GOD DID IT JUST FOR US!

Jesus coming to earth is more than the story of a baby in a manger. It is God’s intimate pursuit to have a deeper connection with His creation. In One of Us you’ll learn that God took on skin in the person of Jesus and became one of us so that we might know who God is and also come to know the meaning of our lives.

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introduction

One of Us
Why did Jesus come to earth?

According to NASA there are about 8.8 billion planets the size of earth in our galaxy, the Milky Way, all orbiting around stars much like our sun. These 8.8 billion planets are in what scientists call the “Goldilocks zone”: a zone that is not too cold and not too hot for life to flourish. Astronomers say the next step in exploration is to invent powerful
telescopes that can take a closer look at these planets to see whether or not there is life. If there is, and like Elliott in the movie *E.T.*, we discovered that there are creatures on some distant planet, it’s a natural urge to try to connect and communicate with them in some way. We would want to communicate with these extraterrestrial creatures because we are human beings; designed in the image of a God, according to Scripture, whose nature is to reach out and communicate.

During the Advent season, we remember how the invisible God reached out to communicate. He arrived on our planet as a human baby—as one of us. Why did God make this journey from the glories of heaven into a dark, cold stable in Bethlehem? Why did the infinite, invisible Spirit take on skin and become one of us? Why does anyone communicate? So that something can be known. But what exactly can be known from God putting skin on? Let’s explore that in the following pages.

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one

We might know God

A young girl woke up one night frightened, convinced that there were all kinds of monsters and spooky creatures in her room. Terrified, she ran to her parents’ bedroom. Her mother took her back to her room, gave her a long hug, and said, “You’re safe here. You don’t have to be afraid. After I leave, you won’t be alone in the room. God will be here with
you.” The little girl replied, “I know that God will be here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin!”

Skin is tangible; skin is relatable; skin can embrace and comfort. We all want someone we can hold on to. Sometimes God can seem, as he did for the little girl, like not enough. We want a God we can touch and feel. Like Thomas, we want a God we can stick our fingers into.

If you had a thought you wanted to communicate to someone, how would you express it? If you’re feeling playful, you might act it out like in a game of charades. Or you might draw a picture. For most of us, the most natural way to express our thoughts and ideas is through words, spoken or written. And if the message is very important, rather than relying on a text message or a phone call, you’d likely try to express your message through words in person.

John, one of Jesus’ closest students, wrote in the gospel that bears his name: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . Through him all things were made. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1, 3, 14). The mysterious Word, who is God (John 1:1, 18), took on skin, bones, and connective tissue and moved into our neighborhood.
“Like the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Fourth Gospel (as John’s Gospel is often called) does not explicitly assert its author’s name. As far as we can prove, the title “According to John” (still used in certain translations like the KJV) was attached to it as soon as the four Gospels began to circulate together as “the fourfold Gospel.” — NIV ZONDERVAN STUDY BIBLE

The Greek term John uses, which we translate as “Word,” is logos. It’s the root word from which grows our words logic and logical. But this isn’t exactly what the Greeks would have thought of. Close, but not quite. When the Greeks heard the term logos, they would have thought of the logical, rational principle that they believed governed the world. The Greeks believed that an invisible, intelligent, integrating force was behind the universe, holding it all together. Writing to his own Greek world, John grabs their attention by saying in effect, “You’re right! There is a Logos-Power in the world.”

“If John were writing this gospel today, instead of using the word ‘logos’ he might have used the expression ‘Higher Power’ because that’s a term a lot of people use today. John might have said, ‘In the beginning was the Higher Power, and the Higher Power was God.’” Darrell Johnson, a scholar on the Gospel of John, says.
But this Higher Power isn’t simply above us, “out there” and aloof. Unbelievably, this Higher Power has *come* to us to communicate with us, which is why *Word* is such a fitting translation for us today. Jesus came to communicate God to us.

Jesus was *the Word* because the message that God wanted to convey to us was so important that he had to come to us in person to express it.

The Higher Power, the Word, came to us in time and space two thousand years ago on that very first Christmas and began communicating with us through the words and actions of Jesus Christ. The message? This is who God is.

My friend Penny’s dad founded a Bible school. In his later years, when he moved out of his house into an apartment in Vancouver, British Columbia, he had to clear out his huge library. Most of the books went to the seminary where he served as the founding president, but Penny asked him to select a handful of books for her. Books that he especially wanted her to have.

He carefully went through his vast library and came up with several books, all of them focused on Jesus. When he handed them to her, he said, “Get to know Jesus—because to know Jesus is to know God.”
“‘If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’

Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.’” John 14:7–10

If we get to know Jesus, we get to know God. Because God took on skin and became a human being in Jesus that first Christmas, we get to know who God is. And if we know God, we can also come to know the meaning of our existence.

