

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of him and cried out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me.’” And of his fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.**

**(John 1:14–18)**

## Introduction

C. S. Lewis has written,

We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always easy to penetrate. The real labor is to remember to attend. In fact to come awake. Still more to remain awake. Where is God found in our world today? Are we awake enough to notice?

That is a great question. It deserves a great and glorious answer. The biblical answer is that God is found in our world today, the same place that he has been found for nearly two thousand years, in the person of Jesus Christ. God is found today in the incarnate Son of God. God is found today in the person that was born of a virgin, seen by shepherds, worshipped with gifts by wise men, proclaimed by John the Baptist as the sin-bearing Lamb of God, witnessed by the apostles, and described by John the apostle in the prologue to his Gospel.

Paul argued that God is not far from any of us (Acts 17:27). Yet to so many, he remains hidden. He remains God incognito—the hidden God. The incarnation was God’s final unveiling. If we will accept the testimony of credible witnesses, then we too will believe and behold the glory of the otherwise hidden God.

Martin Luther wrote much about the “hiddenness” of God. He meant that God is not easy to find, at least not on *our* terms. If we could search out and find God and be right with God on our own terms, we would get the credit and take the glory. But God has chosen to hide himself from us so that, when he is found, it is he who has done it. He gets the credit; he gets the glory.

The incarnation is actually all about this. And John understood this.

In this prologue, though several themes are mentioned, a predominate one is God’s self-disclosure—and man’s response.

In the opening verses, this disclosure is couched in creation language (vv. 1–5). Then God’s disclosure is clothed in proclamation language (vv. 6–13). Finally, God’s self-disclosure is couched in incarnation language (vv. 14–18).

The point is that God, whom no man has seen, has taken the initiative to reveal himself.

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And yet he remains hidden to some. In fact, he is rejected by most. This theme of rejection is indicated clearly in vv. 10–11, and is implied in v. 5. We need to be clear that “God incognito” is not primarily about God concealing his true identity. Not at all. Rather, the issue is that we reject his true identity.

But, thankfully, God is neither hidden from nor rejected by everyone. John tells us in v. 14 that “we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father.” And in v. 18, even though “no one has seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.”

John is not saying that everyone has seen his glory, but there are *some* who have, including the disciples of Christ, of which John was one.

For many today, even as they celebrate Christmas, God remains hidden. But if you are in this category, then I trust that you will hear and receive the greatest of gifts.

The prologue of John’s Gospel is like the foyer of a home: It sets the tone for everything else that will be revealed. Verses 1–18 form the foyer for the rest of John’s Gospel.

The Gospel’s major themes are present here: life, light, darkness, the world, witness, reception, rejection, revelation, glory, grace, belief, Son of God, etc. But, of course, the overriding theme that is introduced here is the *incarnation*. John highlights this theme in his prologue, in several places in various ways, but most striking perhaps is his declaration here in v. 14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” Again, in v. 18, he concludes the prologue with the dramatic reminder: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.”

These eighteen verses could easily require a series of messages to extract their riches. But my goal here is to survey them in one sitting. I will do so under the heading, “God Incognito.”

When we say that someone is dressed incognito, we imply that they are disguising themselves. (Think *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.) In some ways, this is precisely what the incarnation was about. God clothed himself in flesh as a means of disguising himself to some, and revealing himself to others. “Hide and seek” may be a good way to describe this. We will consider this text under several headings.

## God Incognito is the Reason for the Incarnation

We previously considered the opening thirteen verses of the prologue. There, John built toward the climax of his argument, stated here in v. 14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” The Word introduced in v. 1 is now the Word incarnated in v. 14.

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“Became flesh” means just that: God the Son did not merely *appear to be* a human being; he actually *became* one. By doing so, he “tabernacled” with his people. And, like the tabernacle of old, those who had eyes to see experienced the glory of God in their midst.

As we have seen, this does not mean that *everyone* saw this glory, but only those to whom this grace was given. In fact, John may here be referring to the Mount of Transfiguration where he, Peter, and James saw him in his glory. Regardless, the incarnation was the miraculous and amazing reality of God “tabernacling” with his people.

Christmas reminds us that Jesus is God. “Full of grace and truth” references the scene in Exodus 34:6–7, where Moses asked God to show him his glory (33:18). Moses only saw the “back parts”—the “afterburners”—of God’s glory. But to walk with Jesus was to see more of his fullness.

Remember this blessing on Christmas! God is no longer hidden. God revealed himself through his Son and did so in such a way that his people could and would survive it (see Luke 5:1–10).

