

Christology: God With Us and For Us

A 4-Week Series at Forestgate Presbyterian Church

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Week 1: Introduction; and the Eternal Son

Part 1: Introduction

Opening and Prayer

All right, good morning everyone; let's get going! Before we start, let me introduce myself since I haven't met all of you yet. One of the great joys of my time in seminary was realizing just how much more depth there was in the doctrine of Christology than I had know before, so I'm excited to share a taste of that with all of you over the next few weeks. Before we dive in, though, let's pray!

So I said that one of the joys of seminary was the doctrine of Christology. But what exactly do I mean by that? When I use the word "Christology," I think it's easy for it to feel kind of heady or abstract. And we're Presbyterians, which means we're often relatively comfortable with things that are a bit more abstract and heady. But one of the things I hope we take away from the next few weeks is that yes, these *are* wonderful mysteries; they *are* a feast for our minds—but they are also a comfort for our weary souls; they're encouragement on this sometimes *very* hard path of life. And as we'll see, that's how Scripture uses these doctrines: to encourage us in our faith. And my prayer for this is that we come out of this both *knowing* and *feeling* God's love for us more deeply—and with that, loving him more deeply, loving Christ our Savior more deeply.

Outline

So with that as our big picture, let me give you an overview of the class, and set the stage in a bit more detail, and then we'll dive into a couple of the doctrines!

- This week, we're setting up the big picture, and then diving into the doctrine of the divinity of the Son of God.
- Next week, we're going to look at the Incarnation and at how Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah.
- In week 3, we'll look at the *passion*—Jesus's trial, crucifixion, and death—and the *resurrection*.
- In week 4, we'll look at Jesus' work on our behalf *after* his resurrection: his ascension, his intercession for us, and his reign—both

now, and in the end when it is finished. And then we'll wrap up and reflect on these things we've learned along the way.

Along the way, we're going to hear a lot of Scripture, and a lot from our brothers and sisters in the history of the church who have gone before us, thinking hard about these things. We're also going to be moving *very* fast, so I'm not going to provide handouts. I think they'd actually just be distracting! But I'm very happy to share all my notes with you, to point you to further resources, and so on—just ask me, or send me or the office an email!

The why

I want to start by really working to set the stage here. Why do we care about studying “Christology”? The obvious answer is that we are *Christians*, and that we worship Jesus Christ! We believe he's our savior. So this doctrine is a core part of our faith. We should care about it. And that's... true. But the question I'm putting to us is both a bit further back than that, and a bit closer to home than that.

- When I say it's “further back”, I mean: *why is the core of our faith that, as one of my favorite hymns puts it, “the incarnate God ascended / pleads the merit of his blood”?* Because there are things there which are strange and wonderful and surprising. And we're just *used* to them. But stepping back and seeing them again, *feeling* that strangeness again, helps us worship, and helps us know his love.
- And when I say it's “closer to home”, what I mean is: *how does this come to play in our lives every day?* Even beyond the thinking-and-feeling I just described, this matters for how we practice our faith. How does Jesus being Israel's Messiah impact what I do when I go to work tomorrow? Because it does! How does the doctrine of the Incarnation touch on my dad's struggle with brain cancer last year? Because it does! Even if it's not obvious right away: that's

So we're going to spend the next four weeks seeing *how* and *why* the doctrines of Christ are the core of our faith, and how those doctrines are not just abstract propositions or interesting ideas, but the very core of the Christian life as we *live* it day in and day out. Because the Christian life is a *Christ-ward* life. The Westminster Catechism says we exist to love God and enjoy him forever, and we can't love him or enjoy him if we don't know him

know him. And we come to know him as he reveals himself, and he has revealed himself climactically and finally and conclusively in Jesus Christ.

As Hebrews puts it: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”! You could equally translate that “by Son”: the Son is the way the Father speaks himself to us. So John says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”—and God has spoken his *Word* to us, himself, in his Son who is the Word. And as Jesus says to his disciples in John: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” We know God by looking at Christ. We understand all the aims of Scripture by looking at Christ, who is its center. And we walk our faith, we grow in holiness, by looking at Christ. 1 John tells us: “We do not know what we will be like [when he appears]. But we know we will be like him, because we will see him as he is.” To see God, in Christ, with the eyes of our minds and our hearts opened by the Spirit *is* to be transformed into his likeness.

We could tackle this in a lot of different ways. All of Scripture points to Christ! But we’re going to focus on Hebrews—I’ll mention many other texts, but I’m going to quote Hebrews the most. And that’s because I learned to think the way I think about all these things from Hebrews. You can summarize the book’s message as “Hold fast because Jesus...” and then fill in the blank with all the doctrines we’re going to cover! The book uses all these deep doctrines to comfort and encourage, to remind us to hold onto the grace he has given to us.

Hebrews is a book written to a bunch of people tempted to go back to the life they came from—in their case, to Judaism. Things were hard. They were facing persecution: they had fellow believers in jail for their faith. And the author of Hebrews spends the whole book exhorting them to hold fast to their faith... and the way he does that is by digging in to these mysteries of Christ. Not just the cross: not only “Christ died for you so continue in the faith” but also his eternal sonship, his incarnation, his faithfulness in his life and preaching ministry, that he is so clearly the fulfillment of all of Israel’s hopes, and his death on our behalf, once for all; and his resurrection in triumph; and his ascension and his current work as our high priest forever; and the promise and hope of his return.

