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JESUS CHRIST IS the one-of-a-kind person in all of history. Jesus of Nazareth, the unique One, has undoubtedly been the subject of more books, more songs, and more devotion than anyone who has ever lived. His appearance on earth was so monumental that history divided around His life, before Christ (BC) and in the year of our Lord (*anno Domini*, or AD). Time has meaning to us as it is defined by the presence of Jesus Christ in history.

On one occasion Jesus' disciples voiced the question that people have continued to ask about Him for almost two thousand years. Having witnessed His miraculous calming of the sea, the Twelve looked at each other and asked, "What kind of a man is this?" (Matthew 8:27). In other words, who is this Jesus? The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament were written to answer that question and explain its implications for our lives.

In part 1 we will explore this greatest of all subjects, considering the uniqueness and authority of Jesus and then looking more deeply at His death and resurrection.

His Unique Identity

Jesus is unique because He is the only person who existed before He was born (see John 1:1, 14) and who is today what He has always been (Hebrews 13:8). That makes him *Deity*. But He is more than Deity. He is the only person whose earthly conception had no relationship to His origin. By virtue of His birth as a man, Jesus Christ is now *both Son of God and Son of Man*. He is Deity and He is humanity. He is the God-man—Deity incarnated, given flesh.

His nature is “very God of very God,” to use a phrase theologians coined to try to declare Christ’s divine nature. A lot of people respect Jesus Christ as a great person, an inspiring teacher, and a great leader, but reject His deity.

This is heresy. You cannot hold Jesus in high regard while denying He is the eternal God, a point Jesus Himself made clear to the religious rulers, the crowds, and His closest disciples (for example, John 8:23–24, 28–29; 10:30–37).

Jesus Christ clearly and directly claimed to be God when He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). This statement is significant because the word “one” is neuter in form, meaning that He and the Father are one, perfect in nature and unified in essence. This was a personal claim of total equality with the Father. Those who heard this statement clearly understood it to be a claim to deity, for they immediately tried to stone Him for blasphemy because He made Himself equal to God (v. 33).

Four Proofs of His Deity

We could use a number of lines of argument to demonstrate Jesus’ deity but I want to consider four of them, beginning with His *preexistence*. We have already said that Christ existed before His birth. The

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prophet Micah stated Christ's preexistence this way: "As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" (5:2).

This is a significant verse for several reasons, beginning with Micah's accuracy in prophesying Jesus' birthplace. I have visited Bethlehem, and even today it's a small town. Yet it was even smaller and more insignificant in Jesus' day, so for Micah to predict Bethlehem as Messiah's birthplace was more surprising, like telling readers where to find a needle in a haystack. But notice what the prophet said about this One who would be born in Bethlehem. He had no beginning; His existence reaches back into eternity past.

Likewise, the prophet Isaiah gave Jesus Christ the title "Eternal Father" (9:6), or "Father of eternity," in his prophecy of Jesus' first and second comings. Since Jesus is the Father of eternity, He is also the Father or initiator of time. But the only way Jesus could be the initiator of time is if He existed before time. This verse speaks of His preexistence and tells us that Christ is of a different nature than anyone who has ever lived.

The prophets were not the only ones who taught Jesus' preexistence. Jesus declared it Himself in an exchange that stunned and infuriated His Jewish detractors. They had accused Jesus of having a demon (John 8:52) because He claimed that anyone who believed in Him would not see death. They reviled Him and asked this question: "Whom do You make Yourself out to be?" (v. 53). That's a great question, but they didn't like Jesus' answer, especially when He said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day" (v. 56).

The Jewish leaders replied, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" (v. 57). They were getting upset because Jesus was making claims no man had ever made before. Then Jesus made this

crucial statement: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (v. 58).

Don’t miss the importance of the verb tenses Jesus used here. He was making a crucial claim. He did not say, “Before Abraham was born,

I was” but “I am.” This is significant because “I AM” is the name God gave Himself when He sent Moses to redeem Israel from Egypt.

“God said to Moses . . . “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you”” (Exodus 3:14). This is the term we transliterate as “Yahweh,” the

self-existing God. This name describes God’s personal, self-sufficient, and eternal nature. The eternal God has no past, so He cannot say “I was.” He has no future, so He cannot say “I will be.” God exists in an eternal now.

Time is only meaningful to us because we are not independently self-sufficient and eternal. When Jesus told the Jews that He predated Abraham, He was claiming not only preexistence but Deity.

The second proof of Jesus’ deity was He made Himself equal to God. By taking to Himself the most personal and hallowed name of God, “I am” in John 8:58, Jesus claimed equality with God. His hearers understood this perfectly, for on this occasion as well they picked up stones intending to stone Jesus for blasphemy (v. 59).