The incarnation was the ultimate experience of God incognito. God was in the world, in a unique way, and yet invisible to so many. The Word (vv. 1–5) became flesh—God took on human flesh. This is astonishing, yet so many are unmoved by it. As Chesterton commented long ago, “May he who flung the moon and the stars in their place and then plunged into our humanity, bewilder us once again, each and all.”

This was the ultimate “disguise”: God in the form of man (Philippians 2:7–8). It was a hiddenness wrapped in humility (Philippians 2:5–6).

## God Incognito Requires Illumination

John makes an important statement halfway through v. 14: “We beheld his glory.” “We” is not an absolute statement; it is not all inclusive. Not everyone who saw God incognito knew that he was God in disguise. In fact, most didn’t. Of course, that wasn’t for lack of witness: “John bore witness of him and cried out, saying, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me’” (v. 15). And still, most rejected him.

Chapters 1–12 of John’s Gospel are filled with rejection of Christ. Consider just one account, after Jesus healed a man born blind:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said to him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” He answered and said, “Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” And Jesus said to him, “You have both seen him and it is he who is talking with you.” Then he said, “Lord, I believe!” And he worshipped him. And Jesus said, “For judgement I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.” Then some of the Pharisees who were with him heard these words, and said to him, “Are we blind also?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.”

(John 9:35–41)

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Even as Jesus was lifted on the cross for the sins of the world, most mocked and scorned him in disbelief.

By “we,” John is no doubt referring to he and his fellow disciples. He is writing as an eyewitness. Some suggest that John is referencing the Lord’s transfiguration, which he and James and Peter witnessed. But certainly they all saw the glorified Saviour after his resurrection. Regardless, not everyone saw through the veil. In fact, John the Baptist himself initially did not (see vv. 15, 29–34).

What made the difference? God’s sovereign grace in illumination, through spiritual enlightenment. It is only by God’s initiative that anyone will see God veiled in the flesh and then hail the incarnate deity. Jesus himself made this clear in an interaction with Peter:

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

(Matthew 16:13–18)

Further, note that very few saw through the flesh at Jesus’ birth. But those who did—Mary, Elizabeth and Joseph (Luke 1:26–28ff, 39–43; Matthew 1:18–25); the shepherds (Luke 2:8–17); Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25–32, 36–38); and the wise men (Matthew 2:9–11)—were graced with illumination. We might call this “Christmas grace.” These individuals were chosen by God to behold his glory, the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The point that I am making is that Christmas is perhaps one of the most publicised of holidays throughout the world, and yet the first Christmas was the most obscure event. And for many, it remains so. Ryan is correct: “We have rejected the Lord of glory in spite of all our Christmas carols and pageants and cards. We want light, but we don’t want the true light.”

In fact, if God did not pull back the veil on that day, it would have gone unnoticed by almost everyone. It would have remained hidden. But thank God, it did not.

There is an important principle here. God wants to be found, but on his terms. He wants to be found, but in his time. He wants to be found, but so that he gets the glory. He wants to be found, but this requires that we seek him and turn to him—and therein lies the problem. For he must first seek us and turn to us. He must get us to follow the light.

If God does not reveal himself, he will remain hidden. We cannot find out God by merely searching for him. He must precede this search with his own search. He initiates, and what he initiates, he completes.

God sent a man to proclaim his revelation through his Son. John the Baptist, of course, was Jesus’ older cousin by six months (see Luke 1). In ancient days, birth order was very significant. But here, John is recorded as saying that Jesus was “before him.” How is that? Well, look back at vv. 1–4!

The point to be made is that Jesus really is God! His glory is the glory of God. His glory is pre-existent, transcendent, and resplendent! John's integrity, was impeccable. His is a credible witness. Believe!

## God Incognito was the Culmination

In vv. 16–17, we learn that the incarnation was in fact the culmination of the Lord's revelation of himself to the world: "And of his fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The closing five verses of the prologue are grounded in the book of Exodus. This, at several levels, makes perfect sense. After all, John has a new creation on his mind (vv. 1–5) and the book of Exodus has several allusions to God's re-creation of a people of God. Further, it is in Exodus 33 that we read of Moses making the audacious request to the Lord: "Show me your glory" (v. 18). God makes it plain that no one can see God and live (v. 20). Yet God will be gracious to Moses (v. 19) and will reveal the glory of his back, but not his face (vv. 21–23). Note God's emphasis upon *grace*.

When God reveals himself, he emphasises that he is the God of "grace" and "truth" (Exodus 34:6). This is interesting, as we approach these verses.

