

The Details of the Incarnation (2)

Hebrews 4:15-16 and Philippians 2:5-11

We are in the middle of a three-part series on the Incarnation. Last week, we considered the Goal of the Incarnation – that we may know God. Today, we are going to tackle the Details of the Incarnation. Next Sunday, we will conclude with the Application of the Incarnation.

It is possible to become a Christian... to live your life... and then die, and never think deeply about the Details of the Incarnation. As long as you simply accept that Jesus is “God in the flesh, and that He died on the cross to pay for your sins” you can be saved.

If this is true, then why even study that details of the Incarnation? The Book of Hebrews commands us to “fix your eyes on Jesus.” And in I Corinthians we are told that we are changed by “beholding the face of Jesus.” We are not being encouraged to look at a picture of Jesus. We are being encouraged to consider who Jesus is, in His essence, in His character. Personally, as I have studied the Incarnation in its detail, I have been encouraged in my faith. I have been encouraged that Jesus does truly know me, and that He is able to save me, even me. The cross may declare to you that you need saving. But the Incarnation declares that Jesus is able to save you, even you.

Philippians 2:5-8 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Hebrews 4:15-16 ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

How often do you feel misunderstood? Do you wonder if anyone truly understands the struggles that you experience on the inside? And even if they could understand, what can they possibly do to help you with your problems? And do they even want to strap on your particular problems?

These are the questions you may be asking today. And when you think about a baby in a manger some 2,000 years ago, you wonder what this child has to do with you. You may think, “His life was so very different than mine. How can He possibly understand me and my particular issues?”

Jesus was not rich, but neither was He destitute. He was a carpenter’s son. He was the first born of several siblings. He came from an intact family and He had parents who loved Him. Jesus lived the life of one particular man. How could He possibly understand you, and the complexity of your particular problems? And yet, the Scripture tells us, “Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He felt the struggles of temptation in the way that we do... with one exception, He never committed sin.”

How is it possible that Jesus understands fully your particular struggles and temptations and weaknesses? Frankly, I am not sure that I can know exactly. On the one hand, Jesus seems vastly different than me, because he did not commit sin, and he did not possess a sinful nature as I do. Not until he hung on the cross, did he feel the weight of the guilt of my sin. But on the other hand, Jesus understands me. He does not only know what sin is generally. He knows and feels my particular struggles. In some sense this is made most clear as I consider my union with Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. But we will wait until next week to explore His ministry.

For now, I want us to reflect upon Jesus. No one knows you like Jesus. No one knows your every weakness except Him. And He does not know your particular weaknesses with contempt. We are told that He knows them with sympathy. And because He is so sympathetic to your particular struggles, you can draw near to the throne of grace, with confidence, knowing that you will receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need. In part, it is the details of the Incarnation that convinced me that Jesus is able to help you... to save you... even you...

For the sake of illustration, I want you to imagine something. It may seem a bit strange. But I think it will prove helpful. I want you to imagine that the Son of God became you. Even saying this edges close to heresy. Jesus did not take to himself an already existing person. I am not arguing that He did. But I do think to imagine so for a bit may be helpful. Imagine that you were the only person that needed saving. Imagine then that He took on your flesh and blood, your particular nature. Consider your life and your personality and your experiences. What if Jesus joined himself to you, beginning to end? Of course, your life would have been vastly different because you would not have made all those choices to sin. But what if He did not overcome your temptations at the outset? What if he simply felt them with you? What if he experienced with you your every confusion, your every frustration, your every failure, your every weakness... such that He knew you just as keenly as you know yourself, even better than you know yourself.

Hold that image...

Now, imagine that your life is over. I know that you are only partially through your life. You still have much life to live. But I want you to imagine your life over, sort of like Scrooge in A Christmas Carol. Only you do not die in the normal way. You die in the way that Jesus chose to die. Since Jesus has taken on your “particular” flesh and blood, it is you who are hanging on the cross. You are dying there with Jesus. It is here, at the cross, that Jesus begins to overcome your “particular” sins. Since your life is ended, He is not only crucifying some of your sins. He is crucifying all of them. He is not only bearing the punishment for each one of your sins, but He is slaying each of them.

