

## Incarnation

John 1:14, "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."

**Question:** Is God Jesus?

**Key Passages:** John 1:18; Acts 4:12; John 14:6. 14:9

John 1:14 is one of the most extraordinary claims ever made. This idea is what theologians have called incarnation. It's the idea that the God of the universe, the one who finger-painted galaxies into existence, disrobed his deity and clothed himself in the frailty of human flesh.

If you were raised in the church you heard over and over again, "Jesus is God; Jesus is God." But for those not raised with this presupposition it really is an outrageous claim. In fact, this has been the greatest point of contention between Christians and virtually every other religious! If you think about it, you can understand why it is such an outrageous claim. How does an eternal God squeeze into such a small package?! Of course, those who really believe in God recognize the absurdity of limiting God from limiting himself. Nonetheless, for many their imagination of God's potential brackets out his activity in our earthly environment.

Consequently, for the last 2000 years Christians have been debating unbelievers over the mystery of incarnation. Typically, the question is asked: Is Jesus really God? It is an important question and I believe Christians have offered some substantive answers. However, for the sake of *this* discussion I would like to turn the question around. Rather than asking, "Is Jesus God?" I would like to ask, "Is God Jesus?" This is, perhaps, a perplexing turn of phrase. So for clarity, I'm simply asking if Jesus' existence represents a better description of God than our own imaginations.

The reason I'm asking this question is because of verse 18 which says: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." What John writes is right. Our best chance of knowing God is through the life that Jesus lived.

What I want to suggest is simple. If you believe that Jesus is God, then the God you believe in is different than any other description of God on offer. Christians believe three specific things about God because of the incarnation. No other religion describes God in these three ways. Furthermore, these three attributes of God are, in my estimation, the most important things to believe about God. So, with your permission, I want to identify those three attributes and then suggest why they matter so much at a practical level in our lives, because these three beliefs don't just alter our view of God, they transform our treatment of other people.

### **In the Incarnation God is Near**

The first thing the incarnation implies is that **God is near**. He is not off in some distant galaxy watching our world spin on its axis. Nor are we, as human beings, obliged to chase after God up some stairway to heaven. Our knowledge of God and our relationship with God is not dependent on our own efforts, ability, or goodness. Rather, we know God and experience God because God came to us. He revealed himself to us through the life, love, and actions of Jesus Christ. No other religion teaches this. Indeed, there are some religions that teach some deity is near. For example, animistic religions believe that the divine force is found in rocks and trees and rivers. However, those religions do not promote a personal relationship with God. God is like the force in Star Wars—all around us but not clear to us.

On the other hand, there are religions with a robust view of God's identity, even naming him—Yahweh or Allah. However, when God is personalized, he is always distanced. For example, in Judaism, only the High Priest could approach God and then, only once a year in a very specific room in the temple. In Islam, Allah is too powerful to be personal or present in our realm of the mundane.

The concept of Christianity is so different. We are taught that God came to us in the person of Jesus so we could know God through our experience with Jesus. In fact, we are encouraged to pray directly to God using the most personal title "Abba", which means "Father". At one point, a man named Philip, one of Jesus' Apostles, asked Jesus to show them the Father. Listen to Jesus' response, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9). Because of Jesus, God is near—personally available to every individual. Again, only Jesus can grant us access to the Heavenly Father. Hence, it was perfectly reasonable for Jesus to say three verses earlier, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the father except through me" (John 14:6).

### **In the Incarnation God is Love**

A second idea from the incarnation is that **God loves us**. Now clearly, there are religions that teach God loves his own people. Though they are fewer than you might imagine. In most world religions deity is indifferent to humanity. Certainly there are gods who protected their people. For example, Yahweh rescued the Jews and Allah rewards Jihadists. Christianity teaches something entirely different. Bible teaches he loved us even when we were enemies. Romans 5:8, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Who could possibly believe that God loved his enemies except that Jesus died *for* his enemies? Do you remember his first words on the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That gives Jesus the moral authority to command us to love our enemies (Matt 5:44). He showed us how! But I'm getting ahead of myself. We will talk about the implications of this in a moment.

