

SERIES: This We Believe

SERMON: **I Believe in Jesus Christ**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 1:1-13

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DATE: April 27, 2008

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel we have recorded for us the great discourse Jesus gave on the Bread of Life. It was highly controversial because in it Jesus claimed superiority to Moses, established equality with the Father, and claimed to be the only way to eternal life. Because of these claims, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Then Jesus asked the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Simon Peter answered for the rest, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:66-68).

I would ask us the same question today: to whom shall we go—for peace with God, for forgiveness of sins, for meaning and purpose, and for life everlasting? To whom, other than Jesus? He still has the words of eternal life.

Our survey of foundational Bible truths brings us today to the doctrine of Jesus Christ, God's Son. We have spent more than half our time for the past eighteen months studying the life and teachings of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, but what I desire to do today is to offer a summary of the Person and work of Christ. I would like to focus on the uniqueness of Jesus in regard to His pre-existence, His incarnation, His life, death, and resurrection, and His ascension and present ministry in heaven. But my ultimate goal is to move us to fall in love with Him more and to worship Him.

Our proposed Free Church Statement of Faith reads in article 4:

Jesus Christ

We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus—Israel's promised Messiah—was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.

There is no one else in all of history like Jesus.

Jesus is unique in that He existed before He was conceived. (John 1:1-2; 8:58; Micah 5:2)

If asked, "Where did you come from?", most of us would have no difficulty answering that we came into existence at the moment a sperm and egg from our two biological parents united. Well, that explains where our bodies originated. However, if asked, "Where did your soul and spirit come from?", the answer is a bit more difficult. Some theologians have suggested that every time conception takes place God creates a new soul and spirit and deposits it into the fetus. Some have even suggested that God created all the souls that would ever exist and keeps them in a soul-bank, depositing one when a body is conceived. Others, however, myself included, believe we receive our souls and our spirits the same way we receive our bodies—from our parents.

It is not just a body that is conceived, but a living human being. And that's why we not only look like our parents but also tend to act like them, talk like them, and think like them (scary thought, isn't it?). That's also why we sin, as we saw last Sunday—our parents passed on to us the sin nature they received from their parents.

Jesus Christ is unique in this regard. He received His body and his human nature from His mother alone by virtue of the miracle of the Virgin Birth, for the Holy Spirit enabled Mary to conceive without the agency of a human father. However, he did not receive His soul and spirit from her; thus there is no need to posit *her* immaculate conception in order to maintain *His* sinlessness.

Jesus' soul and spirit existed long before His conception, in fact, from all eternity. Listen to John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." In John 8:58 we find Jesus Himself claiming pre-existence, as He says to the religious leaders of His day, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" No one else alive in His day or in ours could say that.

Micah 5:2, the well-known prophecy of the birth of Christ, says, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." So Jesus Christ was unique in that He existed *before* He was conceived.

Jesus is unique in His incarnation.

"Incarnation" means the embodiment of deity in human form. We sometimes speak of God living in us, of Jesus Christ sitting on the throne of our lives, or of the Holy Spirit filling us, but none of that qualifies technically as incarnation. Those describe man coming under the power and influence of God, but the incarnation is God becoming human. That happened only once.

The necessity of the incarnation: that we might know the Father. Back in John 1, verse 14 we read more about the Word: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Then in verse 18 it says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Believers before Christ knew God, but not as we can know Him. They knew Him by his creation, by His miracles, and by His words, but there was much about Him that was shrouded in mystery. They certainly did not know Him as Father.

Someone has used the analogy of one of us trying to share with a snail what the world of human beings is like. Where would we start? How could we communicate? Probably the only way to succeed would be to become a snail and to communicate like snails communicate. Even then, would the snail have the capacity to understand what we were trying to share? Well, that may be something like the dilemma God faced in wanting to make Himself known to us after the Fall, and He resolved it by sending His own Son to become one of us.

The meaning of the Incarnation: humility. Turn with me to Philippians 2. This is a passage which principally addresses the subject of unity and love in the body of Christ. Jesus is presented as our supreme example because of His selfless humility revealed in the Incarnation. Let's start reading in verse 5:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

This passage begins with Christ enjoying the glory of Heaven as His Father's equal. However, He did not hold on to that position at all costs; He did not grasp it and refuse to let go; instead He made himself nothing or, as the KJV reads, He emptied Himself. This is sometimes called the *kenosis* by theologians since that is the Greek word for “emptied Himself.” That's in essence what it meant for Christ to become a man. So great were His divine position and prerogatives that to even veil them for a short time was an incredible act of humility.