Before we dive in and start doing just that—any questions?

Part 2: The Divinity of the Son of God

So, let's pick up some of those ideas I just mentioned, and dig in. We're going to start by following the Scriptures to think about God the Son in eternity! I want to open by just *stating* the doctrine, as the church has understood it through the centuries. Then we'll hear some of the Scriptures that led the church to those summaries, and finally reflect on this doctrine!

Summary of the doctrine

The first doctrine is that Jesus Christ is (and here I'm quoting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed from 381 "the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made." In truth, we could spend a whole lesson on every one of those points, but I'm going to summarize them this way: the Son is *truly* God, perfectly coequal with the Father. He has no beginning; instead, everything that exists came about *through him*. And finally—and this is important—he is always *the Son*: he did not *become* the Son at some point, but is *eternally* the Son of God. I'll say a bit more on all of these points as we come to the end, but first, let's dig into the reason that the church confesses all these things: because Scripture teaches them!

Scriptural basis

Hebrews opens with this, in vv. 1–3:

Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son. God has appointed Him heir of all things and made the universe through Him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of His nature, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Then it continues by quoting the Psalms. In verse 8, the author quotes Psalm 45:

Your throne, God,
is forever and ever,
and the scepter of Your kingdom
is a scepter of justice.

He's *explicitly* identifying the Son with God. He does the same in verses 10–12, quoting Psalm 102 and alluding to Isaiah 50 and 51:

In the beginning, Lord,
You established the earth,
and the heavens are the works of Your hands;
they will perish, but You remain.
They will all wear out like clothing;
You will roll them up like a cloak,
and they will be changed like a robe.
But You are the same,
and Your years will never end.

Many of us are familiar with this, but I think it's still worth pausing and chewing on this for a minute. We need to *feel* it again. The Psalm being quoted here is pointing straight back to Genesis 1—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"—and Hebrews is telling us "this is talking about Jesus!" All the ways Hebrews wants us to see that Jesus is better than the angels go back to what it says in verse 2: God made the universe through the Son.

John 1:1–3 tells us exactly the same thing:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
All things were created through Him,
and apart from Him not one thing was created
that has been created.
Life was in Him,
and that life was the light of men.
That light shines in the darkness,
yet the darkness did not overcome it.

John tells us at the end of his gospel that he wrote it to help people believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—and by believing have *life* in his name. And Jesus tells us in John 5 that this *life* he has is life the Son has eternally in himself, the same life the Father has in himself, and the Son has it eternally from the Father. This idea of the eternal sonship is at the very guts of John's gospel, and it's there from the first verse.

And in Colossians, Paul makes this same move—Colossians 1:15–17 says of Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For everything was created by Him,
in heaven and on earth,
the visible and the invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or authorities—
all things have been created through Him and for Him.
He is before all things,
and by Him all things hold together.

So this should raise a question when we look at these texts. Why do these three different authors all ground their messages *here*? They all start in the eternal Trinity—specifically, in the Son, the Word, who is God, who was sent by God—the one who made all things, but who is not the Father? When John wants to enable people to believe, *this is where he starts*. When both Colossians and Hebrews want people to hold fast to the faith, *this is where they start*. Why? Why do they start *here*?

The answer, I think, is that nothing else we say about the person Jesus Christ makes any sense or matters at all if we get this wrong. To put a finer point on it: *there is no gospel* if we don't get to the point where we see the full and total and perfect divinity of the one who is our savior! And this is not something I came up with, by a long shot; this is the answer that the church has given throughout history, from Irenaeus in the second century A.D. to Kevin Vanhoozer on a podcast I listened to just yesterday.

And of course, the other gospels and the other epistles all get to this same conclusion—they just work *up* to it, *starting* with Jesus' humanity. John and Colossians and Hebrews all *assume* (the content of) the Synoptics: they are meditations by and for people who *know* the story, and who have drawn the only conclusion it allows: for our sake, God *himself* came to be with us. And we'll dig into that part of it more next week when we talk about the Incarnation. Here in John and Colossians and Hebrews, though, we see these three authors thinking, under the inspiration of the Spirit, about what it means that the one who *came for us* was God, and that God prayed to God, in light of the Old Testament's affirmation of the *oneness* of God. To say that the God who created all things, of whom Deuteronomy commands God's people to say "Our God is *one*"—to say that this one God is both

Father and Son, that the Father created *through* the Son, is necessarily to have to press into the nature of God himself.

And this is not an accident! The author of Hebrews wants us to marvel on this: we know these “deep things of God” (a phrase I’m stealing from Fred Sanders) *because* God has revealed himself “by Son”. We know God as he is because of how he has acted in history.

