

# Was. With. Became.

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I'd like us to turn together back to the passages that we read in John's Gospel, chapter one. When it comes to thinking about the birth of Jesus, the big word that theologians use is the word incarnation. That actually comes from a Latin word, *in* and *caro*, which means in flesh. And so that word incarnation is speaking about how God the Son became human, how Jesus is God incarnate, God in flesh. That's the big word that theologians use, and incarnation is a big, important theological word. And I want us to think about it a little bit today. But instead of using that big word, John gives us three little words in the passages that we read that are crucial for helping us understand just what is involved in Jesus being born, in Jesus becoming one of us. And what I want us to actually see, or to, what

I want to suggest today is that these three little words, I think, probably give us the best summary of what was involved in the coming of Jesus. There are three little words that are very easily missed, and on their own they don't sound particularly important. But the truth is they are massive little words. What are they? Was, with, became. These three words are crucial, and they're teaching us some of the most fundamental truths of the Christian Gospel, and they're actually getting us to think about, and they're giving us answers to some of the biggest questions of life. And so for a wee while, I thought we would go through them together. We'll start with was. John's Gospel opens with the words, in the beginning was. You can see them right there. That's his first four words. Now that should ring bells in all of us, because it's pointing us back to the very first sentence in the whole Bible, in Genesis chapter one, where it says, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. So John is echoing the language of Genesis, but there's a difference with John, because he actually is going back even further than Genesis. John doesn't go back to the creation of the universe. He goes back to the ultimate reality from which everything else has come. And that's part of what makes John's Gospel so fascinating. You only have to read four words, and you are confronted with the biggest questions of life, of reality, of truth. And if you think about it, that phrase that John starts with, in the beginning was, is crucial for every single one of us. It's a massive phrase, because we've all got to be able to finish that sentence. Every single one of us has got to be able to finish that sentence. In the beginning was, what? So how would you finish that sentence? And

I'm like, I really want you to think about that. How would you finish that sentence? In the beginning was nothing. In the beginning was a blob of potentiality. In the beginning was a higher power. In the beginning was a pantheon of God's. In the beginning was, I don't know. The reason it's so important is because A, your ending to that sentence has got to make sense, surely. And B, the way you finish that sentence is going to determine how you understand the world. In other words, your ending to that sentence up there is going to tell you what you believe ultimate reality to be. And that means that your ending to that sentence is either going to be inspiring if your ultimate reality is worth building your whole life upon, or it's going to be depressing if your ultimate reality is so benign that it undermines the value of everything else that you care about, or it's going to be scary if your explanation for ultimate reality is unknowable or even worse if it's wrong. That tiny word was is forcing us to think about massive questions, to think about the eternal constant that has always been there, to think about the foundation and explanation for everything else that exists. It's making us think about whatever it was that was long before you and I ever were. And many people will respond to that kind of challenge to finish that sentence by saying, well, I just don't want to think about it. And that's very typical of culture in 2022 in the West, because in our culture, distraction is the antidote to almost all our problems. So for most people, it's like, well, I don't want to think about that, especially not our Christmas Day. But for those who do think about it, and lots of people have thought about over the years, what we tend to see today is that people have concluded that that ultimate reality is either something impersonal, or it's something meaningless, or it's something that we can't possibly know, so it's either impersonal, like an object or a force or something, or it's meaningless, like nothing or something along those lines, or it's just like, well, I just don't know, we don't know. And maybe that's what you think as well. Maybe you do think that, well, ultimately, ultimately, it all goes back to, well, I don't really know. Does that satisfy you? Is that answer really good enough? Well, how does John finish that sentence? Well, he says something absolutely astonishing. He says, in the beginning was the word. Now, this is one of the most famous statements in the whole Bible. And when we hear that statement, or read that statement, if you're anything like me, two things tend to happen. Part of us thinks, wow, that is incredibly profound. And at the same time, another part of us thinks, I actually don't have a clue what that means. And it's okay if you feel like that, you think, wow, that does sound profound, but I don't really understand it. That's a very normal way to react. So what on earth does John mean when he says, in the beginning was the word? Well, as you may know, the Greek word translated

as word is the word *logos*. And that's a very important word in the ancient literature of both Greeks and Jews. It does mean word, the translation's accurate, that's what it means.

