

The Importance of the Incarnation

What is the Incarnation? The word “Incarnation” means “the act of being made flesh”. It comes from the Latin “in” and “caro” (or “carno”) meaning “flesh” (as in the words “carnivore” and “carnal”). The word “reincarnation” means “made flesh again.”

John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The Latin Vulgate Bible used the word “incarnated” for “became flesh.”

It is a multi-syllabled theological word, but it does have a place, because it’s the best way to describe Christ as God taking on flesh by being born, in one word, as far as I can see.

We have become so used to hearing the stories of Jesus being born in the manger, and hearing that the Son of God became a man, that we can tend to take it for granted, and fail to appreciate the amazing mystery of the Incarnation.

So let’s spend some time thinking about it and examining this unparalleled event, certainly one of the greatest events that has ever happened in the history of the Universe. Nothing like it has ever happened before or since.

William Barclay says about John 1:14: “It might well be held that this is the greatest single verse in the whole New Testament. We must therefore spend much time upon it that we may enter the more fully into its riches.” So he goes on for many pages to expound on this in his “Daily Study Bible.” He also says “This is one of the verses of Scripture of which a lifetime of study and thought could not exhaust the truth.”

So we could talk about John 1:14 for a very long time, but let’s move to some other scriptures. The Bible calls the Incarnation a mystery.

1 Timothy 3:16 “Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”

It is something outside of the range of human comprehension. You have to have the Holy Spirit in order to grasp the meaning of it. People talk about “the miracle of childbirth,” talking just about human birth. This is a vastly more fantastic miracle of childbirth!

Galatians 4:4-5 ⁴“But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.”

An interesting question to ponder: Do you think Jesus became the Son when He was born of Mary, or had He been the Son in heaven before that?

It seems from this verse that He was the Son in His eternal relationship with the Father. He didn’t become the Son in His birth, but was sent by the Father as One who through all eternity was the Son.

If there wasn't a Son before the Incarnation, then there wasn't a Father either, but God the Father is mentioned in the Old Testament. Most Christians have historically believed He was eternally the Son, but some believe He wasn't, and good arguments can be made for both views.

Matthew 1:18 "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit."

The way that the Incarnation happened was by means of the virgin birth. The Holy Spirit caused the Son to become flesh from the very early stage of a fertilised ovum, which grew in Mary's body for 9 months. The Son came from God, but He also came from Mary. So He is not only God, but He is also human, like every one of us.

It's a pretty amazing event to think about! It's so important that if you don't believe in it, you can't be a Christian.

1 John 4:2-3 ²"This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

To the Greeks of the time of early Christianity, the body was evil, so they didn't want to believe God became human. And "Christ came in the flesh" doesn't just mean He was human, but the word "sarx" is used, rather than "anthropos" (human). "Sarx" is the word used over and over to refer to the weakness of human flesh and its liability to sin. The very thought of applying this word to God the Creator was mind-blowing and staggering to the Greeks.

A group called the "Docetists" held that Jesus was only a phantom, an appearance. His human body wasn't a real body, but more like a ghost. Thankfully that's not much of an issue these days.

One passage that reveals a lot about the Incarnation is Philippians 2:5-8:

⁵ "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; ⁷ rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

Verse 6 From all eternity He was God—had the nature of God and equality with God. In verses 7 and 8 Paul lists 7 downward steps Jesus took in His renunciation of Himself.

- ◆ 1. He made Himself nothing (or 'of no reputation'). He "emptied" Himself of His divine attributes. He didn't lose His Deity when He became a man, because God is immutable and cannot cease to be God. He was always God the Son, continued to be God the Son in His earthly life as a man, and is still God the Son in Heaven today, and always will be. He is "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) But as well as being God, He took on the qualities of man, all of them, so He is both fully God and fully Man. So He became hungry, weary and tearful.

- ◆ 2. “He took on the very nature of a servant.” He didn’t boast His eternal glory and His right to be served, but instead showed His humility and desire to serve. (Matthew 20:28 also). It wasn’t play-acting, it was reality.
- ◆ 3. “He was made in human likeness.” He participated in the same flesh and blood as man—a totally new state of being for Him.
- ◆ 4. “And being found in appearance as a man.” He associated with the people around Him—didn’t hold Himself aloof. He was just one of us.
- ◆ 5. “He humbled Himself.” It is a supreme example of humility for someone who flung stars into space to be born in a stable, to be subject to a human parent as a baby, to be tortured and nailed to a cross.
- ◆ 6. “He became obedient to death.” The God of the Universe submitted Himself to a cruel death of a criminal.
- ◆ 7. “Even death on a cross.” Crucifixion was considered the worst kind of disgrace. Galatians 3:13 –God’s law said it was a curse. Jesus died bearing the burden of the worst of criminals and the guiltiest of sinners—with the guilt of every sin ever committed!

So the Incarnation is a very important event! Let’s look at the purposes of the Incarnation, the things it achieved and the reason for this phenomenal occurrence.

1. Jesus came to Reveal God to Man.

Matthew 11:27 “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”

We can see and know God to some extent in the Creation around us, and by praying to Him, but the greatest revelation of what God is like was shown by Jesus.

John 14:8-9 ⁸ “Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”
⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

If we’ve seen Jesus we’ve seen the Father.

John 1.18 “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has **made Him known**.”

John 17:4 “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”

He came to glorify the Father, to show the Great God to mankind.

2. He came to show us the light, the Truth.

John 1:9,17 ⁹ “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

He is the light of the world. He brought light, truth and grace.

3. He came to Redeem Man, to Save us from our Sins.

John 1:29 “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

There are many verses on this, but let’s look at just one other passage:

Hebrews 2:14-15 ¹⁴ “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

Some other reasons for His Incarnation are given here.

4. He came to destroy the power of the Devil.

5. He came to be our High Priest

(Verse 17) so He can help us in time of need, e.g. Temptation (Verse 18).

6. He came to train the Disciples and Set up the Church

To preach the gospel (the good news of this salvation from sin) to the whole world. This is the beginning of the Kingdom of God.

7. He came to bring us Eternal Life.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

So this amazing event, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, is supreme in its importance.

How does this apply to each of us personally? Well, because of the Incarnation, we know God, we know the light, we have a High Priest in heaven to help us, we are part of the Church, our sins are forgiven, and we have eternal life! But there is something else. We also can participate in the Incarnation in a very special way.

The Incarnation means God dwelling in the flesh, and from our point of view, we are already flesh, but we can have God come down and dwell in each of us!

This happens when we are baptised. Just as Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit coming into Mary, so the Holy Spirit can come into us, and we are born from above with Jesus living in us. That means God and Man are united in each of us, which is what the Incarnation was all about: God becoming flesh.

2 Peter 1:4 "Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."

We don't only have human nature; we have the divine nature in us.

Let's give God glory and thanks; that God was willing to become flesh so our sins can be forgiven, and He continues to live in our flesh today. Praise God for the wonderful miracle of the Incarnation!