As you think of Jesus hanging on the cross, think of him doing so in your particular nature. Think of yourself hanging on that cross. And when Jesus lay breathless in the tomb, imagine your body lying there cold and lifeless. And then, when Jesus rose up transformed on the Third Day, imagine that He did so in your particular nature.

If Jesus only came for you, could He save you? Could you ever imagine that if He took on your particular nature that He would meet His match in you? And yet, this is what we think far too often. Jesus came to save others, but I am somehow beyond His saving.

Jesus did not take on your personality. He had his own. But in taking on His own particular personality, we believe that He also took to Himself fallen humanity generally. That means that because He is God, and knows every person whom He has chosen in all of their details, when He took fallen flesh and blood to Himself, He was taking to Himself the humanity of each one of His elect. In becoming a man, God is walking in your shoes.

If you have any sense of the holiness of God, you should wonder how this is even possible. God's holiness is like a burning fire. The whole reason why Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden was because God could not tolerate sinful humanity in His presence.

How is it possible that this Holy God could take to Himself fallen humanity? In the Incarnation, God does the unthinkable. He joins His light to our darkness. In His Person the light of the divine is joined to the darkness of fallen humanity. It is only this union of Divine Light with the Darkness of fallen humanity that is able overcome our darkness.

And this is what we have in Jesus Christ. We have one redeemer uniting the hot brightness of the divine nature with the fallen darkness of the human nature. This union alone is able to carry fallen humanity to its death, and then upward again into pure light. The Son straps fallen humanity to Himself in order to crucify that fallenness. But the crucifixion of fallen humanity in Christ was only the first step in raising that humanity to newness. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, fallen humanity is resurrected to a new humanity. And only this new humanity is able to rise all the way to the very Holy of Holies where the brightness of God burns hottest.

Humanity is now dwelling in the presence Divinity. Humanity is now beholding Divinity's holiness. It is impossible for darkness to know and enjoy that which is light. If you are to know God who is light. You must become light. And yet, only if you are joined to light, will your darkness be transformed into light. This is what God has done in the Incarnation.

God did not create Jesus out of the dust of the ground. God became one of Adam's fallen race. Jesus was born of the woman Mary, who herself was the offspring of Eve. This union should not be possible.

When Jesus was reclining at supper, and a prostitute comes to wash his feet with her tears, the Pharisees cringed. They understood that a holy man should not allow and unholy woman touch him. They were right. What has light to do with darkness? But they overestimated their own holiness. They did not see any problem with themselves eating with

Jesus. And they misunderstood what it was that Jesus was doing in this world. They could not see that this was the whole purpose of his coming – to make it possible to join light to darkness.

Philippians 2:5-8 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

What would it mean for Jesus to consider equality with God a thing to be grasped? It would mean that He would have remained in heaven. And it would mean that you would forever remain in darkness. Instead, he emptied himself. He made himself nothing. That does not mean that he ceased to be God. But He put aside His heavenly glory in such a way that he could be born in the likeness of men. I haven't a clue what all that involved. But I know that if the Son did not do this, I could not be saved, and I would never know God.

Jesus was and is “in the form of God”. And Jesus is and will always be “in the form of man”. And as such, Jesus, in His person joins God to man.

What Jesus has done is unimaginable! It is unthinkable! We casually accept its truth because we are told to accept it. But we rarely reflect upon it. Every bit of your salvation is dependent upon you being united to Jesus Christ. You must be “in Christ”. And Christ must be “in you.”

