

Introduction

Good morning, everyone! Let's start by praying!

Today we're picking up in the second of our four weeks studying *Christology*, our understanding of what Scripture teaches about the person and work of Jesus Christ. If you missed last week, it was recorded and all of the notes for it are online as well at forestgate.org/sunday-school. By the end of the day today, notes for today's class will be up there as well, so don't worry if you miss something.

Last week we looked a bit at the doctrine of the Son in the context of the *Trinity*. We saw that there is no gospel apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, and the gospel *is* the place where our Triune God has revealed himself. As part of that, we saw how the Bible teaches us to understand the Son of God as *eternally* the Son, and we talked a little about what a comfort that is: it's *his* sonship we are adopted into, and the Father's fatherly love that he has given us by his Spirit is *real* fatherly love, the true fatherly love, which our fathers on earth can only dimly picture.

This week, we're turning to two doctrines that build on all of that and see *how* God revealed himself to us: that Jesus is *Israel's Messiah*, and the *Incarnation*. And there's a reason for that order!

Part 1: Israel's Messiah

Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. God has acted in history—the history of a specific people, through whom he has brought salvation for all *other* people. Jesus is not an abstract savior for abstract people; he is *Israel's messiah*, and *because* he is Israel's messiah, he is our savior.

The doctrine

The Westminster Confession sums it all up this way:

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

Under the Gospel... Christ, the substance, was exhibited... There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same...

Scriptural basis

One way we could trace this through Scripture is by reading all of Hebrews, whose theme this is. But here I want to follow the author of Hebrews by reading some of what they were reading! I want us to hear the story and see how Christ comes to satisfy the hopes and longings and *calling* of Israel.

This promise is for all from the beginning: from the moment when God speaks to the serpent after his deception in Genesis 3:

I will put hostility between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.

But throughout the rest of the Old Testament we see the promise getting more and more specific about this salvation. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram out of Haran. In Genesis 15 God promises Abram descendants as uncountable as the stars in the heavens, and a land for them to dwell in. In Genesis 18 God says the *purpose* of this promise: “all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him.”

The generations after see this promise narrowing: the hope is through Isaac (not Ishmael), Jacob (not Esau, the firstborn), and Judah (the worst among his brothers!) whose descendant would rule. And then after Israel’s long years in Egypt, God called Moses: a prophet to save his people from their slavery and to show them their God. Through Moses God gave his people the law and a covenant and calling to *be* priests for all nations—and the promise of another prophet like Moses. Through Joshua he led them into the land, and then almost immediately they broke the covenant and fell away from God’s law. Generation after generation the cycle repeated, and the priests did their duty under the law. Bulls and goats and birds, slaughtered and slaughtered and slaughtered for the sins of a people who were always falling away.

There came the day when Israel wanted a king—and they *needed* a king who was *righteous*, but they *wanted* a king who was merely *mighty*. After Saul and David’s failures—alike in kind, unlike in their response—God promised David something spectacular:

I will raise up after you your descendant, who is one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for Me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. I will not take away My faithful love from him as I took it from the one who was before you. I will appoint him over My house and My kingdom forever, and his throne will be established forever.

But Solomon and all the long line of kings through the years after him failed, too—even the best of them. And so that promise kept ringing in Israel’s ears, echoing in new ways through the Prophets. On the one hand, in Isaiah 49:6:

I will also make you a light for the nations,
to be My salvation to the ends of the earth.

And on the other, in Isaiah 50:6:

I gave My back to those who beat Me,
and My cheeks to those who tore out My beard.
I did not hide My face from scorn and spitting.

And in Jeremiah 33:14–16:

“Look, the days are coming” —
this is the LORD’s declaration—
“when I will fulfill the good promises
that I have spoken
concerning the house of Israel
and the house of Judah.
In those days and at that time
I will cause a Righteous Branch
to sprout up for David,
and He will administer justice
and righteousness in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved,
and Jerusalem will dwell securely,
and this is what she will be named:
Yahweh Our Righteousness.

