



The “with us” God

by Paul Anderson

Don't you love prepositions? They are not into themselves at all. Listen to some of them: into, for, through, before, around. Here are a few reasons why we should like them:

- 1. They are often small and humble words**, like in, at, on, and to.
- 2. They draw attention to their object.** A prepositional phrase includes a preposition followed by its object. Nouns get more attention than prepositions, but prepositions help us understand what is going on with the nouns. How unselfish can you get?
- 3. They are relational.** Webster says that a preposition is “a relation word.” It never stands alone. It points away from itself. In the sentence, “They went to the house,” “to the house” is a prepositional phrase. Prepositions can easily be overlooked, but they are indispensable for the meaning. “They went house” makes no sense. “House” needs the tiny “to” connector to tell us about the destination, that house, the one with the yellow trim.

One of the most important prepositions in literature occurs in Matthew 1:23. After describing Joseph's dream that gave him assurance to get married, Matthew quoted from Isaiah to demonstrate the fulfillment of a seven-hundred-year-old prophecy: “*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.*” Then he adds the meaning of the name—“God with us.” The “with” relates the noun “God” to the pronoun “us”—two unlikely connections.

Scripture makes it clear that God and humanity don't mix. God said, early on, “*My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal*” (Genesis 6:3). “Mortal” could also read “corrupt.” Paul wrote that “*the sinful mind is hostile to God*” (Romans 8:8). So the preposition “against” fits better than “with.” The whole Old Testament illustrates the “against.” God attempted to bridge the rift by calling out a man (Abraham) and a nation (Israel), but the nation walked in continual disobedience. He sent prophets to speak Truth, but the nation chose the lie and killed the messengers. Prophets began to speak of a new day and a new prophet who would be qualitatively different from anyone who had gone before.

The early church struggled with the issue of how to understand the marvel of God breaking into the human race. They fought the dual heresies that Jesus was a God who only looked like a man, or that He was a man and not really God. Then in the fourth century, the Nicene Creed finally spelled it out this way: “I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ...God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man...” The conclusion: Jesus was and is God, and He was and is man.

John started his powerful letter this way: “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our*

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hands have touched..." (1 John 1:1). It was strange for the ancients to speak about God within reach. He was higher and holier. But now the untouchable came within our grasp, the unsearchable within eyesight. In the words of John's Gospel, "*The word became flesh*."

God came. The initiation clearly arose from the divine side. The fact that we and God were not mixing well impacted God, if not us. Humanity tried bridging the chasm by self-made holiness, by intellectual escape, by meditation—all futile attempts at a colossal breach. We tried and failed at getting spiritual, but marvel of all marvels, God got physical. He initiated a plan that would bring the two antagonistic parties together—and it was a shocking plan indeed. He would become one of us! He could have kept talking from a distance. He had tried that for centuries by being "among us" through people who spoke for Him. He finally represented Himself through His Son. "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*" (Hebrews 1:2). But how did He come?

He Came in Flesh and Blood

He had a human birth. He was the literal son of Mary, Son of David, son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). He was born "*of the seed of David according to the flesh*" (Romans 1:3). In other words, He was on the roster of the human race. Luke traces His descent back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38). When His father and mother showed up at the tax station, they gave their names. "And any children?" "One, a newborn." "Name?" "Jesus."

Other than for the angelic visitation, there were no clues that the child was God. He seemed quite ordinary—in fact, on the lower end of ordinary. Even the directions given for locating Him, "*You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger*," spoke more to His lowly calling rather than His lofty one.

And He had a body. Would He get thirsty or tired? Would He ever suffer as we do? Would He feel the confinements of time and space, or would He live His private, divine life? Would He be shielded from what aggravates us, pressures us, tempts us? Would He ever feel as far from God as we do? Would He sleep? Would He be some kind of demigod, half human and half divine?

The thing that sets us apart from divinity is humanity—flesh and blood, stuff that can be touched, diseased, worn out, aged. God is not subject to the elements, to time, to cramped quarters. Then can you imagine a God limiting Himself to the uterine wall of a virgin girl? And can you imagine His coming in such a way as to not be recognizable as anyone different from ourselves? What

would it be like to be in the company of God? What would happen if "the one who inhabits eternity" were to be truly with us?

