



ADVENT

25 REFLECTIONS ON THE
INCARNATION OF CHRIST

SOJOURN

Wilt thou love God as he thee? then digest,
My soul, this wholesome meditation,
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on
In heaven, doth make His temple in thy breast.
The Father having begot a Son most blest,
And still begetting—for he ne'er begun—
Hath deign'd to choose thee by adoption,
Co-heir to His glory, and Sabbath's endless rest.
And as a robb'd man, which by search doth find
His stolen stuff sold, must lose or buy it again,
The Son of glory came down, and was slain,
Us whom He had made, and Satan stole, to unbind.
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
But, that God should be made like man, much more.

John Donne, Holy Sonnet XV

INTRODUCTION

The incarnation refers to the doctrine that the second person of the Trinity has become human in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus took on flesh, becoming fully, truly human, He did so without ceasing to be fully, truly divine. He was the divine Son of God long before He became Jesus of Nazareth, and He will go on being both for all eternity.

Our hope for this 25-day Advent devotional is to facilitate further reflection upon this awe-inspiring doctrine. As you make your way through the daily readings, you will encounter two categories of reflections:

1. *Select portions of Scripture which contribute to a biblical theology of incarnation.* In the words of Richard Bauckham, “[The incarnation] could not have been expected, but nor was it uncharacteristic. It is novel but appropriate to the identity of the God of Israel.” Terence E. Fretheim goes even further in saying, “There is no such thing for Israel as a non-incarnate God.” Indeed, the God of the Old Testament is regularly presented as though incarnate, or at the very least, anthropomorphic (having human characteristics). What can be said for all the biblical language concerning God’s eyes, ears, arms, hands, fingers, and so on? Might this be preparing us to see the incarnation as a natural development?
2. *Bible-based meditations on the theological, philosophical, and practical implications of the incarnation.* The truth of the incarnation has seismic implications for the doctrine and knowledge of God, the nature of knowledge itself, our understanding and appreciation of the created order, the dignity of human existence, the mission and methods of the Church, the encounter between Christianity and other world religions, and the question of evil and suffering in the world. Thus, interspersed within the reflections to follow, we will attempt to scratch the surface on a few of these topics.

The eternal Son of God has taken on human flesh. He is now and forever incarnate, and when the penny drops on this doctrine, it ought to fill us with wonder. In response to our dire need, God the Father did not send a mere priest or king or prophet; He sent His very Son to fulfill and transcend each of these Old Covenant offices. He left the riches and glory of His heavenly home to experience pain, poverty, temptation, and brutality. With human eyes, He wept and witnessed atrocities. With human ears, He heard the cries of the oppressed. With a human mouth, He cast out demons and declared the gospel of the kingdom. With human hands, He healed the sick and dying. This is divine love wrapped in flesh (1 John 4:9).

Happy Advent, brothers and sisters!

THE CHALCEDONIAN CREED (451)

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

THE BELGIC CONFESSION (1561)

Article 18, The Incarnation

So then we confess that God fulfilled the promise made to the early fathers and mothers by the mouth of the holy prophets when he sent the only and eternal Son of God into the world at the time appointed. The Son took the "form of a slave" and was made in "human form," truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without male participation. And Christ not only assumed human nature as far as the body is concerned but also a real human soul, in order to be a real human being. For since the soul had been lost as well as the body, Christ had to assume them both to save them both together.

Therefore we confess (against the heresy of the Anabaptists who deny that Christ assumed human flesh from his mother) that Christ shared the very flesh and blood of children; being the fruit of the loins of David according to the flesh, descended from David according to the flesh; the fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary; born of a woman; the seed of David; the root of Jesse; descended from Judah, having descended from the Jews according to the flesh; descended from Abraham—having assumed descent from Abraham and Sarah, and was made like his brothers and sisters, yet without sin.

In this way Christ is truly our Immanuel—that is: "God with us."