## **In the Incarnation God Suffered**

A third idea from the incarnation is that *God can suffer*. Going back to Greek mythology and dozens of religions since, it's pretty clear that this is a foreign concept to religion. The gods are supposedly beyond our ability to suffer—they don't experience cold or hunger, loss or emotional turmoil. They are "above and beyond." But that's not the picture of God painted through the life of Jesus. He suffered on the cross for the sins of the world. There is precious little in the Old Testament that would help us predict God's suffering but there are a few hints. For example, when God flooded Noah's world, he was (here's the biblical word) "grieved." Not quite suffering but it's moving in that direction. The only two passages in the Hebrew Bible that clearly suggest God suffers are Isaiah 53 and Zechariah 12:10. They are so out of step with Jewish theology that the Rabbis had a difficult time explaining them. The writings that survived from ancient days show just how odd this idea was the God could suffer. Because Christians believe Jesus fulfilled these texts, they alone have a clear explanation of these ancient prophecies. This is not to be critical of other religious leaders. I'm simply saying, if you don't have the model of incarnation, you will be confused by the concept of God suffering.

So there you have it: Three ideas about our God that are only possible because of the incarnation of Jesus. Furthermore, these are the most important ideas about God to believe. But what does it matter? Look, these are not just interesting ideas in the history of religion. The incarnation is not just what happened in the life of Jesus, it is a model of how to live life as Jesus' followers. If you want to win at life, live incarnationally. Let's revisit each attribute of God and ask what it means to live like that.

## **Why Does This Matter?**

First, God is near—he has made himself available. If we could live like that, we would improve every relationship we have. Husbands and wives often keep secrets and distance to protect their hearts. Parents are often present but not available because of the barriers of technology, fatigue, or secret sin. Friendships are truncated because of our selfish pride, laziness, or egos. Now, this does not mean gushing emotions on strangers at the grocery store or reveal our secret insecurities on a first date. It does mean that we be present where we are. It is easier said than done. Nonetheless few things would improve productivity at work or relationships at home more than this. Be present. When a husband comes home, spending five minutes in conversation with his wife can alter the evening. Five minutes of prayer in the morning with your family can change the trajectory of the day. Honesty with a roommate, confession of sins to a friend, or simply listening deliberately to a child has huge impact in the strength and enjoyment of our relationships. God came near in Jesus to model how we can make ourselves available to others. This simple action would radically alter our relationships with the people we care about the most.

Second, God loved sacrificially not just his friends but those who were opposed to him. Jesus put it this way when he unpacked his life's purpose: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." Again, that's not merely what he did for us it is a model he expects from us. So many are driven by our own ambitions to greatness. Little do we know that self-sacrifice is the fastest track to significance. If you want to be great...great, nothing wrong with that. But what path will most likely lead you there? According to Jesus, it is self-sacrifice. In practical terms that means listening more than talking. Tithing rather than hoarding. Volunteering rather than self-promoting. Bragging about others rather than seeking recognition. Oddly, in the end, sacrifice is not loss but gain.

Finally, God suffered. We avoid it at all costs. And that is understandable. Pain is not fun. However, our greatest growth comes from our suffering not our success. It is the pain we endure, the loss we suffer, the inconvenience we endure that builds the character we crave. We want short cuts and comfort at the risk of losing our souls. The person we want to become is more important than the sacrifice it takes to get there. In a real sense we have traded success for significance and pleasure for purpose. God himself modeled a way not to achieve but to become. Our suffering for others in the name of Jesus offers more than creature comforts and personal satisfaction can afford.

Incarnational living turns out to be the most successful, satisfying, and purposeful path in life. John 1:14 is a powerful theological window, true. We see God most clearly in Jesus. But it is more than a window, it is a door through which we pass to enter the kind of life God designed for our greatest good AND the salvation of the world. Imagine a world where God's people imitated his best attributes by following the incarnational life of Jesus.

**Key Points:**

- Incarnation means Jesus is God in human form. It also means that God is Jesus—only those who know Jesus will fully know God. Specifically:
- Love, nearness, and suffering are divine attributes only seen in the incarnation.
- The incarnation of Jesus is not merely a theological truth but a practical model of successful relationships.

**Action Step:** Share these three attributes of Jesus/God with someone you live with and ask them which of the three they would like you to develop in your life.

**Further Resources:** Dennis Kinlaw, *Let's Start with Jesus* (2005).