It's a very important concept to both the Greek and the Jewish mind of the classical period. And there's been thousands of pages written explaining how that Greek and Jewish background might feed into what John is saying here. And all of that's very interesting and all that's very helpful. It does give us a clear understanding. But what I want to suggest is that when it comes to a passage in the Bible, or a statement in the Bible that can be a wee bit hard to understand, or it's not immediately obvious what it means, a good thing for us to do is to just try and keep things as simple as possible. So we could get super complicated and go into all sorts of stuff from ancient Greek and Jewish literature. I don't know if we need to do that because I think we can just keep it quite simple. And so when you think about the word word, what do you think of? What comes to mind? Well, we tend to think of two things. One is in terms of individual words. So words like dog or cat or whatever.

[ 8 : 50 ]      The other thing we tend to do is think in terms of a collected word. So if I say the word on the street is, none of you are thinking about the word dog written on the pavement.

You're thinking about a collection of information. You're thinking about the news that's spreading. So the word on the street is the dog's gone missing or whatever it might be. And so you've got this like individual words, yes, but also the idea of a collective word together, conveying information. We do that all the time. So does the Bible. The Bible has lots of important individual words, but it also has the collective word of God. And that second one in many ways is where the emphasis tends to be. So that's just the basic starting point. When you see the word word, I want you to think in those terms. Now, we can unpack all of this a wee bit more. Now I'm going to warn you that this is maybe at risk of being a little bit complicated.

I'm a little bit nervous thinking, should I do this today? It's Christmas Day. Will it be cruel? It's like, well, yes, I will be cruel because I think you need to earn your Christmas dinner. So you just roll up the sleeves of your mind and stick with me.

Okay. I hope it'll be worth it. Okay. So let's sign unpack all this a wee bit more. When you encounter a word, whether that's an individual word or whether it's a collective word in a phrase, several things are happening. And I think it's helpful to think these things through. First of all, there's a disclosure of content, a disclosure of content. So dog, cat, red, blue, all those words are conveying content. And so a word conveys something, or we might even say it's revealing something. So when I say dog, you don't think of the letter D and the letter O and the letter G lined up and combining to make this word dog that sounds like dog. You're not thinking of that. You're thinking of an animal that's wagging its tail and it wants you to rub its tummy. And so whatever it is, when you encounter a word, content is being disclosed to you. Second thing we have is that that brings an interaction. So when you encounter a word, it inevitably involves an interaction with another. So again, please stick with me on this. Just try and think that through that.

Yes, you know, a word involves an encounter with another, it might be instantaneous when you say Merry Christmas to someone today, face to face, straight away. It might be much more delayed. You might send someone a text and they don't read it until tonight. You might write a book and no one, someone doesn't read it until a thousand years from now. Because that happens to you. You can pick up a book written a thousand years ago. It's taken a millennium for the interaction to happen. But it's still an interaction. And so there's this, this interaction is connection between the person who discloses the word, the person who receives it. And the result of that is stuff happens. Action takes place at the very least there's communication. And so information gets shared one to another. And that's true of a simple word like hello, just information's been shared. And it's also true of much more complicated things. So if you got a fancy, I don't know, if you got a fancy new computer or something or a new tool, and you had to read all the instructions, same kind of thing is happening. There's communication between the person who transmits the word, the person who receives it. And if that communication is effective, further results will follow.

[12:22] Stuff will actually happen. So let me give you a very technical example. This afternoon, when I say past the pigs and blankets, what's what do I want to happen? What's going on there? Okay, well, there's a disclosure from me, isn't there? Because I'm first of all identifying sausages wrapped in bacon as pigs and blankets. Okay, so that's my way of conveying that concept. And I'm also revealing my desire to eat them and to have them on my plate.

And so it's also establishing an interaction between me and the person that I'm asking as he passed the pigs and blankets. I'm interacting with them. And I hope that the result is that something will happen. My need for pigs and blankets is being communicated. And if not, if my communication is effective, then the sausages and bacon will find their way to my plate. And that's all straightforward enough, I hope. But the fascinating thing is that all of this is actually an outworking of some of the most fundamental aspects of our existence.

You might have thought that, that the answer to the big philosophical questions of life lie in the sausages and bacon on your Christmas dinner table. But it's partly true, if you think about it. It's showing us that when a word is encountered, fundamental aspects of human experience must be in place. And I'm going to give you three. First of all, a word has to be personal. Now, when I say personal, I mean that it comes from a person.