DEC 1: THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16

We begin our journey here in 1 Timothy 3, where the Apostle Paul describes “the mystery of godliness.” When Paul uses the word *mystery*, he does not mean to suggest that the gospel is a secret. It may still be beyond our ability to fully comprehend, yet Jesus has made the plan of God discernible. The mystery has been revealed (Ephesians 1:9, 3:3-9). And what, according to Paul, was the first piece of that puzzle? The incarnation! “[The Son of God] was manifested in the flesh.”

The manner in which Paul uses the word *mystery* to describe the incarnation implies that the incarnation was seeded within earlier revelation. In other words, the word *mystery* invites us to explore the Old Testament to see what subtle clues, themes, or allusions might have been developing a biblical theme of incarnation all along. Recall the quote from Richard Bauckham in the introduction, “[The incarnation] could not have been expected, but nor was it uncharacteristic. It is novel but appropriate to the identity of the God of Israel.”

We’ll explore this further over the next 24 days. For now, take a moment to pray through the verse above, 1 Timothy 3:16. If helpful, use the space below to journal your prayer.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 2: THE IMAGE OF GOD

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

Genesis 1:26

In the beginning, God creates. He speaks, forms, breathes, names, plants, waters, commands, and exercises dominion. And as He prepares to create the crown jewel of His universe, mankind, God says to Himself (being three, yet one), "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). God intended for humanity to bear His image, to represent Him to the rest of creation. This has always been His desire: a world teeming with image-bearers, reigning and ruling, shepherding and keeping, gardening and tending on His behalf. So He walked alongside His image-bearers, and He related to them intimately.

How could God be so humble and generous as to make us like Him? How can we trust that this is true? Let's consider the incarnation more deeply.

In the incarnation, the human form was proven suitable for God himself, as Christ took up residence in a body of flesh, grew up in physical and mental strength, and pumped human blood through his human heart. God created us in His image and His likeness, and beyond that, He has made Himself to be like us. Now, Jesus reigns and rules over all things as a King—a truly human king, the fullness of God's image. After all, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). The incarnation is not found only in the writings of the New Testament and nativity scenes. It was planned from before Adam had breath in his lungs, and all of it is grace.

Take a moment to pray and meditate upon the grace of God in creating you to be like Him. Then consider the even greater grace of God to become—in body—like you.

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 3: GOD APPEARS TO ABRAHAM

And the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant."

Genesis 18:1-5

In Genesis 18, three mysterious visitors approach Abraham's camp. Abraham runs out to greet them, and it soon becomes clear that Abraham is speaking with Yahweh. God appears to Abraham as a man, walking, standing, eating, drinking, and speaking. In fact, He appears such like a man that Abraham does not recognize Him until He speaks; until He reveals Himself through His word.

The early church fathers had little doubt concerning the identity of this mysterious visitor, teaching that it was the pre-incarnate Son of God. In the words of Irenaeus (130–202 AD), "The Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout Moses' writings." According to John Calvin, the three visitors were angels in human form, one of whom was the pre-incarnate Christ. Regardless, we know that the gospel was preached to Abraham (Galatians 3:8) and that Abraham saw the day of Christ and rejoiced (John 8:56-58).

Abraham was eager to serve the Lord, to be with the Lord, to speak to the Lord, and to feast with the Lord. Pray for faith to respond like Abraham to the coming of the Son of God.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found a people acceptable in your sight; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 4: THE FACE OF GOD

And a man wrestled with [Jacob] until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

Genesis 32:24-30

Jacob was a life-long wrestler. He wrestled with his brother, Esau. He wrestled with his father, Isaac. He wrestled with his uncle, Laban. And here in Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with "a man," who is later revealed to be God. In fact, he is given the name Israel (one who wrestles with God). The message is this: Through all those years of wrestling—with Esau, Isaac, and Laban—Jacob was ultimately wrestling with God. God wrestled with Jacob as a father, not as an adversary, and through these wrestlings, Jacob grew into a strong and mature man.

