



'In the Flesh'

**Life Group Studies
on the Doctrine of the Incarnation**

Introduction

The season of ‘Advent’ is the lead up to Christmas, and focusses on the Christian hope in the ‘coming’ of Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

As part of this we are looking at our understanding of the doctrine (i.e. Christian teaching) of the ‘Incarnation’, which is how we describe the reality of God becoming a human being in the person of Jesus. This is one of the central beliefs of the Christian faith. It is the turning point of the story of the Bible, as it moves from the expectation of the Old Testament to the fulfilment of the New Testament. The Gospel of John begins with a meditation on the purpose of God for this world from before creation, and the wonder and joy of the disciples of Jesus in realising that ‘the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us’ (John 1:14).

The incarnation is also the basis of many other areas of our Christian life, as we will see. It is a very practical belief. So, a proper understanding of this idea is key to growing in our knowledge of God.

The doctrine of the incarnation, and the belief that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, has often been contested and discussed in detail over the history of the church. Some of your group members may have serious questions about it! One authoritative explanation of proper Christian beliefs about the nature of Jesus was given by the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD, which may provide stimulus for your discussions over these four studies:

*We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent,
teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;
truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body;
consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the
Godhead,
and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood;
in all things like unto us, without sin;
begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead,
and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation,
born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the
Manhood;
one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten,
to be acknowledged in two natures,
inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably;
the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union,
but rather the property of each nature being preserved,
and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence,
not parted or divided into two persons,
but one and the same Son, and only begotten,
God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ;
as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him,
and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us,
and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.*

Study 1: Fully God

Hebrews 1:1-14

1. Describe what you think it means for Jesus to be called the ‘Son of God’.
2. Do you find it difficult to accept that Jesus is ‘fully God’? Why/why not?
3. What does verse 1 of the reading tell us about how Christians should read the Old Testament scriptures?
4. What do vv3-4 tell us about the nature of the ‘Son’?
5. What events are referred to in v3 when it says ‘After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven’?
6. Verses 5-14 are an argument for the superiority of Christ over the angels. What differences between Christ and the angels does the writer note? Why might they spend so much time on this particular issue?
7. There have been many movements in the history of the church that have denied that Jesus was ‘fully God’, eg. the ‘Arians’ in the 4th century AD who argued that he was merely the first and greatest created being. Why do many people find it attractive to place a distance between Jesus and God? Can you think of any contemporary Christian groups that do this?
8. Why is it important for Christians to believe in the full divinity of Jesus? If you need help with finding answers, read John 1:1-18 and 1 John 1:1-4.

9. What would we lose if we gave up the belief that Jesus was the Son of God?
10. What practical difference does the ‘divinity’ of Jesus make to your life?

Study 2: Fully Human

Hebrews 2:5-15

1. Do you ever feel that God is distant from you and your troubles?
2. How would you answer the question ‘Why did God become a human being?’
3. Look at verses 5-9 of the reading – why was Jesus made ‘a little lower than the angels’?
4. According to vv10-12, how has Jesus created a new family of children of God?
5. What did the suffering and death of Jesus achieve? (vv14-15)
6. Why is it so important in this passage for Jesus to be fully and truly human?
7. The early church struggled with a belief called ‘Docetism’, which was the idea that Jesus merely appeared to be human, but was in fact really just a spiritual being. Why would people want to believe this? What does the incarnation say about what our attitude should be to our physical bodies?
8. Did Jesus have weaknesses and temptations like us? Read Luke 22:39-46.
9. What would we lose if we gave up the belief in the full humanity of Jesus?
10. What does the reality of Jesus’s humanity contribute to your faith? Read Hebrews 10:19-25 for ideas.

Study 3: At Work in the World

Luke 4:14-30

1. Where do you see God at work in the world at the moment?
2. This story from Luke comes after Jesus's baptism and his testing by Satan in the wilderness. What special thing is Jesus claiming about his own ministry here (v18)?
3. What is the nature of Jesus's work going to be (vv18-19)? Read Isaiah 61 together for a fuller appreciation of the context of his sermon.
4. Why did the people of Nazareth struggle to accept Jesus's divine anointing? Why did they reject him and try to kill him?
5. Why do you think that God has 'hidden' his work in the world inside the human nature of 'Joseph's son' (v22)?
6. What does this passage say about the mission of Jesus's followers?
7. People often feel a tension between the need for Christians to engage in evangelism (telling people about salvation), and to do works of social justice and welfare. How might the incarnation of Jesus shed light on this problem?
8. What does the incarnation of Jesus mean for the way that God might work through you?

Study 4: Lord of All

Philippians 2:1-11

1. Who is a leader that you particularly admire? What do you admire about them?
2. What is God like? Write down a list of all the descriptive words that your group can come up with.
3. Verses 6-11 of the reading speak about what is called the ‘kenosis’(i.e. emptying) of Jesus in becoming fully human. What does this tell us about the nature and character of God?
4. Why are we told by Paul to model ourselves on Christ (v5)? Is it possible for us to be like Jesus, who is fully God?
5. What is the basis for the ‘lordship’ of Jesus in verse 9-11)? What does this tell us about how he might exercise this lordship?
6. What particular attitudes and actions does Paul want to see in the Philippians in the way they relate to each other (vv2-4)? What basis does he give for them being able to live this type of transformed life?
7. Many Christians struggle to hold together the reality that we are saved by grace with our need to work in order to grow in holiness. How can the incarnation help us to understand how to overcome this tension?
8. How could you show in your life that Jesus is Lord?

NOTES