

**“NAIL PRINTS”**

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Heb.1:1-2

Last Sunday we talked about footprints. This morning I would like you to think with me about nailprints.

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son. . . “

Last Sunday, as we met to worship in this friendly place, we took hat in hand and set out to follow the strange footprints we have seen all about us.

We walked out under the stars and observed a universe of order, simplicity and intelligibility. We walked in the company of great men, through the pages of this blessed Book, and down memory lane to our childhood home. As a result of that journey, we said,

“We know God *is*! We have seen him in the splendor of his creation. In the language of the Bible. In the lives of great men. And, in the quiet, simple faith of our fathers and mothers.”

But following those footprints left us somewhat unsatisfied, for while they told us that God is, they did not give us a clear picture of what he is like. We found ourselves wishing for something more than these “illusive sparks and flashes of the divine.” If only we had a better picture of him. A clear-cut photograph with every line and feature in sharp focus.

If only this God who is so majestic and mighty, could be brought near and spelled out in the language of life. Then we would know not only that he *is*, we would know what he is like. Well, as I intimated last Sunday, if such a photograph of God does exist, it will be found in the Bible. For while his footprints have been stamped upon nature’s notebook, on the pages of history where great men have trod, on the book of memory with its faded tin-type of mother kneeling in

prayer, they are nowhere so clearly stamped as on his written word. And, as we search through the Bible to see what it has to say on this subject, we come upon a sentence which stops us short.

“God, who gave our forefathers many different glimpses of Truth in the words of the prophets, has now, in these last days, given us the truth in his Son . . .”

Those words send us scampering back to another verse we remember reading in the Gospel of John,

“In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God . . . And the word became flesh and dwelt among us . . .”

And suddenly we begin to understand that we *do* have a picture of God. A photograph in which every line and feature *is* in sharp focus. A living likeness which *can* be seen and heard and fully understood.

### **God Is Like Jesus**

When her Sunday School teacher asked, “What is God like?” A little girl responded, “He is like Jesus.” In those four simple words she uttered a profound truth which no theologian can improve upon. God is like Jesus.

Winston Churchill says that,

“God has become incandescent in Jesus.”

That is, he lit up in Jesus. He is

“The mirror of the infinite,” asserts Cannon Streeter, “the living picture of God.”

And when you come to him with your frantic, fragmented, sin-stained lives, you find judgement, yes, but his judgement is tempered by mercy and expressed in forgiveness.

You know that whatever else God may be, he cannot be less than Jesus. Not less firm and just. Not less patient and gracious. Not less loving and kind.

God is like Jesus. Take a careful look at Jesus, and when you know Jesus, you will know that God is a Good Shepherd, who takes loving care of his sheep. Guarding their safety. Guiding their path. Quieting their fears.

You know he is a Great Physician filled with sympathy for the suffering, reaching out a tender hand to heal.

You know he is a faithful friend who sticks closer than a brother. Who is willing to give all, at any hour, to meet another's need.

You know he is a Righteous Judge, austere as well as gentle. Unrelenting as true love must sometimes be, but always merciful toward the penitent.

And best of all, you know he is an all-wise heavenly Father who longs to be in fellowship with you and whose holy goal is to help you reach your full potential.

### **How Is The Incarnation Possible?**

You say, well, that's all very nice. But how could the omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal God be compressed into the mold of a man? How could the great God be in a tiny baby reconciling the world unto himself? Now I confess that these are questions which gave me a great deal of trouble in times past. I really struggled to work it through. In the process I came across several ideas which were helpful to me and I passed them on, with the hope they will be helpful to you.

### **God Became One of Us**

To begin with, I came to the conclusion that some such arrangement as the incarnation was necessary if God was ever going to really “get through” to people. I came to that conclusion one day while watching an ant struggle to carry an object many times its own size back to its nest. I remember thinking, I'd like to help you with that load, little fella. It looks like you've tackled a task which is too big for you.

I realized that if I reached down, lifted the load and put it over by the opening to his nest, I would frighten him to death. How could I communicate to him that there are resources outside and beyond himself which could help bear the load? And the thought came, by becoming an ant.

By condescending to live in the world of ants and, hopefully finding a way to tell them, I could make it clear that, despite their prodigious ability and wonderful sense of community, there was the possibility of life outside of, above and beyond their circumscribed existence. As I rolled that thought around in my mind, it struck me that *that's* what God did in the incarnation. He became one *of* us. He communicated *to* us. And finally, he openly gave himself *for* us.

### **All of God Was Not in Christ**

The second thing that helped me was gaining a clearer understanding of what the Bible meant when it says, “God was in Christ.” A lot of folks have difficulty accepting the deity of Jesus because they cannot believe that all of the Lord God omnipotent and omniscient was in Christ. And, of course, they are right! All of God was *not* Christ.

When God took on the form of man in order to give us a living motion picture of what he is like, he had to take on the time-space limitations of man.

As J. B. Phillips puts it in his valuable book, Your God Is Too Small,

“There was an almost unbelievable ‘scaling down’ of the ‘size’ of God  
(if we can use a term which doesn’t really apply to God) to match the life  
of this planet.”

With the result, for instance, that Christ could not be omnipresent. He could not be everywhere at the same time.

This is graphically illustrated by the comment Martha made to Jesus when her brother Lazarus, died. Jesus was down by Jericho at the time. He was busy ministering to other people and their

needs. When he finally arrived at the home of Lazarus, Martha came out to greet him and said, in very telling words, “Master, if you had been here our brother would not have died.” But you see, Jesus could not be *here*, with them, because, at the time, he was over *there*, with someone else.

But, while God in Christ was “scaled down” so to speak, this revelation of himself to the world did not in any way diminish his essential or eternal being. At the very same moment God was in Christ, God *was*, period!

