to the infinite. But Christianity is very different.

This spirituality says, not humans must become God, but God has become a human. God has become a human and made himself known.

And for John, that means two things. First, it means that in Jesus we can see God's glory. And second, it means that in Jesus we can receive God's grace.

[12:05] So let's look at the first of those. We can see God's glory. Look again at verses 14 and 15. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory. Glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth.

John 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. We've seen his glory. Isn't that what so many spiritualities are trying to get at?

A sort of glimpse of glory, of transcendence, of infinite, of awe and wonder and holiness. John says, here it is. In the word, Jesus, the only son from the father who became flesh and dwelt among us.

Of course, in one sense, this is what the whole Bible's about. Remember all the way back in Genesis chapter one, God creates the world. In six days, he sort of sets up the form, right? And then in six creation days, he sort of fills it out.

And then on the seventh day, what happens? Well, the writer of Genesis says, God rests. But you know, that doesn't mean that God took a break because he was tired, right?

[13:09] It wasn't as if six days of work was really rough. You know, you and I work five days and we get kind of worn out. We need a two-day weekend. God can work six, but he still needs one day off, right? That's not what Genesis is saying. The resting on the seventh day is not the rest of a weary laborer, but the resting of a king on his throne.

All of creation in Genesis one is built like a temple for the living God, the place where his glory rests. From the very beginning, God intended to dwell with his creation, with his people.

But as the story goes, the first humans disobeyed their king. They disobeyed God and they were driven out from God's presence in the garden. The dwelling place seemed to be lost. But then as the story continues, God reestablishes his dwelling place.

He redeems his people from slavery in Egypt and he tells them to do what? He tells them to build a tabernacle, build a tent in the wilderness. And this tabernacle would be the place where God again begins to dwell in the midst of his people.

They lived in tents, so God would come and dwell in their midst in a tent. And then after God establishes them in the promised land, he allows them to build a temple.

[14:27] Because after all, the people now live in houses, so God will dwell in their midst in a house. And the tabernacle and the temple would be the place, it would be the center of the spirituality of God's people.

Here is where God's glory would reside, right in their midst. Here is where the infinite would touch the finite. Here is where transcendence and holiness would come into contact with the material and the mundane.

This is where God would rest. This is where God would dwell. And in both instances, when the tabernacle was first raised and the temple first constructed, we are told that God's holy glory comes down and fills it.

But you know, the tabernacle and the temple, these were just signposts. They were just preliminary sketches.

God had something greater in store. Because when the fullness of time had come, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And the word dwelt that John uses there is the same word for pitching a tent, for a tabernacle.

[15:38] John is very deliberately saying that the true tabernacle, the true temple, is finally here. God's no longer dwelling in a tent or in a temple.

God became flesh so that humans might know his glory at last. God has become human. In Jesus Christ, we see God's glory.

That was the message of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner. He who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me. According to John the Baptist, Jesus has the preeminence, the glory.

John saw it and testified to it, the gospel writer John says about John the Baptist. But how about you and me? Do we see it?

Do we see God's glory in the incarnate become flesh word, Jesus? Many choose not to.

[16:42] After all, I mean, isn't God's glory supposed to be powerful and overwhelming? Shouldn't it be huge and gilded and shining like the walls of the temple? But Jesus, look at him.

born to an insignificant family in an insignificant part of Israel, living an insignificant life for 30 years. Goodness gracious, he dies hung up on a Roman cross like the trash of the earth.

There's no glory there. Where's the power? Where's the shock and awe? But what sort of glory were you looking for?

The real glory of God, the true God, the God who makes himself known in Jesus, it isn't that sort of glory. You want celebrity, fame, money, power, that's not real glory.

Real glory, God's glory, is right here. in Jesus, John says, full of grace and truth. That's what God ultimately wanted us to see.

[17:59] And that's what he had been telling his people for centuries actually. Do you remember when Moses said to God in Exodus, God, show me your glory. What did God do? Well, God knew that if sinful Moses really saw God and his holiness, Moses would be undone.

Just like Isaiah's vision in the temple. Do you remember that? Isaiah has this prophetic vision where he sort of sees just the hem of God's robe, sort of like the edge of the outermost piece of his clothing.

And what happens? He sees the edge of God's robe and Isaiah cries out, woe is me! I'm undone! My very being is shaken to the core and I'm in pieces. I'm uncreated by the holiness of God.

