

# GOD WITH US

## Part 8: JESUS

### Message 2 – JESUS before Jesus

#### Introduction

As we prepare to walk through the earthly life of “Jesus,” it is important to take a step back and ask the question: Who exactly was “JESUS?” There’s a tendency today to see the earthly, human Jesus as a great teacher, a prophet, someone worth respecting and emulating, like we’d respect Ghandi, or Aristotle or Confucius or some other religious/philosophical leader. Yet, the four gospels (and other passages in both Old and New Testaments) make it clear that JESUS was much more than a very special human being. It is only when we truly understand who He really was that we can comprehend the meaning of His appearance in this world. We will use the *introduction to the Gospel of John* as the anchor for our study; but from there, we will consider other key passages that contribute to and amplify John’s presentation of JESUS as *the GOD Who came to DWELL among us*.

#### **The Self-EMPTYING of the JESUS: Philippians 2**

We begin by considering a passage from the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He was encouraging the people in this church to live with *humility toward one another*. As the prime example of humility, Paul spoke about the humility that JESUS exercised when He “emptied” Himself of certain divine rights and entered our world for a time, to be a servant to our needs.

***“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up his divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated Him to the place of highest honor and gave Him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:5-11).***

*Kenosis* is a Greek word meaning “to empty.” The Greek literally reads: He (JESUS) “*emptied Himself*” and became a human being. What did JESUS “empty” Himself of? He emptied Himself of “*the independent exercise of His attributes.*” He didn’t empty Himself of the attributes of God. He couldn’t ‘stop being God.’ But He could “*set aside His right to appear and act in ways that God typically appears and acts.*” “*He gave up His divine privileges.*” (The New Living Translation does a good job of giving the precise sense of the Greek.)

Paul’s main point is that JESUS provided the ultimate example of *humbly serving the needs of others*. Yet, his indirect point comes through loud and clear: *JESUS’ entry into this world as a humble servant was a temporary self-emptying*. BEFORE He came to earth, He had ALL the divine privileges and He was free to exercise them. AFTER He came to earth, He was exalted by the Father “*to the place of highest honor.*” In fact, His name was exalted above every other name in history.

*Paul’s point was about the exercise of humility toward one another; about considering the other person as more important than oneself to preserve unity in relationships with others. Does the example of Jesus move you in any way to take a step of humility toward someone so that you can protect the unity of the relationship? Meditate on Philippians 2:3,4 and imitate JESUS!*

### **The Eternal GOD: John 1:1-3**

Of the 4 gospel writers, it was the apostle John that was moved by the Spirit to drive home this idea of *the greatness of JESUS before He was Jesus*. John wrote *an introduction* to his gospel that was completely different from the other. Matthew and Luke began with birth narratives. Mark dove right into the public ministry of the adult Jesus. John starts in eternity past; somewhere before Genesis 1:1. He begins with a forceful declarations about JESUS:

***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1,2).***

John wants us to know from the first verse that *JESUS is the eternal God*. He was there in the beginning, at Genesis 1:1. He was with the Father. He was distinct from the Father (*with God*) but He also *was God*. John’s language shows theological precision. JESUS has always been part of the eternal godhead.

When you go back to Genesis chapter 1 you see a hint of plurality in the godhead.

***Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26).***

John wants us to know that *JESUS was there with God the Father, and God the Spirit*. He was there *before* and *as* the visible world as we know it was formed. In fact, JESUS was the CREATOR.

***“All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3).***

JESUS was the acting *agent* through Whom the entire created world came into being. Nothing exists apart from Him calling into being. The Jesus that walked the earth is the JESUS that *made the earth*. Heaven was His eternal home; but He decided to spend a few years with us.

