

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 3: THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD

Lesson 6

The Word Became Flesh

The Miracle of the Incarnation

The Infinite Becoming Finite Without Ceasing to Be Infinite

Key Texts: John 1:14; Philippians 2:5–8; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 2:14–17; Galatians 4:4

“And the Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*
2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

We have arrived at the event that divides all of history. Not merely the history of the church, not merely the history of the Western world, not merely the history of the Jewish people or the Roman Empire or the ancient Near East, but the history of the universe. Every moment of time before this event was moving toward it; every moment after it moves from it. It is the event that the Protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 first promised, that the Abrahamic covenant narrowed and specified, that the Davidic covenant anchored in a royal line, that the prophets of Israel described with increasing specificity and increasing wonder, and that the fullness of time brought to its appointed fulfillment. The eternal Son of God became man. The Word became flesh.

John 1:14 announces this event in ten Greek words whose simplicity is inversely proportional to their significance: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (NASB 1995). The one who was in the beginning (ἐν, en), the eternal, unoriginated being of the pre-incarnate Word, became (ἐγένετο, egeneto), entered into the realm of temporal, creaturely existence, flesh (σάρξ, sarx), in the fullness of human nature, with all its weakness, vulnerability, and mortality. Three words: the Word became flesh. But behind those three words lies the most astonishing reality that has ever existed: the infinite God, in the Person of His eternal Son, took on finite human nature without ceasing to be infinite.

This lesson works through the theology of the incarnation with the care and the wonder the subject demands. It examines John 1:14 as the primary christological announcement; it engages the Philippians 2 hymn and the difficult doctrine of the kenosis; it addresses the necessity of the incarnation, why only a divine-human Mediator could accomplish what sinners need; and it reflects on the pastoral and doxological significance of the truth that God, in the fullest and most permanent sense possible, has come to be with us. The incarnation is not merely a theological proposition; it is the ground of everything the Christian gospel declares and everything the Christian life is built upon.

I. JOHN 1:14, THE DEFINITIVE ANNOUNCEMENT

The Theology of the Incarnation Compressed into Ten Greek Words

A. The Word Became: The Astonishment of Egeneto

The theological weight of John 1:14 rests first on the verb ἐγένετο (egeneto, “became”). As noted in Lesson 3, this is the same verb used throughout John’s prologue for the coming-into-being of created things (“all things came into being,” v. 3; “there came a man,” v. 6; “John was not the Light,” v. 8), and it stands in deliberate contrast to the imperfect ἐν (en, “was”) used for the eternal existence of the

pre-incarnate Word. The Word's eternal being admits no becoming; the incarnation is a genuine becoming. The eternal Son entered into the realm of creaturely becoming, the realm of origin, development, change, and mortality, without ceasing to be the eternal Son.

This is the first and foundational paradox of the incarnation: the one who cannot become (because He is eternal and immutable) became. The one who has no beginning took on a nature that had a beginning. The one who transcends time entered time. The immutable assumed the mutable. This is not a contradiction but a mystery, the mystery of the hypostatic union, in which the divine and human natures are united in the one Person of the eternal Son without confusion, change, division, or separation (as the Council of Chalcedon would later define it). The becoming does not undo the being; the incarnation does not diminish the eternity. The Word who was in the beginning continues to be, and has now also become.

B. Flesh: The Fullness and Humility of the Assumption

The term “flesh” (σάρξ, *sarx*) in John 1:14 is the most comprehensive and the most deliberately provocative term John could have chosen to describe the nature assumed by the eternal Word. In Johannine usage, “flesh” does not refer merely to the physical body; it refers to the whole of human nature in its creaturely weakness and vulnerability, the full range of what it means to be human in a fallen world, short of sin itself. The Word did not become a divine human hybrid or a lightly humanized deity; He became genuinely, completely, vulnerably human, subject to hunger, thirst, weariness, grief, temptation, suffering, and death.

The deliberate starkness of the term “flesh” is also a polemical thrust against the proto-Docetic tendencies that were already present in the communities John was addressing. Docetism, the claim that Christ only appeared to be human, that His body was a phantom or a spiritual semblance rather than a genuine physical reality, was the perennial temptation of a piety that found the idea of God becoming genuinely, messily, vulnerably human more offensive than edifying. John will have none of it. The Word became flesh, real flesh, genuine humanity, with all the limitations and vulnerabilities that the word *sarx* implies. And John's first-person testimony confirms it: “we saw His glory.” Not ‘we perceived His glory through spiritual intuition’, but ‘we saw.’ The glory was visible, embodied, historical.