Jesus’ claim is even stronger in John 5:17–18. “‘My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.’ For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” Those around Him understood Jesus to mean

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that He was placing Himself on equal standing with God because He was claiming to be of the same essence as God.

The Bible elsewhere equates Jesus with God. Genesis 1:1 says that God created the world. But Colossians 1:16 says that by Jesus Christ, “all things were created.” Either we have two Creators, or the God of Genesis 1 is the God of Colossians 1.

The apostle John made the identical claim for Jesus when he began his gospel by declaring, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). So the Word is distinct from God, yet the Word is equal with God.

John doesn’t leave us in doubt about the identity of the Word. “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). Then he added, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (v. 18).

When you put these three verses together, you get quite a picture of Jesus Christ. He is distinct from God, yet equal with God. He took on human flesh for the purpose of making the invisible God visible to human beings. The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus “is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3).

IN HEBREWS 1:8 GOD THE
FATHER CALLS HIS SON “GOD.”
NOTHING COULD BE CLEARER
THAN THAT.

So don’t let anyone tell you that Jesus is just a great man or merely a son of God. He is God, the Son. There is even stronger language in Hebrews 1:8, because here God Himself is the speaker. “Of the Son He

says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.” God the Father is calling His Son “God.” Nothing could be clearer or more direct than that. No wonder Paul wrote that in Jesus, “All the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).

This cannot be said about anyone else. Jesus claimed equality with God, and the writers of Scripture consistently support that claim.

A third proof for Jesus’ deity is that Jesus readily accepted the worship of His disciples and others. For a mere human being to do that would be blasphemy. But Jesus’ disciples came to recognize Him as God, and after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, they had no hesitation in making that known.

One example of this worship is that great scene in John 20 when Jesus appeared to the disciples after His resurrection. Thomas had been absent during an earlier visit, and he said he would not believe unless he saw with his own eyes (v. 25). So Jesus came to the disciples and invited Thomas to touch His hands and side and to believe (v. 27). Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” (v. 28).

Not only did Jesus accept Thomas’s declaration of worship, but He said that all those who believe in Him are “blessed” (v. 29). Notice that when Thomas said, “My Lord and my God,” Jesus said in effect, “Yes, I am He.” He accepted the worship that is due to Deity alone. We can see worship being offered to Jesus throughout the Gospels. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, the disciples worshiped Him after He calmed a storm (Matthew 14:33). Even demons acknowledged His deity, although Jesus silenced them (Mark 1:23–25). But Jesus Himself offered the strongest proof of His deity. He answered Satan’s temptation with the statement, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus said worship belongs to God alone, yet He received that worship. Only God could say what Jesus said.

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A fourth proof of Jesus' deity is His membership in the Trinity. Titus 2:13 tells us that Jesus Christ is “our great God and Savior.” The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and yet He is fully God. It also teaches that God the Father is God. The question the early church grappled with was how Jesus could be God yet also be distinct from the Father as the Son.

A child at our church once asked me, “Pastor, if Jesus is God, then who was He talking to on the cross when He said, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?’ Was He talking to Himself?”

That’s a very perceptive question. Jesus was not talking to Himself on the cross but to the Father. We can say this with confidence because the Bible teaches that the Godhead is composed of three distinct, yet coequal persons who share the same divine substance: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The term “trinity” is used for this foundational truth.

So when we talk about God, we could be talking about either the Godhead corporately or about any one of the three persons who make up the Godhead. God’s Word teaches Jesus’ deity because it presents Him as a member of the Godhead, the divine Trinity. Jesus identified Himself as distinct from the Father when Jesus called Himself “the Son of God” (John 10:36). Yet, just a few minutes before He said that, He also said, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30).

The unity of the Trinity and yet the distinction of its three members is evident in Jesus’ commission to His disciples. He told us to baptize people “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Normally we would expect to read the plural form “names” here, because Jesus mentioned three names. But He used the singular “name.” So we must conclude either that Jesus was mistaken, or that He used the singular on purpose because the three members of the Godhead make up one entity.

There’s no question which of these conclusions is correct. The name

of God is singular because the triune God is one God. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. Paul closed one of his letters with this benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Paul integrated the three persons of the Godhead because they are one.

The Trinity is not an easy concept to grasp because there is nothing like it in the universe. Without the Bible we would have no knowledge of this kind of existence. It is outside our realm of understanding to think of one God existing in three equal persons who are distinct personalities while sharing the same essence. There have been a number of illustrations suggested for the Trinity, but they all fall short of the mark because the Trinity is unique.

For example, someone has suggested the illustration of water, ice, and steam. All are made up of the same essence, yet they are distinct forms of that essence. The problem with this is that if we apply it to the Godhead, it makes it appear that God appears sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Spirit. But that is a heresy because the fullness of the Godhead is always present in each member of the Trinity.