*Do you think much about the fact that Jesus, your Savior and Friend, is also JESUS your Creator and Sustainer? Look around you at life, at your world, at the universe, at creativity everywhere, and at yourself. Then pause to give thanks to your Creator and Sustainer, JESUS the Son of God! He made it all, including you.*

### **CREATOR, SUSTAINER and HEIR: Colossians 1:16,17**

Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians because false teachers had presented diminished ideas about Jesus. They were promoting BIG religion, little Jesus. The false teachers argued that Jesus was no big deal. Instead, what was important was religious rules, ceremonies, holy days and the like. So, Paul sets the record straight in the opening chapter:

***“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16,17).***

All things were created *through Him* AND *for Him*. That means that the world exists *by and for* the JESUS, the Son of God. And, HE *holds all things together*. Physicists refer to it as the “cosmic glue” that invisibly holds things together. The Bible tells us that the cosmic glue is JESUS. HE made it all and sustains it all.

The significance of Paul’s argument for the preeminence of the

PERSON of Christ should not be missed. The WORK of Christ on the cross (paying the sin-debt for all of humanity) could not have happened if He was just an ordinary human being. Only if He was the eternal GOD could He pay the debt for all sin in one moment in time. Paul stressed this point:

***“For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness (of deity) to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Coloss. 1:19-20).***

When the PERSON of Christ is minimized, the WORK of Christ on the cross is neutralized. When the PERSON of Christ is preeminent, the WORK of Christ on the cross is honored. The blood of His cross was effective because it was the blood of the God-man. Have you made the connection between the PERSON and WORK of Jesus? When you realize WHO it was that gave His life on a cross for your sins, it causes you to pause in wonder. The refrain from the old hymn, And Can It Be says it all: “Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, My GOD, should die for me.”

### **The EXACT PICTURE of GOD: Hebrews 1:1-3**

The anonymous writer of the book of Hebrews opened his letter with some of the same ideas found in John 1 and Colossians 1. This was because, once again, there were some teachers spreading minimized ideas about Jesus. The writer opens forcefully:

***“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:1-3).***

JESUS is the creator, sustainer and heir of the world. And the earthly Jesus was the “exact representation of God’s nature.” “Exact representation” is the Greek word “character.” A “character” was an imprint in clay that a die-maker would produce from an original. The original would be stamped into the wet clay, and that stamp was called the “character” of the original.

The writer is saying something like this: If you were to take God the Father, and somehow stamp Him into wet clay, that *image* in

the clay would be Jesus: the “exact representation” of the Father. This explains why, later in John’s gospel when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus said these words:

***Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? (14:9).***

“Philip, you don’t need to look any further to figure out what God the Father is like. Look at Me and you have seen the Father.” Because Jesus is the “exact representation” of the Father.

Once again, for the writer of Hebrews the importance of the WORK of Christ was inseparably linked to a proper view of the PERSON of Christ. In Hebrews, Jesus is our great High Priest Who, through His death and resurrection, has opened the way for us into the heavenly temple, the eternal presence of the Father. Jesus could accomplish this work if He was just an ordinary man like the rest of us. He had to be GOD to accomplish this amazing work for all of humanity.

*You have a great High Priest Who has opened the way into the presence of God through His own blood sacrifice. “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16). Never hesitate to come to Him with your needs. He has opened the way for you.*

### **The ONLY EXPRESSION of God: John 1:1,18**

Returning to John’s introduction . . . John wants us to know something even deeper about JESUS before Jesus. He was “*the Word*” of God. Why did John call JESUS the “Word?”

That is an important title, because it means JESUS is the *expression* of God; the *manifestation* of God; the *revelation* of God. When God wanted to define Himself to the world, JESUS became that definition, or expression, that “Word” of God.

In fact, JESUS the Son of God has *always and only been* the One to reveal or explain God to humanity. Look closely at the last line of John’s introduction:

***“No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is Himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us” (John 1:18 - NLT).***

God the Father and God the Spirit have *never been seen by human eyes*. That raises the obvious question: Who was it appearing throughout the Old Testament, before Jesus showed up as a baby in Joseph and Mary’s family? Scholars call those many O.T. appearances of God “theophanies” (appearances of God).

