

Week 8

God the Son: The Incarnation

Key Verses

John 1:14, 18 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ...¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time; God the only Son, who is in the arms of the Father, He has explained Him.

Other Scriptures: Matthew 1:20-23, Philippians 2:6-8, Isaiah 7:14

+ Setting the Stage

Paul Harvey told a story to illustrate the miracle of the Incarnation:

A farmer realized that some sparrows were in trouble, so he tried to direct the birds to the safety of the barn. Nothing worked, however, as the birds were terrified and failed to understand that the farmer was trying to help them. The farmer thought, "If only I could become a bird – one of them – just for a moment." With this thought, the farmer grasped the whole principle of the Incarnation. Harvey concludes: "A man's becoming a bird is nothing compared to God's becoming a man. The concept of a sovereign being as big as the universe he created, confining Himself to a human body was – and is – too much for some people to believe."¹

Christmas is one Christian holiday that the world seems to embrace. By early November, you hear Christmas carols everywhere, and nativity sets are popular decorations in many homes and yards. But the true meaning of Christmas is that the baby born to Mary and placed in a manger was – God. This truth is almost beyond comprehension.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *God is in the Manger*, states that "no priest, no theologian stood at the manger of Bethlehem. And yet all Christian theology has its origin in the wonder of all wonders: that God became human."² No wonder Tim Keller, in *Hidden Christmas*, calls the Incarnation the most "universe-sundering, history-altering, life-transforming, paradigm-shattering event of history."³

+ Heaven Came Down

The Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18) gives us a synopsis of John's entire gospel, and it introduces themes that are expanded throughout the rest of the book. The Prologue contains profound truths about Christ's deity and Incarnation, and a great way to introduce a study of the Incarnation is to look briefly at two verses in the Prologue that declare the humanity of Christ, and how – in His humanity – Jesus revealed God to man.

JOHN 1:14 *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

JOHN 1:18 *No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.*

A. The Word Became Flesh

Numerous commentaries identify John 1:14 as the most concise biblical statement of the Incarnation, therefore making it one of Scripture's most significant verses. "The Word" (the Logos, a term John uses to express Jesus as God's self-revelation; or, in other words, God's expression of Himself to humanity) "became flesh" (God the Son assumed a human, though not sinful, nature. However, He did not cease to be God). As God took on humanity, the infinite became finite, eternity entered time, and the invisible became visible.

B. And Dwelt Among Us

Literally, this phrase refers to the days of Israel's desert wanderings, and the word translated "dwell" means to "dwell in a tent" or "to tabernacle." During His life and ministry, Jesus "tabernacled" among us. John's readers would recall that the tabernacle was that portable structure at the center of their worship and erected at the center of their camp during their 40 years in the wilderness.

C. And We Beheld His Glory

In the first of the sign miracles in John's Gospel, after Jesus turned water to wine at the marriage feast in Cana, John states that Jesus thereby "*manifested His glory*" so that His disciples believed in Him (John 2:11). During His earthly ministry, Christ's glory was "*veiled in flesh*" (as the Charles Wesley hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" reminds us). Nevertheless, the disciples at times witnessed the manifestation of Jesus' heavenly glory, most notably on the Mount of Transfiguration.

D. Only-Begotten

This does not imply that Jesus was created by God and therefore not eternal. Instead, it means that He was unique, the only one of His kind. Only Jesus was virgin-born (Isaiah 7:14), and only He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, confirming that only this unique, sinless person could become our Redeemer. Wayne Grudem, in Systematic Theology, explains:

"God, in His wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human

birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit." ⁴

✦ Explaining the Inexplainable - Fully Human, Fully Divine

Jesus is the answer to the question, "What is God like?" In Jesus Christ, the character of God may be known.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is essential to our Christology. John understood how central to our faith is the affirmation that God, in Jesus, was truly and fully human, that He indeed "became flesh." The verses we have reviewed in this section also raise three questions we need to answer in the rest of this lesson:

- How can Jesus be both fully human and fully divine?
- What does it mean when we say that Jesus became "like us?"
- Why was it important that God reveal Himself to us in this way?

MATTHEW 1:20-23 *But when he had thought this over, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." ²² Now all this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: ²³ "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN WILL CONCEIVE AND GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."*

While this topic alone could (and has!) consumed volumes, there are two aspects of the full deity, full humanity of Christ, that are essential to our understanding.