The Gospel is *utterly* Trinitarian. We can see this throughout the whole New Testament, but we can survey a few of the most striking moments here:

- the Incarnation—when the Father sends the Son to be a man by the Spirit overshadowing Mary
- Jesus’ baptism, when the Son prays to the Father and the Spirit descends on him, empowering him for his ministry
- Jesus’ discussion in his final discussion with his disciples in John 14–17, where he speaks of his own identity with the Father—“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”!—and of the Spirit whose coming would be *better* for them than Jesus being *right there with them* was
- The Son’s resurrection by the power of the Spirit, to ascend and sit at the right hand of the Father, and from there to send the Spirit to us
- The Son serving as our high priest before the Father forever (as Hebrews teaches us), even as the Spirit prays for us when we don’t know how (as Romans teaches us)
- the church itself being built up *in Christ, by the Spirit*, as a dwelling place *for God* (as we see in Ephesians)

I could add many, many more examples, because the gospel simply *is* Trinitarian. It is the good news that the Father has sent the Son for us and given us the Spirit, and that by the Spirit we *also* are his sons and daughters in Christ. I really like how the Belgic Confession summarizes this: “that, which appears to us somewhat obscure in the Old Testament, is very plain in the New”. As God’s people *waited* for their redemption, they were also waiting in a real way for God’s further self-revelation. As Hebrews puts it, they “all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.” But we *have* seen: Jesus, God’s perfect self-revelation and our salvation!

The doctrine

This is the essential point the early church came to understand: that in the work of Christ God was showing us himself more clearly. God always acts in accord with who he is—and he is, eternally, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So when we hear the creeds and confessions that affirm this, we're hearing our brothers and sisters through the ages having rejoiced in, *and guarding*, the same thing we're looking at today: that God has shown himself *truly* to us in Christ, because Jesus *is* God, coeternal and coequal with the Father. If we *lose* this, we lose *the gospel!*

The Heidelberg Catechism gets this across beautifully in questions 14 and 18:

- 14. Can another creature—any at all—pay this debt for us?**
15. No. To begin with, God will not punish any other creature for what a human is guilty of. Furthermore, no mere creature can bear the weight of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.
- 18. Why must the mediator also be true God?**
19. 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.

Jesus could only save us *because* he himself was and is the Son of God. No creature could save us. Not even the angels! Only God could reconcile himself to us. Only God is actually sufficient to pay our debt. And so if God were not Triune, there would be no salvation for us. A God who is perfectly unitary would not be the God who can both send and be sent, the God who can pray and hear prayers. Our adoption as daughters and sons is because God the Father is *the Father* who ever has a *Son*, and because the *Son* has made us one with himself and brought us into that life—and all this through the *Spirit* of the Father and Son, who indwells us and makes Christ's work effective for us.

This is where the church's affirmation down the years of the Trinitarian faith comes from: reflecting on the gospel, on how it is that we become heirs with Christ! The church has learned from Scripture to speak of the eternal *sonship of the Son* and the eternal *fatherhood of the Father*. The name for this doctrine is *eternal generation*. The use of the word "generation" here comes from the history of the word *generation* and the Greek *gennao* (γεννάω). Instead of "generation" you might also hear people use the words

“begottenness” or “filiation”. I’m not sure if these really get the point across in modern English: no one uses those words much. Unfortunately, we also don’t have a single word that *does* get the point across just right! I’m happy to keep the words, as long as we understand what they mean, though.

And the right way to think of it is that the Father is *eternally* the Father of the Son, and the Son is *eternally* the Son of the Father. There was no time when the Father was *alone*, and no time when the Son did not exist. The Son did not at some point *start* to be the Son and likewise, the Father did not bring the Son into existence. The Father, through the Son, brought everything *else* into the existence. And that’s important because the Father’s fatherhood is real, essential Fatherhood—it’s more real than the mountains out that window; it’s at the foundation of reality. It’s not an add-on. It’s who the Father *is*—and the same for the Son: his Sonship (which in some mysterious way we share in through the Spirit) is *who he is*; it is the only thing that distinguishes him from the Father.

The Apostles’ Creed covers this in a single phrase, “And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...” Over the next couple centuries, the church *had* to articulate this in more detail, though. This isn’t a church history class so I won’t cover all the twists and turns, but from the beginning people consistently attacked essential elements of the truth of the Gospel. The final formulation the church ended up with about the Son was in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, which I read as the summary at the start:

[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made...

The Reformed tradition in general affirms exactly the same points, and indeed *all* the Reformers drew heavily on the Fathers and regarded the ecumenical councils as binding and authoritative statements of the faith of the church.

So, for example, the Belgic Confession says in Article 8:

The Father is the cause, origin and beginning of all things visible and invisible; the Son is the word, wisdom, and image of the Father; the Holy Ghost is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son.... the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, and likewise

the Holy Ghost is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless these persons thus distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed: for the Father hath not assumed the flesh, nor hath the Holy Ghost, but the Son only. ... The Father hath never been without his Son, or without his Holy Ghost. For they are all three co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last: for they are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.

The Westminster Larger Catechism traces this out, too (and notice how carefully it follows the language of the creed):

- 9. How many persons are there in the Godhead?**
10. There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.
- 11. What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead?**
12. It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.
- 13. How does it appear that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father?**
14. The Scriptures manifest that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father, ascribing unto them such names, attributes, works, and worship, as are proper to God only.

This is what we *have* to confess if we are going to hold together everything Scripture says about the Trinity. And yes, it exceeds our ability to understand! I like how D.A. Carson put it:

In short, even though we affirm that the doctrine of the Trinity is warranted by Scripture and rightly affirmed in the ecumenical creeds, it remains, at numerous junctures, impenetrably mysterious, at many points beyond our comprehension. All of us must own that Scripture gives us little more than glimpses of the relations among the Persons, and certainly not a well-elaborated depiction of those relations. Of no part of the discussion is this observation more relevant than of the eternal generation of the Son... [It] is much easier to be precise about what we are denying than about what we are affirming.