Incredibly, Jacob grew into a man who could actually prevail against Yahweh. Of course, this does not mean that Jacob defeated God; rather, Jacob was wrestling for God's blessing, and through his perseverance, he received it. Thus, the life of Jacob teaches us to wrestle faithfully, with patience and perseverance, to interpret our own wrestlings as coming from the hand of God for our growth and maturation.

Pray for faith to face every circumstance trusting that God is a good Father who desires to see you prevail. He desires to bless you.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 5: ISRAEL, GOD “INCARNATE”

You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.

Numbers 35:34

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27

When we look back at biblical history, we see that God was always in some sense “incarnate” through the people of Israel, His covenant image-bearers. On one hand, Yahweh’s dwelling in the midst of Israel was obviously *not* equivalent to Jesus’ dwelling in human flesh. But on the other hand, Jesus was the true Israel; in His body, He brought the presence and glory of God everywhere He went, which was precisely Israel’s calling. Israel was called to represent the goodness and grace of God to the nations, to be the bodily, material representation of God in the world.

This raises the stakes for the Church. When the New Testament describes the Church as the Body of Christ, we are being called to represent the goodness and grace of God to the nations, to be the bodily, material representation of God in the world. Christ’s human body has ascended, but Christ’s body of humans remains, empowered by the Holy Spirit “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Take a moment to consider the implications of your membership within the Body of Christ. Pray for power to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you’ve been called.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 6: SHOW ME YOUR GLORY

Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

Exodus 33:18-23

God appears to Moses on a number of occasions in the book of Exodus, and here in chapter 33, reference is made to God's face, hand, and back. Moses boldly asks to see His glory, which according to the passage, was a deadly request. So God's presence and glory pass by, while His hand shields Moses from seeing Him fully.

This is an astonishing moment in biblical history; not since the Garden of Eden had a human being witnessed the glory of God to this degree. This was an unimaginable privilege, but even so, God remained frustratingly distant. Moses could not experience an intimate, bodily, face-to-face encounter with God as a fellow person. For a man to experience an encounter like that, God would have to condescend, to assume creaturely limitations.

Thus, the incarnation is proof of God's desire for intimacy. He wants to share Himself with us, to grant us the experience of an intimate, bodily, face-to-face encounter with Him as a fellow person. And so, the Son of God became the conduit for a restored intimacy. In the human life of Jesus Christ, we can know the true nature and fullness of God's goodness and humility.

Praise Him for His goodness, humility, and intimate presence.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 7: COMMANDER OF THE LORD'S ARMY

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

Joshua 5:13-15

The people of Israel, led by a man called Joshua, had crossed into the Promised Land of Canaan, baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. They circumcised a new generation and feasted upon bread and the fruit of the vine. Then, just outside the city of Jericho, a mysterious, sword-wielding man speaks with Joshua, calling himself the commander of Yahweh's army. Joshua rightly worshipped at his feet. Then, Joshua was told that Jericho had already been defeated, and what followed is one of the best-known stories in the Bible: Israel marched around Jericho blasting trumpets and had miraculous victory.

As Christians, we too have been led by a man called Yeshua (or Joshua) through the waters of baptism and into promised rest. We invite others to have their hearts circumcised and to be released from slavery to sin and death. We feast on bread and wine as we join with God in making all things new. And one day, when all the ransomed Church of God are saved to sin no more, our King and Savior will come, sword in hand and trumpets blasting, to lead us in victory over all of the enemies of God. He will finish the work He was doing outside of Jericho, and we too will worship at His feet.

Ask the Lord to hasten the day when He will once again send the Commander of His army (Christ) to complete the work of redemption, renewal, and victory.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 8: YAHWEH IS SHALOM

So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them." And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace.