It originates from a person. Impersonal realities can inspire words, but they will never create them. That's why a beautiful flower like this one can inspire 1000 poems, but it's never going to write one. Something impersonal does not create words. A word has to be personal.

It has to originate with a person. Secondly, a word has to have meaning. So the word has to mean something. So when I say pass the pigs and blankets, you need to know what certain things mean. So you need to know what pass means. And this is important because if you interpreted that wrongly, if you interpreted the word pass at the table in the way that you interpret the word pass at a rugby match, it would be very messy. And also you need to know what pigs and blankets means because if you take that literally well, it's just a disaster. And so there has to be meaning, doesn't there? And so the word's got to be personal. It originates with a person. It has to have meaning. Thirdly, encountering a word must involve a relationship. And this is really what I want us to get to. It must involve a relationship. If you give a word or receive a word, it connects to personal communicators in a relationship. That might be the briefest of relationships when you just say excuse me to somebody in a busy Tesco on Christmas Eve, but it's still a relationship because two personal beings have communicated in a way that has meaning. Now why am I telling you all this? I'm telling you all this because I hope it's helping you to see that this concept of word is crucial to who we are. You are all going to spend the whole of today, the whole of next week, the whole of the rest of your lives giving and receiving words as personal, meaningful communicators in relationship with one another. It's actually at the heart of what it means to be human. The concept of word is crucial to who we are. In fact, we can say that your word, now I really want you to listen to this one because I hope you'll agree with me. Your word is more fundamental to who you are than your physical body. Your word is more fundamental to who you are than your physical body. Now you might be thinking, no, I don't agree with that. Well, I think I can prove it. We can prove it if you think about somebody you love who's passed away. If their body had been embalmed and preserved, if you went and looked at their body, would you feel like you had been with them? I doubt it very, very much because when you see a body, all you see is a shell. Even if it's preserved, you see a shell. The person is not there and you come away thinking it's not them anymore. But if you go home and open the drawer of your desk and take out a letter that that person has written to you, what have you got in your hands? You're holding a word. And as you read that word, what happens? You say, it's them. And you connect with them again. The word captures and preserves a person in a way that a body or a corpse never could. I hope that that makes sense. And I really hope that it helps you all to see that this concept of word is crucial to who we are. And so when you hear the word word, it's pointing us to all of this stuff that we've tried to explain just now. And that's when we realized that this is talking about something very important. And then we turn back to John. And John is telling us that it's not just important. It's ultimate

[18:27] reality. The ultimate was of reality is a word, the word that tells us that ultimate reality is one who is personal, one in whom there lies ultimate meaning, and one who is relational. In other words, it's easy to probably just say it the other way around. John is telling us that ultimate reality is not impersonal. It is not meaningless. It's not unknowable.

And the moment we see that we discover that John is giving us the worldview, the explanation for reality that we all crave. Do you want ultimate reality to be impersonal? But everything's ultimately just forces and mechanisms. Do you want ultimate reality to be meaningless when everything is ultimately without purpose, chaotic and worthless? Do you want ultimate reality to be unknowable where unbreakable relationships are impossible? John is telling you that you don't need to have such a rubbish worldview. You can have the worldview that says in the beginning was the word. The ultimate was of reality, the constant of eternity, the absolute of existence, the was that precedes every other will be is the word, the personal, meaningful, relational word. He is the ultimate was. Nothing comes before him. There was never ever a moment when this was, wasn't. And that's why John, just a couple of sentences later can go on to explain that it's from this was that everything else comes. All things were made through him without him was not anything made that was made in him was life and that life was the light of men. How did he do it? How did the word create everything that exists?

How Genesis one tells us he created it by speaking a word and you see it all started to fit together. That means that in the gospel's relation explanation of reality, in the gospel's explanation of reality, the personal comes before the material, meaning comes before mechanics, relationships matter more than anything else. And that's confirmed by the second word with the next two words won't be as long as the first one. So don't worry, we are, we are well over halfway. John's getting us to think about ultimate reality at the heart of his explanation of ultimate reality is the word, but that is not the entirety of ultimate reality. In other words, in the beginning was the word, but the word isn't all that was. And that's because the was, the was, the word, the word that was was with another. This is a very hard sermon to deliver. The was was with another in the beginning was the word, the word was with God from all eternity, the word was and the word was with. In other words, ultimate reality is not just a was. Ultimate reality is also a with. So who was the word with? John tells us he was with God. Now again, this can, this is very profound and very confusing. What is John saying here? He's saying that the ultimate was of eternity consists of a withness. Okay, the ultimate was of eternity consists of a withness between what he calls the word and what he calls God. That means a couple of crucial things. It means that the eternal was was not solitary and singular. So you think back to eternity, I told you you have to earn your Christmas lunch today. All the way back to eternity, think about every whatever it is that's ultimate reality. It's so easy to think that that is just a solitary, solitary being a kind of mono isolated one of something.