And this is the path that the church has followed down the centuries since the gospels and the epistles were written. There is a reason, when we look at the document that the Council of Chalcedon wrote, for example—and we'll dig into this a bit more next week—that it spends a big chunk of its time saying what *isn't* the case about the two natures of Christ!

Conclusion

There are a couple things I think we should take away here:

One is that humility that Carson points us to. We can speak *truly* about the eternal Son of God, our Savior, but we cannot speak *exhaustively*. Whenever we touch on these questions, we are reminded of how much greater than us God is, how much deeper his mysteries are than we can grasp. This should lead us to worship with reverence and awe.

The other is the joy it is to get to meditate on these things—not just to think about them, though we should do that, but also to pray them and comfort our hearts with them when we struggle. We can rest in God's love for us as Father—we can be sure that it will never fail, that he will never stop being *our* Father—because he *is* the Father of the Son by his very nature, and because the Son who is *eternally* God the Son has earned for us adoption as sons and daughters, to be his younger siblings, and because the Spirit guarantees that adoption forever.

Now, we've covered a lot of ground, so for these last few minutes: what questions do you all have?

Week 2: Israel's Messiah and the Incarnation

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 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

¹ Gregory Nazianzen, To Cledonius The Priest Against Apollinarius (ep. CI)

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's little book *Dogmatics in Outline* is a wonderful meditation on the Apostles' Creed. The chapter "God in the highest," 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!

² Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 40.

Week 3: Suffering and Death; and the Resurrection

Introduction

Good morning everyone! Let's pray as we get started!

All right, today is the third of our four weeks looking at the doctrine of Christology: the things the church has learned from Scripture to say about our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. As a quick refresher:

- In the first week, we saw that God the Son is truly God, and *eternally* the Son, and how—amazingly—in Christ, by the Spirit, we're adopted into that same love the Father has for the Son.
- Last week, we saw that Jesus Christ was Israel's Messiah—the fulfillment of all God's promises to bring salvation to all nations through one people. We also followed the early church in thinking through the fact that Jesus was fully God and fully human, and how this is why we are fully saved.
- This week, we're talking about Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.
- Next week, we'll talk about his ascension, session, and reign, before wrapping it all up.

If you want to review any of these, the recordings are up at forestgate.org/sunday-school, and I'm putting all of my notes up on those pages as well.

Part 1: Suffering and Death

We'll start out today by looking at Jesus's suffering and death. There is a weight here I hope we can all feel again: because it is the weight we *should* be under, and *would* be under if it were not for his suffering for us.

The doctrine

I'm going to start with the Westminster Confession, chapters 8.4 and 8.5, which together cover *both* of our major doctrines for the day (as is right: they fit together, as we'll see):

8.4. This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that He might discharge, He was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it; endured most grievous torments immediately in His soul, and most painful sufferings in His body; was crucified, and died, was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third

day He arose from the dead, with the same body in which He suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sits at the right hand of His Father, making intercession, and shall return, to judge men and angels, at the end of the world.

8.5. The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, has fully satisfied the justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for those whom the Father has given unto Him.

It's worth chewing on those words: he *willingly* did this for us. He went under the law, and though he kept the law perfectly himself, he was crucified as one who had broken it—as we have. He was tormented in both body and mind—as we should have been. He died—as we have all earned death. He sacrificed himself, fully satisfying the justice of his Father—justice that was due as penalty on *us*.

Scriptural basis

As with every one of these topics, there is more to say on this one than I could hope to fit into this time slot. The gospels dwell overwhelmingly on the final week of Jesus' life, on his death, and then look in wonder at his resurrection. The rest of the New Testament is in many ways a reflection on those two events: the death of the one who seemed to be Messiah, and then his vindication *as* Messiah when God raised him from the dead. And of course those reflections are informed as well by his miraculous birth and his ministries of teaching and healing. But the climax of death and resurrection is the focal point of the lens—not just of Jesus' life, not just of the New Testament, indeed not just of Scripture, but of *all reality*. *Everything else* comes clear in light of these two truths: that God has come to be with us and *died* in our place, under the judgment we deserved; and that he did not *stay* dead but rose triumphant from the grave.

In brief, though, let's feel the weight of what Christ did *for us* at Calvary:

- He atoned for sin, once and for all. As Hebrews 7 tells us, “He doesn't need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this once for all when He offered Himself.” His sacrifice was *sufficient*, for your sins and my sins and indeed every sin that has ever been sinned. For all who trust him, Christ *has done* what the blood of bulls and goats never could, and

what we in our sinfulness never could: He has paid our penalty, as our substitute, and atoned us with God—that's where "atoned" came from: Tyndale made it up to translate this word into English. Jesus made us one with God again.