Judges 6:19–24

In Exodus 33, God had told Moses, "Man shall not see me and live." Here in Judges 6, Gideon realizes that he has been conversing with God Himself, and he fears for his life. But God reassures him, and pronounces peace over him. In fact, the sequence of events in 6:18-24 corresponds to the sequence of the Peace Offering. And because our Sunday liturgy is patterned accordingly, we follow this same sequence of events every week in corporate worship. We come into the presence of God, we fearfully confess our sin, God graciously reassures us and pronounces peace, and all within the context of a shared meal.

Peace, *shalom*, is communion with God. That's true for all individuals, and that's true for all nations. Wholeness, completeness, unity, and joy are restored at the table of the Lord. After sharing a meal with God, Gideon destroys false gods and sets people free. After sharing a meal with God, we can do the same.

Praise God for coming to us in human form to restore fellowship.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 9: THE WORD IN FLESH

And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." [...] And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

1 Samuel 3:10, 19-21

Samuel's call to be a prophet and a judge in Israel came as a young lad, the understudy of an unfaithful priest. He was sleeping at the Temple, where God's presence dwelt, when he heard the voice of Yahweh calling. In the account above, however, we can see that God was not only speaking to Samuel; He appeared to Samuel. The Lord came and stood before the young boy and spoke to him. We don't have a more detailed account than this, but what we can know is that God has revealed Himself both physically (standing) and verbally (by His word). The way the text reads blurs the line between the anthropomorphic standing and the prophetic hearing. Is God revealed to Samuel in the standing or speaking? Is Samuel's ministry in response to seeing God or hearing God? The answer is: both.

Samuel's task was to judge Israel, to prepare the way for a king, and to cleanse Yahweh's House (the tabernacle/temple). Likewise, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, is the Judge of all nations (not just Israel), the King of Kings for whom the prophets paved the way, and the final temple-cleanser, making atonement by His own sacrificial blood. We worship a God who stands on human feet and speaks in human languages. It is not Word *and flesh* that saves us, but Word *in flesh*.

Praise God for giving His Son, the Word in flesh. Thank Him for the clarity of His revelation to us, and for the completed word of His salvation, which was promised in His Word, and accomplished in His Flesh.

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

DEC 10: THE KING OF GLORY

Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is the King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

Psalm 24:8-10

Psalm 24 was likely written early in David's reign as the King of Israel, just after reclaiming the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines. Following this victory, David led a triumphant procession into Jerusalem. They sang, danced, and feasted because the presence of God, represented by the Ark, was once again dwelling in their midst. In the verses above, David is welcoming God through the gates of Jerusalem, referring to Yahweh—rather than himself—as the King of Glory.

The Psalms, like all of God's Word, find their fulfillment in Christ. David welcomed the Lord into Jerusalem, but His ultimate arrival as King would come many generations later. Born of a virgin, from the line of David, Jesus Christ is the King of Glory. In the days leading up to His death and resurrection, King Jesus led a triumphal procession into Jerusalem as the people sang, danced, and feasted. More than the Ark of the Covenant, Jesus is the true dwelling place of God, and He is now enthroned in the heavenly places, graciously ruling over all things for the good of His people.

Pray for loved ones who do not know the King of Glory. Ask God to open the gates and doors of their hearts that the King of Glory may come in.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found a people acceptable in your sight; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 11: THE RIGHT HAND OF YAHWEH

My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 63:8

David is desperate for the LORD in Psalm 63. The language is dripping with need and love and exhaustion. David's hope is Yahweh, and in Yahweh alone does David find confidence and strength in the midst of exile and loneliness. It is Yahweh's "right hand" which upholds him in his troubles. In the context of poetry, we may not think much of David alluding to Yahweh upholding him with His "right hand." He is using human imagery to describe the reality of God's support and care for him. Any reader can imagine what it feels like to be held up by a strong hand.