And He had pain. Surprise of all surprises, He was born as we are born, and He suffered like we suffer. We would expect God, like a Superman, to avoid suffering. He might dish it out, but He wouldn't take it in. But not the Word made flesh. "No crying he made" hardly describes Jesus. Isaiah calls Him "*a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering*" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus didn't just suffer at the cross; He suffered all His life. To submit to the will of God put Him at odds with people. He was a reject, the odd man out. He was a part of the human race and yet shoved to the corner. His death outside the walls was a picture of His whole life as an outsider. How ironic that the God who was outside came to live as an insider—and never was.

He came "*in the likeness of sinful flesh*." He "*condemned sin in the flesh*" (Romans 8:3). This was anything but convenient. "Flesh" or "body" means just that—no spiritualizing. It is the stuff we are made of, skin and bones and blood, that makes up the human being and allows us to see the person.

But "flesh" means more than that. It comes to mean that part of us most unlike God. He is different; He is Spirit. That makes Him eternal. We are flesh, meaning that we are mortal. We have a life span; He does not. Flesh is weak, frail, heading for the grave, and it ends up there. "*All flesh is like grass...*" (Isaiah 40:6).

God has boundless energy; we don't. In Jesus, God got tired, needed food and drink. So you have an oxymoron in the phrase, "the Word became flesh." You have the eternal one, not bound by time or space or any other limitations suddenly bound by space (if He is here, He can't be there), by time (He can be late for an appointment, unlike God who is never late for anything). He is limited by His own skin.

He died. This was not a quick in-and-out appearance. He stayed long enough to grow up with a family, to have a job, then a ministry. And He stayed long enough to die. What happens to the universe when the God who is holding it together quits breathing? Jesus died alienated from most of the people He lived with. He died outside the walls, separated from His disciples, from the religious community, and at one point, from His Father. And He died as poor as when He entered the human race. Paul wrote, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

"The Word became flesh."

1 John 1:14

that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). "Poor" describes His descent from the highest heavens to the lowest earth, from King of Kings to itinerant preacher, from the heir of the universe to a penniless criminal condemned by Romans. When soldiers bargained for His clothes, that was the limit of His earthly possessions even though He was destined to inherit the world and everything in it. Jesus at the cross "was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). Guilt by association!

My youngest once said at Christmas, "Jesus wasn't really born in a stable, was He?" I answered, "Yes." "Not a palace?" "No." "Why?" "To include everyone, including the poor." Then she moved quickly from Christmas to the Passion, as if she understood the significance of what was just said: "So He had to die, huh?"

Jesus did His redemptive work in a body. "He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death..." (Colossians 1:22). The writers of the New Testament don't want us to miss this one, so they keep it before us. Peter says that "He was put to death in the body..." (1 Peter 3:18). This was as physical as one can get. It was not a simulated death—His mission statement centered around

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..."

Genesis 28:15

the cross. He said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The God-become-man, the scapegoat of the human race.

He returned to heaven. There is now something different that was not in heaven before—a man. The pre-incarnate Christ did not have wounds in His hands. What is Jesus doing in heaven? Hebrews says He is representing us (Hebrews 9:24). He stands before God on our behalf. We are represented in heaven by a man. A man who has been praying non-stop for two thousand years prays for us in heaven. He knows God perfectly, having been in the bosom of the Father from eternity. But He also knows human beings, having taken on human flesh to live on earth for a little over three decades. We worship and follow a man.

He will come back. Here is the clincher: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am" (John 17:24). It is not enough that He was here with us here, Jesus has made provision for us to be with Him forever. But before He invited us to His clean place, He came to our dirty place. And by contrast, hell is the worst "without"—it is without light, without God, without fellowship, without hope, without a future, without a

friend, without a Savior, without forgiveness, without anything that could satisfy or make us happy.

