



The Incarnation

Lesson 4

“Quantum physics” is a concept shrouded in mystery. Quantum physics explanations of how the world works on a subatomic level are often confusing and counterintuitive. Nevertheless, as scientists continue to do experiments they find evidence that the building blocks of the world as we know it behave very oddly. It may not always make sense why or how everything works the way it does, but that’s where the data appears to be leading and so that’s where the scientist goes. Some things that are true are beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

As odd, quirky, and hard to fully grasp as the quantum world is, it pales in comparison to the problems we have when we try to wrap our minds around the incarnation. “Incarnation” is a word that comes from the Latin “in” which means “into” and “carn” which means “flesh.” The incarnation is, therefore, when the divine Son of God became flesh, or became human. How it is that the uncreated Creator of the universe could take a body made of created material is mind-bending and blows all our categories.

But like the scientist who believes in quantum mechanics because that’s what his authority – the scientific method – would seem to require, believers likewise accept the incarnation because that is what our authority – Scripture – most certainly does require! The incarnation is a challenging, but crucially important doctrine to study. In this lesson we will look at the humanity of Jesus and his virgin birth. We will then spend some time meditating on what the incarnation meant for Jesus and follow up with what it means to us.

I. The Incarnation and the Humanity of Jesus

There are two important ideas tied up in the concept of the incarnation: the fact that Jesus is God and the fact that he became human. In our last two lessons we spent a good deal of time discussing the divinity of Christ, so at the beginning of this lesson we will look at what Scripture has to say about the humanity of Christ.

The humanity of Christ is not as hotly contested today as it once was. The ancient Greeks taught that matter was inherently inferior or even sinful, and so to hold Jesus as divine meant

that he couldn't have actually had a material existence.¹ Today, people tend to assume there was a person named Jesus who walked on planet earth and to discount anything spiritual, and so they struggle more with the idea of a divine Jesus than a human Jesus. Nevertheless, it is good to briefly review why it is that Scripture teaches the humanity of Jesus.

A. Jesus' behavior demonstrates that he was human.

1. He had human limitations.

Throughout his ministry Jesus got tired and hungry, and on several occasions we hear of him eating. We also see him getting tired and needing rest just like the rest of us.

Can you think of instances when Jesus got hungry, thirsty, or tired?

The first temptation Satan through Christ's way was to make bread to satisfy his hunger (Matthew 4:1-4). From the cross Jesus cried out for something to drink (John 19:30). Once resurrected, he was given food to eat which to the audience communicated that he was a real person and not a ghost (Luke 24:40-43; cf Luke 8:53-55). One instance where he was both tired and thirsty is with the woman at the well (John 4:6-7).

2. He was physically present.

Jesus had a physical body that could be touched. In fact, after his resurrection he invited Thomas to touch him as evidence that his body had physically risen from the dead (John 20:27-29).

3. He had normal development (Luke 2:52).

Luke tells us that Jesus grew intellectually (wisdom), physically (stature), spiritually (favor with God), and socially (favor with man). Jesus did not come out of heaven as a fully mature adult, he was born and had to grow and develop just like anyone else.

B. Statements directly affirming his humanity.

Not only does the New Testament describe Jesus in ways that suggest to us he is just a normal human, but there are even some very specific statements along those lines.

1. The author of Hebrews affirmed the humanity of Christ (Hebrews 2:14, 17).

The author of Hebrews (whoever he may be) states two reasons why Jesus had to "partake of flesh and blood" or "be made like his brothers."

¹ This is referred to as "Docetism" from the Greek *dokeo* which means "to seem." This false teaching stated that Jesus only seemed to be human but he actually wasn't. Docetism was the opposite of Arianism, which denied the divinity of Jesus. As we have seen and will continue to see, Scripture teaches both the divinity and humanity of Jesus.

What are the two reasons in these verses why Jesus had to become a man?

First, it was necessary for Christ to be fully human so that he could destroy death for us. Secondly, he had to become a human so that he can truly know what it is we go through and thus be a merciful high priest. We will look at both of these later in the lesson; our point here is simply that the author of Hebrews states twice in slightly different terminology that Jesus was made human.

2. The apostle John affirmed the humanity of Christ (1 John 1:1-4; 4:2-3; 2 John 7).

John is fighting the docetists (those who hold to Docetic teaching, i.e. that Jesus only seemed human). In doing this, he marks out some very clear doctrinal boundaries that people must abide by. One of these doctrinal necessities is that they must believe that Jesus came in the flesh. He also states that he himself had physically interacted with Christ, including touching him. John affirmed he was a firsthand account of the humanity of Jesus and warned that those who denied this truth was teaching false doctrine.

II. The Incarnation and the Virgin Birth

The twentieth century saw a lot of attention given to the virgin birth, for reasons we will discuss below.

A. The doctrine of the virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:34-36).

The Bible has relatively little to say about the virgin birth. The statement that the seed of Eve would crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15) might hint at the virgin birth, since normally it is men who have “seed” in the Bible. But only 3 verses, one in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament clearly and explicitly teach the doctrine. It is not elaborated on or applied in the New Testament letters. Yet these three verses very clearly and unequivocally teach this doctrine – Jesus is born of a virgin.

B. The importance of the virgin birth.²

1. A test of faith in God’s Word

A well-known Christian college includes in their university creed, affirmed daily in chapel, the following statement: “I believe in... the incarnation and virgin birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

² Some argue that the virgin birth is necessary because if Jesus had a human father 1) He could not have been divine and/or 2) He could not have been sinless. For a good explanation of the problems with these views, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology 2nd Edition*, pages 772-773. For a theologian who understands the case that Erickson makes yet still carefully and tentatively holds to both, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, pages 529-532. Since Scripture does not clearly and unequivocally tie the virgin birth to either the full divinity or the full sinlessness of Jesus, neither position will be argued in this study.