C. Dwelt Among Us: The Tabernacling Presence

The verb translated “dwelt” in John 1:14 is ἐσκήνωσεν (*eskēnōsen*), from the noun σκηνή (*skēnē*), meaning “tent” or “tabernacle.” The choice of this verb is theologically precise and historically loaded: it deliberately echoes the language of the divine dwelling in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, where the glory of YHWH took up residence in the midst of Israel (“the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle,” Exodus 40:34). The Word tabernacled among us, He took up His dwelling in the midst of His people in the way that the Shekinah glory had dwelt among Israel, but now in a definitive,

personal, and permanent way: not in a tent made with human hands, but in the flesh of the eternal Son.

The connection to the Shekinah glory is confirmed by the next phrase: “we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father.” The glory that the disciples saw, fully unveiled on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8), anticipated in the signs of the Gospel of John, definitively manifested in the resurrection, is the Shekinah glory of YHWH, now dwelling personally and bodily in the incarnate Son. The tabernacle was always pointing forward to this moment. Every time the cloud and fire descended on the tent in the wilderness, it was a foretaste and a type of the One in whom the fullness of the Godhead would dwell bodily (Colossians 2:9).

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

JOHN 1:14, NASB 1995

II. THE KENOSIS, PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

He Emptied Himself: The Self-Humiliation of the Eternal Son

A. The Hymn and Its Christological Structure

Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the most theologically concentrated and most exegetically debated passages in the entire New Testament. Paul introduces it as a motivational ground for the humility and unity he is exhorting in the Philippian congregation: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (v. 5, NASB 1995). What follows is a compressed christological narrative in two movements: the downward movement of the incarnation (vv. 6–8) and the upward movement of the exaltation (vv. 9–11). The hymn is almost certainly pre-Pauline, Paul is citing or adapting an early Christian confession, which means it reflects the christological understanding of the first generation of believers.

The downward movement begins with a description of the Son’s pre-incarnate state: He “existed in the form of God” (ὑπάρχων ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, *hyparcheōn en morphē theou*). The verb ὑπάρχων (the present participle of *hyparchō*) carries the sense of antecedent, continuous existence, the Son was already existing, had always been existing, in the form of God. The μορφή (*morphē*, “form”) of God is not a superficial external appearance but the essential, inner reality of what something is, to be in the form of God is to be God, in the fullest sense of the term. This is the Pauline equivalent of John 1:1: the pre-incarnate Son is fully, essentially, and truly divine.

B. “He Did Not Regard Equality with God a Thing to Be Grasped”

The next clause, “did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6, NASB 1995), is the most contested phrase in the entire hymn. The Greek is: οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ (ouch harpasgmon hēgēsato to einai isa theō). The key word is ἁρπαγμός (harpagmos), which can mean either something to be seized (that one does not yet have) or something to be exploited for one’s own advantage (that one already possesses). The second meaning, defended most influentially by Roy Hoover and N.T. Wright, is almost certainly correct in context: the Son already possessed equality with God, and He chose not to exploit it for His own advantage but instead chose the path of self-humbling condescension.

This reading transforms the theological meaning of the clause. The Son is not striving after a divine status He does not yet have and nobly restraining Himself; He already possesses full equality with God, and He chooses freely, from within that equality, not to leverage it for self-advantage but to pour Himself out in the incarnation. The incarnation is not a desperate act of divine longing; it is a sovereign act of divine love. The one who had every reason and every right to remain in the unveiled glory of the divine life chose, in the freedom of eternal love, to empty Himself.

C. The Kenosis: What Was Emptied and What Was Not

The climactic statement of the downward movement is verse 7: “but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (NASB 1995). The verb ἐκένωσεν (ekenōsen, “emptied”) has given this doctrine its name: the kenosis. What did the Son empty Himself of? The grammar of the passage provides the answer: He emptied Himself by taking, the self-emptying is not a subtraction but an addition. He did not empty Himself of His divine nature or of any divine attribute; He emptied Himself of the independent, unveiled exercise of the divine glory, by taking on the form of a servant and the likeness of human beings.

The kenosis is not the laying aside of deity; it is the veiling of glory. The Son did not cease to be omniscient at the incarnation; He chose to exercise His divine knowledge in ways consistent with genuine human development and the redemptive purpose of the Father. He did not cease to be omnipotent; He chose not to exercise His divine power for His own comfort or advantage during the period of His humiliation. He did not cease to be omnipresent; He chose to be present in a specific, located, embodied way in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. The kenosis is the supreme act of divine condescension, the infinite choosing, in the freedom of eternal love, to become vulnerable, to become limited, to become mortal, for the sake of those who without Him had no hope.

The movement of Philippians 2:7–8 carries the condescension to its final, most humiliating expression: “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (NASB 1995). The cross is the ultimate expression of the kenosis, the point at which the self-emptying of the eternal Son reaches its lowest depth. The one who existed in the form of God died the death reserved for slaves and criminals. The tabernacling glory of YHWH was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. And it was precisely at this lowest point that

the upward movement of the exaltation begins: “For this reason also, God highly exalted Him” (v. 9, NASB 1995).