Some of us don’t quite understand the meaning of our lives. Sometimes we may feel as if our lives are like a book with a missing chapter. But John is saying that Jesus is the missing chapter, and if we embrace him, he will complete the book of our lives.

If there were no Higher Power in the world, no Word to communicate with us, then our presence on earth would simply be the result of some kind
of a cosmic accident. If we are all the result of some cosmic fluke billions of years ago, then the meaning of our lives amounts to nothing more than “a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Not very inspiring, but it’s a fair conclusion if our lives are simply cosmic chance.

Yet to that idea John says, “No, no, no! There is a Higher Power, an infinite Word, a God who is seeking to communicate with us” (see John 1:1). The Word took on skin in the person of Jesus and became one of us that first Christmas so that we might know who God is and also come to know the meaning of our lives.

Now, if you’ve heard the Christmas story from the Bible before, this idea may not stun you. In fact, you may be yawning a bit about this whole idea. But think about the first readers of John’s gospel. To John’s fellow Jews during the first century, the idea that God would take on skin would have been beyond scandalous. The Greeks in John’s world, on the other hand, would not have been offended by this story about God taking on skin because their gods: Zeus, Apollos, and Aphrodite, were often thought to walk among people looking like humans themselves. The Greek gods were often depicted as human beings in statues. But John and his fellow Jews were forbidden to portray the living God in any concrete way,
whether as a statue or a drawing (Exodus 20:1–4).

Several times groups of Jews threatened to kill Jesus during his public ministry because, as a *human being*, he claimed to be God. He claimed to be able to forgive sins. Before Abraham existed (who lived two thousand years before Jesus walked the earth), Jesus said, “I Am” (or literally in Hebrew, “I-was-am-will-be” see John 8:58). In other words, Jesus claimed to preexist before his *own* birth on earth—something he would not have said if he had not believed that he was God. When his fellow Jews heard these words, they were so scandalized by what they thought was blasphemy that they picked up rocks because they wanted to stone Jesus to death.

Have you ever been that offended? So offended by someone that you wanted to curse them, spit on them, or punch them? Have you ever been so scandalized by someone that you wanted to draw a weapon and snuff them out on the spot? That’s how many of Jesus’s fellow Jews felt about him when he claimed to be God. Why so offended? Why not just write him off as a nut job and walk away? Their offense and outrage wasn’t merely personal, it was an offense to their religion and their God. It struck an offense at the very core of their identity.

For a Jew, the assertion that a *human being* was God was the worst kind of blasphemy, a horrible disgrace.
Many fans and ardent followers of Jesus gradually came to believe that Jesus was God because he did things that only God could do: he turned water into wine, opened the eyes of the blind, and raised the dead.

On the other hand, some who came to believe that Jesus was God doubted that he was actually a human being. These followers of Jesus began saying, “He’s God but he’s not really a human being. He just seems like a human being.” This idea persisted for about three centuries.

As a result, early church leaders determined that some clarity was needed. The Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus Christ was God and that he was mysteriously a human being. Jesus was God “incarnate,” “of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”

What exactly does incarnate mean? It comes from the root word carne, which means “meat.” The Spanish phrase con carne means “with meat.” God incarnate, or God con carne, means God with meat—God with flesh, muscle; God with skin. This is not some dusty, abstract
We might know God 

theology that makes no difference in our lives: this truth can change our lives and our eternity.

How so?

If God came to us with skin that first Christmas, then it means we are never truly alone. We have someone who has mysteriously come to us both as Spirit and as an embodied being.

Now, it should be said that God was not absent before Jesus came that first Christmas. The whole Old Testament is filled with stories of how God was present with his people. But when Jesus was born that first Christmas, it was “God with us” in a whole new way.

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

That first Christmas, God—an invisible spirit—took on skin and became one of us so that he could be with us always (Matthew 28:18–20).

Scripture teaches the mystery that Jesus Christ was both 100 percent human and 100 percent God. Why
is this important? Because if Jesus was both a finite human being and the infinite God, then his death was not only for one person, but for the whole world. Being human, he could die for human sins (of which he had none of his own so he could die for someone else), and being God his sinless death was enough for the sins of everyone. Yes, for your sins too. That’s why John says that Whoever receives him can have their sins washed away and can actually become a daughter or a son of God (see John 1:12). We celebrate the Christmas story because God, the Higher Power, the Word, became flesh—con carne, with meat, with skin—so that we might know who God is: a God who loves us and who died to show us mercy and forgive our sins.

Study:

Jesus came as the long awaited Jewish Messiah, yet many people missed his true identity. John 5:39 says this explicitly. Why did those who should have recognized him most, miss who he truly was?
Reflect:

Remember a time when you wanted/needed to know that Jesus was right there with you. Were you able to remind yourself of his presence? What difference did or didn’t it make?