John says that Jesus was likewise "full of grace and truth" (v. 14). In v. 18, he seems to have Exodus 34 on his mind. He mentions Moses in v. 17. What is the connection? His point is that, in Jesus, we have a fuller revelation even than that of Moses. These are weighty words. But we can summarise. John is telling us that, in Jesus Christ, we truly have the full (v. 16) revelation of God. When we see Jesus, we see the Father (14:9). The writer of Hebrews concurred:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

(Hebrews 1:1–3)

God incognito, in the person of Jesus, protects us from destruction (see Luke 5:1–10). God incognito enables us to approach God. Grace has always been God's agenda. This is a major point in these verses.

John is not saying that law without grace characterised God's dealings with Moses and the nation of Israel, but that now, in Christ, grace is the ruling characteristic of God with his people. No. Rather, he is making a comparison.

Without minimising either the ministry of Moses or the administration of God of the old covenant, John tells us that the dawn of a new age, with the arrival of Jesus, elevates grace to a new and to a fuller level. He is not saying that the old covenant was law while the new covenant is grace. No, he

is saying that grace is so much fuller under the new covenant because God has come in the flesh, not in a tent.

When God re-created a people for himself (Exodus 19), he did so by grace. We see this in the preamble to the law: “And God spoke all these words, saying: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’” (Exodus 20:1). This act of grace preceded the law that follows in the Ten Commandments. Grace (deliverance) preceded law (demands).

So John is telling us that, at Christmas, God’s gracious purpose culminates. The “hidden God” is gracious to his new creation. What a privilege!

Further, the real emphasis is how the grace of God was and now is mediated. Moses merely mediated grace; Jesus Christ was grace personified. In Jesus, grace was embodied. Christmas instructs us that God is full of grace. Christmas invites us—calls us—to seek this hidden God who desires to be known by grace.

## God Incognito is an Invitation

Finally, as we consider v. 18, let us note that God incognito is an invitation: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.”

This is inseparable from the what we have just examined. To know God, we need to know Jesus. John tells us why: because “the only begotten Son ... has declared him.”

The word translated “declared” is the word from which we derive “exegete.” To exegete is to explain. We can say that Jesus is the “narration” of God. This is precisely what Jesus Christ did. This is why the writer to the Hebrews says that in these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son (1:1–2). Jesus Christ is the final and full revelation of God.

Because Jesus for eternity has been “in the bosom of the Father,” we can trust what he explains to us about God. Among other incalculable truths, that he is our creator, our Father, our provider, and our Saviour. Those who have received him (v. 12)—and *only* those who have received him, for he reveals himself only to them (see 21:14)—can rest in these “explanations” in the midst of a world that seems to defy explanation. To those to whom he has not revealed himself, God remains hidden.

If the only time you pay any heed to the Word is on Christmas Day, then you miss the point. The Word spoke then, but we need to continue to hear him speak now—always. The Word incarnate drives us to the word inspired. In other words, if your only exposure to the Word is one time a year, then God remains hidden. God incognito remains God invisible. God invisible remains God inaccessible.

How did (does) Jesus unveil God to us? By what he did, by what he declared, and by how he died. God is only hidden from those who will not see (John 9:39–41; cf. 14:6–9). Christmas instructs us

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that, in the face of evil and heartache and disappointment and suffering, we have all the grace that we need.

As we grow closer to Jesus, God is increasingly visible, and the once hidden God is now the one before whom we comfortably, worshipfully, adoringly live—*coram Deo*.

Christmas reminds us that God wants to have a relationship with his creation, but only on his terms. The incarnation should be celebrated on these terms. The incarnation is a stumblingblock to man in his sins precisely because it speaks of weakness, vulnerability, and humility. And, let's be frank: humility is not high on the list of our pursuits.

Packer was correct that the most unbelievable idea in the Christian faith is not the resurrection or the miracles of Christ. Rather, the most difficult thing to believe is the incarnation. Once you believe that God took on human flesh, you can believe anything else. God incognito—now *that* is amazing!

The miracle of Christmas is that the hidden God unveils himself to those whom he chooses. Like the shepherds of old, not everyone has this privilege. What are you doing with it?

## God Incognito Demands a Response

We have looked at the revelation of the Son of God: that he is truly and fully God. We have looked at the revelation of God through the Son: that he is truly and fully whom the Son explains him to be. But this confronts us with the need for a response. What will we do with this revelation? Have we experienced this revelation, or is God still hidden from us?

Ask God for grace to see the Son for whom he is. The Son will then reveal the otherwise hidden Father to you (Matthew 11:25–27; 16:17). On Christmas, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

AMEN