That's not what John is saying. The was was with. And there's even more though, because that not a loneliness. Alongside that not a loneliness, there's also a not separate fromness about the with. Okay, so there's a not a loneliness about the was. There's a not separate ness about the with. The word is both distinct from God, and yet identified as God. That's what happens here when he says the word was with God, the word was God.

What is that describing? It's describing a perfectly united, harmonious relationship.

[ 23 : 56 ] The with that exists between the word and God is so close, so harmonious, so intimate, they are actually one. And you see this beautiful balance in what John writes in his opening two verses. He says in the beginning was the word. The word was with God, the word was God. So they got the was and the was, then you got the with and the with. The word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. And all of it was in the beginning in the beginning. You got this beautiful symmetry and balance in what he's saying. Now, if you're reading these words for the first time, or if you were, if you imagine you were reading them for the first time, you'd be forgiven for getting to the end of verse two again.

I can't get my head around this. What is John saying? Well, he helps us a wee bit further along when we talk about this relationship between the was and the with, the word who was God, the word who was God, with God in the beginning. What does he talking about?

Well, he explains just a few verses later. He tells us in verse 18 what this with was relationship, this word God relationship actually is, it's a son by his father's side. Literally in the Greek, that phrase says a son in the bosom of his father. And so that's what John's talking about. A beautiful, intimate relationship. And this, of course, is part of the Bible's revelation of the nature of God. We think about God. I'm sure everybody in here believes in God. What's God like? What's God's nature? Is he just this kind of isolated, cold deity that's way up there? Or is he this kind of multitude of God's like what you have in Greek mythology? He's neither. The great truth revealed in the Bible is that God is neither a cold, isolated singularity, singularity, nor a multitude of deities. Instead, you have the God who is one and the God who is more than one, the God who is father, son, and

Holy Spirit. What's that telling you? It's telling you that according to the Bible, ultimate reality is relational. One God, father, son, and spirit in a perfect, eternal relationship.

In other words, the way of all eternity consists of a beautiful witness. Now you might be thinking, what difference does that make? It makes all the difference in the world. Because it means that John is saying that if you go back to ultimate reality, if you go back to the explanation of everything else that exists, you will find the one thing that you know is more important than anything else. You find love. This is why the Bible can say that God is love. That's not like a nice, vague kind of soft, woolly statement. This is actually what God is. He is love, a loving unity of father, son, and Holy Spirit. The eternal way is a forever with ultimate reality is the God who is love. And that means as we share

[ 27 : 41 ] Christmas together with people that we love, or if you struggle through Christmas because you desperately miss people that you love, all of that makes sense. Because your love for people is not some accident of chance mechanisms. And it's not a kind of charade or an illusion that is kind of masking an otherwise meaningless world. Your love for people and their love for you is a reflection of God, of the one who in the beginning was and who in the beginning was with. This is where we make sense of life. This is where it all makes sense. And I saw that captured brilliantly in a program that I watched the other night. Christmas week is the week for watching DVDs. So I watched what I think is now one of my favorite DVDs, the Run Rig Documentary. There must be a place, not seen it, buy it before you buy my book, buy that documentary, then buy my book. Fantastic. Really, really good. I love Run Rig as I'm sure all of you know. It's a quote from Rory McDonald. Rory

McDonald is one of the singers and one of the main songwriters along with his brother Callum in that documentary. And towards the end of the documentary, he said this, I think most of our songs are about the spiritual quest. I cannot believe that we go through our lives and all the wonderful experiences we have and all the love we share in this life is all for nothing. And he is absolutely right. And this is why the songwriter will always beat the scientist in terms of connecting with people. If I announce to you, right, I'm going to sell tickets to read a biology textbook. For a public reading of a biology textbook, would you come? Of course you wouldn't. Nobody would come. Nobody would come. If

Run Rig put on a concert, 50,000 people flock to get there and they sing as loud as they can that there must be a place under the sun where hearts of old and glory grow young.