But the incarnation gives greater meaning to this poetry. The right hand of Yahweh that upheld David in the wilderness was the right hand of Yahweh that would one day be pierced for David's sins. In Christ, the right hand of Yahweh healed the sick, broke bread with the disciples, and turned over tables in the Temple courts. The scarred right hand of Yahweh was held out to Thomas following the resurrection, thereby upholding a doubting brother.

Moreover, Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. He not only has the right hand of God, but He *is* the right hand of God, upholding all things by the power of His victory and Kingship. Oh, that our souls might cling evermore to Yahweh, that His right hand, Jesus, might hold us up with Him eternally!

Spend a few moments remembering that you need the right hand of Yahweh to uphold you every moment of every hour for all eternity. Praise Him for being faithful and glad to do so!

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

DEC 12: TWO BECOME ONE FLESH

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.

Song of Songs 8:6

The verse above is commonly recognized as the theme verse for the Song of Songs. It contains the only reference to God (Yahweh, the LORD) in the Song of Songs. And coming near the end, this verse reinterprets the entire poem. It takes what appeared to be an erotic poem about two lovers and it turns it into a cosmic poem about Yahweh and His Bride.

This is yet another Old Testament hint towards the necessity and eventuality of the incarnation. The Song of Songs powerfully illustrates the depth of relational intimacy God desires to share with His people and His people desire to share with Him. And notably, the relationship is a flesh-to-flesh relationship. The Bride's desire would have been unfulfilled had the Bridegroom not come to her in the flesh.

The New Testament calls the Church *the Bride*, but it also calls the Church *the Body* of the Bridegroom. This is not a mixed metaphor. The Bride and the Bridegroom are united; they have become one flesh. Take a moment to enjoy Him.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 13: HOLY CONDESCENSION

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Isaiah 6:1–5

Isaiah sees the King, Yahweh of hosts, with his own two eyes, and like many faithful men before him, Isaiah is convicted of sin and fears for his life.

The word “holy” is often understood as an attribute of distinction and transcendence; God is unlike anything else. But here, the song of the seraphim suggests that God’s holiness is actually a function of His nearness, His dwelling *in* creation, not His distance *from* it. So God is holy as He is “high and lifted up,” but He is also holy as He condescends to dwell with us. Once again, the incarnation does not contradict God’s holiness. Rather, the incarnation is the full demonstration of God’s holiness.

The whole earth is full of God’s glory. Where do you see it today?

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 14: THE GREATER WATCHMAN

And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Ezekiel 1:26-28

Ezekiel was called to be the “watchman” over Israel, to call a rebellious people to turn back to Yahweh. The Lord had told Ezekiel that the people would not listen (Ezekiel 2:7), but he was still responsible for calling them to repent. Judgment was coming, and if Ezekiel wasn’t faithful, God promised to hold him responsible for the sins of Israel (Ezekiel 3:16-21). But before Ezekiel was given this responsibility, he was given a vision. He saw the heavenly throne room, a sapphire throne, and a ruler with a human appearance (Ezekiel 1:26).

Like Ezekiel, Christ ministered amidst a rebellious people. He also called for repentance and warned of God’s judgment. Yet, the ministry of Christ was different in a few key ways. First, Christ was the “human appearance” seated on the sapphire throne, and He came to finish the work that Ezekiel began. Second, Jesus was a faithful prophet, but He nonetheless bore the bloodguilt of a sinful people. In fact, the faithfulness of Jesus bore the fullness of bloodguilt for the rebellion of all mankind. Third, Jesus has the power to turn the hearts of rebellious men and women that they might be spared the judgment to come.

Take a few moments to praise God for sending a better Watchman than Ezekiel in the person of Jesus Christ. Thank him for His ability to turn rebels into friends of Yahweh.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 15: CHRIST, WISDOM INCARNATE

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.