“He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” | “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

PHILIPPIANS 2:7–8, NASB 1995

III. THE NECESSITY OF THE INCARNATION

Why Only a Divine-Human Mediator Could Accomplish What Sinners Need

A. The Problem Defines the Solution

The necessity of the incarnation is not an arbitrary divine decision; it is the divinely appointed solution to the precise contours of the human problem. Sin has produced a condition in which human beings are simultaneously guilty before God (requiring a just penalty to be paid), enslaved to the power of sin and death (requiring a liberator), estranged from the divine life (requiring a mediator who can bridge the ontological gap between Creator and creature), and incapable of providing any of these things for themselves. The solution to this problem must be adequate to each of its dimensions, and this is precisely what the incarnation provides: the eternal Son of God, by taking on human nature, becomes the one in whom the divine and the human meet, the unique, unrepeatable, and sufficient Mediator between God and man.

Paul states the necessity with elegant simplicity in 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The mediator must be both God and man because mediation requires access to both parties. A merely human mediator, however righteous, however devout, has no standing before the infinite God and no capacity to bear the infinite weight of divine justice. A merely divine mediator, however willing, however powerful, cannot stand in the place of human beings, cannot represent them before God, cannot identify with their weakness, and cannot die their death. Only one who is fully God and fully man can do what sinners need done.

B. The Necessity of Genuine Humanity for Redemption

The author of Hebrews presses the necessity of genuine humanity for redemption with sustained theological argument in chapters 2 and 4. The foundational principle is stated in Hebrews 2:14–15: “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (NASB 1995).

The Son had to share in flesh and blood, genuine, mortal, vulnerable human nature, because only by dying could He defeat death, and only a genuine human being can die.

The argument continues in Hebrews 2:17: “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (NASB 1995). The word translated “had to” (ᾧφειλεν, *ōpheilen*) expresses necessity, not the arbitrary necessity of divine decree alone, but the moral and theological necessity that flows from the nature of the priestly office and the requirements of the redemptive task. A high priest must be able to represent those on whose behalf he offers; he must be able to sympathize with their weakness because he has shared it. The incarnation is not a gracious extra, a divine condescension beyond what was strictly necessary; it is the indispensable prerequisite of the atonement.

C. Athanasius’s Argument: The Creator Must Renew the Creation

The great patristic theologian Athanasius of Alexandria, in his treatise *On the Incarnation* (written c. 318 AD), provides what remains the most elegant and the most theologically compelling account of the necessity of the incarnation. His argument proceeds from the nature of the divine image in humanity: the human being was created in the image of God (‘according to His own image,’ Genesis 1:26–27), and the image consists in the participation of the rational soul in the Word of God, by whose power and wisdom the image was impressed. Sin has defaced and is progressively destroying this image; the human being is returning to non-being, to the corruption and death that belong to creaturely existence without God. The image that was impressed by the Word can only be renewed by the Word; the corruption that the creature has fallen into can only be reversed by the incorruptible Creator taking on the corruptible creature’s nature and restoring it from within.

Athanasius’s argument is profound because it grounds the necessity of the incarnation not merely in the requirements of justice (though those are real and demanding) but in the nature of what it means to be human: the human being is the image of God, and the image of God can only be renewed by the original, by the very one whose image it is. The Word became flesh because only the Word could renew what the Word had made. Only the Creator can restore the creation. Only the one who impressed the image can re-impress it. This is the deepest theological reason why the incarnation was necessary: not merely to pay a debt (though the debt is real) but to renew a nature, to restore an image, to raise from corruption to incorruption a humanity that had been destroying itself through sin.

IV. THE INCARNATION DEFINED: ADDITION, NOT SUBTRACTION

What the Incarnation Is and What It Is Not

A. The Incarnation as Assumption

The most precise and the most important single statement about the nature of the incarnation is this: the incarnation is the assumption of a human nature by the eternal Son of God, not the transformation of the divine nature into a human one. The Son did not stop being God in order to become man; He became man while remaining God. The incarnation is an addition, the taking on of a genuinely new mode of being, a genuinely new nature, a genuinely new set of experiences and limitations, without any subtraction from the divine nature or the divine being. He who is the Son of God became the Son of Man without ceasing to be the Son of God.

This precision matters because the most natural and the most common misunderstanding of the incarnation is to think of it as a transformation: God turned into a man, poured Himself into human form, set aside His deity for the duration of the incarnate life. This is not what the New Testament teaches. John 1:14 does not say “the Word turned into flesh”; it says “the Word became flesh”, and the becoming is the taking on of flesh, not the abandonment of divinity. Colossians 2:9 declares that “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (NASB 1995), the fullness of Deity, not a portion of it, not a diminished or kenotic form of it, but the complete, undiminished divine nature, dwelling bodily in the incarnate Son.