- Who was it in the Garden of Eden that walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day?
- Who was it that showed up on the day they sinned; Who promised to crush the serpent and rescue them from their fall?
- Who tenderly comforted Hagar in the wilderness, the One she called El-Roi (the God Who sees).
- Who was it that appeared to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel?
- Who showed up on Mt. Moriah to keep Abraham from sacrificing his own son?
- Who wrestled with Jacob, and gave him the name “Israel:” “He who wrestles with God?”
- Who appeared to Moses at the burning bush and called Himself “I AM” (Yahweh)?
- Who was that mysterious 4th person that showed up to protect Daniel’s 3 friends in the fiery furnace?
- Who was that “Angel of the Lord” that appeared repeatedly and was willing to receive worship from people?

It was *God the Son (JESUS) making God known even before He showed up as Jesus*. This is why John chose the title, “*the Word*” to describe Jesus. Because Jesus has *ALWAYS been the ONLY manifestation of God to humanity*. On the “Angel of the Lord” see: <https://www.jewsforjesus.org/files/pdf/issues/issues-14-06.pdf>

*After the events of Genesis 1-3, the very first theophany (appearance of God) was to Hagar, the outcast servant of Abraham and Sarah. Read her story in Genesis 16. See how she named God, and how God in turn named her son. It is a tender exchange. What does this first theophany, and the person to whom it was granted, tell you about the character of JESUS? Is it any surprise that the earthly Jesus dealt with similar compassion and tender mercy to people in need? It was JESUS before Jesus that met with Hagar!!!*

## Astounding Claims later in John's Gospel

John wants us to know all of this about JESUS right up front. His introduction sets the stage for the story that follows. This way, the reader won't be so surprised when the earthly Jesus makes some astounding claims. For example . . .

In John 5 Jesus was talking in ways that made it sound like He was in a special Father-Son relationship with God. They Jews never used Father-Son language to describe their relationship with God. So when Jesus talked like that, they were shocked and troubled.

***Jesus replied: "My Father is always working, and so am I." So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill Him. For He not only broke the Sabbath, He called God His Father, thereby making Himself equal with God" (John 5:17,18).***

Equal with God? Yes! Because He shared in the very divine nature of His Father. Recall John 1:1. From eternity past, JESUS was *with God (the Father) and was God*. Similarly, in John 8 Jesus was in a heated debate with the Jewish leaders, who could not understand His audacious claims.

***"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM." Therefore, they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple" (John 8:56-59).***

"I AM" is the eternal name of God in the O.T. Jesus' opponents knew exactly what He was saying. He claimed to be the God Who appeared to Abraham (more than 2,000 years before). AND, even before Abraham was born, He was God!

### Putting it all together . . .

You put all of these passages together and you get a very BIG picture of JESUS before He was Jesus.

- He was with God the Father and God the Spirit in the beginning.
- He was God; He shared in the quality of deity.
- He was the agent of creation, through Whom everything came into existence.
- He was the designated heir of all created things.

- *He holds all things together; He sustains the universe.*
- *He is the One Who reveals God to humanity.*
- *He is the exact representation of the nature of God.*
- *He is Yahweh, the great I AM.*

### **GOD Pitched His Tent among us: John 1:14**

Back to John 1, the introduction to the gospel . . . John comes down to the short, earthly existence of Jesus. With a brief line:

***“And the Word became flesh, and DWELT among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).***

Now here’s John’s entire point, and it’s found in one word: *“dwelt.”* He is obviously saying that the Word (the Son of God) became flesh; He took on humanity; He lived among us; we saw His glory. He’s saying that Jesus became one of us; but that’s not John’s whole point.

The word *“dwelt”* is a Greek word that means *“to pitch a tent temporarily.”* It’s a word that reads, literally, *“tabernacle-ed.”* John takes the word *“tabernacle”* and turns it into a verb. Jesus *tabernacle-ed among us for a little while.* John intentionally chose a term that His Jewish readers would have understood immediately. Because in the O.T. God told the Israelites to build Him a *tent* or a *tabernacle* that God could dwell in as they made their way through the desert to the Promised Land. And then God dwelt in that *tent* or *tabernacle* until Solomon came along and built a *stone temple* for the Lord. The Jews understood that God temporarily *tabernacle-ed among them* in the O.T.