Why would a creed include as a standard of faith a doctrine only taught in 3 places in our Bibles?

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the truthfulness of God's Word was under attack. One form of attack sought to affirm what the Bible said, but only after redefining everything. "Resurrection" meant Jesus lives on in our hearts. "Miracles" are impressive acts of God's providence, not a suspension of the laws of nature to accomplish God's design. "Salvation" no longer meant simple faith in Jesus to forgive us from our sins. In this context, the virgin birth stood out as a test. Would a theology professor, prospective pastor, or denominational leader affirm that Jesus was born a virgin? If the answer was yes, odds were he also believed in miracles, defined sin as God defined sin, and held to the inerrancy of Scripture. If not, he likely didn't.

Today the virgin birth stands out still as a test of faith. There is no human explanation for how a first century maiden could conceive without having intimate relations with a man. The virgin birth thus stands as a helpful litmus test – will we believe God's Word and trust that God can and does work miracles? Or will we explain it away based on our own wisdom?

2. A reminder of our desperate need of God in salvation

The fact that Christ's mission to save us needed to begin with a miracle reminds us from the very start that God's plan of salvation is a divine, and not human work. God needed to be the one to bring it about, and we were and are completely dependent on him for salvation.

III. The Cost of the Incarnation (Philippians 2:5-8)

As we think about the implications of the incarnation, it is helpful to remember what the incarnation meant for Jesus. One of the ways the incarnation should change us is to increase the love and appreciation we have for Christ because of what he did for us.

A. Jesus humbled himself (2:6-7).

This passage begins by pointing out that although Jesus was existing in the form of God (i.e., he was God, see previous lesson) he was willing to humble himself and give up the prestige and honor of heaven and come to earth and add the form of humanity.³

³ Verse 7 has caused quite a bit of ink to be spilt in systematic theology textbooks over the phrase "made himself of no reputation" (Greek *kenōō* "emptied himself"). Some have argued that this means Jesus emptied himself of divinity, that is, he gave up being God. This theory, called the Kenosis theory, wrongly teaches that in becoming man Jesus stopped being God. The problem is that this is not what Paul is saying here. The following verb "and took" could also be translated "by taking." As has been stated by theologians, this is a subtraction by addition. In other words Christ emptied himself of the honor and glory of his divinity, at least temporarily, *by* taking the form

B. Jesus served (2:7).

Not only did Jesus give up the glory and splendor of heaven to come to earth, but he came to serve. Giving up the seraphim crying “Holy, holy, holy” would be enough of a shock, but that was not replaced by the honor and respect that was owed him on earth. Instead, he took the lowly place of a servant when he rightfully had the prerogative to rule instead.

What are some of the many ways in which Jesus served?

C. Jesus died (2:8).

Christ’s ultimate service, of course, was seen in his death. This passage transitions from the fact that Jesus gave up the glory of heaven for the form of a servant, became human, and ultimately suffered and died. Not only did he die, but Paul highlights he died on a cross. This beautiful, short passage shows us the depths that Jesus was willing to go out of love for us, and it took him from the highest imaginable spot to the lowest possible spot. What an incredibly loving Savior!

How can meditating on the humility and sacrifice of Christ in the incarnation change our spiritual lives?

IV. The Need for the Incarnation

It’s one thing to say “Scripture teaches this thing.” It’s another thing to say, “And here’s why that matters.” As we have already acknowledged, the incarnation is a challenging doctrine to wrap our minds around. So what benefit comes as a result of taking the time to understand what the Bible teaches about the incarnation?

A. The incarnation is necessary for revelation (John 1:14, 18; 14:8-9; Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15).

Because Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh, he reveals to us the character and nature of God in a way that no other person ever could. He himself describes the relationship this way: “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). In other words, as we watch Jesus and his interactions with people, we learn what God the Father is like. As we read the written record that has been left behind about the life and ministry of Jesus, we behold a complex character that is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) and learn a lot about what God would think and say and do if (or rather, when) he walked among us.

What types of things do we learn about God the Father as we watch the life of God the Son?

of a servant. This passage teaches, not that Jesus stopped being God, but rather that he gave up the splendor of heaven for the rags used to wash feet.

B. The incarnation is necessary for intercession (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:14-16; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Jesus is both God and man. As such, he stands between the two as a mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). And Hebrews informs us that he doesn't do this as some sort of neutral 3rd party. Jesus is actively going to God on our behalf, and he can do so knowing exactly it is that we have been through.

Why does it matter that someone who represent us understand what we've been through?

How can the truth of Christ's intercession help us in our daily lives?

C. The incarnation is necessary for redemption (Romans 5:17; Hebrew 2:14-15).

The author of Hebrews makes clear that in order for Christ's work on Calvary to succeed, we needed a fully human substitute. For Jesus to stand as the new representative of a new human race (Romans 5:17) he needed to in fact be human. Without the incarnation, the saving work of Christ would not have been able to be applied to our account. The divinity of Jesus was necessary for his sacrifice to be an infinite sacrifice, and the humanity of Jesus was needed so that what was accomplished could be accomplished by a human. In the incarnation, we have the necessary blend of divinity and humanity required for our salvation.

The incarnation is an important doctrine. Without the incarnation we would not understand God as clearly, we would not have a sympathetic high priest, and the work of Calvary would not be sufficient for all and applicable to humanity. As we grapple with this challenging doctrine, we should find our hearts filled with gratitude to God for his unspeakable gift and wonder over the incredibly wise plan only God could have invented. We will likely never fully understand what it means that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, but what we do know should amaze and excite us and lead us to worship this one who gave his all for us!