- As part of that, he was *obedient*— "to the point of death, even death on the cross" (Philippians 2:8). And as Hebrews puts it: he was made perfect *through suffering* (2:10), and "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). More: where we give in to our temptations all too easily, he resisted to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:4): both in resisting the temptation to turn away in Gethsemane, and then in dying for us.
- He freed us from Satan's reign: Ephesians 2 reminds us that we were following "the spirit now working in the disobedient" when he saved us; Hebrews 2 tells us that through his death Jesus "destroyed the one who 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."
- He broke down the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, and indeed every racial and ethnic division, *in his own flesh*. He reconciled us to God *together*—in one body, his *own* body, Ephesians 2 says—at the cross. Through his death he killed the hostility between Jew and Gentile, white and black, Irish and English, Chinese and Japanese—every last one *made one* in his body at the cross.

In sum: everything we deserve, he endured at Calvary; everything we have broken, he began setting right in his death. He is our substitutionary atonement, and he is the victor—over sin, over death, over Satan. And we *know* it because of what we'll see in the next section: his resurrection.

What the church has said

The Apostles' Creed in its traditional form says of Jesus' death that he:

was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.

The first half of that is uncontroversial, though worth reflecting on, and we're going to spend some time on it. The second half is obviously a bit *more* controversial!

First, the important bit: the Apostles' Creed's was defending against the idea that Jesus *didn't* really do any of those things: wasn't *really* crucified, didn't *really* physically die, wasn't *really* physically buried. But, as we saw last week in thinking about the Incarnation: our salvation hinges on the fact that Jesus didn't just *appear* to be a human being; he *really was* a human being—and so he *really did* die for us. It wasn't a good magician's trick! And so it's good news for us that he really died, because in really dying (not just seeming to die) he *really* defeated death.

Now, what about the descent into hell? The church has basically taken this in two orthodox directions: *either* that this is referring to Christ's soul enduring the same reality of hell as we would, on the cross; *or* that it's talking about what the Old Testament calls Sheol, what the New Testament calls Hades: the place of the dead before Christ's coming.

The Reformed tradition, from Calvin's Institutes on,³ has fairly universally held to the first meaning: that Jesus endured the wrath of God against our sin and the punishment of eternal separation from God: hell not in the sense of *location* but in the sense of *experience*. Thus, the Heidelberg Catechism says in Question 44:

44. Why does the creed add, "He descended to hell"?

To assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.

If we read the creed this way, I think it's reasonable—but "descended into hell" requires a lot of explanation, if so! My own preference is to keep it in and deal with the work of explaining it, because I'm pretty hesitant to take out a line from a creed the whole rest of the church uses—but I also understand why not only Forestgate but a fair number of other churches hesitate here.

Because I think that the traditional Reformed angle is correct, I'm just going to leave aside the interpretation that this was Jesus going into Sheol and leading God's people waiting there to the heaven where God himself is. I think it's a *possible* interpretation, and it does pull together some threads (from the Old Testament especially)... but the text just doesn't give us a lot to hang that idea on, so at least at this point, I don't hang anything on it!

³ Institutes of the Christian Religion 2.16.10

In our lives

It's hard to single out a point for application here! The New Testament is chock full of exhortations grounded in Jesus's work on our behalf. The two main things I want us to take away are:

First: we should come away with a sense of joy and awe at the weight of what Christ bore for us, and accomplished for us, in his death: delivering us from death, from hell, from ethnic hatred, from Satan's power, from guilt, from shame, from—as Athanasius reminds us, *corruptibility to incorruptibility*. From death to life, through his death.

Second: we should come away with a desire to imitate Christ—as 1 Peter 4:1–2 says:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh, equip yourselves also with the same resolve—because the one who suffered in the flesh has finished with sin—in order to live the remaining time in the flesh, no longer for human desires, but for God's will.

Now, before we move on to the Resurrection—any questions?

Part 2: The Resurrection

As Jaimie can attest, about the only topic that gets me as profoundly excited as I got about the doctrine of the Incarnation last week is the Resurrection. A few years ago I read a book with an absolutely brilliant title: *The Cross is Not Enough*. The book wasn't great, unfortunately, but the title has stuck with me because it gets at a fundamental truth of our faith. It sounds, at first blush, like we're saying something crazy, right? But the point, as we'll see, is exactly right: everything we've said about the cross is null and void of Jesus was not raised from the dead. The cross alone is not enough: the Resurrection is necessary.

The doctrine

The doctrine of the resurrection is worth stating fully and clearly: Jesus was truly dead—not, as *The Princess Bride* might have it, “mostly dead” and therefore “still partly alive”: he was *all* dead, 100% dead. And then God raised him *bodily* from the dead. Not, as some heretical theologies have said, only as a spirit; and certainly not just the *ideas* of Jesus living on. He was physically dead, and then he was physically alive—but with his body transformed into something more glorious than it had been.

Every early creed includes the phrase “the third day he rose again.” The 39 Articles, the core Anglican statement of doctrine, says:

Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things [relating] to the perfection of Man’s nature...

That is: he rose with every last bit of his human nature, just as we said last week—skin and bones, too, not some kind of “spiritual” resurrection, whatever that would mean.

The Heidelberg Catechism, in its beautiful way, says:

Q45. How does Christ’s resurrection benefit us?

First, by his resurrection he has overcome death, so that he might make us share in the righteousness he obtained for us by his death.

Second, by his power we too are already raised to a new life.

Third, Christ’s resurrection is a sure pledge to us of our blessed resurrection.