Those who are united to Jesus Christ are promised all the glories of knowing God. Those who are not united to Jesus Christ have no hope whatsoever. The mechanism by which we are united to Jesus Christ is “faith”. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we are united to Jesus Christ. But if we are not united to the Christ who has truly united God to man, then we still cannot truly know God. We need the Details of the Incarnation.

Everything that we know and believe about Jesus Christ in the Definition of Chalcedon comes from our wrestling with the texts of Scripture. We do not refer to other sources to find the specifics about who he is. The writers of the

Scriptures present to us the truth of who Jesus is. The fact that it took the Church some 400 years to give definition to what the Scriptures teach should give us great appreciation for what we have in them.

You have an insert with the words of the Definition of Chalcedon on one side. And on the other side, you have the names of the various heresies that were condemned by the early Church Councils. I am not going to walk you through these today. Normally, the place where I walk through these strange names is in Church History Class. It has been some time since I taught Church History in Sunday School. I usually teach a class for home-schoolers every 3 or 4 years. But it is probably time to have another Sunday School class for the Church. Anyway, the reason I have given you these names is so that you will have them for your personal reference.

Today, I want to take the historical struggles of 400 plus years and squeeze them into a few moments. We must begin our discussion of Jesus with a basic understanding of God from the OT. The OT is absolutely clear that there is only One True God.

Deuteronomy 6:4 ⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

To even conceive of any other being to be on par with God is idolatry and blasphemous.

Exodus 20:2-3 ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

So, when Jesus came teaching with authority and doing all sorts of miracles it was natural that many of the Jews would struggle to believe that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Mark 6:2-3 ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

John 10:31-33 ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" ³³ The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."

With this understanding, it makes sense that even among the earliest followers of Jesus Christ there were Jews who could not accept that He was truly God. And yet, that is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself.

John 10:30 ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

In Mark 2 he declares to a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven, a right reserved for God alone.

Mark 2:5-12 ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"- he said to the paralytic- ¹¹ "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." ¹² And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

And Jesus declares that He only does what He sees the Father doing.

John 5:17-21 ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." ¹⁸ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was

even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. ¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

Jesus also portrays himself as the object of our faith and is more than willing to receive our worship. In all of these ways and more, Jesus emphatically declared himself to be the One True God. But alongside the passages that declare Jesus' absolute equality with God, there are other passages that speak of the Father being greater than the Son.

John 14:28 ²⁸ You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

How is it possible to Jesus to be equal with God and yet for the Father to be greater than Jesus? This is what confused the early Church.

Matthew 24:36 ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

How is it possible for God to not have knowledge of the day and the hour of his return?

Luke 2:40 ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Luke 2:52 ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

How is it possible for a man who grows in wisdom and stature to be God? The Bible does not work out the answers to these questions. But they are questions that arise from the text of Scripture. They are not manufactured by men. They

are questions that God raises for us to ponder. One early solution was that rather than Jesus being God, he was a man upon whom the Spirit of God descended. Is this not what might be concluded from Jesus' baptism?

Luke 3:21-22 ²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Maybe Jesus was only able to do the things he did because the Spirit of God had come upon him.

Luke 4:1 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness

And maybe this Spirit was taken up again to God when Jesus hung on the cross.

Luke 23:46 ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

This solution was cast aside as heresy. If Jesus only had the power of God, and was not Himself God, then He would have violated the first commandment by encouraging worship of Himself. The early church confessed Jesus as Lord and believed that in Jesus they had God Himself.

Another difficult question that had to be considered was this: If Jesus was indeed God, then were we not forced to conclude that there were Two God's after all? And if we now have two God's, then does that make the statement in Deuteronomy wrong? How could Jesus be God AND the Father also be God? Maybe what we have in Jesus is the true God, but maybe He is God in another form. In the OT, God was revealed as God the Father. But now in Jesus we have another form of God. He is now God the Son in the flesh. And after he returns to heaven, we have the same God in another form, that of the Spirit. Maybe it is like water! Water can exist in three forms: ice, water, and vapor.