B. Galatians 4:4 and the Fullness of Time

Paul’s statement in Galatians 4:4 provides a concise summary of the incarnation from the perspective of redemptive history and divine purpose: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (NASB 1995). Every phrase is loaded with theological significance. “The fullness of the time” (τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, *to plērōma tou chronou*) declares that the incarnation was not an improvisation but the culmination of a divine purpose that had been working itself out across the whole of redemptive history: the Protoevangelium, the patriarchal promises, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic dynasty, the prophetic expectation, all of it had been preparing the world for this moment.

“God sent forth His Son”, the language of sending implies both the pre-existence of the Son (He was with the Father before He was sent) and the initiative of the Father (the incarnation is a Trinitarian act, not merely a christological one). “Born of a woman”, genuine, biological, human birth from a human mother; the Son entered human existence through the normal human channel, not by supernatural apparition or divine intrusion into an otherwise human story. “Born under the Law”, subject to the obligations of the Mosaic covenant, placed under the demands that He would fulfill on behalf of those who were incapable of fulfilling them. The incarnation is not merely the divine presence in human form; it is the divine presence in human form for the specific purpose of redemption, born under the Law in order to redeem those who were under the Law, and thereby to secure the adoption that was always the goal of the covenant of grace.

C. 1 Timothy 3:16 and the Mystery of Godliness

Paul's compressed confession in 1 Timothy 3:16 captures the incarnation in its most essential dimensions with the rhetorical force of a liturgical declaration: "By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (NASB 1995). The phrase "by common confession" (ὁμολογουμένως, *homologoumenōs*) signals that what follows is not Paul's personal theological opinion but the agreed, confessed, corporate testimony of the early church, the apostolic kerygma in its most distilled form.

"Great is the mystery of godliness", the word μυστήριον (*mystērion*) in the New Testament does not mean something that is irrational or unknowable; it means something that was previously hidden but has now been revealed, a divine secret disclosed in the fullness of time. The mystery of godliness is the mystery of the incarnation: God revealed in flesh, the eternal Son made visible and tangible in a specific human life. The six clauses that follow trace the arc of the incarnate life from its beginning (revealed in flesh) through its vindication (in the Spirit, the resurrection), its witnesses (seen by angels), its proclamation (among the nations), its reception (believed on in the world), and its consummation (taken up in glory, the ascension). The mystery is not a puzzle; it is the gospel.

V. THE WONDER OF THE INCARNATION: MEDITATING ON THE CONDESCENSION

The One Who Sustains All Things Became a Creature Who Needed to Be Sustained

Theology must periodically pause its analytical work and simply contemplate. The incarnation is, above all other realities in the universe, the reality that most rewards contemplation, not because it is irrational or beyond the reach of theological analysis, but because its depth is inexhaustible and because the analytical frameworks that illuminate it are always pointing beyond themselves to a reality that exceeds every framework. The eternal Son who upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3) became a creature who needed to be upheld; the one who created the womb lay helpless within it; the one who formed the human hand before whose touch lepers were cleansed held in His own infant hands the smallness of creaturely dependence.

Athanasius puts it with characteristic precision and characteristic beauty: "He was not, as might be imagined, circumscribed in the body, nor, while present in the body, was He absent elsewhere; nor, while He moved the body, was the universe left void of His working and providence. But, thing most marvellous, Word as He was, so far from being contained by anything, He rather contained all things Himself." The incarnate Son did not cease to uphold the universe in order to inhabit a body; He continued to uphold the universe while also, in the mystery of the hypostatic union, inhabiting the

limitations of human nature. The one who is omnipresent was present in a specific location. The one who is omniscient grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52). The one who is omnipotent became hungry (Matthew 4:2). This is not contradiction; it is the most astonishing expression of divine love that has ever existed.

The pastoral and doxological implication is this: the God who sustains your existence from moment to moment, in whose will you live and move and have your being, is the God who knows from the inside what it is to be you. He has wept (John 11:35). He has been exhausted (John 4:6). He has been afraid (“My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death,” Matthew 26:38, NASB 1995). He has prayed to the Father with tears (Hebrews 5:7). He has been tempted “in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NASB 1995). The incarnation is not God observing the human condition from a safe, divine distance; it is God entering the human condition from within, dwelling in its midst, sharing its limitations, and bearing its worst consequence, death, in order to redeem it from within.