Practice:

Though Jesus came and put on skin, he’s now in heaven. Yet in Matthew 28 he promises that he’s always with us. What reminders of his presence can you use to experience his presence everyday?
two

God might know us

The living God also took on skin so that God might know us. Two thousand years ago, when the invisible God became visible for the first time, God was only barely visible—a single, fertilized egg, an embryo almost imperceptible to the naked human eye. John tells us that the Light of the World voluntarily entered the darkness of the womb for nine months, and then he was born.
Let’s pause and reflect on this for a moment. As a newborn baby, the One who designed the eye could not focus his eyes. Like the rest of us, he first saw in black and white and then eventually in color. The living God of the universe could not feed himself, and so he had to learn to breastfeed. The God who holds the universe together could not control his bladder or bowel, and so he had to crawl around in the first century equivalent of diapers. At about age one, the Word learns to say his first word. Around this time, he probably learned to take his first steps. As a boy, he would likely fall and scrape his knee.

There is much, in fact nearly everything, about Jesus’s growing years that we do not know. But let’s imagine for a moment. Perhaps as a child, he grew bored of his toys and walked away from them. He likely went through the emotional ups and downs of adolescence as the waves of hormonal change tossed him about. As a junior apprentice carpenter, perhaps splinters in his fingers were common; as he learned to use a hammer, he occasionally missed and hit his thumb. How did he react to that? Jesus wasn’t born knowing that he was the unique Son of God, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, he discovered this over the course of time. Scripture tells us that Jesus went through a spiritual maturing process as he learned to
obey God through what he suffered (Hebrews 5:8).

When I was in seminary, I read textbooks about people’s problems and poured over case studies based on true stories. When I became a pastor, I sat across from people who told me about the deep pain they were going through. Since I had already read about these various problems, and I was now hearing about them from people whom I was growing to know and love, I felt like I knew quite a lot about suffering. Then I experienced some of that pain for myself. I was engaged, and I went through a devastating breakup. Sometime later, my wife and I lost an unborn baby. Then, in time, I experienced the pain of losing my father. It’s one thing to read about pain, and it’s another to listen to and sympathize with someone else’s pain. But it’s altogether different to go through the pain and then be able to empathize deeply because you yourself have suffered.

Because Jesus Christ was fully human, he knows what it is like to feel hungry and tired, to be financially destitute, or to suffer.
the loss of a loved one. He knows how it feels to have his prayers go unanswered or to feel completely alone, abandoned by God. Some of his last words on the cross were, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, Psalm 22:1). Jesus experienced abuse, torture, and then paralysis when his limbs were pinned by nails. He was tempted by the Evil One to sin, and even though he didn’t sin, he felt shame when he absorbed our sins on the cross. Whatever we are going through—loss, oppression, depression—Jesus has suffered as well, and so he can stand with us in our pain. I don’t want to minimize the suffering you have experienced, but the pain and suffering Jesus faced was greater than yours or mine. Thus Scripture teaches that Jesus empathizes with our suffering because he has been tried and tempted in every way we are (Hebrews 4:15–16).
Study:

God knows everything; we call it omniscience. But Scripture is clear that Jesus grew and learned. What things did Jesus learn about being human during his time on earth?

Reflect:

Have you ever had a struggle that you thought God doesn’t understand? Some temptation that feels beyond his realm of experience? Take a moment to be honest with God about those things.
Practice:

Hebrews 4 encourages us that Jesus can relate to our experience of temptation—yet he did not sin. How can you remind yourself to go to him when you are tempted and ask him for his strength to resist?
three

We might become like God

Christmas is a season when we can savor the greatest gift we’ve ever received—the gift of God coming to us in skin as Jesus Christ. But ironically, Christmas, for many, is also the busiest and most stressful time of the year. In North America, we will spend more than six billion dollars as we plan and attend parties, take in concerts, send cards, prepare special meals, and buy gifts. Though
these are all good things, taken altogether, they can leave us short of breath and short of attention.

So how can we simplify our lives this Christmas? How can we slow down and take some time to savor the gift we have received in Christ Jesus—the gift of God becoming one of us, taking on skin so that he might know us, we might know him, and we might become more like him?

“Yet to all who . . . receive [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). The expression, “receive Jesus,” may seem to suggest a one-time deal when we first welcome Christ into our lives. But in all of our close relationships—whether with friends, family, or a romantic love—we don’t just receive someone once, but we welcome them again and again whenever we share time or enjoy meals together and when we experience adventures and adversity together. This is also true with Christ. When we receive Christ for the first time, he will begin to change us. But as we welcome Christ into
our lives, over and over again, we will see our lives changed more and more.

