

Session 4 — What Is God Really Like?

John 1:14–18 — The Word Became Flesh

Main question: *When God seems distant, harsh or difficult to understand, how can I know what He is really like?*

Big idea: The eternal Word did not remain distant. He became genuinely human and lived among us. In Jesus, God's character, glory, grace and truth become visible. If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus.

Memory verse: John 1:14

Main passage

- John 1:14–18

Parallel passages

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| • Exodus 25:8; 33:12–23; | • Isaiah 7:14; 40:3–5 | • Hebrews 1:1–3 |
| 34:5–7 | • Colossians 1:15–20 | • Hebrews 2:14–18 |
| • Psalm 85:10–11 | • Colossians 2:9–10 | • 1 John 1:1–3 |

Read John 1:14–18 in NASB95, NIV and KJV, noting especially the different wording surrounding “dwelt,” “grace,” “truth,” and the description of the Son in verse 18.

Session goals

By the end of the session, participants should understand:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The eternal Word of John 1:1 became genuinely human.• “Dwelt among us” deliberately recalls God's dwelling with Israel in the Tabernacle.• Jesus reveals the divine glory that Moses longed to see.• “Grace and truth” echoes God's revelation of His character in Exodus 34:6.• John is not contrasting a bad Old Testament God with a gracious New Testament Jesus. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Torah was itself a gracious gift from God; Jesus brings God's grace and truth to their fullest expression.• Moses faithfully revealed God's instruction, but Jesus uniquely reveals God because He comes from the Father's presence.• Jesus is fully divine and fully human.• Because God entered human life, He is not distant from our suffering, weakness or everyday struggles. |
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Brief recap: Sessions 1–3

Session 1 — John 3:16–17: Can God really love me?

God loved the world and gave His Son to rescue rather than condemn.

“Believe” — Greek πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) — means more than acknowledging facts about Jesus. Biblical faith means trusting and relying upon Him.

Key truth: God loves, God gives, and we respond by trusting Him.

Session 2 — John 1:1–5: Who is Jesus?

John deliberately echoes Genesis: “In the beginning...”

Jesus is the eternal λόγος (*logos*, “Word”) through whom creation came into existence.

He embodies God's powerful Word and divine Wisdom revealed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

John 1 also moves from creation, life and light toward new creation.

Key truth: Jesus did not begin at Bethlehem. The Creator entered His creation.

Session 3 — John 1:6–13: Can I belong to God's family?

John the Baptist was a witness pointing toward Jesus, the true Light.

Some rejected Jesus, but: “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12, NASB95).

This is also the theological pivot of an influential chiastic reading of John 1:1–18: rejection gives way to reception and the gift of becoming God's children.

Key truth: Our deepest identity is not something we achieve. God gives new life and family identity to those who receive and trust Jesus.

Where John 1:14–18 fits

John now completes the Gospel's opening introduction.

John 1:1: The Word was God.

John 1:3: Everything was created through Him.

John 1:4: He is the source of life.

John 1:9: He is the true Light.

John 1:12: Those receiving Him become God's children.

And now John 1:14 makes an astonishing announcement: The Word became flesh.

The eternal Creator entered the world He created. John then uses imagery deeply rooted in Exodus to explain what this means.

Historical and audience context

John writes from within Israel's biblical story while communicating to an audience that appears to include readers who need Jewish customs and terminology explained.

Jewish readers familiar with Scripture would immediately hear echoes of:

- Moses,
- the Exodus,
- the Tabernacle,
- God's glory,
- Sinai,
- God's covenant faithfulness,
- and the Torah.

Gentile believers needed this background explained because Jesus cannot be properly understood apart from Israel's Scriptures.

John is therefore not abandoning the Old Testament story.

He is telling readers:

The God who revealed Himself to Moses has now revealed Himself climactically through Jesus Messiah.

John 1:14 — “The Word became flesh” “The Word”

Greek: ὁ λόγος (*ho logos*, “the Word”)

This is the same Word introduced in verse 1.

John does not introduce another person.

The One who:

- existed in the beginning,
- was with God,
- was God,
- created everything,
- possessed life,
- and brought light

is the One who became human.

Simple point: The baby born in Bethlehem did not begin to exist in Bethlehem.

“**Became flesh**”: Greek: σὰρξ ἐγένετο (*sarx egeneto*, “became flesh”)

“Flesh” emphasizes genuine human existence.

Jesus did not merely:

- look human,
- temporarily wear a human body,
- appear in a vision,
- or pretend to suffer.

He became genuinely human while remaining who He eternally was.

Later John stresses this because false teachers denied that Messiah truly came in the flesh (1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7).

Simple point: God did not rescue humanity from a safe distance.

He entered human life.