Of course, Jesus never emptied Himself of His deity; what He emptied Himself of was the independent use of some of His divine attributes. By that I mean He never became less than God, never less than loving, just, faithful, patient, and truthful, but He did surrender the independent use of attributes like divine omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

The result of the Incarnation (is best expressed in the following way): undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever but without mixture. We're dealing here with some heavy theological truth, but it's very important, because most of the destructive heresies of the Christian faith and most of the cults make their gravest errors right at this point. Some err in denying His deity, others in denying His humanity. Some call him a divine man, others a human God. He was neither; He was the God-man—undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person. There are five lines of evidence we can offer to show that Christ possessed undiminished deity.

The undiminished deity of Jesus Christ

1. He possessed the attributes of God. Virtually every one of the attributes of God the Father we examined three Sundays ago is attributed to Jesus somewhere in the NT. Let me cite just a couple of examples. He is unchangeable (Heb. 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”). He is gracious (John 1:17 says, “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”). He is faithful and true (Revelation 19:11: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True.” From the context it is clear that the rider is Jesus Christ.

Now the reason this is powerful evidence for the deity of Christ is that if God alone possesses a

set of attributes to perfection, and yet Jesus possesses those same attributes to perfection, then Jesus must be God.

2. Jesus performed the works of God. In John 5:17 Jesus says to the Jews who were persecuting Him,

“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.’ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

Let me mention four works of God which are attributed to both the Father and the Son, but to no ordinary human being. First, consider creation. While Gen. 1:1 tells us that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," John 1:1-2 ascribes creation to Christ, as does Col. 1:16: "By Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

A second work of God which Jesus also performed is forgiveness of sins. A paralytic was once let down through a roof into the home where Jesus was teaching. It says in Mark 2:5, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Now some teachers of the Law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" You know, they were absolutely right—only God *can* forgive sins. But they were wrong in failing to realize is that Jesus could too, because He was God.

A third work of God Jesus performed is regeneration, the imparting of spiritual life. He said in John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." Who, other than God, can give eternal life to anyone? Yet Jesus claimed He could.

A fourth work Jesus did was to impart physical life by means of resurrection. In John 5:21 He claimed, "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it."

3. He was given the names of God. Jesus is called "God" in Hebrews 1:8, "Lord" in John 11:27, "King of Kings" in Rev. 19:16, and "Lord of Lords" in the same passage.

4. He accepted worship as God, from both men and angels. In John 20:28 doubting Thomas worshiped Jesus, saying, "My Lord and my God," and, far from rebuking him for doing so, Jesus affirmed what He said. God even commanded His angels to worship Christ. In Hebrews 1:6 it says, "When God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" But on top of all these evidences Jesus also . . .

5. He claimed to be God. It's curious to me that liberal theologians today often deny that Jesus ever claimed to be God. But the liberals of His day certainly thought He did. In John 10:31 the Jews were preparing to stone Jesus when He challenged them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any

of these,' replied the Jews, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.'" Well, He was not a mere man, but He did claim to be God. They acknowledged this again when they accused Him before Pilate in John 19:7.

The undiminished deity of Christ is stated most forcefully and clearly in Col. 2:9: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." I do not know how such a verse can be misinterpreted. Jesus was God. But He possessed not only undiminished deity; He also exhibited perfect humanity. In fact, He was human in every way that we are, except for sin.

The perfect humanity of Christ

1. He had a human genealogy. A considerable amount of space is devoted in Matthew 1 and Luke 2 to the ancestry of Jesus. The first genealogy is that of His step-father, Joseph; the other is that of His mother. Both lists trace His roots back a thousand years to King David, and one goes all the way back to Adam.

2. He experienced normal human growth and development. Martin Luther's famous carol makes the claim that "the little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes." I doubt that seriously. The picture we have of Jesus would indicate that He was a quite normal child. There's a remarkable reference in this regard in Luke 2. After the incident when Jesus debated the teachers of the law in the temple when He was just 12, we read, "Then he went down to Nazareth with his parents and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." The thought of God incarnate growing in wisdom and stature is mind boggling, but no more so than the thought of God incarnate as an infant depending upon His mother's breast for sustenance. The mystery of the Incarnation will never be entirely removed this side of Heaven.