A. Not subtraction, but addition

The Incarnation presupposes the prior existence of Christ. His existence did not begin with His birth; He exists from the beginning (John 1:1). However, when He became man, He became whatever it took to be human while remaining God in an undiminished way. Jesus was fully God and fully man. In a wonderful series of videos by William Lane Craig on the Incarnation, Craig emphasizes how important to our Christology is the understanding that at His Incarnation, the Logos acquired an additional nature. Nothing was subtracted; instead, He acquired a human nature. ⁵

Christians affirm that Jesus Christ is both divine and human united in one person. In taking to Himself full humanity, the second person of the Trinity remained fully God. There was no divine subtraction in the divine self-emptying, but a human addition: God being united with human flesh for all eternity. ⁶

To summarize the Incarnation: remaining what He was, He became what he was not. In other words, while Jesus continued 'remaining' what he was (fully divine) He also became what He previously had not been (fully human as well). Jesus did not give up any of His deity when He became man, but He did take on humanity that was not His before.⁷

John understood that to deny the true humanity of Jesus was to deny something at the very heart of Christianity. In I John 4:2, we read *"By this you know the spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God..."*

B. Two natures, one person

William Lane Craig explains that, as we consider the Trinity, we can describe it as "multiple persons in one nature." By contrast, at His Incarnation, Jesus became "two natures in one person." And these two natures were distinct, not combined or somehow blended. This is important because it is at this point that many misunderstandings (and heresies) have arisen over the centuries. These inadequate or erroneous views of the person of Christ suggest that Jesus had a human body, but not a human mind; that there were two separate persons in Christ, a human person and a divine person; or that He had one nature only and that the human nature of Christ was taken up and absorbed into the divine nature creating a 'third kind of nature.' The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD addressed these misconceptions, stating that, in His humanity, Jesus was "perfect in Godhead" and also "perfect in manhood," and that Christ did not divest Himself of any of His divine nature, and definitely did not just turn Himself into a man. Wayne Grudem explains,

"His divine and human natures are forever distinct and retain their own properties even though they are eternally and inseparably united together in one person. This is probably the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible – the eternal Son of God, himself fully God, became fully man and in doing so joined Himself to a human nature forever."⁸

+ One of Us

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8 *"who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

In His humanity, Jesus was subject to the laws of human development, and He experienced a normal infancy, childhood, and young adulthood. He was not masquerading as a man, as critics would attest. In the passage in Philippians 2, we see that, while remaining God, Jesus "emptied" Himself in the sense that He took on something – human nature, the "form" of a man and the "form" of a slave. In fact, as Wayne Grudem states, "For the first 30 years of his life Jesus lived a human life that was so ordinary that the people of Nazareth who knew Him best were amazed that He could teach with authority and work miracles."⁹

Numerous passages in the gospels indicate that Jesus experienced all the characteristics of finite human nature. He experienced fatigue (John 4:6), He was hungry (Matthew 4:2) and thirsty (John 4:7). His suffering was real, as was His death on the cross. He experienced temptation so that He could sympathize with us in our weakness (yet He was without sin, Hebrews 4:15). He experienced human emotions such as compassion, pity, grief, indignation, joy, and anger. Two quotes from James Montgomery Boice (foundations, 281, 285) emphasize the importance of this.

“It is not an impassible, insensitive, unmovable Christ that is presented to us in the New Testament. Rather, it is one who has entered into our griefs and understands our sorrows, one who was on occasion moved to righteous indignation and angered by sin.”¹⁰

“Jesus, by means of the Incarnation, came to know all the vicissitudes of life: trials, joys, sufferings, losses, gains, temptations, griefs. He entered into them, understood them, and thus became a pattern for us, that we should go through these experiences as he did, and also an encouragement to us to come to him in prayer, knowing that he understands what we are going through.”¹¹

Of special interest are passages that reveal how Jesus, simultaneously fully human and fully divine, exhibited qualities of both natures in a single incident. For example, in Mark 4:35-41, we read the account of a time Jesus and the disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. During the storm, Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat (humanity). When the disciples called to Him that they were “*perishing*,” He “*rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Hush, be still.’ And the wind died down and it was perfectly calm*” (deity).