Everyday connection: Does God understand what I'm going through?

People sometimes think: “*God couldn't understand my pain.*” “*God doesn't know what exhaustion feels like.*” “*God doesn't understand rejection.*”

But Jesus experienced:

- hunger,
- thirst,
- fatigue,
- temptation,
- friendship,
- betrayal,
- grief,
- physical pain,
- injustice,
- and death.

Hebrews 2:14–18 develops precisely this implication of the incarnation.

Simple point: The God who saves us also entered the world in which we suffer.

“**Dwelt among us**”: This phrase contains one of the most important Old Testament connections in John's Gospel.

Greek: ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (*eskēnōsen en hēmin*)

Literally, the verb means something like: “pitched His tent” or “tabernacled among us.”

John's readers familiar with the Torah would immediately think about the *מִשְׁכָּן* (*mishkan*, “Tabernacle”).

Exodus 25:8 — God wants to dwell among His people

God commanded Israel: “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them.” (NASB95)

The Tabernacle was not merely Israel's worship building.

Its central message was:

God desires to dwell among His people.

The Creator who cannot be contained by creation chose to place His presence among Israel.

John now announces something greater.

God's presence has come among humanity in Jesus.

Tabernacle: God dwelling among Israel.

Jesus: God's Word dwelling among humanity in flesh.

Simple point: Jesus is God's presence among us.

“**We saw His glory**”: Greek: δόξα (*doxa*, “glory”)

This also points directly back to Exodus.

After Israel's sin with the golden calf, Moses asked God: "I pray You, show me Your glory!" (Exodus 33:18, NASB95)

God told Moses that no human being could see the fullness of His face and survive.

Nevertheless, God allowed Moses to experience a limited revelation of His glory.

Now John says: "We saw His glory."

Something Moses longed to see has become visible in Jesus.

But John will redefine what divine glory looks like.

Jesus' glory appears through:

- His signs,
- His character,
- His service,
- His obedience,
- His sacrificial death,
- and His resurrection.

In John, the cross itself paradoxically becomes part of Jesus' glorification.

Simple point: God's glory is not merely dazzling power. In Jesus it is revealed through self-giving love.

Exodus 33–34 — The crucial background

This is probably the most important Old Testament passage for understanding John 1:14–18.

Moses asks: "Show me Your glory."

God responds by revealing His character.

Exodus 34:6 describes the LORD as:

- compassionate,
- gracious,
- slow to anger,
- abundant in lovingkindness,
- and abundant in truth/faithfulness.

That language lies behind John's description of Jesus.

"Full of grace and truth": Greek: χάρις και ἀλήθεια *charis kai alētheia* "grace and truth"

This likely echoes the Hebrew expression in Exodus 34:6: נְהַיִּי וְרַחֵם *hesed we'emet* (roughly: "steadfast love and faithfulness.")

The Septuagint does not translate Exodus 34:6 with John's exact Greek phrase, so this is primarily a conceptual Hebrew-scriptural echo, not a direct quotation of the LXX wording.

That distinction matters.

John is saying that the character God proclaimed to Moses is now embodied in Jesus.

God had proclaimed Himself:

abounding in covenant love and faithfulness.

John describes Jesus as:

full of grace and truth.

Simple point: Jesus does not reveal a different God. He reveals the character God had already revealed to Moses.

John 1:15 — John the Baptist witnesses again

John the Baptist reappears: "He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me." (NASB95)

Chronologically, John the Baptist was born before Jesus.

Yet John says Jesus existed before him. Why?

Because Jesus' earthly birth was not His beginning.

This reinforces John 1:1.

Simple point: Jesus entered history at Bethlehem, but He existed before His human birth.

John 1:16 — "Grace upon grace"

John says believers have received from Jesus' fullness.

The phrase translated "grace upon grace" is: χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος *charin anti charitos*

Its precise nuance is debated.

It can carry the idea of:

- grace upon grace,
- grace following grace,
- or one gracious provision succeeding another.

The important point is that God's generosity did not begin with Jesus' earthly ministry.

God had already shown enormous grace through:

- creation,
- Abraham,
- the Exodus,
- covenant,
- Torah,
- prophets,
- forgiveness,
- and restoration.

Now God's grace reaches its climactic expression through Messiah.

Simple point: Jesus is not God's first act of grace. He is the fullest revelation of God's grace.

John 1:17 — Moses, Torah and Jesus

“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” (NASB95)

This verse is sometimes misunderstood as:

Moses = law and condemnation versus Jesus = grace and forgiveness.

That would badly misread both Exodus and John.

Torah itself was grace

The Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (*torah*) means “instruction” or “teaching,” although “law” is a traditional translation.

God gave Torah after rescuing Israel from Egypt.