In other words, there has got to be hope for people who've gone before us and for us. And this is telling us that the answer we crave is in the gospel. The walls and the width of John chapter one is where life makes sense. It's what makes God worthy of your worship.

God's not worthy of your worship because he's big, strong, intimidating, powerful. He's worthy of your worship because he is perfect love. In God, you find the ultimate explanation of reality and at the same time, you find the deepest, most beautiful love that we'll ever see. And so we can stand in awe before God because he's the eternal was the infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And we gaze and wonder at God because he's the everlasting with as you go deeper and deeper and understanding God, you are going to see more and more of a beautiful loving relationship between the father and the son and the Holy Spirit. It's absolutely amazing. But there's more. The most amazing word of all is the last one.

[ 31 : 39 ] John is telling us that ultimate reality is the word. The ultimate was of reality is the word. That word is the son who has forever been with the father. But the most amazing thing of all is that he became something he wasn't. He became one of us. And John tells us that in verse 14, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the great act of the word. Remember, we said that word involves disclosure, involves interaction, it accomplishes contact and communication. When the word became one of us, it's the ultimate self disclosure of God. God is interacting with us. He's revealing himself to us. He's communicating with us so that we can know him. That's why John says later on, no one has ever seen God, the only God who's at the father's side, the word he has made him known. Jesus has come as the great disclosure of God, the great reliever of God, revealer of God. In other words, when we encounter Jesus, we are seeing what God is really like. And what is he like? He is full of grace and truth. That's exactly what you see in Jesus. You see truth. Jesus is giving us the truth that we crave. He's giving us an explanation for reality that makes sense.

He's giving us answers in a world that's so confusing. He's giving us promises that he's never, ever going to break. We see truth. We also see grace because Jesus poured out the love of God towards people who don't deserve it, towards people who are riddled with guilt and shame about mistakes that they've made, people who've suffered desperately because of all the brokenness in the world, people who are scared, people who are weak, people who have doubts, people who are just like you. The word that Jesus speaks to you is a word of absolute truth, a word of amazing grace. So Jesus always was, he is the eternal God. Jesus was always with, he is the eternal son of the Father. But a moment came when Jesus became, he became one of us. And that's the astounding reality of the incarnation.

The eternal was who was forever with his Father. He left it all behind to become like you.

He became a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult. He became one of us. But he didn't just do it to show you something. He did it to make you something. He did it so that you might become the child of God as well. Do you know what that means? It means that as we stand in awe of God, who is the ultimate was of reality, as we stand gazing at the eternal was and at the everlasting with between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as we stand marveling at the indescribable love that exists within the triune God, as we do that, God doesn't say, I want you to admire this love forever. He says, I want you to receive this love forever.

God the Father doesn't say, I want you to admire my child forever. He says, I want you to be my child forever as well. And God the Son doesn't say to you, you need to reach up to my level. He says, I'll come for you. I'll come down for you. I'll become what I never was before so that you can know my Father's love as well. Jesus became flesh. He became one of us. He did it so that he could save you. He did it so that he could die for you on the cross. And on the cross, something absolutely incredible happened. The word was silenced for you. The sun was cut off for you. The eternal was became crushable for you.

[ 37 : 04 ] The everlasting with became forsaken for you. And it's all because of what he became.

He became one of us so that you can be his forever was and with tell you that for all eternity, God is love. But the word became tells you how much he loves you.

So these are three massive little words and you've all done incredibly well to make it through all that. You've definitely earned your Christmas dinner. I want you to see that these tiny little words are giving you everything that you need. Was gives you an explanation of reality that can satisfy you intellectually. That's one of the amazing things about the gospel. It gives us an intellectually satisfying worldview was gives you an explanation that will satisfy your mind with gives you an absolute for eternity that you can delight in the God who is loving and gentle and joyful that ultimately God is happy as the father, the son and the Holy Spirit delight in you with gives you an absolute that your heart can delight in. So was gives you an explanation for reality that will satisfy you with gives you an absolute you can delight in become became. Well, that tells you how much you mean to him. And so when you think of Jesus's birth, please remember these massive little words was with became what a savior. What a God. Amen.

Lord Jesus, we bow before you as the one who was the one who was with your father forever and the one who became.