There are many, many more, but the New Testament claims them all for Jesus. The Gospels show us his descent from from David, from Judah, from Abraham, from Adam; they show us his gentleness not to break bruised weeds or blow out smoldering wicks like Isaiah 42 says; they show us his back beaten and beard torn out and scorn and spitting as he went to the cross; they show us that he was both just and merciful; they show us that he did not sin; they show us his atoning death and his triumphant resurrection. In sum, Jesus fulfills Israel’s hopes. He really is the Messiah they had been hoping for.

And wonderfully, it is because he fills up all those promises *to Israel*—fills them to overflowing—he is *our* savior. The hope, remember, was for Abraham’s offering to be a blessing to all nations, for Israel’s priesthood to be for all nations, for the servant to be a light to all nations... Israel was the means by which God chose to bring about his promise of hope for humanity from the beginning.

In our lives

1. First and foremost: God keeps his promises and accomplishes his plan. Down all those years when Israel went back and forth and back and forth from fidelity to infidelity, he was never for one second thrown off.
2. We are saved because (not in spite of) the specificity of Jesus' coming *to Israel*. Because he came to fulfill Israel's calling: to be a blessing to all nations, to be *priests* and *light* for all nations; and to answer Israel's longing: for—
 - a prophet who reveals God to us and teaches us how to walk with him,
 - a priest who intercedes for us with God, and who has dealt with our sin,
 - and a king who is both just and merciful, that is, who is *righteous*.

And that's good news in *at least* two ways: First, we, too, are people who are often unfaithful, tempted to worship false gods, to trust in ourselves and our own might instead of in God—and he saves people *like us*. And second, he is a God who keeps his promises to real people in real history—in fact he *has* done so. And so when he promises *us* that he will return, that he will resurrect us all, that there is a land waiting for us better than this one, we can believe him! We can, as Hebrews 11 reminds us, hold fast to the hope set before *us* just like those who waited for Christ to come; and we have this sure and steadfast anchor of the soul as we wait: that Christ *has* come and gone for us into the inner place behind the curtain where only a righteous high priest could go.

Questions?

Now, what questions do you have?

Part 2: Incarnation

Last week we established that our Savior is God, had to be the eternal Son for the gospel to hold. But we also just saw that the savior is Jesus, the son of Mary, of the line of David and of Judah and of Abraham and of Adam. He was a human being, just like us. Our second doctrine for the day—the Incarnation—falls out of the first: *God has acted in history by coming into history himself*.

We usually talk about the Incarnation at Christmas—and that's good, but not good that we tend to talk about it *only* at Christmas, because the doctrine of the Incarnation is good news all year long, in every part of our lives. I said last week that Hebrews is a book that says “Hold fast because Jesus _____” and then fills in the blank with a great many things. At the root of *all* of those, though, is the work of Jesus who is not only the Son forever (as we saw last week) but who is also a *human being* who is “like us in every way, yet without sin,” as we just saw.

The doctrine

I'm going to open with a summary by Gregory of Nazianzus, who served as a pastor in the 400s A.D.:

[That] which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole. Let them not, then, begrudge us our complete salvation, or clothe the Savior only with bones and nerves and the portraiture of humanity.¹

In other words, if the Son only united himself to *some* parts of us when he became incarnate, *only those parts are healed*. If he didn't really have a body (that's the heresy of docetism, where it just *looked* like he had a body but didn't really), our bodies don't get saved. His death and resurrection are *shams*. If he doesn't have a human soul, a human intellect, human emotions, how can we say he has *any* idea what it's like to be tempted as we are? In what sense did he actually overcome sin? Because temptation is something we experience both bodily and mentally. And Scripture tells us both that God cannot be tempted to sin and that Jesus was tempted as we are. He *had* to have a human soul for our souls to be redeemed. And of course, he's not coming up with this as mere speculation. He's following Hebrews!

