

THE STRANGER OF GALILEE

by Ray C. Stedman

Who was Jesus -- visibly? What did men see when they looked at him, when they heard him teach, when they followed him and lived with him? A great many images of Christ today are far removed from the biblical picture of him. They range all the way from "gentle Jesus meek and mild" -- a sort of harmless, gentle spirit whom no one need take very seriously -- to a fiery-eyed radical, all set to burn everything to the ground and overthrow the establishment. In the midst of these contradictory images, our heart longs sometimes to say, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" That, of course, is who we are looking at in the Gospel of John -- the real Jesus, Jesus as he really was.

Dorothy Sayers wrote,

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore -- on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe... He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a "gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations;

He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humour that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (Creed or Chaos)

That, I am afraid, is the story of many generations. In the prologue to John's gospel, however, we have a summary of what John came to understand Jesus to be. Eternally, Jesus was "the Word," the articulation of the thought of God, the spokesman of the mind of God; the eternal Word, which, as Creator, spoke everything into being. Jesus was the Word who said, "Let there be light," and there was light, 'Let the earth bring forth,' and it brought forth." In his ministry, Jesus was also the Life-giver, the Light-giver to men, animating and sustaining everything and giving new life -- God's life -- to those who received him.

Beginning with Verse 14 of Chapter 1, we now learn what John the Apostle saw within when he looked at Jesus:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") {John 1:14-15 RSV}

As John listened to Jesus, lived with him, walked with him, touched him, heard him and slept beside him, he tells us that what he saw was a tent.

The key to Verse 14 is the word "dwelt": "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That is an interesting word. It declares that Jesus "tented," he "tabernacled," among us. He came and lived in a tent in our midst. John saw that human tent.

There is really nothing unusual about that because everyone lives in tents. (We all live in tents lives, no pun

intended!) Our bodies are what might be called "earth suits." Like the astronauts who have space suits designed to enable them to function in space, we have been given "earth suits" which are marvelously designed to enable us to function in the conditions found on this planet. But we ourselves are inside those suits. What you are seeing this morning is my earth suit functioning according to my control. As I wave my arms and flap my lips, you are seeing but the outside tent in which my spirit dwells. I'm looking at your tents as well, some of them much better looking than mine, some functioning much better, but they are nevertheless earth suits. That is what John saw when he looked at Jesus.

But what caught John's attention was the glory that he saw inside. That is what he says was remarkable. Have you ever walked around a campground at night and seen lights inside the tents glowing like jewels in the darkness as they shone through the fabric? That is descriptive of what John saw when he saw Jesus: he saw a glory inside. In four remarkable images, John tells us what was that glory:

First, it was the Word made flesh; that eternal Word, that marvelous articulation of the mind and thought of God, that speaking of God that brought all things into existence, become a soft, baby flesh. That is a staggering thought. In the Greek text those two words appear side by side: "the logos became sarx"; or, literally, "logos sarx became." Sarx is the Greek word for flesh; the meat, the soft, yielding flesh of our human bodies. The Word, the energy of the universe, was contained in a baby's body.

Yet, in the mind of God, that is what he intended from the beginning. The most remarkable thing about our race is that God designed man to be the bearer of himself. Man has a capacity for God; and that makes him unique. No animal has that capacity; no animal has any idea or concept of God as men have and share universally. Let evolution explain that if it can! Why is it that we are so different from any animal?

Every human being has a capacity for God and a hunger after God. Whether we know it or not, we are longing, searching constantly all through our life for something that will meet what Pascal called, "the God-shaped vacuum" in the human heart. That capacity was designed of God, for God intended man to be the dwelling place of God. Now, at last, in human history that actually takes place: God becomes man; God becomes flesh, in an amazing blending together of these two concepts.

In his letters, John the Apostle says that fact is so fundamental to our faith that a denial of it constitutes an anti-Christian heresy: "If any man deny that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, that is the spirit of anti-Christ," {cf, 1 Jn 4:3}. That truth is so central to our faith that if you want to test any other religion or cult, ask yourself, "What do they teach about Jesus? Was he God made flesh, or not?" That is the test of heresy. The glory that John saw in Jesus was the shining out into the darkness of the world of the eternal glory of the Word of God.

Furthermore, it was the "glory of the only begotten Son of the Father." Sons oftentimes look like their fathers, and sometimes you can tell much about a father just by meeting his son.

I never had the privilege of meeting Dr. R. A. Torrey, the founder of the Church of the Open Door, in Los Angeles, and the founder of the Bible School of Los Angeles (now Biola University). Dr. Torrey was an associate of D. L. Moody, and was one of the great Bible teachers of the past generation. He died while I was yet a baby, but I met his son one day. I took a picture of him and had a conversation with him. Everyone who knew both the father and the son were in agreement that the son looked exactly like the father; that the timbre of his voice, his expressions, his personality, reflected his father. Because I knew his son, I have always felt that somehow I knew Dr. R. A. Torrey.