I know this sounds contradictory, but stick with me for a moment. Don’t be like those folks who reject the incarnation just because they cannot understand it. May God help us if we ever *can* fully understand it! It would be too small a wonder if we could wrap our finite minds around it.

### **God’s Timelessness**

There is a third factor we need to move into place, and I suppose it was this truth which was most helpful to me in understanding how the incarnation could possibly be. It has to do with the discovery that God is timeless.

One of our main difficulties in understanding the incarnation lies in the fact that because *we* are restricted to time and *our* life consists of a past, a present, and a future, that since *our* existence comes to us in little dribbles, a moment at a time, we therefore assume God himself is hampered by the same restrictions. That isn’t so. God is eternal, a circle without beginning and without end. His life does not consist, as ours does, of a series of moments followed by other moments.

C .S. Lewis helped me come to grips with this reality when, in his book Beyond Personality Lewis asks his readers to think of time as a straight line drawn upon a piece of paper, the past, present, and future as little marks intersecting that line. Then, Lewis suggests, picture God as the *whole page* upon which that line is drawn!

When you do you, immediately recognize that God is outside of, and around, all the little pasts,

presents and futures which people call history. And, when we wonder who kept the stars on course while the baby Jesus was asleep on his mother's breast, or who was in charge of things while Jesus was dying on the cross, Lewis suggests we are asking questions which have their origins in our world of time.

We are assuming the life of God consists of a past, present, and future like ours does. That the thirty-three years Jesus was on earth was one segment *out* of his life, just as the five years I have been Morgan Park is a segment out of my life. But we are forgetting, as C.S. Lewis points out,

“God's earthly life in Christ was a particular period in history only from *our point of view*. We, therefore imagine that the year 1 A.D. till the crucifixion was also a period of history in God's existence. But God has no history. He is too completely *real* to have one. To have a history means losing part of your reality because it has already slipped away to the past, and not yet having another part of your reality because it is still in the future. In fact, it means having nothing but the tiny little prism called the present, which is gone before you can speak about it.”

Quite obviously, as Lewis points out, that kind of time-locked God would be no God at all. And because God is timeless, he could be in Christ during those thirty-three years of earthly ministry, revealing himself to the world without losing a particle of his eternal and essential being. Those thirty-three years were just so many little marks on the line of time, *all* of which were, are, and ever will be within in the eternity of God.

Now these three ideas may, or may not, help you. If not, chuck them aside. I have only used them to show that while the incarnation is *beyond* reason, it *is* reasonable. And, while it must be accepted by faith, it can be, at least in part, supported by faith.

### **What The Incarnation Does**

Suppose then, as the Christian faith proclaims, God *did* slip into the stream of human history and *was* born as a baby. Suppose he *did* become focused in a single life, speaking words, expressing thoughts, demonstrating life in terms common folk could understand. What would be the result?

### **Questions Answered**

For one thing, many of our questions about God would be answered. We would not only know something of *his* character, we would begin to understand the meaning of our own existence. Where we came from. Who we are. Why we are here. Where we are going.

### **An Example to Follow**

Further more, we would have a clear-cut example to follow. We would have a motion picture in living color of how God intended life to be lived. In other words, we would see God! Not as a vague, distant, impersonal oblong blur out there somewhere, but as One who is intimately and personally concerned about and involved in life as we have to live it.

We would not only have the puzzle, we would have the solution. The invisible God would become visible in the form of a real, live, flesh-and-blood human being. And, based upon what we saw in him, we could determine whether we wanted to live life with God or without him.

Well, I am here to say that what *might* happen were the incarnation true, *has* happened, because the incarnation *is* true. God *was* in Christ revealing himself to the world. Believe it or not, when the world saw this living likeness of God who answered their question, “What is God like?” they didn’t like what they saw. He was too disturbing. Too unnerving. He made too many demands. He required too many radical and painful changes in their manner of living. So they killed him!

They thought they had gotten rid of him for good. But of course, they hadn’t. They had only given him a chance to put the finishing touches on this portrait of what God is like. And there, in that life on the cross, in the blood shed for the remission of sin, and in a voice saying, “Father,

forgive them for they know not what they do,” God gave us the purest, clearest, finest picture of what his love is like.

So, while we appreciate the footprints in the sod which lead to God, we are *most* grateful for the nailprints that mark his hands and feet. It is in *them* that we see God as he truly is.

What is God like? He is like Jesus. For “the word become flesh and dwelt among us.”

Fanny Crosby, the blind girl who became a world-famous writer of hymns was witnessing one day to a man who didn’t know her Savior. She tried to tell him all that Jesus meant to her, but the man wouldn’t listen. He simply couldn’t believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, or that Jesus could satisfy the needs of the human heart.

Finally, in exasperation, he said,

“Suppose it’s true. Suppose there is a heaven and you and Jesus will be there, as you say. How would you know him in all that crowd? You wouldn’t be able to recognize him, you’re blind!”

Those words sent Fanny Crosby home with a heavy heart. She had never thought of it like that before. How *would* she know him? She couldn’t *see* him. She *was* blind. And then, suddenly the light of heaven filled her countenance. She remembered that blind people don’t see with their eyes. They see with their fingers! And she exclaimed,

“Of course, that’s it! Why didn’t I think of it before. I’ll *know* him, by the print of the nails in his hands.”

Fanny Crosby sat down and wrote this beautiful hymn.

“When my life’s work has ended,  
And I cross the swelling tide,



When the bright and glorious morning  
I shall see.  
I shall know my redeemer when I reach  
The other side,  
And his smile will be the first to welcome me.

I shall know him, I shall know him,  
And redeemed by his side I shall stand.  
I shall know him, I shall know him,  
By the print of the nail in his hand.”