Scriptural basis

Hebrews Chapter 2 has most of this, so I'm just going to read a *lot* of it and then summarize it. Try, as we hear this again, to really hear it! Starting in chapter 2 and verse 8:

As it is, we do not yet see everything subjected to him. But we do see Jesus—made lower than the angels for a short time so that by God's grace He might taste death for everyone—crowned with glory and honor because of His suffering in death.

For in bringing many sons to glory, it was entirely appropriate that God—all things exist for Him and through Him—should make the source of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the One who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying:

I will proclaim Your name to My brothers;
I will sing hymns to You in the congregation.

Again, I will trust in Him. And again, Here I am with the children God gave Me.

Now since the children have flesh and blood in common, Jesus also shared in these, so that through His death He might destroy the one holding the power of death—that is, the Devil—and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death. For it is clear that He does not reach out to help angels, but to help Abraham's offspring. Therefore,

He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tested and has suffered, He is able to help those who are tested.

We hear here a really remarkable list of things he could accomplish only because he was truly man as well as truly God:

- he was perfected *through suffering*—and God does not suffer; only man does and can
- he could, and did, die—to destroy the devil and the fear of death
- he became like us in *every way* in order to become a merciful and faithful high priest who could *actually* make propitiation for our sins
- he became able to help us when we suffer and are tested—because *he* has suffered when tempted

And the author picks up this theme again later; he sympathizes with us, 4:15 tells us, because he has been tested in every way, just like us—but without sinning.

Paul tells us the same thing in 1 Corinthians 15:21–22:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

And we could cite many other passages—from Genesis, to Isaiah, to Luke, to John... Jesus Christ was *really a man*, and also *really God*.

What the church has said

I'm going to open with a long quote from the Council of Chalcedon. Hang with me; we're going to tease work through the hard parts together.

following the holy Fathers, we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same consisting of a reasonable soul and a body, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, the same of one substance with us as touching the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin; begotten of the Father before the ages as touching the Godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, born from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as touching the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and concurring into one Person and one subsistence, not as if Christ were parted or

divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as the Prophets from the beginning spoke concerning him, and our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us, and the Creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.

And yes, that's a single sentence! We'll pull it apart a bit in just a minute.

First, though, a bit of context: this document exists because of a meeting a lot like a Presbyterian general assembly, if GA were a month long. The meeting was focused primarily on a controversy over that word *Theotokos*: was it right or wrong to call Mary the mother of God? They concluded that we *must* say Mary was the mother of God—because to say otherwise is to say that the one she bore in her womb *was not truly God*. She did not have two persons in her womb, but one! But we know from everything we saw last week that that one person *must* be God the Son, and from what we saw in our first section today that that one person *must* be a human being. Our salvation hangs on the truth that in Mary's womb, there was *one person*, with *two natures*: God-nature, and human-nature.

That is “the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man.” But then the obvious questions: how do those two natures relate? The church answered with four negations: “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”. Why those four?

- “without confusion”—because God's nature and human nature are not mingling in the Incarnation; they don't turn into some kind of *_third thing_* that's neither exactly God nor exactly human; the divine nature and human nature remain distinct. One person, two natures.
- “without change”—God's eternal being is not altered by the incarnation; he is still “the same yesterday, today, and forever”; and human nature did not stop being human and become something *else* in the incarnation, which is good news for us, because *we're* still fully human in nature!
- “without division”—this was not somehow breaking apart the nature of God or the nature of humanity. For one thing, God's nature is indivisible; you cannot have the will of God apart from the love of God, or something like that. And on the other hand, the Incarnation is not God's mind and a human body but *no* human mind. *All* human nature is present in the incarnate Son.
- and finally “without separation”—meaning, these two natures cannot be pulled back apart; this person is forever God the Son, the man Jesus Christ, *one person*.

And that's how they conclude: “one Person and one subsistence, not as if Christ were parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ.”

So that's the doctrine, and it's heady, and it's *hard* to wrap your head around all of it. Just like we talked about last week, though, getting this right is at the core of the gospel.

