

# The Gift of Presence

John 1:14-18 on December 13, 2020

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*Please read John 1:14-18 before going further in this transcript.*

This morning I'm excited to share about one of my very favorite topics: God's presence in our world. When I think about God's presence in this world, I think about one of my very favorite Bible verses. Genesis 3:8 says, "...the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day..." I LOVE this scene, which describes what things were like before God was forced to hold mankind accountable for sin. Adam and Eve enjoying paradise with God; enjoying His direct and immediate presence in a world that was uncomplicated and untainted by sin. And even though mankind was kicked out of the garden, that didn't stop God from faithfully revealing His presence time and time again throughout the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> When we come to the New Testament, God reveals His presence once again, but this time in a SHOCKING paradigm shift. It was like nothing that mankind had ever seen before... God Himself took on flesh. John 1:18 explains, "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." Once again, we see a clear demonstration of God making His presence known to all mankind. What a blessing; what a gift, the Gift of Presence!

John 1:16-17 makes an interesting observation: "Out of his fullness [this is referring back to verse 14, to Jesus who was FULL of grace and truth]... Out of [Jesus] fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In other words, after God had already graciously given us the law through Moses, He then gave us even more grace.<sup>2</sup> After making His presence known through Moses and giving us a list of His holy expectations<sup>3</sup>, God then faithfully gave us an even better grace.<sup>4</sup>

Can you imagine if God had stopped at the Old Testament? If He'd decided that He'd done enough to reveal Himself to mankind? After all that God did in and through the Old Testament. After all the many marvels of His created world, mankind was without excuse.<sup>5</sup> That should've been enough for us to turn to Him. And yet, God continued to reveal His glorious presence to us. We see this in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The glory of Jesus is the "grace and truth" that He revealed through His presence here on earth. Through all of the incredible miracles and through all of His authoritative teachings. Being fully human, Jesus got right up close to mankind and revealed God's glory in a way that seems almost impossible for us to miss.<sup>6</sup>

Revealing His glory to mankind has been God's pattern all along though. Let's jump back to the Old Testament for a few minutes. Back in Exodus 33, Moses makes a bold request, He asks God to show Him His glory. But God doesn't just simply flex His muscle and reveal His great power. INSTEAD, God reveals something ELSE about Himself. Exodus 33:18-19 tells us, "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.' And the LORD said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you,

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<sup>1</sup> God revealed His presence powerfully through... Noah's ark and the flood and the reminder every time we see a rainbow. ...the miracles in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, providing Manna/Quail. ...the conquest of the land, and the reign of various judges/kings. ...Babylonian Exile and the restoration back to Israel's homeland. And those are just a few examples of how God revealed His presence throughout the Old Testament.

<sup>2</sup> That phrase, "grace in place of grace already given" has caused a lot of discussion among Bible commentators. "The most convincing view takes anti in one of its most common uses (and by far the most common in the LXX) to mean 'instead of': from Christ's fullness we have all received grace instead of grace." (Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 132). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: IVP; W.B. Eerdmans.) As always, Scripture is its own best interpreter. So the best way to understand verse 16 is to read it in context of verse 17. "On the face of it, then, it appears that the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ is what replaces the law; the law itself is understood to be an earlier display of grace." (Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 132). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: IVP; W.B. Eerdmans.) In other words, the glory of God's goodness in the Old Testament has been anticipating the incarnation of Jesus in the New Testament, which would help reveal the glory of God's grace and truth. "The law, i.e. the law-covenant, was given by grace, and anticipated the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; now that he has come, that same prophetic law-covenant is necessarily superseded by that which it 'prophesied' would come. The thought is not dissimilar to Matthew 5:17-20." (Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 133). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: IVP; W.B. Eerdmans.)

<sup>3</sup> These holy expectations were designed to lead us ultimately to Jesus. See Romans 3:20 and 7:7 as well as Galatians 3:23-25.

<sup>4</sup> "the law that was given through Moses is an earlier display of grace (what verse 16 calls 'grace already given'), and the grace and truth... that came through Jesus Christ replaces the Mosaic law-covenant." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2147 footnote on John 1:17.

<sup>5</sup> See Romans 1:20.

<sup>6</sup> Consider the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, especially verse 31.

and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence....” You see, when we imagine God’s glory, we might be drawn to His awesome power, but God’s glory is His goodness. His glory is His grace and truth.<sup>7</sup> Later on Exodus 34:6 records, “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Here’s the point, “The glory that Moses saw in Exodus 33 and 34 is the same glory that John saw in the Word made flesh.”<sup>8</sup> John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In other words, by becoming flesh and making His dwelling among us, Jesus helped us see God’s glory from a different perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Many of us have probably heard it explained before that the Greek word for “made his dwelling” is connected to the word “tent or tabernacle.” So, we could say that through the person of Jesus, God “pitched His tent” among us. This tent imagery also points us back to Old Testament times, when God would camp among the Israelites in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was really just a HUGE tent. All 12 of the tribes of Israel would set up their tents around this HUGE tent. In other words, God’s tent was in the very center of the Hebrew camp. One of the places that we can read about this HUGE tent, or tabernacle, is in Exodus 40:34-38, “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.”