That is what John is saying here: the glory that he saw in Jesus was the exact reproduction of the glory of the Father, because the Son reflects the Father. (John is going to come back to that at the end of this section.)

Thirdly, John gives the specific nature of that glory. What was that glory that shone in Jesus, which everyone saw as they came in contact with him? We do not have to guess. John tells us exactly: "He was full of grace and truth." Grace and truth -- that is the glory of God.

There are many definitions for grace. Someone has defined it as "that which God does within you, without

you." I have always liked the acrostic that defines grace: God's Riches At Christ's Expense -- G-R-A-C-E. Perhaps the simplest definition of all is that grace is "the generosity of love." Grace is love giving itself. The greatest evidence of grace in the Bible is contained in the words, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," {cf, John 3:16}. That is grace: Love giving itself.

Truth is the manifestation of reality, the unveiling of what is actually there, the stripping off of all the illusions, veils, shams, phoniness, the facades, and getting down to what is actually there. Jesus was full of both grace and truth. He was the ultimate revelation of what is really there in life; and he is the fullest expression of love giving itself, pouring out, reaching out to others. That is the glory that John saw in Jesus.

These words relate back to Verse 4, to the words, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." Grace and truth are really nothing more than life and light. What is life if it is not love? Life at any level is a revelation of the love of the Creator, the giving of the Creator to his creatures, the sharing of his life with them. We have come to understand that love is an absolute necessity for human beings. We cannot function without it. Those who are deprived of love, either by circumstances or by their own mis-choices, lose the capacity to perform, to live, to do anything; they huddle in a corner, or they assume a fetal position, unable to do anything, because love is life. Grace, therefore, is the source of life.

And what is light if it is not truth? Light is the comprehension of reality. Have you ever said, "I wish I had more light on this subject"? By that you mean, "I wish I understood it better; I wish I saw more clearly what was there." Truth is light. The glory within the tent of Jesus was grace and truth, life and light; and in him it was full; he was "full of grace and truth."

But even more, the apostle goes on to quote John the Baptist:

(John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") {John 1:15 RSV}

That verse is somewhat difficult to translate, because it uses the word "he who comes after me is in front of me (or before me), and he was before me." The scholars differ as to how to translate these words. What this translation says is, "This one who came after me, who followed me in time (because Jesus appeared after John the Baptist began his ministry), this one ranks before me," i.e., "he has a higher dignity than I have." It is possible to take these words in that sense. But I do not think that is what John the Baptist meant, nor is it what John the Apostle meant when he used that quotation.

I believe that these are all "time" words, so that what John the Baptist said was "This one who comes after me in time was before me in time. He was indeed my first." (That is the literal expression used.) "The one who came before me preceded me in time." It is important to see that. It is true that Jesus was greater than John the Baptist -- there is no question about that -- but John used a riddle, as it were, to get people to think.

This surely is one of the secrets of the great attractiveness of the ministry of John the Baptist. I have been to Israel six times and have traveled all through that desert region where John preached. Having known the extreme heat of the desert, the barrenness of the landscape and the distance from the cities of Jerusalem and Jericho, it has always amazed me that people flocked out of these cities to hear this rugged preacher who dressed in hairy skins and had such strange eating habits. Why would anybody go out to hear him? The answer, obviously, is that the message he gave was one that touched deeply the need of the human heart. People were hungry for what John had to say, and he put it in such captivating ways, such enigmatic expressions, that they were puzzled by it; he made them think deeply.

John's riddle is, "He who came after me actually came before me." People wondered what he meant by that. Again, the key is what we have already seen in John's use of the word, "He tented among us." John the Baptist is saying, "This Jesus, who is the one who comes after me, the one whom I have been talking about, this Jesus was the final appearance in history of a glory that had been seen before I came." When we ask ourselves what he is talking about, and link it with that thought of a tent, it carries us back immediately to that remarkable manifestation in the wilderness when the whole camp of Israel wandered through the desert for

forty years, and in the midst of them God placed a tent, a tabernacle.

That remarkable building, made of animal skins and beautiful woven, special cloth, with rods of silver and with gold decorations, was divided into two rooms, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. To show how remarkable and how different it was than anything the Israelites had ever seen, there hovered over it a cloud by day, a mist, a vapor, which at night shone with fire and light; so that there was a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day marking this tent as the dwelling place of God. That tabernacle, that tent, was a shadow, a figure of God living among his people. John the Baptist is saying that tabernacle, which was in time before him, is now in reality the One who comes after him. It is the same One: God dwelling among his people; God dwelling in his tabernacle.

I believe the apostle includes this quotation because that is how he first discovered who Jesus was. Every Christian can look back to the moment of his conversion when he first discovered the truth about Jesus. Here John the Apostle is telling us that he saw for the first time who Jesus was when he heard John the Baptist (whose disciple he was for awhile), say, "This one who came after me is the one who was before me." Putting that all together, John caught on to the fact that this Jesus of Nazareth, this Stranger of Galilee, was a human tent in which was hidden a remarkable glory, a glory full of grace and truth.