Nice solution right? Not so fast. Did we not have all the forms existing in one place at the same time at Jesus' baptism? This solution too had to be cast aside. It was not a solution at all.

There was another problem that developed in the early church that made it difficult to accept that Jesus was truly God in the flesh. This world is messed up. Everywhere you look, this physical world has marks of being corrupted. It is one thing to see the baby in a manger as the Holy One, but it is quite another to see an adult afflicted with all of the common maladies that we experience.

When his neighbors asked, “Is this not the carpenter’s son?”, they might have gone into more detail. “Did we not see him bleed when he cut himself with the chisel? Did we not smile when he could not make a table as nice as his dad? Did we not see him sick with a fever when he was a child?” And is it not true that the Scripture refers to the “flesh” as being opposed to God?

Galatians 5:17 ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

How is it that God could take on flesh if the flesh is opposed to God? I know that we see these passages as referring to the “sinful nature”, but very early in the Church people wrestled with the idea that the material world was evil. And if that were the case then it would be impossible for God to take material flesh to himself. The beginnings of this heresy was already infiltrating the Church before the NT period was ended.

1 John 4:2-3 ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

As you can see here, it was not a matter of indifference. If Jesus was not God in the flesh, the Gospel was lost. In fact, Satan was at work trying to convince the Church that God had not come “in the flesh.” The Church was moving closer to a definitive statement that Jesus was fully God, but there was one more huge question with which to deal. Are we not told in John 1 and John 3 that Jesus was “begotten of the Father”? Is it not true that to be begotten is to “come into being”? And if that is the case then do these passages not teach that there was a time when the Son “was not”?

Maybe Jesus is made up of similar stuff as God, but he is not really the same stuff as God. Maybe he looks a whole lot like God, like any son might look like his dad. But he is not truly God, not eternally God. And if this is the case, then

maybe Jesus is “a” god, and not “the” God. Maybe Jesus is above other men, but not yet on the level as the original God. In his nature, he is “subordinate” to the original God. But again, if we do not have “the” God in Jesus Christ, then Jesus cannot bring us to “the” God.

Philippians 2:5-6 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

“Being in the form of God” is not a reference to outward appearance, but rather in God’s true form or substance.

Colossians 1:15-17 ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 2:9 ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

The Council of Nicea in 325 makes clear what Scripture clearly reveals. Jesus is truly God. He is of the very same substance as God. When you have Jesus, you have God. The clear articulation of Jesus as God does not say more than Scripture teaches. But it does make it possible for the Church to continue exploring in more detail who it is that we have in Jesus.

It might seem strange, but the next question to be grappled with was whether Jesus was truly a human. Now that the Church believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, it was necessary to go back and rethink, “Was Jesus really and fully human?”

We as humans are both material and spiritual. When Adam was created God took the dust of the earth and formed man. But then He breathed life into man. Since John 1 speaks of the Word becoming flesh, is it not possible that Jesus had a human body but not a human soul? A good illustration of this might be the OT Tabernacle. The pillar of fire would descend upon the Holy of Holies. The Tabernacle was simply the vessel that contained the Glory of God. Maybe the body of Jesus functioned as a vessel into which was poured the Divine Word.

But if the Incarnation was for the purpose of redeeming man, only that part of man that was assumed by God could then be redeemed by God. And if God did not take to himself a “reasonable soul”, our reasonable soul, then that part of us could not be redeemed.

Basic to our salvation is that we are joined with the Divine, all of us – body and soul. Only our union with the Divine can accomplish the redemption we need.

Hebrews 2:14-18 ¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Temptation does not only occur in the body. It is our “reasoning soul” that makes the choice to sin. It is not simply our bodies that need saving. It is our souls. Under God’s sovereign hand, the Church concluded that Jesus had to be fully human, having both a true body and a reasonable soul.