For the rest of this lesson, I’m going to simply *marvel* at the *wonder* of what Christ has done in the resurrection—basically following that outline from Heidelberg: he has overcome death so we can share in the righteousness he obtained for us; we are raised *now* to new life; and we will be resurrected.

Scriptural basis

Starting in Luke 24:1–8—after Jesus had laid dead in a rich man’s tomb for *days*, *this* happened:

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb. They went in but did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men stood by them in dazzling clothes. So the women were terrified and bowed down to the ground.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” asked the men.

“He is not here, but He has been resurrected! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, ‘The Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and rise on the third day?’” And they remembered His words.

Matthew 28:8–10 adds:

So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell His disciples the news. Just then Jesus met them and said, "Good morning!" They came up, took hold of His feet, and worshiped Him. Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me there.

And then Luke again, in 24:36–42:

And as they were saying these things, He Himself stood among them. He said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. "Why are you troubled?" He asked them. "And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself! Touch Me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." Having said this, He showed them His hands and feet. But while they still were amazed and unbelieving because of their joy, He asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish, and He took it and ate in their presence.

This dead man was alive. Alive like us. Skin and bones like us! Eating broiled fish like us! But also, somehow, not *quite* like us—resurrection means *this body* but transformed into something gloriously more and better. Dead, and then *not dead, forever*.

And the implications for us! Romans 4:25 tells us:

He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Do you catch that? We are justified *because he is raised*. Sometimes we talk as though the Resurrection is just kind of a bit of punctuation on the cross, as though the cross is the *real* work, and the Resurrection secondary—but that's not it at all; they're of a single piece, and neither is whole without the other. Romans 8 emphasizes the point, just in case we missed it the first time:

Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, who has been raised.

Even more, it says: he has been raised! And this is our first confession, per Romans 10: if we confess and believe that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved. Not, notice, believing just that he died. Everyone believes that! The keystone is believing he is *raised*.

And when we are being saved, *we* have been brought to new life. Thus, Ephesians 2:4–7 tells us:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! Together with Christ Jesus He also raised us up and seated us in the heavens, so that in the coming ages He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace through His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Somehow we are *now* raised, resurrected spiritually from the death to which we used to be enslaved. And we are raised for a reason, for a purpose that Romans 7:4 paints this way:

so that you may belong to another—to Him who was raised from the dead—that we may bear fruit for God.

And as Colossians 3 puts it:

So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God.

We are called to live in the righteousness he bought us with his death and resurrection. And this much alone is amazing—but there is *yet more*: we will also be resurrected not only spiritually as we have been now, but physically, as Christ was on the third day.

Going back to Romans 6 again:

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him, because we know that Christ, having been raised from the dead, will not die again. Death no longer rules over Him.

And Paul hammers this home in 1 Corinthians 15:16–17:

For if the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.

But the good news in v. 20:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

And so our confidence, as 2 Corinthians 4:14 puts it, is that:

We know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and present us with you.

These bodies, which *die*—all of us have to stare that in the face at some point—God will raise from the dead because we are *his*, his Spirit living in us now and forever.

As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it:

Q57. How does “the resurrection of the body” comfort you?

Not only will my soul be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but also my very flesh will be raised by the power of Christ, reunited with my soul, and made like Christ’s glorious body.

In other words, as good as the news is that we’ll be with Christ when we die, even better news is that we will be *raised*. A few years ago I read an article which pointed out that right now we are in the body, which is good, but sinful, which is *very bad*. At death, we will no longer be sinful, but we will also no longer be in the body: *better*, but not yet fully what we were meant for. At resurrection, we will be truly holy *and* embodied: exactly what we were meant for from the beginning.

Very often, the theology I encountered earlier in my faith had little to say of resurrection. It’s not that it denied it. It’s just that it really wasn’t talked about much. We got as far as “we will be in heaven with God”—and that alone is incomparably good news. As Paul says in Philippians 1: it will be “far better” to die and be with Christ. But it never clicked for me until much later that Jesus is in heaven with his resurrected body *now* and in some sense intends to resurrect heaven and earth and *us* into something more glorious than we can imagine—which will itself be better even than being in heaven with God, astounding as it is to say that.

When we thrill at the beauty of this earth, when we delight in our bodies working as they were meant to—and when we see the brokenness of these things, and feel our bodies aging and decaying—we know that *this but even better* is what we are meant for, and Christ’s resurrection is the first fruits of that, and the guarantee that it will be ours. We will be raised *with him*, and he will dwell *with us*. His Resurrection is the seal of the promise of ours; it’s the way in which God remains *forever* not only for us but also *with us*.

That’s as good as news gets.

Now, as we wrap up here: what questions do you have?

Conclusion

Let's pray!

Week 4: Ascension, Session, & Reign; Conclusion

Introduction

Good morning everyone! Before we jump into the lesson, let's pray!

Well, today is the last day of our Sunday School class on the doctrine of Christology.

Today, we will wrap up by talking about the *rest* of what the Westminster Larger Catechism describes as Christ's exaltation: his ascension, current place seated at the right hand of the Father, and future return. As usual, we'll have short breaks between our discussion of each of those for questions. Then, at the end of the class, I'll *try* to sum up everything we've said in the last four weeks. (We'll see how that goes.) Because we've covered a *lot* of ground over the last couple weeks, I've left some a bunch of extra time at the end for questions about *anything* we've covered, so start thinking now!