Proverbs 3:19

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:15-16

At the peak of King Solomon's reign, the nations came to Jerusalem to hear his wisdom. Israel was blessing to all the nations of the earth (1 Kings 9-10). We too have access to Solomon's wisdom through the book of Proverbs, where we are instructed to heed the voice of Lady Wisdom, as opposed to Lady Folly. Lady Wisdom builds her house and sets a table for the nations to feast in her presence (Proverbs 9:1-12). Meanwhile, Lady Folly is a prostitute offering stolen food, poison for those who feast upon it (Proverbs 9:13-18). In the end, Solomon feasted with Lady Folly, and his kingdom was divided. The nations once again came to Jerusalem, this time to plunder it.

In Christ, we have a King greater than Solomon. He is the wisdom of God incarnate, and the nations are coming to Him. Christ is building His house and setting a table for the poor and foolish, the weak and weary, the sinner and the sloth. At His table, the Church becomes Lady Wisdom as we feast upon His Word, His salvation, and reject the poison that Lady Folly offers.

Spend a few moments dwelling on the beauty of real wisdom and peace that can only be found in Christ. The good life in God's world is feasting upon the Word made flesh.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found a people acceptable in your sight; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 16: THE CARPENTER'S SON

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

Matthew 13:53-56

Feast on this quote from *The Person of Christ* by Donald MacLeod: "For the Son of God, the incarnation meant a whole new set of relationships: with his father and mother; with his brothers and sisters; with his disciples; with the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees; with Roman soldiers and with lepers and prostitutes. It was within these relationships that he lived his incarnate life, experiencing pain, poverty, and temptation; witnessing squalor and brutality; hearing obscenities and profanities and the hopeless cry of the oppressed. He lived not in sublime detachment or in ascetic isolation, but 'with us,' as 'the fellow-man of all men,' crowded, busy, harassed, stressed and molested. No large estate gave him space, no financial capital guaranteed his daily bread, no personal staff protected him from interruptions and no power or influence protected him from injustice. He saved us from alongside us."

Jesus knows you, and He knows what it's like to live in this world. You can trust Him, and you can confide in Him.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 17: THE WORD BECAME FLESH

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 1:14

The enfleshing of the Word was not a mere sojourn, temporary dwelling, manifestation appearance, or visitation. The Word *became* flesh. The Son of God *became* incarnate. Jesus doesn't just tabernacle, He *becomes* the tabernacle. He is the presence of God in the wilderness. Thus, God's demonstrated desire to dwell with His people, which we have seen all throughout the Old Testament, reaches a crescendo in the incarnation of Christ.

The phrase "we have seen His glory" alludes to Moses, who was permitted to witness God's glory (Exodus 33). As we mentioned on Day 6, this was an unimaginable privilege. And yet, in Christ, it's a privilege enjoyed by every new covenant Christian. In the words of Alastair Roberts, "Christ is the glory of God, the One whom Moses witnessed." So the incarnation makes a Moses out of each of us; we are all privileged to encounter God without a mediator.

Thank God that you can pray to Him *directly*. Yahweh, the Incarnate Word, the Lord of glory and King of Kings, knows the sound of *your* voice.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 18: TRINITY & HUMANITY

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

John 17:20-23

The Son of God did not become a pristine, invulnerable humanoid; He incarnated into actual human flesh, subject to sickness, injury, death, and decay. The eternal dance of self-giving love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has now woven humanity into the choreography. We have been welcomed into the triune love ("that they also may be in us"). If that strikes you as inconceivable, you're beginning to understand what makes the incarnation so wonderful.

In Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, we are privileged to know God in His very being. We don't just know what He's like; we share in His life. To be sure, this is an act of humility on God's part, but remember, "the incarnation neither contradicts nor obscures who God is, as if God were known more fully and clearly prior to or apart from the appearing of Immanuel. God the Son come in the flesh is not an instance of divine retreat, the regressive revelation of God! On the contrary, in this stunning act of divine invasion, of progressive revelation, God accommodates Himself to us in the humanity of Jesus Christ to reveal Himself all the more radiantly" (Clark & Johnson).