“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”

COLOSSIANS 2:9, NASB 1995

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: THE INCARNATION AS THE GROUND OF ALL CHRISTIAN HOPE

Every dimension of the Christian gospel depends on the reality of the incarnation. The atonement depends on it: only a genuine human being can die for human beings, and only the eternal Son of God can bear the infinite weight of divine justice. Justification depends on it: the righteousness that is imputed to the believer is the active obedience of the incarnate Son, who kept the law perfectly in the humanity He shared with those He came to redeem. Sanctification depends on it: the Spirit who indwells the believer is the Spirit of the incarnate and risen Christ, conforming those He indwells to the image of the one who has already borne and glorified human nature. The resurrection hope depends on it: the risen body of Jesus, glorified, incorruptible, immortal, is human flesh, the same humanity He assumed at the incarnation, now permanently and irrevocably transformed by the power of the resurrection. The beatific vision depends on it: the one whom the redeemed will see face to face in eternity is the incarnate Son, the God-man, who has taken human nature permanently into the Godhead.

The incarnation is not a temporary divine expedient, graciously undertaken for the purpose of redemption and then discarded when the purpose was accomplished. The risen, ascended, and glorified Christ retains His human nature forever. The Son of God is now, and will be forever, the Son of Man. The Word who became flesh has not unbecome it. The tabernacling that began in the womb of the Virgin Mary continues in the glorified body of the risen Lord and will continue in the new creation, where God will “tabernacle” among His people (σκηνώσει μετ’ αὐτῶν, Revelation

21:3, the same verb as John 1:14) in the most permanent and most glorious form possible: the God-man dwelling with redeemed humanity in the new heavens and the new earth.

This is the gospel in its most comprehensive form: God has come to be with us, permanently and irrevocably, in the flesh of His eternal Son. The Word became flesh, and the Word remains flesh, glorified and exalted at the right hand of the Majesty on high, interceding for us, preparing a place for us, and coming again to bring us into the presence of the one whose glory the disciples saw when He tabernacled among them: full of grace and truth. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Key Texts: *John 1:1, 14, 18; Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Timothy 3:16; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:14–17; 4:15; Colossians 2:9; Revelation 21:3*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Incarnation	From the Latin <i>in carne</i> , ‘in flesh.’ The theological term for the event described in John 1:14, the eternal Son of God assuming a genuine human nature (body and soul) into personal union with His divine Person. The incarnation is an addition, not a subtraction: the Son took on human nature without ceasing to be God, without diminishing His divine attributes, and without confusing the divine and human natures into a third thing. The incarnation began at the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary and continues permanently: the risen, ascended, and glorified Christ retains His human nature forever.
Kenosis	From the Greek <i>κενόω</i> (<i>kenōō</i>), ‘to empty.’ The theological term drawn from Philippians 2:7 (‘He emptied Himself’) for the self-limitation of the eternal Son in the incarnation. The kenosis is not the abandonment or temporary suspension of divine attributes; it is the voluntary veiling of the divine glory and the voluntary restriction of the independent, self-serving exercise of divine prerogatives during the period of humiliation. The Son remained omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent in His divine nature throughout the incarnation; His human nature experienced genuine limitation, growth, weakness, and development in a manner consistent with real human experience.
Eskēnōsen	Greek: ‘He tabernacled’ or ‘He dwelt.’ The verb used in John 1:14 for the incarnate Word’s dwelling among human beings, derived from <i>skēnē</i> (‘tent,’ ‘tabernacle’). The term deliberately echoes the Old Testament tabernacle language (the Shekinah glory dwelling in the wilderness sanctuary) and identifies the incarnate presence of the Son as the fulfillment and surpassing of the Old Testament’s typological divine dwelling. The Word did not merely visit humanity as a divine guest; He tabernacled, took up His dwelling, in the midst of humanity in the most personal and permanent way possible.
Morphe Theou	Greek: ‘form of God.’ Used in Philippians 2:6 to describe the pre-incarnate Son’s essential, inner nature as God. The <i>morphē</i> (form) of God is not a superficial external appearance but the essential reality of what something is; to be in the <i>morphē</i> of God is to be God in the fullest and most essential sense. The phrase is the Pauline equivalent of John 1:1 (‘the Word was God’) and establishes that the self-emptying of verse 7 is not the abandonment of divine nature but the voluntary condescension of one who is fully and essentially divine.
Harpagmos	Greek noun used in Philippians 2:6, translated ‘something to be grasped’ or ‘something to be exploited.’ The most widely accepted interpretation (Hoover, Wright) reads it as <i>res rapta</i> , something already possessed that could be exploited for one’s own advantage. On this reading, the Son already possesses equality with God and freely chooses not to exploit it for self-advantage, but