But this conclusion raised another question. If Jesus has a fully divine nature and a fully human nature, did this mean that there were actually two persons “in Jesus”? Could we not speak of both a Divine Jesus and a Human Jesus? This question swirled around questions about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Is it not true that when we consider the baby in the womb, we should think of Mary as bearing God in her womb? Is it not correct to say that Mary was the mother of God? Certainly, we would not say that Mary only bore the human Jesus and not the divine Son of God.

But to say that Mary was the bearer of God speaks too highly of Mary. And if you go down this road too far, you begin to exalt Mary more than Christ. Here we begin to see the razor’s edge of truth concerning Jesus. We must be able to affirm that God was growing in the womb of Mary, while still maintaining that God was eternally omnipresent and above His creation.

The Chalcedonian Definition will say that Jesus “was born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God,” but it will wisely add, “according to the Manhood.” Why, because “According to the Godhead” the Christ was “begotten before all ages of the Father.”

The Chalcedonian Definition will repeatedly use the word “same”. “One and the same Son” or “one and the same Christ”. This language is designed to oppose the idea that there are two persons in Jesus. Instead, we are to accept that Jesus had two natures, one divine and one human and these natures were united in one person. It is the personal union between the two natures that enables the Scripture to sometimes speak in strange ways.

^{ESV} **Acts 20:28** Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Whose blood purchased the church? God’s blood. Does God, who is a Spirit, have blood? No, but since God is united to human flesh in the person of Christ, we can rightly say that God purchased the church with his blood. We could not say this if there were two separate persons in Christ. But because the two natures are united in one person, we can say this. Another example is in John 8.

John 8:58-59 ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Notice how Jesus speaks of his pre-existence before Abraham. It is Jesus in the flesh who is speaking. And yet, because his human nature is united to His divine nature in one person, he can rightly say that he existed before Abraham. The Council of Ephesus in 431 AD emphatically accepts that there is only one person in Christ.

But as soon as you affirm that Jesus is one person, you start thinking more of the divine nature than the human nature. I mean really, when push comes to shove, who is going to get squashed if the two natures come into contact with one another?

Some people began to think again that the human nature was overwhelmed by the Divine. So, in reality, we are left with one nature – the Divine. But if the human nature is overwhelmed, then we who are human cannot be redeemed as humans. This is where the Definition of Chalcedon is at its best. It states, “One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, is to be acknowledged in two natures, Inconfusedly – that means that the two natures are not somehow mixed together. Unchangeably – that means that the two natures are not added together to make a third nature altogether. Indivisibly – that means that there are not portions of either nature that are carved out. Inseparably – that means that the two natures are united forever to one another in one person.

The distinction of the natures being by no means taken away by the union...

The manhood of Christ remains manhood.

And the Deity of Christ remains Deity.

1 Timothy 2:5 ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

Only the Christ of the Incarnation... the Christ who is articulated for us in the Definition of Chalcedon... is able to save you, even you. But this is the Christ in whom we place all our hopes. In the person of Jesus, we have the union of Divine Light with the Darkness of humanity. Jesus took on fallen humanity generally. But in so doing, He did take on your humanity particularly. You are not a surprise to Him. Your particular struggles, even though they seem insurmountable to you, are not so to Jesus. He is able to strap you to Himself. He is able to carry you to the cross. He is able to take you to your death. And then He is able to raise you up to new life... all the way into the Holy of Holies in Heaven where you can behold the face of the Holy One.

Because Jesus did all of this some 2,000 years ago, in our fallen nature, you ought to have greater confidence that He can do it in your life today. In the end, when we are all standing around the throne in our glorified bodies, we will see Jesus as He is. For now, we see dimly, as through a cloudy glass. But see Him we do, and see Him we must, if we are going to not lose our confidence in Him.

I do not know the particulars of your struggle. But Jesus does. He has taken them to Himself. He has been made like you in every respect, yet without sin. As you leave here, believe that in Jesus Christ, God has come all the way to you, so that He might redeem you all the way back to God. Jesus truly is the Reason for the Season. Amen!