Part 1: Ascension

The doctrine

I'll open our discussion of the ascension by simply quoting the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

Scriptural basis

This comes straight from Acts 1, where we read that the disciples asked Jesus about restoring Israel to what they thought was her place in the world, still not fully understanding what this Messiah was really doing. So he commissioned them, and then:

After He had said this, He was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. While He was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven."

The angels' question here makes me laugh a little. Of course, the angels have the right of it: "Jesus told you what to expect. Get back to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit, and then go to the nations!" At the same time, I suspect that if *I* watched Jesus ascend into the sky and disappear into the clouds, I would *also* stand and stare. I'm not sure it felt like *good news*.

In our lives

But it is. All the Reformation confessions and catechisms pick up on this; but the Heidelberg Catechism has my very favorite way of putting it:

Q49: How does Christ's ascension to heaven benefit us?

First, he is our advocate in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that Christ our head will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a corresponding pledge. By the Spirit's power we seek not earthly things but the things above, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.

That is: Christ's ascension is good news for us in three ways—

- First, because we have an advocate in heaven. I'll say *much* more about this in the next section.
- Second, he didn't just *junk* his humanity and leave it behind. He came to save us as human beings, so he remains human. We can be *confident* that will finish saving this humanity, all of it, soul and skin and bones alike, because (to go back to my favorite hymn): "...the incarnate God ascended / pleads the merit of his blood." God who became man, prophet, priest, and king of Israel, righteous sacrifice, rose from the dead—and then went bodily to heaven.
- Third, he sent us his Spirit to empower us to (as Colossians 3 says) "seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God." And why? "For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God."

The Ascension is good hope for our full humanity to be saved, and strong exhortation to look to Christ and seek first the kingdom.

Now: what questions do you have?

Part 2: Session

All right, let's keep moving!

The doctrine

The second section today is what is sometimes called Christ's session. The word originally came out of Latin meaning "seated", and that's actually the short version of the doctrine! Again, from the Apostles' Creed: "He is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty."

Scriptural basis

Many places in the New Testament use this phrase. Hebrews 1:3 reads:

After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

We heard it a minute ago in the exhortation in Colossians 3, to "seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God." Ephesians 1:20 says:

He [that is, God] demonstrated this power in the Messiah by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavens—far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

So Scripture tells us over and over again that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. But... what does that mean for us, exactly? Part of the answer is that he continues doing what the Son has always been doing: he is the one through whom the Father created all things, and he is the one who sustains all of creation by his powerful word. But now, in Christ, the Son does more for us: he reigns as our good king, and he intercedes for us as our merciful high priest.

Kingship

First, Jesus is *ruling now*, even his reign is not *complete*. As Hebrews notes, "We do not yet see everything subjected to him." But he is nonetheless ruling. That's what the imagery of being seated at the right hand of the Father *means*. And that's not just his rule over the church: as Ephesians tells us, "far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion."

The Westminster Larger Catechism says:

Q54: How is Christ exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God?

Christ is exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God, in that as God-man he is advanced to the highest favor with God the Father, with all fulness of joy, glory, and power over all things in heaven and earth; and does gather and defend his church, and subdue their enemies; furnishes his ministers and people with gifts and graces, and makes intercession for them.

So Jesus' rule as king means that he gathers us into his church in the first place, and then he protects us afterward! He'll never lose us. Because, as he told us in John: he doesn't lose *anyone* the Father has given to him. He also has the right to give us the gifts and graces we need as his people—and he exercises that right!

I also love that it calls out that he has “all fulness of joy, glory, and power over all things in heaven and earth”! The one whose earthly life was so marked by grief now gets to reign in *joy*, because he finished the task. And we can rejoice in that, too!

We'll come back to this in the final section today, because, again, his reign is not yet *complete*. But it has *begun*. And that's good news for us because it means that whatever comes our way—and if we're honest life is full of things that can make us wrestle with this, but it remains the truth—Jesus is king. That's the first thing we see: Jesus is king.

Priesthood

The second thing we see is that last phrase in Westminster's answer; “and makes intercession from them”—straight out of Hebrews, which says that by the merit of his death and resurrection he *is* our high priest, and as our high priest he helps us when we are tested. He sympathizes with our weaknesses. He calls us to come his throne when we need mercy and grace, and he will give them. And he remains our high priest forever. He never dies, so “He always lives to intercede for them.” For *us*.

Here again, I think the Westminster Larger Catechism just nails this: > > Q55: How does Christ make intercession? > : Christ makes intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; Answering all accusations against them, and

procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services.

How could it possibly get better than this? Jesus Christ, God the Son incarnate, *prays for us*. Says we are his. Defends against every accusation—from Satan, from our own consciences, from our own *real* failings. “I dealt with that,” he says. “It is finished.” Sweet, sweet, deep, deep comfort to our souls. You are never alone. Christ is always praying for you. When you are asleep, he’s praying for you. When you feel too spiritually weak to pray, he’s praying for you, praying for you to come to him and get the grace you need. When you feel too guilty to pray, the one who took *all* your sins is praying for you. *Forever*, God the Son in Christ Jesus—the king!—is serving us as our high priest, praying to God the Father for us. That is good, good news!

Thanks be to God in Christ Jesus, who is our mediator forever!