Imagine what this might have been like. God’s presence was RIGHT THERE in front of them, in plain sight. All of them could see this visible symbol of God’s presence clearly among them.<sup>10</sup> It must have been an incredible blessing to be able to look over at any time and clearly see that God was present in their midst. And there was never any question about when or where to travel. There’s no need for a GPS when you have eyes in the sky! God made his presence obvious, with a cloud by day and fire by night.<sup>11</sup> And yet, I wonder if it was ever difficult to be so near to God, and yet be unable to approach Him.<sup>12</sup> This is what makes John 1:14 so stunning and so attractive to us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us....” It’s as though God’s people went from having God camping in the tent next door to them, to having Him come out of his tent and sit around the campfire with them.<sup>13</sup> He wasn’t just nearby, He was present right there with them, eating food, telling stories, and answering their questions about life and godliness. God gave His people the gift of His presence, at a WHOLE new level! You see, despite their sinful condition, Jesus let the disciples approach Him. They could sit right next to Him, look Him in the eye, and talk with Him face to face.

This is a significant reason for us to rejoice during the Christmas season, to rejoice in the gift of Jesus’ incarnation. We rejoice in the incredible reality of God’s immanence! The transcendent God of the universe could have chosen to stay far away from us and to keep us at a distance from Himself; but instead, He humbled Himself and became flesh. Jesus brought down to earth “The Gift of Presence.”

But how is God revealing His presence in our world today? It’s not through a pillar of cloud and fire like it was for OT Israel. It’s not through Jesus’ earthly ministry like it was in the Gospels. Actually, in our world today, God is revealing His presence through the church! It’s through our Christian faith and testimony that the gift of God’s presence is being revealed. 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 says that God

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<sup>7</sup> See John 1:14.

<sup>8</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2147 footnote on John 1:14.

<sup>9</sup> “The glory of God is the weight of [His] majestic goodness...and the resulting...reputation, that he gains from revealing himself as Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and Redeemer.” The Glory of God” article by James M. Hamilton Jr., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 2640.

<sup>10</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 116 footnote on Exodus 13:21.

<sup>11</sup> See Exodus 13:21.

<sup>12</sup> See Hebrews 4:14-16, especially verse 16.

<sup>13</sup> “God has chosen to dwell amongst his people in a yet more personal way, in the Word-become-flesh.” Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 127). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

“...uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” In other words, God is continuing to faithfully make His presence known in this world. And His key strategy right now, is to do that is through the local church.<sup>14</sup> One of the most common smells at Christmas time is pine. Anyone who’s ever cut down or purchased a live pine tree, is familiar with that wonderful pine scent. It’s a wonderful aroma that fills the entire house. In fact, it’s often a scent that even comes with you when you leave your house... because you end up with pine pitch on your hands and your clothes and even in your hair! It’s incredibly difficult to remove pine pitch. You have to use something like gasoline to get it off. Of course, then you end up smelling like gasoline! The other option is to try and cover it up with some other scent, but pine scent is a strong, lasting scent.<sup>15</sup>

I share all this to illustrate that God actually wants His people to be a little bit smelly. Seriously, God wants our scent to be strong enough that people will notice our unique odor. That’s what 2 Corinthians 2:15 is getting at, “For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” God doesn’t want us to try and wash off our scent or to cover it up. He wants to use us, to spread His aroma everywhere we go. The pleasing aroma of Christ is an aroma that we spread among fellow believers as well as among those who are perishing. We are called to be the pleasing aroma of Christ...

**a) ...Among those who are being saved.** This means that “the gift of God’s presence” is something we give to one another as fellow believers. We do this by being present in one another’s lives. Of course, in this year of COVID-19, giving the gift of presence has been considerably more challenging. Nonetheless, one of the ways that God makes His presence known is through our ministry to one another.<sup>16</sup> So, we need to make the most of the opportunities that we do have. Some are direct opportunities, with people who live under the same roof. Some are creative opportunities, with people we’re social distancing from. Ideally, “the Gift of Presence” is best enjoyed in one another’s literal, physical presence. It’s certainly preferable for believers to meet in person at the church building. And it will certainly help when we can get back to the days when no one is asked to wear a mask or stay 6’ apart. And as soon as we can get back to that, we SHOULD get back to that.

In the meantime, let’s consider the fact that “the Gift of Presence” doesn’t ABSOLUTELY require us, to be physically present with each other. Rather, what’s MOST important, is that we actively engage in one another’s lives. Hebrews 10:24-25 exhorts us, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another....” “Not giving up meeting together” is not just a rally cry for believers to come to the church building, instead of staying home. If it was, the writer of Hebrews WOULD NOT have contrasted it with the words, “but encouraging one another.” Instead, he would have contrasted it with something like, “not giving up meeting together, but gathering with one another.”