The order matters.

God did not say: Obey Torah and perhaps I will rescue you.

He rescued Israel first.

Then He taught the redeemed people how to live with Him.

Exodus therefore follows this pattern: Redemption → covenant → instruction → God’s dwelling among His people.

Torah was a gift to an already redeemed people.

Psalm 119 celebrates God’s Torah as:

- good,
- delightful,
- truthful,
- life-giving,
- and gracious.

Therefore, John is not insulting Moses.

Moses and Jesus

John presents a progression: *Through Moses*: God graciously gave Torah. *Through Jesus Messiah*: God’s grace and truth reach their fullest personal expression.

- Moses delivered God’s instruction.
- Jesus embodies God’s revelation.
- Moses faithfully served God’s household.
- Jesus is the Son.

Compare Hebrews 3:1–6.

Simple point: Moses faithfully brought God’s words. Jesus is God’s Word in flesh.

John 1:18 — “No one has seen God”

This returns directly to Exodus 33.

Moses wanted to see God.

God said: “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exodus 33:20, NASB95)

John now says: “No one has seen God at any time...”

But the sentence does not stop there.

Jesus has explained Him.

Greek: ἐξηγήσατο (*exēgēsato*)

This verb means:

- explain,
- make known,
- relate,
- interpret.

It gives us the English word “exegesis.”

Jesus is, in a sense, the exegesis of God.

He makes the unseen God known.

Simple point: If you want to know God’s character, study Jesus.

A textual note on John 1:18

NASB95, NIV and KJV reveal an important manuscript difference.

Some manuscripts read essentially: “the only begotten Son.”

Others read: “the unique/only God.”

That accounts for differences among English translations.

Either reading fits John’s larger theology.

John has already stated: “The Word was God.” (John 1:1)

And throughout the Gospel Jesus uniquely reveals the Father as the Son.

For a new-believer study, the manuscript issue need not dominate the lesson.

The main point is clear in either reading:

Jesus uniquely knows the Father and makes Him known.

Parallel passage — Colossians 1:15–20

Paul calls Jesus: “the image of the invisible God.”

Simple points

- God is invisible.
- Jesus makes the invisible God known.
- Everything was created through Him.
- Everything exists for Him.
- Everything holds together in Him.
- He has authority over the new creation as well as the original creation.
- God reconciles creation through Him.

This strongly parallels John 1.

John: Everything came into being through Him.

Paul: All things have been created through Him and for Him.

Simple point: Jesus reveals the Creator because Jesus Himself participates in the Creator’s identity and work.

Parallel passage — Colossians 2:9

Paul states that: “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” (NASB95)

Notice the same two ideas found in John 1:14:

Deity + bodily existence.

Jesus is not half God and half human.

Christian teaching historically summarizes the biblical evidence by saying Jesus is: fully God and fully human.

Parallel passage — Hebrews 1:1–3

Hebrews begins much like John.

- Previously God spoke: through the prophets.

The Son:

- created the world,
- radiates God’s glory,

John calls Jesus the Word.

Hebrews calls Him God’s climactic speech through the Son.

Simple point: Jesus is God’s clearest revelation of Himself.

- Now God has spoken: through His Son.
- exactly represents God’s nature,
- and sustains creation.

Parallel passage — Hebrews 2:14–18

Jesus shared in flesh and blood. Why?

So He could:

- experience human existence,
- suffer,
- confront death,
- deliver people enslaved by fear of death,
- become a merciful and faithful high priest,
- and help those who are tempted.

This is the practical consequence of: “The Word became flesh.”

Simple point: Because Jesus genuinely became human, He can genuinely represent and help human beings.

Parallel passage — 1 John 1:1–3

John emphasizes that Jesus was not an idea.

The apostles:

- heard Him,
- saw Him,
- looked at Him,
- and touched Him.

The eternal Life entered ordinary human experience.

Simple point: Biblical faith is rooted in God’s action within history, not merely abstract spiritual ideas.

Key words

Word: λόγος (*logos*) — “word.” God’s eternal self-expression and revelation.

Flesh: σὰρξ (*sarx*) — “flesh.” Genuine human existence.

Dwelt: σκηνοῶ (*skēnoō*) — “dwell,” “pitch a tent,” “tabernacle.” Points back to God’s presence in Israel’s Tabernacle.

Glory: δόξα (*doxa*) — “glory.” God’s revealed majesty, character and presence.

Grace: χάρις (*charis*) — “grace,” “favor,” “gift.” God’s freely given goodness.

Truth: ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*) — “truth,” “reality,” “faithfulness.” In this context it likely recalls God’s covenant faithfulness.