Term	Definition
	instead pours Himself out in incarnational condescension. This interpretation preserves the full deity of the pre-incarnate Son (He already has equality with God) and the freedom of the incarnation (He is not compelled but chooses, from within divine fullness, the path of self-giving).
Docetism	From the Greek δοκεῖν (dokein), 'to seem' or 'to appear.' The earliest and most persistent Christological heresy, holding that Christ only appeared to be human, that His body was a phantom, a spiritual semblance, or a divine apparition rather than a genuine physical reality. John 1:14 ('the Word became flesh') and 1 John 4:2 ('Jesus Christ has come in the flesh') are the primary New Testament refutations of Docetism. Docetism destroys the atonement (a phantom body cannot truly die), the resurrection (a phantom body cannot truly rise), and the sympathy of the High Priest (a phantom body cannot truly suffer).
Hypostatic Union	The classical theological term for the mystery of Christ's Person: two complete, distinct natures, fully divine and fully human, united in the one Person (hypostasis) of the eternal Son of God. Defined at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) with four negative boundaries: the natures exist 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.' The hypostatic union is the ontological reality that makes the incarnation possible: the divine Person of the Son assumes the human nature without the human nature thereby becoming a separate human person, and without the divine nature being mixed with or changed by the human.
Theanthrōpos	Greek: 'God-man.' The classical theological shorthand for the unique, unrepeatable Person of the incarnate Son, fully divine and fully human in one undivided Person. The term expresses both the unity of the Person (one theanthrōpos, not a divine being alongside a human being) and the integrity of both natures (genuinely theos and genuinely anthrōpos). The incarnate Son is not a divine being who appears in human form (Docetism), not a human being who is divinely elevated (Ebionism), not a mixture of divine and human producing a third thing (Eutychianism), but the one, true God and the one, true man in the unity of a single divine Person.
Shekinah	From the Hebrew shakan (שָׁכַן), 'to dwell.' The divine glory that tabernacled among Israel in the wilderness sanctuary and the Jerusalem temple, the visible, radiant manifestation of the divine presence that descended on the Tabernacle at its dedication (Exodus 40:34–38) and departed from the temple at the exile (Ezekiel 10–11). John 1:14 identifies the incarnate Word as the fulfillment and permanent form of the Shekinah presence: the glory (δόξα, doxa) that the disciples saw in Christ is the Shekinah glory of YHWH, now dwelling personally and bodily in human flesh rather than in a tent or a temple.
Fullness of Time	The phrase used in Galatians 4:4 (τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου) to describe the moment of the incarnation as the divinely appointed culmination of all prior

Term	Definition
	redemptive history. The incarnation did not occur by chance or in response to unforeseen circumstances; it occurred 'when the fullness of time came', at the precise moment that God had planned from eternity, when the preparation of the old covenant had reached its appointed completion and the world was ready for the definitive revelation and redemptive act of the eternal Son. The fullness of time is the hinge-point of all history, the moment toward which all prior history was moving and from which all subsequent history proceeds.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the incarnation is a genuine historical event, that the eternal Son of God actually, truly, fully assumed a human nature in the womb of a real woman, in a real city, at a real point in first-century Palestinian history. The incarnation is not a myth, not a metaphor, not a spiritual symbol for the nearness of God; it is the most consequential event in the history of the universe, datable to the reign of Caesar Augustus, geographically locatable in Bethlehem of Judea, and historically verified by the apostolic eyewitnesses who “looked at and touched with our hands” the Word of Life (1 John 1:1, NASB 1995). The pastor who is not certain about the historical reality of the incarnation will preach a gospel that is vague where it needs to be concrete, spiritual where it needs to be physical, and tentative where it needs to be proclaimed.

We must also believe that the kenosis does not involve the diminishment of the divine nature, that the Son did not set aside His omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence in the incarnation. The difficulties of reconciling the divine and human attributes in the incarnate Son are real and demand careful theological engagement; but the solution is never to diminish either nature. The Son’s occasional expressions of limited knowledge in His human nature (Mark 13:32) do not imply that His divine nature ceased to be omniscient; they imply the genuine reality of His human nature, in which He truly grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52) as part of the authentic human development through which His active obedience was accomplished.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the incarnation produce in you a wonder that never grows old. The tendency of long familiarity with the Christmas story is to domesticate the incarnation, to reduce it to an annual celebration of warmth, family, and spiritual sentiment, stripped of its theological terror and its cosmic significance. But the incarnation is not primarily a heartwarming story; it is the most astonishing event in the history of the universe. The eternal Son of God, through whom and for whom all things were created, became a creature. The one who upholds the universe by the word of His power was laid in a feeding trough. The one before whose glory the seraphim veil their faces was wrapped in swaddling cloths. Let that reality press upon your heart with its full, undomesticated weight.