Another common illustration of the Trinity is the egg. An egg has three parts—the shell, the yolk, and the white (albumen). The problem with this illustration is that none of these three parts by itself can be defined as an egg. They are just part of the egg. But the fullness of Deity resides in each individual member of the Godhead. Jesus Christ isn’t part God; He is fully God. The same can be said of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The best illustration I have come up with for the Trinity is a pretzel. A typical pretzel has three circles or holes formed by the dough. These holes are distinct from one another, and each hole is complete within itself. Yet the three holes are interconnected because they belong to the

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same piece of dough. They have the same character. There is only one pretzel, not three. This is not a perfect illustration, but I think it gets closer to the point. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity establishes the full deity of Jesus Christ. He is God.

The Human God

Yet Jesus is also man. He partakes of the nature of Deity because He is the Son of God. He also partakes of the nature of humanity because He is the “Son of Man.” In fact, this was Jesus’ favorite title for Himself.

Jesus left heaven to take on human flesh, which is what we mean by the term “incarnation.” Jesus became flesh and blood, an event that was prophesied in Scripture hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Two prophecies from the book of Isaiah and their fulfillment in the New Testament give us a picture of Jesus’ human nature. He was fully human yet unique in several important ways.

The most important distinctive of Jesus’ human nature is that He was born of a virgin. In Isaiah 7:14 the prophet wrote, “The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” Two chapters later comes a second prophecy: “A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us” (9:6).

Notice how careful the Holy Spirit is with the language here. The Son is “given,” not born. Why? Because as the Son of God, Jesus already existed. But the child is “born,” a reference to Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. God the Father gave the Son to us through a supernaturally wrought conception in human flesh through the process of a human birth. Paul brought these prophecies from Isaiah together when he wrote, “When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4).

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God “sent forth” the Son because the Son is given (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus was “born of a woman” because a child was to be born. This is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus’ birth confirms His distinctiveness as God in the flesh. Matthew says that the events of Jesus’ birth happened “to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet [that is, Isaiah]” (Matthew 1:22). Matthew preceded this statement with the specific reason for Christ’s birth, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Essentially, Jesus was a baby who was born to die. Mary knew this. Joseph knew this. Even the wise men who came to worship the child in the cradle who had created them knew this. That’s why the gifts they gave Him were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The myrrh, in particular, is an expensive resin used as a perfume yet also used in burying the dead (John 19:39). The wise men gave Jesus this burial fragrance for the same reason Mary wrapped her newborn in swaddling clothes. Swaddling clothes kept a newborn’s arms straight during his or her early days. The strips of cloth were not unlike the bandages used to wrap the dead. The meaning of both the swaddling clothes and the myrrh was not lost on Matthew, who had let us know that this baby had come to take away the sins of the world.

Significantly, the gospel writer earlier gave another testimony to the distinctiveness of Jesus’ human nature. Matthew concluded the Lord’s genealogy, writing, “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16). The phrase “by whom” is critical here, because it is a feminine singular relative pronoun. That is very important because the Bible is saying that Jesus was conceived through Mary, but not by Joseph.

This, in other words, is a careful witness to His virgin birth. Joseph is important in Jesus’ genealogy, because Matthew is showing that Joseph was descended from David. Since Joseph was Jesus’ legal—though not

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biological—father, Jesus had a rightful claim to the throne of David. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), and not by Joseph, in order that His human nature might be sinless. This is why He would be called “the Son of God” at His birth.

Jesus’ humanity had both a heavenly origin through the power of the Holy Spirit and an earthly origin through Mary. Because Jesus’ nature is different from ours in terms of being sinless and born of a virgin, some people in church history denied His humanity was real. They believed He just appeared to be human. But that is another heresy that denies the reality of His life and His death for sin.

JESUS WAS FULLY HUMAN. HE
COULD BE TIRED AND THIRSTY,
HAD HUMAN EMOTIONS, AND
WEPT AT LAZARUS’S GRAVE.

Make no mistake; Jesus was fully human. The Gospels demonstrate this again and again. He was the God who made everything, the God who never becomes weary or needs to sleep. Yet in His humanity He could be tired and thirsty (John 4:6–7). We know Jesus had human emotions because He wept at Lazarus’s grave (John 11:35) and felt compassion for people (Matthew 9:36). He also loved us with an everlasting love. And He had a human soul and spirit (Matthew 26:38; Luke 23:46), which all human beings have.

Some people have a problem with Jesus’ human nature because they assume if He was human, He had to be sinful. Not when the Holy Spirit oversees the birth process. We have already noted that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, bypassing the sinful human nature of Joseph as the father. The same objection is raised about the Bible. If human beings wrote the Bible, the argument goes, it must have errors in it. That might be true except for one thing: The Holy Spirit oversaw the writing

of Scripture to preserve it from error (2 Peter 1:21).