Now John gets to his real point. The Son of God, the eternal Word of God, the Creator God, the Sustainer God, the Revealer God . . . came and *pitched His tent among us for a short period of time.* He came to *dwell with us temporarily.* *For 33 years the Creator of everything came to be with us.* The Message translation reads:

***“The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (Jn. 1:14).***

John is trying to help his readers understand that – *the earthly life of Jesus (those few 33 years) was just a short appearance of the eternal Son of God, JESUS.* He is trying to help his readers get the proper *context* for the earthly life of Jesus. He’s saying: Reader,

this is not the whole story. There was JESUS before Jesus!! The *whole story* is that *the eternal Creator-God came into the world to redeem His creation.*

### **The UNWELCOMED GOD: John 1:10,11**

***“He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:10,11).***

The great irony of the story that John will tell is that *the Creator of everything came to His creation to redeem it and THEY DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM or RECEIVE HIM! The One Who made the promises to Abraham and Who appeared to Moses, WAS NOT RECEIVED EVEN BY HIS OWN CHOSEN PEOPLE.*

Some thought He was a prophet. Others thought He was a revolutionary. Others thought He was a lunatic. Still others thought He was a blasphemer, for making God-like claims. A few thought He was an agent of Satan. Some just thought He was a no-good trouble-maker who threatened the peace the Jews had brokered with the Romans. But pretty much everyone agreed in the end: *Crucify Him!*

*The same is true today. A lot of people are walking around with similar ideas: Jesus is a great guy; he was some kind of amazing prophet; a great revolutionary; he was a deceiver; he didn't even exist; etc. The entire point of the 4 gospels is to make the case that the eternal God came to be with us (Immanuel = God with us) and to save us from our sins. Is that your view of Jesus? Can you understand why C.S. Lewis proposed the tri-lemma? Jesus could only be one of 3 things: Liar, Lunatic or Lord. He didn't leave us any other options!*

### **BUT . . . for those who DID RECEIVE HIM: John 1:12,13**

***“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12,13).***

A lot of people failed to *recognize and receive Him* into their hearts. But to all those who DID receive Him He gave them the right to become children of God; to be “born of God,” or, to be “born again” (new birth is a favorite theme with John, both in the gospel and his 3 epistles).

The word “believe” is used 98 times in John’s gospel! That’s the sole condition for becoming a child of God: *Believe that Jesus was JESUS, the eternal Son of God and Savior of the world.*

You see, John is not only saying up front that Jesus is the eternal GOD; he is also saying that our view on this is of *eternal consequence*. To accept Jesus as a great teacher is not enough. To accept Him as a prophet like Mohammed or someone else is not enough. To accept Him as a wise man like Confucius is not enough. John was saying in his introduction:

**In the person of Jesus, GOD came to save His creation.  
But you must BELIEVE in order to BECOME a child of God.**

***Summary: GOD With Us***

We entitled this entire journey through the Bible: *GOD With Us*. Because that’s the point of the whole Bible. When we come to the life of the earthly Jesus, we must realize that this is the ultimate act of GOD coming to be WITH US. JESUS before Jesus was GOD. And then, in a moment of time, He came to be with us for a few short years. And not just to be with us, but to sacrifice Himself for us to make it possible for us to be with Him forever. Now we can better understand why Jesus prayed these words on the last night of His life:

***“I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began” (John 17:4,5).***

**Discussion Questions**

1. What has most surprised you (or informed you) about this study of JESUS before Jesus?
2. Does this understanding of Jesus as the eternal Son of God cause you to think differently about any aspect of His life, His teachings, or His ministry?
3. Many people would say today that they ‘admire’ or ‘respect’ Jesus as a person. How would you respond if someone said something like that to you?
4. Of all the things you have learned about JESUS in this study, what most encourages you?