Lewis Chafer, in *Major Bible Themes*, comments on this:

“...it may be seen that the Lord Jesus Christ sometimes functioned within the sphere of that which was perfectly human and sometimes within the sphere of that which was perfectly divine. His divine being was never limited in any degree by the fact of His humanity, nor did He minister to His human need from His divine resources. He could turn stones into bread to feed His human hunger, but this He never did.”¹²

✦ What Christ's Humanity Accomplished

In addition to the Atonement, the New Testament provides several reasons why it was essential that Jesus become fully man.

A. As an example

I PETER 2:21 “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.”

Christ, during the years of His earthly ministry, gave us an example of how a person ought to live in this world.

B. To have a relationship with man

I JOHN 3:1 *"See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are..."*

Timothy Keller, in his lovely book *Hidden Christmas*, states that "The purpose of the Incarnation is that we would have a relationship with Him. In Jesus, the ineffable, unapproachable God becomes a human being who can be known and loved. And, through faith, we can know this love. This does not stun us as much as it should."¹³

C. As a mediator

I TIMOTHY 2:5 *"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."*

Again, Keller emphasizes this: "Jesus is the perfect mediator between estranged parties. By assuming a human nature, the God-man bridges the chasm, dies for our sins, heals the breach, and makes peace."¹⁴

D. To demonstrate selfless giving

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9 *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."*

E. To become our Savior

MATTHEW 1:21 *And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."*

Many commentaries emphasize Christ's need to be a man; if He were not man, He could not die. Conversely, if He were not God, His death would be of no value. Lewis Chafer explains, "In becoming flesh He, though laying aside His glory, in no sense laid aside His deity. In His incarnation, He retained every essential attribute of deity. His full deity and complete humanity are essential to His work on the cross."¹⁵ And James Montgomery Boice explains why the Incarnation apart from the cross can lead to false sentimentality. Christ's substitutionary death will be the focus of another lesson in this series.

+ Conclusion

In today's culture, we see increased pluralization and relativism, which makes it critical for our understanding of Christ – His deity, His humanity, His life, ministry and work – to be grounded in biblical truth, truth we apply to our own lives, and truth we share with others. As one writer put it, "A strong and uncompromising belief in the Incarnation which guarantees the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ is all the more crucial."¹⁶ The whole New Testament testifies to the miracle of the Incarnation, and our affirmation of this miracle is essential to the gospel story.

Some final quotes from James Montgomery Boice and J. I. Packer help summarize this lesson, and explain why the Incarnation was...

- **Unique**

“The Bible tells us that the birth of Jesus was unlike all other births in that Jesus existed before birth as the second Person of the Godhead and that He became man, not to provide us with a sentimental story to tell children each winter, or as a theme for great musical compositions, but in order to grow to maturity and then to die for our sin as the means of our salvation.”¹⁷

- **Purposeful**

“The birth of Christ itself teaches us of God’s love, for God loved us so much that he became man in order to die for us. It also teaches us God’s power, for an Incarnation is beyond our ability even to imagine, let alone to bring into being. In the birth we see God’s wisdom. We learn of His mercy. We see His disposition to use little things, to exalt the humble, and to subdue the proud. We see His grace.”¹⁸

- **Life-changing**

“The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity – hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory – because at the Father’s will Jesus Christ became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard or will hear.”¹⁹

- **Miraculous**

“Don’t worry, though; you do not need to know how God became man in order to know Christ! Understand it or not, the fact remains that the Word became flesh; it was the supreme, mind-blowing miracle; love prompted it; and our part is not to speculate about it and scale it down, but to wonder and adore and love and exalt Jesus Christ.”²⁰

¹ Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998, p. 295.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 28.

³ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, Viking Press, 2016, p. 48.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, InterVarsity Press, 1994, p. 530.

⁵ www.reasonablefaith.org

⁶ Melvin Tinker, *Veiled in Flesh: The Incarnation*, InterVarsity Press, 2019, p. 163.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 563.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs*, Zondervan Academic, 2005, p. 70.

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 534.

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, InterVarsity Press, 1986, p. 281. ¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 285

¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, Zondervan, 1974, p. 57.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, p. 53

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 109

¹⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p. 56

¹⁶ Melvin Tinker, *Veiled in Flesh*, p. 169

¹⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*, P & R Publishing, 2009, p. 168

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 176

¹⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, 1973, p. 55

²⁰ J. I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1977, p. 52