So how is God going to show Moses his glory? Well, God says, Moses, hide here. Hide in the cleft of this rock and I'll cover you and then I'll pass by and you won't see my face.

You'll see my back actually. That is, you'll see the kind of after effects, the echo of my passing by and then I'll declare to you my name and my glory. And God does just that.

[19:08] Exodus 34, 6 says, The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, full of grace and truth. That's God's glory.

And it comes to its climax in Jesus Christ. Because in the incarnation, God proves his faithfulness to all of his promises. And in the incarnation, God demonstrates his steadfast love, his grace.

In the incarnation, God completes his plan promised all the way back in Genesis when the first human couple fell and when God promised on that day that one day a child would come.

One day the child would come to crush the head of the serpent, to defeat sin and evil. But in the crushing, the child would be crushed. Look again at the tabernacle.

[20:21] Look again at the temple. What do you see there? Day after day, month after month, week after week. What do you see happening at the tabernacle, at the temple? The temple.

Sacrifices.

After all, how could this holy God, this almighty creator, dwell in the midst of a sinful people? Would it not surely mean their death, their undoing? Surely his unimaginable holiness, wouldn't it, would it not just simply crush them under its weight?

This last summer, my family, we made a trip to Niagara Falls. I don't know if any of you have been to Niagara Falls, but it's just massive. And the just weight of the water pouring down.

You can't really feel it until you're there. And we were there and we went on this thing called I think the hurricane deck or something like that where you sort of can climb out on this deck and you're sort of next to the water pouring down and it's spraying off of you and it hurts.

But it's like the bouncing of it that hurts, right? Not the full weight of it. And honestly, it's very troubling being that close to Niagara Falls because you think, one slip and we're done for.

[21 : 37] And if that's true of a mere waterfall, friends, what about the holy God who made waterfalls and mountains and stars and universes?

Could sinful people dwell with a God like that? So God gives them sacrifices and so the sacrifice dies so the people don't have to.

God allows a substitution to be made. But you know, the sacrifices at the tabernacle and at the temple, again, they were just signposts. It wasn't going to be bulls and goats, but the word made flesh full of grace and truth, full of steadfast love and faithfulness, true to his promise.

God himself would bear the curse and the crushing weight of sin. And that would be the full display of God's glory. According to the Gospel of John, where do we see the glory of God?

It's the glory of the cross. The Holy One would stand in the place of the sinner and the sinner's debt would be paid.

[22 : 54] And that's why John goes on to say, for from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

So John's saying, look, we don't just see God's glory in the incarnate word Jesus, but we receive his grace. We receive it. I mean, think about it.

What is it that we're really looking for in what we call spirituality? There might be a lot of reasons why people go after what they think of as something spiritual. You know, it might be a desire for awe.

It might be a desire for control, trying to get some kind of control around yourself or your surroundings. It might be a desire for meaning. To make sense of life. But I think deep down, isn't what we're looking for, isn't what we really want, isn't it to be known and to be loved?

John says, we've been given grace upon grace. One grace in place of another. What was the first grace? He says, the law was given through Moses. The law is a great gift.

[24 : 07] Why? Because when you look into the law, you see yourself. You see yourself without any hiding and without any pretense. God's perfect law comes and God says, I know you fully.

All of you. All your virtues and your vices. I know you. Everything that makes you lovely and everything that makes you ashamed. All your triumphs and all your failures.

All your flaws and all your sins. God says, I know them all. But is that where it ends? No, there comes a second gift in place of the first.

The law came through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. God knows you fully and he loves you completely.

So much so that what he requires of you, what God requires of you in the law, God provides for you in his son. That's why it's grace and truth.

[25 : 15] There's no one who knows you better than Jesus Christ. He is the God, the one through whom all things, you included, were created. And he became flesh and lived in this very humanity that is ours.

No one knows you better than him. And still, he chose to love you and lay down his life for you. No one knows you better than Jesus and no one loves you better than him.

From his fullness we've received grace upon grace. So where does this leave us? Well, if it is true that no one has ever seen God but the only God, Jesus, the Son, who's at the Father's side has made him known, if that's true, well, then the application seems clear.

The only true and real spirituality is the one focused and centered utterly on Jesus Christ. the bubbling streams of human spirituality that keep breaking through the concrete are meant to flow to him and to him alone.