3. He possessed a human body, soul, and spirit. Professor H. D. McDonald has written a profound book entitled *Jesus, Human and Divine*. He observes,

Jesus revealed those properties of mind, emotions and will, characteristic of the human individual. He showed His possession of normal mental processes by asking questions to gain information. . . . Quite clearly He had studied the OT Scriptures, and learned many passages by heart, in the village school attached to the synagogue, as was the custom of the day. . . . At the same time He displayed throughout the emotions common to all men; the love of family, of friends . . . He could express the anger of moral indignation, too. With sorrow He was not unfamiliar. He knew what it was to weep by reason of sympathy. It seems impossible to doubt, in the light of His own declarations, that Jesus had a will of His own. It is clear that not only was His will moved by appropriate considerations as is ours, but also that it displayed the same activities and operated by the same forces as are common to all men.ⁱ

4. Jesus was given human names. Among them are "Son of Man", "Son of David," and, of course, "Jesus."

5. He exhibited human limitations, such as fatigue, hunger, thirst, sorrow, and death. He was

under the necessary limitations of space and time, as are ordinary people, and had thus to make His way laboriously from place to place.

In summary, Jesus Christ was human in every way, except in that which make man less than man. I'm thinking here, of course, of sin. And that brings us to our third main area of uniqueness.

Jesus is unique in His sinless life, atoning death, and resurrection.

His life was sinless. I have mentioned several times already that Jesus was sinless. This is such a crucial fact that the NT states it explicitly four different times, to say nothing of many times when it is implied, as when He is called righteous and holy. I want you to see all four of these references: Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin." 1 Peter 2:22 says the same thing: "He committed no sin." 1 John 3:5 adds, "In him is no sin." And 2 Cor. 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us."ⁱⁱ

His death was a ransom, a reconciliation, a substitution, and a propitiation.

1. His death was a ransom. Our sin amounts to a huge debt and puts us in bondage to Satan. We have been hijacked so to speak, kidnaped by the evil one. But Jesus paid a ransom to release us. The price was His own life. Matt. 20:28 says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Unfortunately some have taught that the ransom was paid to Satan. I think it is better to consider it a payment to satisfy the holiness and justice of God's character and His fundamental moral law.

2. His death was a reconciliation. Because of sin we are at enmity with God. We desire to be independent, and we are often downright rebellious against God. 2 Cor. 5:17-20 shares how Christ deals with this problem:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

The choice is up to us. We can either remain estranged from God or be reconciled. Jesus, through His death, made reconciliation possible.

3. His death was a substitution. Theologians use the term "vicarious" to communicate that Christ died not only in our behalf, but actually in our place. We deserve to die for our own sins, but because Jesus was sinless He was able to offer Himself as our substitute. I have at times used an analogy that may help. Suppose a person on death row is heading for the electric chair. Just as he is being led from the cellblock one of his fellow inmates calls out to the warden, "Warden, that man is a friend of mine. I don't want him to die. Let me die in his place." I suspect the warden would say, "Look, mate, you're scheduled to die next month; you can't take this man's place." But suppose a reporter covering the execution were to interrupt the process and say the

same thing to the warden, that would be a different matter. While it probably would not be legally acceptable in our judicial system, it would be morally acceptable for the reporter to die in the man's place if it was his own free choice, because he isn't under a sentence of death himself.

All of us are sinners and stand under a sentence of condemnation. We need someone free from the curse of sin to take our place, and Jesus did just that.

4. Jesus' death was a propitiation. That great big word is not in most of our vocabularies, but it is found in I John 2:2 in the KJV and the NASB: "Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." The best single word synonym for propitiation is "satisfaction" Sin is such a terrible affront to God's holiness that God hates it and is actually full of wrath because of it. Something must be found that will assuage that wrath and satisfy it. Well, Jesus is that satisfaction.

The truth of propitiation should deter our tendency toward legalism. You see, the heart of legalism is the false notion that there is something we can do to satisfy God. There is nothing we can do. But then we don't need to, because Jesus has already satisfied Him.