Desire, above all, the comfort that the incarnation provides in the darkest seasons of human experience. The God who governs your life from the throne of heaven is not a God who is detached from the experience of suffering, loss, grief, or fear. He has wept at the tomb of a friend. He has been abandoned by those He loved. He has prayed in agony, sweating drops of blood, asking whether the cup could pass. He knows what it is to be you in your worst moments, not by divine omniscience alone, but by genuine human experience. The incarnation is the ground of the most intimate pastoral

comfort in the gospel: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15, NASB 1995).

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation* from beginning to end. This is the most important patristic treatment of the theology of the incarnation ever written, and it remains, seventeen centuries later, one of the most theologically illuminating and spiritually nourishing texts in the entire Christian tradition. C.S. Lewis’s introduction to the modern edition is itself a masterpiece. Do not merely read it once; return to it annually as a spiritual and theological discipline, especially in the Advent and Christmas seasons.
- Preach the incarnation theologically, not merely sentimentally. The Christmas season provides the preacher with an annual opportunity to teach the congregation the full theological weight of what the incarnation means. Resist the cultural pressure to reduce Christmas preaching to seasonal warmth; use the annual occasion to ground your congregation in the doctrine of the hypostatic union, the kenosis, the tabernacled of the divine glory, and the necessity of the incarnation for redemption. The congregation that understands why the Word had to become flesh will find the Christmas story infinitely more moving, not less.
- Engage Docetism in its contemporary forms. The tendency to spiritualize the physical dimensions of the incarnation, to treat the body of Jesus as a vehicle for spiritual truth rather than a genuine physical reality, is pervasive in popular Christian piety and in certain strands of evangelical spirituality. The pastor who can identify and address this tendency, gently but clearly, will help his congregation develop a more robustly incarnational theology that takes seriously the physical dimensions of the Christian life: the sacraments, the body, the physical resurrection, and the new creation.
- Use the Philippians 2 hymn as a model for preaching on humility and service. Paul introduces the christological hymn as a motivational ground for the ethical exhortation to humility and unity in Philippians 2:1–4. The pattern he establishes, from the pre-incarnate glory of the Son to the servant-humility of the incarnation to the exaltation of the resurrection, is the christological pattern that should shape the Christian’s own journey of self-giving service. Preach the kenosis not merely as a christological doctrine but as the ethical charter of the Christian life.
- Pray the incarnation into your pastoral care. When you visit the sick, the grieving, the suffering, and the dying, bring the incarnation with you. The God to whom you are directing the suffering person is not a God who observes suffering from a safe divine distance; He is the God who entered suffering from within, who wept at Lazarus’s tomb, who sweat blood in Gethsemane, who cried out from the cross. The incarnation is the most powerful pastoral

resource the minister of the gospel possesses, because it is the ultimate ground of divine solidarity with human suffering.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before studying this lesson, how would you have described the incarnation to someone who had never heard of it? What language would you have used, and what theological concepts would you have drawn on? Now that you have worked through the lesson, what would you add, correct, or deepen in your prior description?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read John 1:1–18 with particular attention to the grammatical distinction between ἦν (en, ‘was’) in verses 1–2 and ἐγένετο (egeneto, ‘became’) in verse 14. What does this grammatical distinction establish about the relationship between the Son’s eternal being and the incarnation? What does the verb eskēnōsen (‘tabernacled’) in verse 14 contribute to the meaning of the incarnation? What Old Testament background does it evoke?

3. Read Philippians 2:5–11 carefully. Identify the two movements of the passage (downward and upward). In verse 6, what does it mean that the Son ‘existed in the form of God’? How does the phrase ‘did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped’ relate to His decision to empty Himself? What does the self-emptying consist of, according to the grammar of verse 7? What is the relationship between the depth of the condescension (v. 8) and the height of the exaltation (vv. 9–11)?

4. Read Hebrews 2:14–18. What specific reasons does the author give for the necessity of the Son’s genuine participation in ‘flesh and blood’? Identify at least three distinct purposes the incarnation serves, according to this passage. How does Hebrews 4:15 extend the argument? What is the connection between the genuine humanity of Christ and His fitness to serve as our High Priest?

5. Read Galatians 4:4–5. What does the phrase ‘the fullness of the time’ contribute to the meaning of the incarnation? What does it mean that the Son was ‘born of a woman, born under the Law’? What two purposes does Paul identify for the incarnation in verses 4–5, and how do they relate to each other?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson insists that the incarnation is an addition rather than a subtraction, that the Son assumed human nature without diminishing His divine nature. How does Colossians 2:9 (‘in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form’) support this claim? What are the implications of this claim for understanding the limitations of Christ’s human knowledge (Mark 13:32) and the genuine growth described in Luke 2:52?