Now, in all honesty, the first time I read this, I thought “Okay, I think that's *right*, and I can see how it's important to defend those things”... but I didn't immediately connect it to the *gospel*. Gregory of Nazianzus' quote was part of what connected it for me. The other part was reading another church father, Athanasius. His book *On The Incarnation* is a rich exposition of how in Christ God has taken our corruption, our falling back into the nothingness from which we were created in the beginning and said “NO!” and *saved us*—renewed us into his image, by becoming, as Colossians puts it, “the image of the

invisible God” just as we were meant to be from the beginning. He “turn[s] [us] again from to incorruptibility and give[s] [us] life from death, by making the body his own and by the grace of the resurrection banishing death from [us] as straw from the fire.” (That’s the shortest quote I could manage here; I could just quote pages and pages because it’s so rich and good.)

At this point I’d normally also share from a Reformed confession, but I’m going to skip that today because they all just reiterate—often word for word—what the creeds said. The church Fathers did an *incredible* job hammering out what we must and must not say if we are to hold fast to the gospel we have received. Once again, I’m profoundly grateful for the faithful saints who went before and safeguarded the gospel for us.

I *will* quote the Heidelberg Catechism again, though, because of how beautifully it sums up the necessity of the full divinity *and* humanity of our savior:

15: What kind of mediator and deliverer should we look for then?

One who is a true and righteous human, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.

16: Why must the mediator be a true and righteous human?

God’s justice demands that human nature, which has sinned, must pay for sin;¹ but a sinful human could never pay for others.

17: Why must the mediator also be true God?

So that the mediator, by the power of his divinity, might bear the weight of God’s wrath in his humanity and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

Nothing but a human being could pay for human sin; but no *mere* human could do it—only God is sufficient and able to bear God’s wrath. So our mediator is *both*.

In our lives

As we wrap up this section I want to highlight a few things that encourage me in this.

The first is the same point we hit last week: we have the same Father our Lord does; he calls us brothers and sisters, and astoundingly his Father has become *our* Father through his work.

The second is the thing I think about most with the Incarnation: in *everything* we experience in life, we are not alone. God the Son has come down and walked through *all* of them with us. When we think about what it is to watch our loved ones die, and to know them *really dead*, even if we stand in hope of resurrection—our Lord has felt that grief! When we are weary and tempted to fall away in the face of trials—our Lord knows that weariness! He prayed for deliverance from death, and God heard his prayers! ...and answered them *through* his death.

When we are suffering, tired, lonely, grieving, facing evil—God is *with us*, he has shared our griefs, he has borne our sorrows, he knows exactly what we endure. And he never sinned! He can be the high priest we need, who made an offering of himself for us that *finished* the job, and who can and does intercede for us forever. All this is true because in Jesus Christ we see God and man, two natures in one person: his divinity empowering his humanity to bear our sins and heal our brokenness.

Questions

Now: what questions do you have? I'm sure there are some!

Conclusion

As we close, I want to read you a bit from Karl Barth, who's little book *Dogmatics in Outline* is a really wonderful meditation on the Apostles' Creed. He has a chapter on "God in the highest," which includes this wonderful bit:

He whose nature and essence consist, whose existence is proved, in His descending into the depths, He the Merciful, who gives Himself up for His creature to the utter depths of the existence of His creature—He is God in the highest. Not in spite of this, not in remarkable paradoxical opposition, but the highness of God consists in His thus descending. This is His exalted nature, this His free love. Anyone who wants to look up to some other height has not understood the utter otherness in God, he would still be in the tracks of the heathen, who look for God in an endlessness. But He is utterly other than we think our gods. It is He who calls Abraham and who led that retched nation through the desert, who never swerves through the centuries-long disloyalty and disobedience of this nation, who causes Himself to be born in the stable at Bethlehem as a little child and who dies on Golgotha. He is the glorious Lord, He is divine.²

I love this word: God's highness is revealed *precisely* in Jesus, the man with dusty feet from Bethlehem. Let's pray!

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1. Gregory Nazianzen, To Cledonius The Priest Against Apollinarius (ep. CI)↩
 2. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 40.↩