Pray to the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. Just as the Triune God has offered Himself fully to you, offer yourself fully to Him, knowing that your humanity is no hindrance.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 19: HOW THE CHURCH GROWS

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church... But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Acts 12:1-5, 24

Andrew Walls writes, "There is some inherent fragility, some built in vulnerability, in Christianity." Whereas Islamic cultures tend to remain thoroughly Islamic, the history of Christian expansion features extended periods of recession. According to Walls, this vulnerability is due in part to "the essentially vernacular nature of Christian faith, which rests on a massive act of translation, the Word made flesh, God translated into a specific segment of social reality as Christ... the divine Word is translatable, infinitely translatable."

In other words, the vulnerability of Christianity is not a design flaw; it's essential to the gospel and rooted in the incarnation. The gospel takes on flesh wherever it goes. It does not replicate the same socio-political model in every context. Rather, when the gospel crosses a border, it gives new life to the people and culture already there.

Throughout church history, recession often happens where Christianity has become culturally influential, and expansion often happens where Christianity is fledgling. This pattern is Christlike. Jesus set aside His power and influence in order to become a helpless, dependent child, and the kingdom came. So we can trust in God's sovereign rule whether we are facing recession or enjoying expansion. Our calling is to be faithful with whatever we're given.

Pray for faith and wisdom to persevere in the midst of our current cultural environment.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

DEC 20: THE BAPTIZED BODY

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life... Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

Romans 6:3-4, 12

Christians have a long history of downplaying and/or demeaning the human body. We tend to drift away from the historical, corporeal, real-world implications of God's activity as recorded in Scripture, and we tend to reduce Christian faithfulness into an intellectual exercise, a matter of ascribing to the right doctrines and ideologies. These tendencies, however, run counter to the incarnation.

It's precisely because we have material bodies that we are the image of God. Jesus did not come as an immaterial being; He became a man. From the beginning, the human race was specially designed to be *the creature* through which God's glory would be revealed.

What does this have to do with baptism? In baptism, God applies a material substance to our material bodies. Baptism should engage the intellect, of course, but first and foremost, baptism engages the body. God conveys His covenant love and blessing to us through the most abundant molecular compound in the universe. Baptism cleanses us so that we, in our bodies, can become dwelling places for Christ in the Spirit. For this very reason, we do not let sin reign in our mortal bodies. The baptized human body is holy ground.

How does the incarnation change your perspective on the body? Pray for faith to present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and as we are sorely hindered by our sins from running the race that is set before us, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 21: THE BODY & THE BLOOD

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Phillipians 2:8

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

John 6:35

It is hard to fathom a tortured, humiliated, and suffering Christ. It is often even more difficult to comprehend that the Christ who died is the same man who is gloriously resurrected, the Warrior King currently sitting at the right hand of the Father. All of creation hinges upon the resurrection of Jesus, and the ascension gives us hope in every circumstance. And yet, it is not the resurrection or the ascension that we commemorate weekly at the Lord's Table. We feast upon Christ's body, broken and bound, pierced and bruised, hung and made lifeless. We drink His covenantal blood, as He is upholding His promises moment after moment.

In God's love and wisdom, He calls His people to remember and find life in Christ's death on their behalf. In His death, we have life. In His humiliation, we are humbled. The Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, depends upon His having become human. The incarnation makes the sacraments significant. In the words of Peter Leithart, "Jesus has been exalted into heaven, but in a sense, He remains in humiliation. For now Jesus is not present with us in the flesh. He is present with us through the Spirit. And He is present with us through signs, through Word and Sacrament... This in-signification, like the original in-carnation, is done for us."

Spend a few moments asking God for faith to truly trust Jesus as your sustenance, the bread of life and the true vine.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and as we are sorely hindered by our sins from running the race that is set before us, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 22: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:14-18

As we all know, there is evil in our world. And this raises an important question: Why would a loving and sovereign God allow evil and suffering? Admittedly, the Bible does not answer this question definitively, but that does not mean we are without hope and comfort.