What I’m driving at is that we’re not just talking about gathering warm bodies in the same building; we’re talking about gathering warm hearts. To put it another way, even though today’s message is urging us toward the gift of presence, we all know that it is entirely possible “to be physically present but emotionally absent.” And it’s also possible to be physically absent but emotionally present. The ultimate intention behind these verses in Hebrews 10 is that we need to have an active presence in each other’s lives, through the ministry of encouragement.<sup>17</sup>

That’s why I’ve been urging everyone in our church to join together in a “Church Directory Caregiving Drive.” The idea is simply this, turn to the page in the Church Directory where your name

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<sup>14</sup> Also consider Ephesians 3:10-11.

<sup>15</sup> The more years that I spend deer hunting, the more I grow to respect the amazing sense of smell that deer have. It’s helpful to keep your best shooting lanes upwind of you. If the wind is coming from behind you, blowing at your back, you might as well take a nap or play a game on your cell phone. Deer have an amazing sense of smell. Besides staying downwind, it also helps to descent your body and your clothing. It is also helpful to use a cover scent. In fact, one of the things that I like to do is break off some small pine branches and put them inside my coat. Pine is a strong scent and a safe, familiar scent to the deer.

<sup>16</sup> Consider John 13:34-35.

<sup>17</sup> See Gunner Gundersen, *What If I Don’t Feel Like Going to Church*, 9 Marks series, Crossway, Wheaton, IL 2020, pp. 41-42.

is listed. Then PRAY for the names of anyone who shares the same page as you. And then, CONTACT as many of those names as you feel comfortable contacting. If you need a copy of the updated directory, stop by the office, or ask us to mail you one. If your name isn't in the directory, find the page where it would be alphabetically and then pray for the names on that page. And, if you want your name added to the directory, contact the church and we'll make sure that you are added for future printings. If you discover that someone else's name isn't in the directory, and you think that it should be, please try to find another way to contact them and see how they're doing. Also, ask them if they want to be added to the directory.

One author notes: "We grow by staying in the soil of spiritual community.... Consistently meeting, consistently sharing, ...consistently praying, consistently singing, consistently serving – these are secret weapons in our battle against sin, invisible ingredients in the recipe of Christian joy, subtle nutrients that nurture our spiritual health...."<sup>18</sup> In today's world of technology, there are many ways that we can be actively present in each other's lives, without actually being physically present in the same room. So please contact a few people from our church this week. Call, text, or message them or write them a letter or send them a card. Contact them in whatever way God prompts you to. This Christmas, give someone from our church "the gift of presence." Let's remind each other that God is present in this world and that His church is alive and well, spreading the encouraging aroma of Christ among those who are being saved.<sup>19</sup> We are also called to be the pleasing aroma of Christ...

**b) ...Among those who are perishing.** This means that "the gift of God's presence" is something we give to those who do not yet know God.<sup>20</sup> This isn't always easy to do though, because, unfortunately, the reality is that sometimes even the sweetest smell, can be an irritating reminder. So we need to pray for insight and discernment for how to make sure that we're being a pleasing aroma. 1 Peter 3:15 reminds us to give the reason for the hope that we have with gentleness and respect. Our heartfelt prayer and desire should be that the aroma of Christ will be a pleasing aroma that helps the lost come to a knowledge of God. We hope that our loving testimony of the grace and truth of Jesus, will be a scent that will attract those who are not yet following Jesus.

This year, we have a unique opportunity to invite people to our Christmas services. In addition to continuing with our Livestream, we've been working to prepare our Community Life Center to provide extra seating. This will be available for our services on Sunday, December 20, as well as our two Christmas Eve services on December 23 and 24. We're asking that some of us who are regular attenders, will prayerfully consider sitting in the Community Life Center, in order to make more room in our Sanctuary for guests from our community. It would also be helpful if those of us who are physically able, could park in the lower lot.

***This Christmas let's invite someone to church: a neighbor or a friend from work or school. Let's spread the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who do not yet know Jesus.***

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<sup>18</sup> The quote continues, "...Like an acorn buried in a field, consistency isn't impressive – until one day, it is." Gunner Gundersen, *What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church*, 9 Marks series, Crossway, Wheaton, IL 2020, pp. 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the urgency in Hebrews 10:24-25 is to engage in actively coming alongside each other and encouraging each other. In fact, the Greek word that is translated, "encouraging" one another includes in its range of meaning, "to come alongside someone." παρακαλέω "① to ask to come and be present where the speaker is, call to one's side." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 764). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>20</sup> "As the gospel aroma is released in the world through Christian testimony, it is always sweet-smelling, even though it may be differently received." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1956 footnote on 2 Corinthians 2:16.