Part 3: Return & Future Reign

For our very last doctrine, let’s look at Jesus’ return and future reign. Before we get into this, though, I want to note that I am *not* going to get into the specific details today of things like the tribulation or the millennium. If you care to know, I’m an amillennial guy at this point and I’m happy to talk to you about that outside of this context. For our purposes *today*, those distinctions are all secondary, because we all agree on this doctrine:

The doctrine

Jesus is coming back as the glorious king of the universe; and when he does he will raise everyone from the dead, some to eternal judgment and some to eternal life with God; and he will remake all things—new heavens and new earth, renewed together in glory. As the creeds and confessions say it: he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Scriptural basis

There are a number of places Scripture teaches us this. Philippians 3:20–21 reads:

...but our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humble

condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself.

And 1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us:

or the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In our lives

The Heidelberg Catechism reflects on this doctrine by asking:

Q52. How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?

In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

The first thing here is the comfort that this provides for God's people when they are suffering: our suffering will end, and when our suffering is at the hands of people who hate God, he will do justice. If they repent, then justice has been done at the cross; and if they do not, judgment is coming. This is especially good news to our brothers and sisters in places where they can be jailed or killed for following Christ. Remembering God's justice is part of how we're able to follow Paul's instruction in Romans 12: "for your part, live at peace with everyone." We *don't* avenge the blood of the saints—because God *will*.

The second bit here is where I want to camp out for the rest of this discussion—and that is the mix of *holy fear* and *sure hope* that helps us hold fast to the faith. This is what both Hebrews and Revelation are about! When we are tempted by the apparent goodness of the world, or buffeted by trials, they call us to hold fast. And they do so not least by looking to the hope of Christ's return as both *warning* and *comfort*. We need both of those refrains to keep walking with Christ. They remind us *judgment is coming* as a means of grace; they're part of how God keeps us.

So: Revelation is not concerned with *last things* for their own sake. The book opens with letters to the seven churches for a reason, and it closes the way it does—offering living water and warning side by side—for a reason. Wherever we land on the material in between, it's there to encourage God's people to hold fast: because Jesus is victorious—over temptation, and over Satan; over sin, and over the enemies of God's people. He wins! So hold fast! Don't end up under that judgment; overcome through Christ, and receive your reward when he comes in glory.

Hebrews does the same. It exhorts us to “hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (10:23). It reminds us that if we reject Christ or if we fall away, there is only “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries” (10:27). The book is this constant back-and-forth: showing how *good* Christ is, and warning at what happens if we fall away. “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!” as 10:31 says; and “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace” (12:28)—“for our God is a consuming fire” (12:29), but in Christ “we have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure” (6:18), because he *is* our high priest. The book teaches us that Christ “is better than the angels, he is better than Moses, he is better than the prophets, he is better than the Levites and the offerings they made—he is better than them all”⁴—so don't fall away: his judgment is fiercer than theirs but his grace is sufficient to keep you! Christ is better—so hold fast!

Part 4: Conclusion

And now we have come to the end! Before we transition into questions, I want to take a few minutes to fit this all together because we have covered a *lot* of ground over the last few weeks.

I want to emphasize here how we are adopted into the family of God. As the Westminster Larger Catechism tells us:

all those that are justified are received into the number of his children, have his name put upon them, the Spirit of his Son given to them, are under his fatherly care and dispensations, admitted to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, made heir of all the promises, and fellow heirs with Christ in glory.

⁴ “Further Up, Further In”, Hebrews, Psallos, 2017.

This is ours because first of all, Christ is the Son of God eternally. The Father's fatherhood, remember, is not something tacked on, something that came later. Instead, the Father in his very being, eternally, the Father of the Son, and the Son is in his very being, eternally, the Son of the Father. And the Spirit who comes, eternally, in his very being, from the Father through the Son has sealed us everlastingly into that eternal, joyful life!

How? The Father sent the Son into the world as Israel's Messiah—God's anointed one:

- who was prophet, priest, and king, the fulfillment of Israel's hope and her calling
- who strikes the serpent's head
- who is a prophet showing us God perfectly
- who is a priest who does not have to offer sacrifices again and again, does not have to sacrifice for his own sins, but atoned once and for all
- who is a righteous king in David's line, doing justice and loving mercy
- who is himself a light to the nations as Israel was called to be

This man Jesus is God with us, God for us; "God of God / Light of Light / Very God of Very God / by whom all things were made / who, for us and our salvation / came down from heaven." He is fully human and fully God: so that we are wholly redeemed: our human souls and human skins alike, because he too had human skin and a human soul.

He never sinned, not even once—but he took our sins, bore the weight of justice we deserved, died the physical and the spiritual deaths of our curse. But he did not stay dead! He rose, he conquered death, he defeated hell, he put Satan under his feet, he ascended in power to sit at God's right hand until he shall come again—and there he prays for us and gives us his Spirit until he *does* come again and make all things new, judging evil once and for all, and raising us to eternal life with him! Hallelujah!

Now, I've left us about ten minutes here for questions about any and all of this.

All right, we are out of time. Let's end by hearing from Revelation, and then praying!

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them,

and they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them as their God.
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
and death shall be no more,
neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,
for the former things have passed away.

Even so, come Lord Jesus! Amen!