His resurrection proved His victory over death and sin and is a preview of our own resurrection. (I Cor. 15). Jesus was literally physically dead and was brought back to life by the power of God. This is not an optional doctrine of the Christian faith—it is the very heart of it. Listen to the greatest theologian and apologist for the Christian faith ever, the Apostle Paul, as he writes in 1 Cor. 15, beginning in verse 12: "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."

He then goes on to enumerate seven major consequences of denying the resurrection of Christ:

1. The Gospel is emptied of its content.
2. The faith of Christians is a sham.
3. Christian preachers, teachers and witnesses are guilty of perjury.
4. The faith of Christians is worthless.
5. Christians have not had their sins forgiven.
6. Dead Christians have perished for good.
7. Christians are of all men most to be pitied.

But then he concludes with this saving truth: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." Therefore, none of those unthinkable consequences is necessary.

Jesus' resurrection was unlike any before Him. He rose from the dead never to die again. Furthermore, He was raised in a glorified body. The great resurrection chapter, 1 Cor. 15, makes it clear that His resurrection body had both continuity with and dissimilarity to his earthly body. And our resurrection bodies will have those same characteristics, since Christ was the first fruits of the resurrection, the guarantee that there will be more to come. Through the Resurrection Jesus conquered both sin and death. Later in the same chapter Paul writes,

"Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O

death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus is unique in His ascension, whereby He inaugurated His present ministry to us.

After the resurrection Jesus walked on this earth in His resurrection body for forty days, to assure His disciples that He was indeed alive and to prepare them for the extraordinary ministry He was leaving in their hands. At the end of that 40 days he met with his disciples in the city of Jerusalem and told them to wait there for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled. Listen to what happened then in Acts 1:6ff:

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

That was 1975 years ago. What has Jesus been doing since then? What is His present ministry to believers?

He is our High Priest. (Heb. 4:14ff) This is a concept which was incredibly meaningful to those brought up on OT religion, where the priest was the mediator between God and man. Listen to Heb. 4:14:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

A few chapters later in the book of Hebrews we read about more of the high priestly ministry of Christ, as the author distinguishes Him from a typical OT priest (Hebrews 7:12-15):

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

He is our advocate (our attorney). (Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1) Listen to 1 John 2:1: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." Now let me ask you, "Do you think you need an attorney when you stand before God?" I think you do, because there is someone else speaking to the Father and accusing you constantly, day and night. We read about him in Revelation 12:10: "The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the

word of their testimony.” Jesus is there to plead your case. He is responding to Satan’s accusations, “Yes, he did that; yes, she said that. But I died for that.”

He is the Head over the Church. (Col. 1:18) Colossians 1:18 reads, "He is the head of the body, the church." We'll examine more about what this means when we come to the doctrine of the church in a few weeks, but suffice it to say that Jesus is the Lord of the Church, and no one else—not pastors or elders or anyone—should assume His prerogatives. We are undershepherds only; He is the Chief Shepherd.

He is preparing a place for us, and will someday come again to receive us unto Himself. (John 14:1-3) Listen to the great comfort that Jesus offered His disciples in John 14:1-3:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Conclusion: I listed as our key text today Hebrews 1:1-13, but I’ve hardly referred to it. I want to read it now, because I think we can appreciate the truth of it more now that we have examined what so much of the rest of Scripture says about Jesus.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

I close with a quotation from Napoleon Bonaparte,ⁱⁱⁱ not normally thought of as a great Christian theologian, but remarkable for his insight in this instance:

I know men, and I will tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every

other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him.

Are you one of them? He died for you.

i. H. D. McDonald, *Jesus, Human and Divine*, 15-16.

ii. Theologians have had strenuous arguments over the years as to whether Jesus was just *able not* to sin or was *not able* to sin. I had several seminary professors who staked their theological reputations on the fact that Jesus was not able to sin, and they marshaled many philosophical arguments in favor of their view. I was unconvinced as a student and I remain unconvinced 40 years later. The Greek has a very simple way of saying, “Not able to sin,” but the NT never employs it. It does, however, state these four times that He *did* not sin. To me, one runs the danger of destroying the argument of Hebrews 4:15 when one says Jesus was unable to sin. How can it be any comfort to me that Jesus was tempted in every way that I am if He was constitutionally unable to yield to those temptations?

3. I could as well have quoted from C. S. Lewis in his well-known classic, *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.