In Verses 16-18 John goes on to tell us what this meant to him, and what it has meant to every believer since that time:

And from his fulness have we 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 Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. {John 1:16-18 RSV}

Notice the reappearance in Verse 17 of the words "grace and truth," and the contrast which John draws between them and the Law and Moses. The Law makes demands. It is hard, cold, unyielding, without mercy. The symbol of it today is the IRS. We are approaching that time of demand when we must give up what the law requires. If we do not we are subject to penalty: "Do this and thou shalt live," says the IRS. John says that the Law was given by Moses. Moses did not originate it, but he gave it. Moses may disappear, but the Law remains -- cold, unyielding, demanding, without mercy.

But, John says, "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Take away Jesus and you take away grace and truth; he is the channel of them. What John is saying in this section is that law is demand, but grace and truth are supply. designed to meet that demand.

Many people think that law and grace are contradictory, that they are opposing principles. But not in the sense in which they were originally intended. Law and grace supplement one another. Law makes its demands, rightfully and justly, and no one can meet them, but grace and truth is given in order to meet that demand. In Exodus 20 there is the remarkable account of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai; the Law, which came with smoke, thunder, earthquake, fire, fear and trembling. But in the very next section we read the detailed plans for the building of the tabernacle -- God's provision to meet the demands of the Law. Thus, Jesus is in the Old Testament as well as the New. That tabernacle is a picture of Jesus, the meeting place where God's demands are fully met in terms of the sacrifice of blood, of a life poured out. Thus John saw in the coming of Jesus the fulfillment of that tabernacle: "The one who was after me has already been before me." So it is with us. We can say with John, "Out of his fulness (of grace and truth), we have all received, grace upon grace."

God has a daily supply of grace for us. Grace is the generosity of love reaching out toward us, giving itself to us. To those who come to Christ, God's promise is that every day we can take a new supply of his love. We can know that we are loved. We know we are cherished, protected, and blessed. We are strengthened, kept, and supported by his love; grace upon grace, day after day, like the manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. So God gives us a daily supply of love. Because we have been loved, when we reach out in love to someone else, when we give as fully and freely as we have received, then we fulfill the Law, for love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Not only do we have grace, but, in Verse 18, we have the other side of it -- truth: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." No one has ever seen ultimate reality, the truth behind all things. Nobody has ever come to it. Have you ever noticed that about life?

Take science, for instance. Scientists are constantly pursuing truth about the material universe. When I was in high school I was taught that the atom was the smallest particle in the universe. (In fact, the very word atom means "not able to be cut": "a" means negative, no; and "tom" comes from "tomao," to cut.) As such, it was considered impossible to divide the atom. But scientists have since discovered electrons and protons, and neutrons in the nucleus of the atom. They have discovered other particles too, with exotic names like quarks, etc. The further scientists go the more they discover there is to know.

I am reminded of a magazine ad I once saw of a man standing in his beautifully furnished living room. On the table was a television set, and on the screen was a picture of a man standing in his living room with a television set on the table, and on that television set was a picture of a man standing in his living room, etc. The artist had finally given up because the regression was so infinite that he could not depict it anymore. But the mind can project that infinitely. We cannot even grasp the fullness of a man standing in his living room with a television set on his table! No wonder that no one has seen God at any time. "He dwells in light unapproachable," the Scripture says {cf, 1 Tim 6:16}.

No one can find ultimate truth -- except in Jesus! The only begotten Son who dwells at the heart of reality (who lives in the bosom of the Father), has made God known. (The verb is "exegeted" him.) Jesus has explained him and made known that the heart of God is a Father's heart. God is a Father. When we come to him through Jesus Christ we discover a loving Father; around us are a Father's arms; a Father's wisdom guides our way; a Father's power protects us and guards us; and a Father's insight exposes us to dangers we need to learn to face. A Father guides our steps: that is what we learn when we come to Jesus.

An English writer has said:

"Show us the Father" is Philip's profound expression of the deep hunger behind the whole religious quest, speaking for saints and mystics, thinkers, moralists and men of faith of every age. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" is Christ's staggering reply. That is what the doctrine of Christ's divine Sonship really means, and why it matters. In His words we hear God speaking; in His deeds we see God at work; in His reproach we glimpse God's judgement; in His love we feel God's heart beating. If this be not true, we know nothing of God at all. If it be true -- and we know it is -- then God is like Jesus, and Jesus is God, manifest in the flesh, the unique, incomparable, only begotten Son of the ever-living God.

None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other hope in heaven or earth or sea,
None other hiding place from guilt and shame --
None beside Thee.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for our Lord Jesus. What a gift that he has come among us to reveal you to us and to bring us to you. Thank you for that revelation. Help us to walk in the light of it and in the warmth and love of his divine companionship through life. We pray in his name.

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