What the Spirit did with the written Word of God, He did with the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. The Spirit superintended the conception of both the written and the incarnate Word so that there was no human contamination in either. Paul wrote that Jesus “knew no sin,” a perfect sacrifice to become “sin on our behalf” so we might partake of God’s righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

If Jesus were just a sinful human being, His death would have done nothing to save us. According to Hebrews 4:15, Jesus’ present ministry in heaven as our Great High Priest depends upon His sinlessness. He could not help us in our weakness if He were as sinful and weak as we are.

Jesus’ Deity and Humanity

The two natures of Jesus Christ form what theologians call *the hypostatic union*. This is a big term that simply means undiminished Deity and perfect humanity united yet unmixed forever in one person. In other words, Jesus was no less God when He became a perfect man. He was fully human, but without sin. It’s important that we understand Jesus is one person, not two. He is the God-man, not sometimes God and sometimes man. He is one person with two natures. Jesus has a perfect human and divine nature, which makes Him unique. Nobody else is God become a man—God in the flesh.

One Scripture passage puts all of this together: Philippians 2:5–11. We will deal with this phenomenal passage in greater detail later, but we conclude this chapter with the highlights of this union to show that this passage teaches us how we should live in response to what Jesus did in taking on human nature. Significantly in verses 3–4 the apostle Paul prefaced this passage by calling believers to be humble rather than prideful, to be concerned about the interests of others rather than just

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their own interests—which is the way Jesus lived when He came to earth.

Then he wrote, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” (vv. 5–6). This is a tremendous statement of Jesus’ deity. He existed as God prior to His birth in Bethlehem. He was equal with the Father in divine essence. Here is a succinct statement of what the Bible says about Jesus’ deity.

Then we come to Jesus’ humanity. He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (v. 7). Does this mean that Jesus emptied Himself of His deity? Not at all. It was impossible that Jesus Christ could cease being God. This verse is not talking about what Jesus emptied Himself of but what He emptied Himself into. It’s like pouring something from one pitcher into another. Jesus took all of His deity and poured it into another vessel, the “form of a bond-servant.”

He didn’t stop being who He is, but He changed the form of who He is. When He came to earth, Jesus moved from His preexistent, glorified form and poured the fullness of His deity into a human form. Simply becoming a human being was enough of a step down for the Son of God. But Jesus became a “bond-servant,” a slave, the lowest possible position on the social ladder in that day.

JESUS CAME AS A LOWLY
SERVANT, WHICH MEANS THERE
IS NO ONE WITH WHOM JESUS
CANNOT IDENTIFY.

We could say that He who is very God of very God became “very slave of very slave.” That’s why most of the people in Jesus’ day missed His birth. They were looking for a king, not a servant. They expected a king to be born in a palace to rich parents, not in a stable to the poorest of the poor.

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Jesus came as a lowly servant, which is good news for us because that means there is no one with whom Jesus cannot identify. If you are not very high on the social ladder, Jesus understands because He has been there. And no matter how high you may be, Jesus has been higher because He is the Son of God.

When Jesus took on flesh, He was “made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Even though Jesus was much more than just a man, those who saw Him regarded Him as just a man. Jesus didn’t go around with a halo around His head. He looked like a man.

Luke 2:52 says Jesus grew in the same ways as other people: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. Isaiah said Jesus had “no stately form or majesty” in His human appearance that would make people stop and look twice (53:2). Jesus was not only born in humble circumstances, but “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

In His sacrifice for our sins, Jesus humbly accepted the most painful, humiliating form of death the Romans could inflict. In Jesus’ crucifixion we get an idea of what is meant when the Bible says He emptied Himself. Jesus chose to lay aside the independent use of His divine attributes, submitting Himself completely to His Father’s will. How do we know this? Because when Peter attacked the high priest’s servant, Jesus told Peter He could call more than twelve legions of angels to His defense if He desired (Matthew 26:53). But Jesus did not do that, knowing an effective sacrifice for sin meant that He must suffer and die. He could not simply call on His divine power to wipe out Satan but had to submit Himself to death.

Of course Philippians 2 does not end with verse 8. Because Jesus was obedient to death, “God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow . . . and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is

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Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 9–11).

The honor Jesus Christ commands is intrinsic honor, for Jesus is King of the universe, the unique God-man to whom every knee will someday bow. In truly understanding and knowing who He is we are best able to comprehend all that has been accomplished for us on the cross. The cross was not something that just happened at a point in history. Rather, by looking at the prophetic Word we can see how the event of the cross had been established long before Christ was ever even born. Both prophecy and typology pointed forward to it in the Old Testament, which is the subject of our next chapter.