Indeed, we should take great comfort knowing that God incarnate wept human tears (John 11:35). Jesus Christ *experienced* evil, pain, suffering, and death, and through this experience, He has *acted to defeat* evil, pain, suffering, and death. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "It is not by His omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by His weakness and suffering... Only a suffering God can help." But God is more than a suffering God; He is an overcoming God. We ought to take comfort in the fact that He suffered like us, but we ought to take even more comfort in the fact that He has defeated the source of all suffering. Without the incarnation, the glimmer of hope in the human story flickers and fades.

Take comfort in your suffering God, your merciful and faithful high priests. We may not have all the answers, but we know that He is near and that He weeps with us.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 23: MATTER MATTERS

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

Genesis 1:31

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works.

Psalms 104:31

William Temple once described Christianity as “the most materialistic of all religions,” because the Christian worldview affirms the material order. For the Christian, and for God, matter matters. God created the material universe and affirmed its goodness (Genesis 1:31). Many religions (and heretical Christian traditions) consider the material world and the human body as prisons to be escaped through spiritual experience and/or an immaterial afterlife. But there is no space for such spiritual asceticism in the Christian faith. Matter and spirit are not opposed to one another, and our bodies are not hollow vessels from which our souls will one day escape. Quite the contrary. Humans are not human merely because we have souls or intellect; part of what it means to be human is to have a physical body. We bear God’s image in our physical bodies as we interact with a material world.

Christianity has the most robust view of the material world not only in comparison to those who disdain the body, but also in comparison to pantheists who believe that all matter is divine. If all physical matter is divine, then divinity means nothing at all. Yet, God ultimately affirmed the material world in the gracious incarnation of His Son. God took on the material properties of humanity in order to radically reaffirm the goodness of His creation, and to reconcile all things to Himself in love. Jesus became material to establish a new creation, even more glorious than the first, and God saw that it was good.

Spend a few moments asking that God would use your body to do His work, as a living sacrifice, and that you would be a faithful steward of His good world.

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

DEC 24: THE KINGDOM COMING

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 any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:1-4

God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion..."

Genesis 1:28

The first words of the book of Revelation are "The revelation of Jesus Christ." And yet, for many, Christian eschatology (the study of "last things") has little to do with Jesus. The New Testament, on the other hand, is very careful to center our understanding of future events on the person and work of Jesus.

For instance, the Gospel of John opens with the phrase "In the beginning," and the next three verses are all about God's Word, creation, light, and life. This is an obvious allusion to Genesis, but why? Because the incarnation marks a new creation! Jesus has become human in order to fulfill humanity's purpose. He wins the victory over death and the powers of darkness, and He establishes a worldwide Kingdom characterized by love, peace, and justice. In other words, when Jesus put on humanity, He assumed humanity's commission: to multiply and fill the earth with image-bearers, and to exercise dominion over all creation (Genesis 1:28).

The incarnation means that the Kingdom *has come* and *is coming*. Tonight, as you light your candle, remember this: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." The incarnation gives us hope, inextinguishable hope.

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

DEC 25: BORN THIS DAY

Today, we encourage you to gather with friends and family and read aloud the verses below (or more, if you'd like), followed by the prayer.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

[The incarnation] is the essential doctrine, of which the whole elaborate structure of Christian faith and morals is only the logical consequence. Now, we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing of it for the first time, would recognise it as News; those who did hear it for the first time actually called it News, and good news at that; though we are apt to forget that the word Gospel ever meant anything so sensational. Perhaps the drama is played out now, and Jesus is safely dead and buried. Perhaps. It is ironical and entertaining to consider that once at least in the world's history those words might have been spoken with complete conviction, and that was upon the eve of the Resurrection.

Dorothy Sayers