7. The lesson presents Athanasius's argument that only the Word could renew what the Word had made, that the incarnation was necessary not merely because of the requirements of justice but because the image of God in humanity can only be renewed by the one whose image it is. Do you find this argument compelling? How does it relate to Paul's language of the 'new creation' and the image of Christ in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10?
8. The lesson distinguishes the orthodox understanding of the kenosis (the voluntary veiling of glory and restriction of the independent exercise of divine prerogatives) from the heterodox kenotic theology that holds the Son literally set aside or suspended His divine attributes at the incarnation. What specific problems arise from the heterodox kenotic position? How does Colossians 2:9 rule out the literal emptying of divine attributes?
9. The lesson argues that the incarnation is permanent, that the risen, ascended, and glorified Christ retains His human nature forever. What evidence from Scripture supports this claim? What are the theological implications of the permanence of the incarnation for the doctrine of the atonement, the intercession of Christ, and the eschatological hope of the new creation?
10. The lesson identifies 1 Timothy 3:16 as a compressed liturgical confession of the early church. Analyze each of its six clauses ('revealed in the flesh,' 'vindicated in the Spirit,' 'seen by angels,' 'proclaimed among the nations,' 'believed on in the world,' 'taken up in glory') in relation to the events of the incarnate life. How does this confession function as a summary of the entire christological narrative from incarnation to ascension?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson argues that the Christmas season provides the preacher with an annual opportunity to teach the congregation the full theological weight of the incarnation, and that this requires resisting the cultural reduction of Christmas to seasonal warmth. What specific theological content do you most want your congregation to understand about the incarnation? How would you structure a Christmas message or series that does justice to both the theological depth and the emotional power of John 1:14?
12. The lesson suggests that Docetism, the tendency to spiritualize the physical dimensions of the incarnation, is pervasive in contemporary evangelical piety. Where do you observe this tendency in your ministry context, in popular Christian culture, in contemporary worship, in the spirituality of your congregation? What specific teaching or pastoral interventions would address it most effectively?
13. The lesson presents the incarnation as the ultimate ground of divine solidarity with human suffering: the God to whom we direct the suffering person is the God who has entered suffering from within. How does this truth shape your pastoral care in practice? Can you describe a specific pastoral

situation in which the incarnation, the genuine humanity and genuine suffering of the Son of God, was the most powerful pastoral resource you had to offer?

14. This lesson begins Unit 3 of the Christology series, on the Incarnation. Looking ahead to the subsequent lessons in this unit, the Virgin Birth, the True Humanity of Christ, and the Full Deity of Christ, how does the foundational account of the incarnation established in this lesson provide the theological framework for each of those subsequent topics? What questions has this lesson raised that you most hope the remaining lessons in Unit 3 will address?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of John 1:1–18, attending especially to the astonishing movement from verse 1 (“In the beginning was the Word”) to verse 14 (“And the Word became flesh”). Let the group sit with the contrast between the eternal ἦν (was) of verses 1–2 and the historical ἐγένετο (became) of verse 14. Between those two verbs lies the most astonishing transition in the history of the universe: the eternal entered time, the infinite assumed finitude, the Creator became a creature. Read verse 14 slowly, word by word, pausing after each phrase: the Word, became, flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory. Let the simplicity and the staggering significance of those words press upon the group with their full weight.

Spend time in adoration of the incarnate Son, not only in His pre-incarnate glory, not only in His risen majesty, but in the specific, historical, embodied reality of His incarnate life. Adore Him for the womb, for the willingness of the eternal Son to begin His human life in the smallness and the vulnerability of embryonic existence within a teenage girl in an obscure village in occupied Judea. Adore Him for the manger, for the condescension that placed the one who upholds the universe by the word of His power in a feeding trough. Adore Him for the growth, for the genuineness of His human development, learning obedience through what He suffered (Hebrews 5:8), increasing in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), demonstrating that the assumption of human nature was total and not theatrical.

Pray with specific gratitude for the pastoral comfort of the incarnation, for the truth that the God to whom you bring your suffering, your grief, your fear, and your failure is the God who has experienced all of these things from the inside, in the flesh of His eternal Son. Pray Hebrews 4:14–16 over the congregation: ‘Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (NASB 1995). Let each phrase become a petition: that God would help His people hold fast their confession, draw near with confidence, and receive the mercy and grace that the incarnate High Priest perpetually provides.

Close with the first verse of the ancient Christmas hymn “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (Corde Natus ex Parentis, Aurelius Prudentius, c. 405 AD), spoken together as a doxological confession of the incarnation that the church has been making for sixteen centuries:

*“Of the Father’s love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending
He, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore.”*

AURELIUS PRUDENTIUS (C. 405 AD), TR. JOHN M. NEALE (1854)

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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