Personal Application

- 1. God is with us, not only for us.** It is wonderful to know that God is for us. "This I know, that God is for me" (Psalm 56:9). "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). But He could be for us and not with us. There are people who would support us in our great need but not try to get close to us. Getting close means getting messy. "With" is more dangerous than "for." "With" takes a commitment that trumps "for." When you clean up the vomit of the poorest and sickest, you pay the price of being with. To be with lepers and sinners like prostitutes means you get dirty. The world thinks we are clean—too clean. If we were with them like Jesus was with sinners, they would not separate themselves from us.
- 2. Satan hates the Incarnation.** Satan does not like "with," and He tries to keep us feeling "without." But God has made many "with" promises. He said to Jacob, who felt all alone while running from his brother, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land" (Genesis 28:15). The psalmist writes, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

"With" says that we will never be alone. The fear of being left alone is dreadful. Old people feel it. I have a wonderful aunt who hasn't been visited by her daughter for years. Children fear being lost or left in a big store. Consider the powerful significance of "with." It impacts fear. We are often told in the Scriptures, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." It impacts our destiny. It impacts the suffering we go through. It should also impact our not knowing. Children are comforted in knowing that their parents are with them. Someone "knows." God gave a strong word to Israel: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God."

And what does that presence mean? "I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). Several times in subsequent Scriptures God declares through the prophet, "I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand..." (41:13), and again, "I will take hold of your hand" (42:6). And a chapter later, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (43:2), and "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (43:5).

Satan can handle the spiritual side of God better than His physical side. He tries to keep God at a distance by denying His humanity. He wants to make it hard for us

to find God—he wants us to think we always need to run to a chapel with stained glass. God couldn't be in this place—I feel too abandoned, too broken. But Bethlehem shoots all that down. Even though it doesn't smell good or feel good, it is good. In fact, "Good news of great joy." God is here. He is involved. He is one of us.

Sometimes we wonder where we could travel or escape to in order to feel more spiritual. Maybe I could meditate my way out of the limitations of my body. It feels like God isn't here. I don't see Him. I am hurting too much. Things are too mundane.

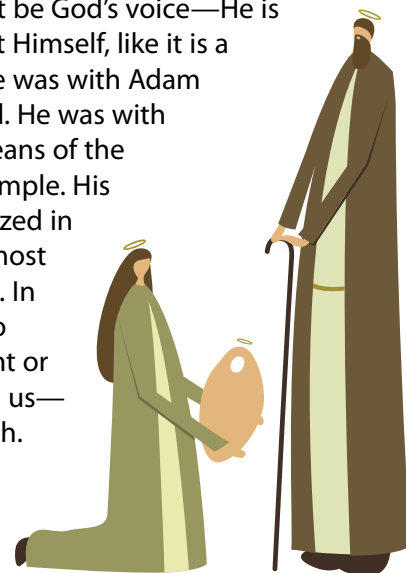
The Incarnation says God has done something about the rift between us. Satan has instructed all his spirits to deny the fact that Jesus ever came to earth in the flesh because it means God broke into our physical world to help us. He is not far from us or indifferent to us as Satan would have us believe.

We often interpret pain as the absence of God. We might think, "If God loved me, He would do something about this arthritis." Satan wants to keep God out of our life. But Jesus invaded it in the most surprising way—by becoming one of us. We would never have guessed. It astounds us. That baby is God with skin on! As the hymn says, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail incarnate deity. Pleased as man with

men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel!"

And then it gets even better. In the New Jerusalem, God is with us in a way He is not now. He is so present that we could go for a walk with Him like Adam did in Eden. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God'" (Revelation 21:3).

The word "with" is used three times in this Scripture. The voice from the throne must be God's voice—He is making the announcement Himself, like it is a happy moment for Him. He was with Adam and Eve before they sinned. He was with the children of Israel by means of the tabernacle and then the temple. His earthly presence was localized in that spot. He was here, almost incognito, through His Son. In the new earth, He sends no messenger and uses no tent or temple. He, Himself, is with us—for all eternity. God on earth.



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Typo alert! The dates for "The Favor of the Lord" Equipping Conference are Friday and Saturday, February 4-5, 2011. The brochure had two different date ranges. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused.