

Who Is the Messiah? Part 1 | John 1:1-18
To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers
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In 1867, Fyodor Dostoevsky stopped in Basel, Switzerland to see a painting by German Renaissance artist Hans Holbein. The painting is 6 feet wide but only ten inches tall, and it nearly wrecked him. His wife, Anna, recounts what happened:

This painting ... portrays Jesus Christ, who has suffered inhuman torture, has been taken down from the cross and given over to corruption. His swollen face is covered with bloody wounds, and he looks terrible. The painting made an overwhelming impression on my husband, and he stood before it as if dumbstruck.... There was in his agitated face that expression as of fright which I had seen more than once in the first moments of an epileptic fit. I quietly took him under the arm, brought him to another room, and sat him down on a bench.¹

The painting would feature at the center of his book, *The Idiot*, where Dostoevsky attempts his most Christlike figure: Prince Myshkin.

What haunted Dostoevsky about the painting, and what haunts the story of Prince Myshkin, is the idea of a Christ who is a beautiful person—and nothing more. It is the idea of a Christlike figure who comes to confront a world of sin, suffering and death, but without the divine power to overcome it.

By the end of *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, despite his noble character and compassion, cannot rescue any of his friends from their destructive passions. The very people he came to love remain dead in sins and devastation.

This idea of a merely human Christ brings into sharp relief two problems we face when considering Jesus today.

The first is the modern tendency to accept and admire Jesus of Nazareth as a moral teacher and good person—but nothing more. A Christ without divine power.

The second is more subtle: it's for the confessing Christians, who outwardly acknowledge Christ's divinity, to functionally live as though it is our circumstances or our feelings that are all-powerful, rather than Christ.

But Dostoevsky understood: a merely human messiah, is no messiah at all.

In our sermon series, *To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers*, we come to the question, *Who Is the Messiah?*

¹ Richard Pevear, "Introduction," in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, Trans by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2002), ix.

“Messiah” was a term the Jewish people used to refer to a unique hero who would appear one day in history, delivering them from outward and inward oppression.

But “Messiahs” abound outside of Israel. A messiah is any leader we believe will ultimately fix us. It is the hero, the helper, the lover, who will finally make us whole.

Christianity teaches that the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth. And that Jesus is not only a beautiful human being. He is God incarnate.

We’ll spend two weeks on this question, *Who Is the Messiah*. Today, we consider Jesus’ Person, *Who He Is*? Next Sunday, we consider Jesus’ Work, *What He Does*?

To understand who Jesus is, there are few better passages than the opening of John’s Gospel, so to John 1:1-18 we turn. These verses set before us the greatest of mysteries: “The Word became flesh” (1:14). We need to emphasize three things about Jesus from this passage: **(1) His Divinity; (2) His Humanity; (3) His Peculiar Glory.**

I. Jesus’ Divinity (1:1-5).

John opens at the beginning:

In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word** was with God, and **the Word** was God (1:1)

There are several truths here making Jesus’ divinity undeniable.

Let’s start with the reference to him as “the Word.”

The Word: This is the Greek term, *Logos*, and can mean “speech,” “reason” or “thought.” From it we get the word *logic*, and it also appears at the end of words like biology, technology, sociology, where “-logy” comes from *logos*, and hence “biology” means the study, or reasoned explanation, of life (*bios*).

Why is John using this term to describe Jesus?

I think it looks back to the importance of God’s Word in the Old Testament: God creates by his word, reveals his moral standards through his word, and conveys his desires and plans with his word.

We might liken God’s Word to God’s reflections and thoughts about Himself—who he is, what he desires, his will and plans. He can reveal this word in speech, but in Jesus, this word becomes embodied in human life.

Jesus, then, is the divine *Logos*; he is the perfect articulation of who God is.

With God and Is God: This helps us understand a second thing in this verse, which is the fact that the Word is described as both “**with God**” and “**as God**.”

... and the Word was **with God**, and the Word **was God** (1:1)

This is a window into the Trinity. Jesus, as the Second Person of the Trinity, is His own person who exists in close fellowship with God the Father: so, “the Word was *with* God.” But Jesus also,

as the Divine Logos, God the Father's perfect reflection on who He is, Jesus is also himself fully God.

This is a mystery we cannot comprehend, like we cannot stare into the sun; but we get a faint glimpse of it in verses like John 1:1.

Eternal and Uncreated: And finally, John emphasizes that the Word was not created, but involved in all the work of creation:

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (1:3).

If without the word nothing was made "that was made," it follows, that the Word itself was not part of "what was made." This underscores the *eternality* of the Son of God—there was never a time when the Son was not.²

These few verses tell us that Jesus is *the divine Logos*, was *with God and is God*, and is *eternal*.

Whew! This is a dense portion of Scripture! Let's draw out a few implications.

(1) Dispels the idea that his divinity was a later development

First, an explicit statement of Jesus' divinity here in Scripture helps dispel a prevalent modern impression that only much later, well after Jesus' life and times, did people think of him as divine.

It is true that in the Gospels Jesus never actually says, "I am God."

But he **says things** about himself that only God would say:

"Before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58).

Here Jesus not-so-subtly takes on the Divine Name, "I Am," which God used of himself in Exodus. And he states he existed 2000 years ago, prior to Abraham.³

And Jesus **does things** that are the prerogative of God alone. He pronounces to one man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5) and the scribes react accordingly, "He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7).

When he casts out demons, he doesn't call upon God or say an incantation. He simply exercises God's authority over demons as though it was his.⁴

² So, when Christians speak in the Nicene Creed of the Son of God as "**eternally begotten of the Father**," they mean two things: (1) The Son is eternally from the Father; (2) but he is not created by the Father, as though there was a time when he did not exist. He shares fully and eternally in the one divine nature. There has never been a Father without the Son, nor a Son who was less than fully God.

³ And at times Jesus takes verses from the Old Testament that expressly refer to God, and applies them to himself. For example, once when young children were praising Jesus, saying "Hosanna," the religious leaders decry him for allowing this. Jesus then applies a verse from Psalm 8, which expressly refers to God, to himself: "Do you hear what these are saying?" [complained the Pharisees]; And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you [God] have prepared praise' [=for yourself]?" (Matthew 21:16–17; Ps 8:2).

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction*, 85, stresses how unique Jesus' authority is.

We also should add that the first people to believe Jesus was divine were the least likely—first century Jews. As one scholar puts it,

The Jew was brought up from childhood in the uncompromising insistence that there is only one God, and that to offer divine worship to any being other than Yahweh is unthinkable offensive, the most fundamental of all sins.⁵

It is incredible, therefore, for a committed first-century Jew like Paul to say of Jesus, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9); or to speak of Jesus by saying he “is the Christ, who is God over all” (Rom 9:5).

During the ministry of Jesus and among his earliest followers a sense arose that Jesus was divine —“Immanuel, God with us” (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:22-23). This was not a late development.

(2) Underscores Jesus' Uniqueness and Power

A second implication—to seeing Jesus' divinity—is that it underscores his uniqueness and power.

Jesus is unlike any other religious leader. Confucius, the Buddha, Muhammad—these leaders offer teaching, guidance for wise living, a map for finding the living water.

But Jesus is more than a map to the water; Jesus himself is the spring (Jn 4:10)! Jesus doesn't give good advice about life; Jesus is life!

Hence, verses 4,

In him was life, and the life was the light of men (4).

When people receive Jesus, a new form of life is deposited in them—a supernatural, living seed. And a growth begins to take place, a transformation of the person from their very depths. They “born again” (Jn 3) because of the nature of Jesus.

What does his divinity mean for us?

One thing it means is that we should **always attribute to Jesus the balance of power**: it is not our circumstances, or our suffering, or our feelings, or our culture, that is divine; Jesus is. Our failures are not stronger than his mercy; our suffering will not have the final word. The ebb and flow of human history is not sovereign; Christ is.

Let us weigh all things against Christ's Divinity: He is Almighty God

II. His Humanity.

The key verse here is 14,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... (John 1:14)

⁵ R. T. France, “The Uniqueness of Christ,” Churchman 95, no. 3 (1981): 204.

“Flesh” is a more graphic term than “body.” Flesh was often a negative way Greek thinkers spoke of the material side of human beings. John is using this so there is no mistake: The eternal Word becomes human—really and fully.

How this happened, from a physical and spiritual vantage point, is beyond comprehension.

We are told in Luke it involved the **virgin birth**.

The angel Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive in her womb and bear a son (Lk 1:31), to which she asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). Gabriel then explains:

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

Though Jesus is one person, in him are two natures: the divine and the human. He is fully God and fully man.

When we observe his life, we see this profound mystery at work. At times he knows things only God would know, such as the secret thoughts and hearts of people (Jn 2:24-25); at times he does things only God could do, like calming a storm.

But at other times, he is altogether human: Jesus developed, “increasing in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52); Jesus got hungry (Matt 4:2), tired (Jn 4:6), thirsty (Jn 4:7), angry (Mark 3.5), and sad (Jn 11:35). Jesus’ knowledge at times was limited (Mk 13.32), and he is susceptible to temptation by Satan (Matt 4), and finally is killed and dies (Jn 19-20).

At times Jesus’ divine glory is revealed in extraordinary ways; at other times we see the ordinary limitations and sufferings of his genuine humanity. But Jesus is never less than fully God, and never less than fully human. Both natures belong inseparably to the one person of Christ.

I want now to stress a few things about his humanity.

First, the eternal son of God, the second person of the trinity, did not always have human form. He took this on and did so about 2000 years ago.⁶ However, having done so, the Son of God will forever be embodied. He is now in heaven, fully God and fully human.

Second, this act of taking on flesh—this “incarnation”—meant a profound **humiliation** and suffering for the Son of God.

To become like us, Christ

emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8).

What must it have been like, for the pure, holy, innocent, Son of God to be thrust into our polluted and twisted world?

What does the humanity of the Son of God mean for us?

⁶ “But when **the fullness of time** had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (Galatians 4:4).

Some of what his humanity means will be considered next week, when we ponder his obedience to the law and his sacrifice of himself for us.

But let me suggest one thing now. It's there in the second phrase of verse 14,

And the Word became flesh **and dwelt among us...** (John 1:14)

"Dwelt among us" speaks to an amazing feature of God's love: all across the Old Testament, despite rebellion against him, God acts to create a way to can dwell with us—that's what the Law and the Tabernacle and the Temple are about: fostering a people holy, so that a Holy God can dwell with them.

The incarnation of the Son of God—and all it cost the Son—is the profoundest expression of God's action to be near us.

Consider what is really taking place in the many scenes of encounters across the Gospels: Jesus finding Peter and Andrew and calling them (4:18–20); Jesus finding the woman at the well and speaking with her (John 4); Jesus going to help Jairus' "little daughter" who was "very sick" (Mk 5:21–23); Jesus befriending Mary and Martha, and loving their brother, Lazarus (Jn 11:1–2).

God is moving about first century Palestine *to be near actual people*.

And the incarnation was not only about physical nearness. By the incarnation, a type of *sympathetic* nearness was fostered.

The embodiment of the Son of God means his experiencing of things as we do.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:14–15).

For the suffering or anxious Christian, for the Christian in the hospital waiting room, for the Christian on the lonely Saturday night, for the Christian beginning at a new school or job—the incarnation of the Son of God means *a knowing sympathy* exists in God, and a *passion to be near you* in your trouble. He is neither distance nor indifferent toward us.

There, then, is Christ: Fully God and Fully Man. We close by considering one other feature of John 1—Christ's Peculiar Glory.

III. His Peculiar Glory

John tells us that seeing Jesus is seeing God and God's glory:

...we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14).

But it is a peculiar glory—a glory that many in Jesus' day missed.

And this is because it's not the type of glory our world trains us to see. It's a peculiar glory.

"The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son of the father, full of grace and truth (1.14).

There is a shocking paradox here: flesh and glory. Flesh is our mortal nature. Flesh is that part of humanity buffeted by temptation and sickness. And in this do we see God's glory?

It's a peculiar glory, because in Jesus, God's infinite majesty is revealed through shocking humility. Peculiar, because in Jesus, God's perfect truth is expressed through astonishing grace.

Twice John tells us that Jesus is full of "grace and truth" (v 14, 17).

This is a peculiar combination—grace and truth.

We associate truth with exposure—everything about a person being known and rightly judged. "We can't handle the truth," as the saying goes.

But we associate grace with mercy—unmerited favor, poured out on a person. We may even feel that grace must overlook the truth.

But grace without truth risks turning each of us into a fake, a mirage, a spoiled and stunted person.

But truth without grace risks crushing us under guilt and shame.

But look now at Jesus' peculiar glory! He gives us both! Exposing the sins and sufferings of our lives, but never without the warmth of grace.

Think of the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus exposes her truth—she even goes home and announces.

"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (Jn 4:29).

But in the bigger picture, he's found this forlorn woman—that no respecting Jew would ever talk to—so that he can offer her living water:

If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water (Jn 4:10).

You may be someone who thinks, "if Christ really knew me, he would not want me." Or, you may be someone who thinks, "I cannot face the truth about myself; I'd collapse under the weight of regret."

Look to Jesus! He is full of *grace and truth*. In his divinity, he knows all and sees all and will not tolerate abiding sin in his sons and daughters. In his humanity, he is "gentle and lowly" (Matt 11:29) and will never turn you away.

Our world does not train our eyes to see glory like his—his is a peculiar glory: his greatness manifest in his humility; his power clothed in mercy; his almighty deity lying in a manger; his sinlessness bearing all our sin.

Do you see his glory?!

I'll close by returning to Dostoevsky. As he worked on this novel, *The Idiot*, he wrote the following in a letter to his niece:

The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful man. There is nothing more difficult in the world... Because the task is immeasurable.... There is only one perfectly beautiful person—Christ—so that the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person is, of course, already an infinite miracle. That is the sense of the whole Gospel of John: it finds **the whole miracle in the incarnation alone**.⁷

The incarnation is a miracle because it's not just the arrival of the finally perfect human leader. The incarnation is a miracle because it's the Creator entering his creation enfleshed in it. It is the eternal God we rebel against, pursuing us within space and time.

Prince Myshkin could love the people around him, but he could not save them. He could offer compassion but not transformation. He could enter their suffering but not overcome it.

But Jesus is no Prince Myshkin. And he is certainly not lying dead in Hans Holbein's painting. Jesus is the living God!

The question, *who is the Messiah?*, now becomes: *do we see Jesus for who he truly is? Have we entrusted ourselves to the God-Man?*

Some admire Jesus from a distance but have never entrusted ourselves to him.

Others of us confess that he is God but live as though our failures or circumstances are stronger than His sovereignty and grace. Or that our sufferings are more sovereign than his wisdom.

Let us look again at Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh—the God-Man! He is “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5).

Such is the Messiah.

Small Group Questions

1. What do you think the average person in your neighborhood thinks about Jesus? If you asked them, “what do you think about Jesus?,” would they describe him as a “good person,” a “moral leader,” or something more? What about you? What do you think about Jesus?
2. Read John 1:1. What stands out to you about this verse? Why do you think John refers to Jesus Christ as “the Word”? What does it mean that the Word is *both* “with God” and “was God”?
3. Read John 1:1-5 and John 1:14. How do these verses explain both Jesus' divinity and humanity?
4. If Jesus is fully God and fully man, what is the difference between admiring him and entrusting your life to him? Are you tempted to treat your circumstances, feelings, or fears as more powerful than Jesus?

⁷ Richard Pevear, “Introduction,” in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, Trans by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2002).

5. How does Jesus full humanity impact your experience of weakness and sorrow? Does the fact that he has experienced weakness and suffering change the way you pray or turn to him in difficult times?
6. Jesus' glory is a "peculiar glory" in that it combines things we'd otherwise keep apart. How does the fact that Jesus is "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14, 17) impact the way you think about his work in your life? Where do you see him bringing truth to light? Where do you see him applying grace? How is he bringing both grace and truth?

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