

# Understanding the Incarnation: A Beginner's Guide to Who Jesus Is

## Introduction: The Heart of the Matter

We will explore the Incarnation—one of the two central mysteries of the Christian faith, standing alongside the Holy Trinity. In the simplest terms, the **Incarnation** is the belief that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, took on a human body and nature. The word itself comes from the Latin *incarnio*, which literally means "into flesh," beautifully capturing the core concept of "the Word becoming flesh."

This belief is the key to all of Christianity. Everything we do is directed toward Jesus Christ. To understand the Incarnation is to begin to understand the answer to the most fundamental question of our faith: *Who is Jesus?*

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## 1. The Story Before the Story: Clues in the Old Testament

### Setting the Stage for a Savior

To understand why the Incarnation was necessary, we must begin with the first pages of the Bible. After the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity incurred a great debt that it could not pay on its own. We were in need of a savior. The entire Old Testament, from that point on, is the story of God preparing his people for the arrival of this savior—a story filled with centuries of longing and waiting. As theologians often say, "the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is the fulfillment of the New."

### Pictures of Jesus (Typology)

The Old Testament is filled with "types"—images, events, and figures that point forward and find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. This concept is known as typology.

- **Isaac, the Beloved Son:** When Abraham was called to sacrifice his only son, Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice on his back up the mountain. It is a perfect image of Jesus, the only Son of the eternal Father, who would later carry the wood of the cross on His back up a hill to be sacrificed. When Isaac asked where the lamb for the offering was, Abraham replied with prophetic words: "God will provide the lamb." In the end, a ram—not a lamb, a ram—was found and sacrificed in Isaac's place. The promise of the true Lamb, the one God himself would provide, was left unfulfilled, hanging in the air for centuries.
- **The Passover Lamb:** The theme of a sacrificial lamb only intensified. A cornerstone of God's covenant with Israel was the Passover, where an unblemished lamb was sacrificed and its blood marked the doorposts of the faithful, saving them from death. For generations, this ritual was

repeated, building a deep, collective longing for a final, perfect sacrifice that could truly pay humanity's debt. This is why the first words John the Baptist proclaims upon seeing Jesus are so powerful, fulfilling all that came before:

### **Direct Prophecies of a Coming King**

Beyond these types and images, the Old Testament also contains direct prophecies that foretell the coming of the Messiah. These passages sound astounding on their own, but they only make complete sense when we see them fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

- **A Sign from Isaiah:** The prophet Isaiah gave a sign to a faithless king. Prophecies like this often have a direct meaning in their own time and a later, more complete fulfillment. An immediate fulfillment came when a good king, Hezekiah, was born, bringing Israel back to right worship. But the prophecy found its ultimate and complete fulfillment centuries later in Jesus.
  - The name "Emmanuel" literally means "God with us"—a direct prophecy of God taking on flesh and dwelling among His people.
- **A Ruler from Bethlehem:** The prophet Micah identified the very town where the Messiah would be born, describing a ruler whose origins were eternal.
  - This prophecy highlights that the promised savior would not be just a man, but one who existed "from ancient times," pointing to His divine nature.

These ancient clues—types, images, and direct prophecies—wove a story of promise that set the stage for the moment when God would finally enter human history in the person of Jesus Christ.

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## **2. The Core Mystery: One Person, Two Natures**

### **Defining the Hypostatic Union**

How do we explain the mystery of who Jesus is? To answer this most important of all questions, the early Church, through centuries of prayer and debate, arrived at a wonderfully beautiful philosophical term: the **hypostatic union**. While the term sounds complex, the concept is the Church's hard-won and straightforward answer:

**Jesus is one divine person with two natures: one human and one divine.**

An easy way to remember this is that Jesus is one "*who*" with two "*whats*." The "*who*" is the divine person of the Son of God. The "*whats*" are His divine and human natures, which He possesses fully and simultaneously without mixing or confusion.

### **Understanding the Two Natures**

Jesus is not a hybrid or a demigod; He is completely God and completely man. This table breaks down what that means.

| Fully Human                                                                               | Fully Divine                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Was like us "in all things except sin."                                                   | The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, existing from all eternity.               |
| Had a human intellect and a human will.                                                   | Possesses the divine intellect; knows all things.                                   |
| Experienced sadness, hunger, thirst, weariness, and righteous anger.                      | Proclaimed His divinity, saying, "before Abraham was, I am," using God's name.      |
| His human hands and voice were the instruments through which He performed divine actions. | Performed miracles that only God can do, such as healing the blind, deaf, and lame. |

### Clarifying Common Misconceptions

Understanding what Jesus *is* can be helped by clarifying what He is *not*. Early Christian councils worked diligently to rule out heresies that misunderstood the Incarnation.

- He is **not** a demigod (half-god, half-human).
- He is **not** a human person who was just "blessed by God."
- He is **not** a created being, even the greatest one. He is fundamentally God.

Understanding this dual nature is not just a theological exercise; it is the foundation for understanding how God relates to us and why Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are so powerful.

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## 3. "So What?" The Incarnation's Meaning for Us

### A God We Can See and Relate To

The Old Testament is filled with the human longing to "see the face of God." In the Incarnation, God astoundingly fulfills this desire. In Jesus, the invisible God becomes visible. He "dains to come down to our level" so that we can encounter Him in a way our human hearts can grasp.

This creates a radical new way to relate to God. It is one thing to say that God, as our creator, understands us. It is another to know that in Jesus, God now understands human suffering—grief, tiredness, hunger, loss—**by experience**. This makes Him tremendously close to us. Now, when we suffer, we know that God himself has been there.

### God Became Man So That Man Might Become God

This visible encounter is more than just a comfort; it is the very means by which God accomplishes the most profound part of His plan. One of the great Church Fathers, St. Athanasius, summarized this purpose with a powerful, almost unbelievable statement:

"God became man so that man might become God."

This does not mean we become God by nature. Rather, it means that by uniting our human nature to himself, Jesus elevated it. How astounding is that? He took what we are, a "clump of dust from the earth," and placed it on the very throne of God. Through this union, He allows humanity to share in the life of the Trinity, raising us to a destiny beyond our wildest imaginings.

### **Strengthening Our Faith, Hope, and Love**

The Incarnation is a gift that directly impacts a believer's spiritual life in three key ways.

1. **It Strengthens Faith:** God has spoken to us in Jesus in a human way that we can more easily hear and understand. Faith comes from hearing, and in Jesus, God's message becomes clearer and more certain.
2. **It Strengthens Hope:** Jesus's coming demonstrates how much God desires to save us. If God was willing to become one of us and die for us, how could we ever mistrust His love or His faithfulness? This gives us a "sure hope" and "perfect trust" in Him.
3. **It Increases Charity (Love):** When we contemplate the incredible love God has shown by becoming man, the only natural response is to love Him in return. His profound act of love inspires our own.

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## **4. Conclusion: One Jesus, True for All Time**

In modern times, some try to separate the "historical Jesus"—a good moral teacher—from the "Jesus of the Gospels"—the Son of God. They suggest that Jesus's divinity was a myth created by His followers.

For the Christian, this separation is impossible; there is only one Jesus. The historical person who was born in Bethlehem, taught in Galilee, and was crucified by the Romans is the same person who is truly God. The Gospels are historical documents presented by eyewitnesses who tell us the whole story of who this man was and is.

The Incarnation remains the core mystery of the faith. It is the story of a God who loved humanity so much that He became one of us to save us, show us how to live, and invite us to share in His own divine life forever.