In John’s gospel, we read that those who receive Jesus are given the right to become the children of God, children born of the Holy Spirit. In our individualistic world, we tend to think of children as sons or daughters of their biological or adoptive parents. But in John’s more communal world, people had a stronger sense of children’s identity in relationship to their fathers or mothers. They commonly used the expression, “son of so-and-so,” or “daughter of so-and-so,” to signify that a child was like his or her father or mother in some way. For example, John had a brother named James, and together they were called the “Sons of Zebedee,” because that was their father’s name.

People in John’s time also might have described a person as a son or daughter of some characteristic that was apparent in their lives. For example, John and James were also called the “sons of thunder.” Why? Because they were hotheads, and their tempers exploded like thunder. Then they began to follow Jesus, and they became sons of God and took on the character of their Father in heaven. They grew more patient, kind, and loving. Their transformation was a thing of wonder and beauty.
That kind of life-changing effect was part of the reason that Christianity went viral in the first century.

One of the great promises of the Christmas story is that because of Christ’s birth as God in human flesh, we can become sons and daughters of God. We can become people who are like our Father in heaven.

Some time ago, I was visiting my mother at her home and asking about our family tree. My mom told me something about her father, my grandpa, that I had never heard before: “When Grandma met Grandpa, Grandma thought he was this virtuous, honorable, principled man, but then Grandpa became really successful professionally; he became quite wealthy and he grew proud and he was unfaithful to Grandma. And at least on one occasion he was also physically violent toward her.” Then at eighty-six years of age, my grandfather received Jesus Christ and became a son of God. He did not become a saint, but according to my cousin, he became kinder and
gentler. He even started to help with the dishes for the first time in his life! After more than sixty years, it’s about time, right? But he was living in Japan, and he was the patriarch and had been a former CEO. It is very unusual in Japan for a man of his age and stature to help with domestic chores. Yet my grandfather changed after he became a son of God.

I don’t know if I will ever have grandkids. If I do, and they become curious about how my life unfolded, they might say something like this: “Our Grandpa Ken was a really mean guy in high school. He wouldn’t let anyone that he thought was uncool hang out with him. He shoplifted, used drugs, and got into fistfights. Then he met Jesus, and he became more welcoming and loving, and with God’s help, he built a church that tried to welcome everyone.”

In reflecting on my family tree, I also thought about my wife’s family tree. Her name, Sakiko, in Japanese, means Sa, “early,” Ki, “Christ,” Ko, “child.” Her name literally means, "We can become sons and daughters of God. We can become people who are like our Father in heaven."
“early Christ child,” and she was the first person in her family tree to follow Jesus. Her parents, who weren’t Christians at her birth, unknowingly and prophetically named her. When Sakiko gave her life to Jesus as a young adult, her parents were shocked and upset; Sakiko’s decision to follow Christ was a break from family religious tradition. But her mother told me later that when Sakiko was growing up, she was very successful academically, was naturally good at sports and art, and was popular to boot. She ended up going to a good university and then flourished in her career. Her mom observed, “She was also really proud and judgmental—feeling superior to others.” After Sakiko met Christ, her father and mother were upset, but they couldn’t deny that she became a humbler, less judgmental, kinder, and more loving person. Because of the change in Sakiko’s life, her mom, then her sister, and then her grandmother gave their lives to Jesus. After Sakiko became a daughter of God, she grew more like Jesus, more like her heavenly Father.

For a long time, I have deeply admired Nelson Mandela. Not long after he died, our church hosted a friend of his from South Africa named Michael Cassidy. Because Michael had regularly met with Mandela, I couldn’t resist the temptation to ask
if Mandela had been a follower of Jesus. Michael responded, “Absolutely, he was a believer and follower of Jesus.”

Whether Mandela had followed Jesus, or not, he would have been a remarkable person, but part of what made him incredibly wise, forgiving, luminous, and loving was that he was a son of God. I’m not saying that if you become a son or daughter of God, you’ll become the next Mandela, but you will grow wiser, more forgiving, and more loving. You will become more like Jesus.

**Conclusion**

We celebrate the gift of Christmas because God became *con carne*, taking on skin so that we might know him, and he might know us, and we might become the children of God—people who bear the image of our Father in heaven. As St. Augustine said, “The Son of God became a Son of man so that we might become the sons and daughters of God.” As John puts it, in Christ, we become a people who bear in our very being “the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father,” people “full of grace and truth” *(John 1:14)*.

Do you want to know this Higher Power, the Word, the living God of the universe personally? Then
immerse yourself in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, where you can observe God as a human being in Jesus.

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**Study:**

2 Peter 1:5–9 and Galatians 5:22–23 both talk about characteristics of a growing and maturing follower of Jesus, someone being transformed to act like Jesus. List those characteristics that are most (and least) evident in your life.

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**Reflect:**

What area(s) of your life show the most change in being like Jesus? Which areas are you still praying for his help?
Practice:

Choose one attribute from the lists given in 2 Peter and Galatians and ask the Lord to give you the opportunity to grow in this area this week.
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