Explain: ἐξηγεομαι (*exēgeomai*) — “make known,” “explain,” “interpret.” Jesus makes the unseen Father known.

The Old Testament storyline behind John 1:14–18

For new believers, the connections can be summarized simply:

Genesis: God creates through His Word.

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Exodus: God rescues His people.

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Sinai: God reveals His instruction.

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Tabernacle: God dwells among His people.

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Moses: “Show me Your glory.”

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God reveals Himself: Compassionate, gracious, faithful.

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John 1: The Word becomes flesh and tabernacles among us.

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Jesus: “We saw His glory...full of grace and truth.”

John is announcing: The God who dwelt among Israel has come nearer still.

Main truths

- God is not distant: The eternal Word entered human existence.
- Jesus shows us what God is like: God’s invisible character becomes visible through the Son.
- God’s character has not changed: The grace and faithfulness seen in Jesus are the same qualities God proclaimed to Moses.
- Jesus fulfills the Tabernacle theme: God once dwelt among Israel in the Tabernacle. Now God’s presence comes among humanity through Messiah.
- Grace did not replace an ungracious Torah: Torah was God’s gracious instruction to a redeemed people. Jesus brings God’s grace and truth to their fullest expression.
- Jesus understands human weakness: The Word truly became flesh. He experienced human life and suffering.
- God’s glory looks like self-giving love: John will ultimately lead readers toward the cross, where divine glory appears in Messiah giving Himself for others.

Everyday-life connections

“God feels far away”: John answers: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God moved toward humanity.

“I don’t know what God is really like”: John answers: Look at Jesus. Study how He treats:

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| • sinners, | • hypocrites, | • the sick, |
| • outsiders, | • enemies, | • and the ashamed. |
| • grieving people, | • friends, | |

“God couldn’t understand what I’m experiencing”: Hebrews answers: Jesus shared flesh and blood.

He suffered and was tempted.

“I’m afraid God’s patience with me will run out”: Exodus 34 describes Him as compassionate, gracious and slow to anger. Jesus embodies that same character.

“Grace means God doesn’t care how I live”: John does not separate grace from truth. Jesus is full of grace and truth. Grace does not redefine evil as good. Truth does not eliminate mercy. God provides both.

Discussion questions

Observation

1. What happened to the Word in verse 14?
2. What did the disciples see?
3. Which words appear repeatedly in verses 14–18?
4. Who are the two historical people explicitly named?
5. According to verse 18, what does Jesus do?

Understanding

1. Why does John say “flesh” rather than simply “a man”?
2. How does “dwelt among us” connect Jesus with the Tabernacle?
3. Why is Exodus 33–34 so important for understanding this passage?
4. How does “grace and truth” echo God’s character revealed to Moses?
5. Why should John 1:17 not be interpreted as “Moses was bad; Jesus is good”?
6. In what sense was Torah already an expression of God’s grace?
7. What can Jesus reveal about God that Moses could not reveal fully?
8. How does verse 18 answer Moses’ request, “Show me Your glory”?

Application questions

1. When you imagine God, do you picture someone distant, angry, loving, unpredictable or trustworthy? Why?
2. How does Jesus challenge that picture?
3. Which characteristic of Jesus most helps you understand God's character?
4. Is it easier for you to emphasize God's grace or God's truth? Why?
5. How can we show both grace and truth toward someone who has hurt us?
6. What suffering are you tempted to believe God cannot understand?
7. How does knowing that Jesus experienced human weakness change the way you pray?
8. Where are you trying to hide from God instead of allowing His presence into your life?
9. What does God's willingness to "dwell among us" tell you about His desire for relationship?
10. If Jesus really shows us what God is like, what should you study more closely about the way Jesus lives and treats people?

Memory verse: "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, NASB95)

A simple version: The eternal One who created us became one of us so we could see what God is really like.

Prayer focus

- Thank God for choosing to dwell among His people.
- Thank Jesus for entering genuine human life.
- Ask God to correct false ideas about His character.
- Thank Him for being both gracious and truthful.
- Bring suffering, temptation and fear honestly to Jesus.
- Ask for help showing others the same combination of grace and truth.

Practical action for the week

Read one story about Jesus each day from John's Gospel. Ask two questions: What does Jesus do? What does this show me about God? Keep a short list titled: "What Jesus is teaching me about God."

Looking ahead

The next session studies **John 1:19–34** and asks: "How can I know Jesus really is the One who can save me?"

John the Baptist identifies Jesus as: "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That statement will take the study back into the Torah — to Passover, sacrifice, the binding of Isaac, and the biblical meaning of a lamb given in place of another; to the Day of Atonement, where one of the goats carries away sins, transgressions and iniquities of the community — and forward to the cross, where John's Gospel reveals what the Lamb came to accomplish.