

The Pre-existence of Jesus

John 1:1-5, 8:31-59

The term “advent” simply means “coming” and refers to Jesus coming into this world as one of us. All across the world Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays before Christmas day. In our sermons this Advent we are going to consider a cluster of doctrines about Jesus associated with His advent. The theological term that describes Jesus becoming one of us is ***incarnation***. You may recognize the root “carne” (flesh) in incarnation. John 1:14 speaks of Jesus when it says, “And the Word/Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us.”

We’re going to take a week on each of these doctrines related to the incarnation: the pre-existence of Jesus, the virgin birth, the humanity of Jesus, and the deity of Jesus. We’ve also developed a reading guide containing Scriptures that correspond with this sermon series. The reading guide officially started last week, but you can start on week two or move everything back a week.

This morning we are going to consider the pre-existence of Jesus. Simply stated, this is the doctrine that Jesus existed with God from eternity past. Jesus didn’t come into existence when He was born into this world a little over 2,000 years ago. Jesus became one ***of us*** when He was born in Bethlehem, but He ***existed*** with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit from eternity past.

We’re going to look primarily at two passages in the gospel of John this morning, one that announces the pre-existence of Jesus and one that articulates one of the core implications of His pre-existence for our lives. We’ll first look at John 1:1-5 in which John boldly announces Jesus’ pre-existence. Then we’ll look at a conversation in John 8 in which Jesus Himself brings up the fact of His pre-existence.

I think you agree with me that a person’s past - whether good or bad - affects how you relate to someone in the present. Just recently I’ve talked with several people about incredible amounts of pain they’ve experienced in the past. Knowing what they’ve experienced helps me really “hear” what they’re saying.

In a similar way, the Scriptures tell us some important things about Jesus’ life before He became one of us. The better we understand who Jesus was and what Jesus did before the incarnation, the better we’ll be able to “hear” from Him and the more we’ll be able to learn from Him.

Jesus’ pre-existence announced (John 1:1-5)

The pre-existence of Christ is developed quite fully in the gospel of John. John begins his gospel with this statement:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

This is a profound passage that warrants a deeper treatment. . . But for our purposes this morning I'll emphasize the claims that John makes about the pre-existence of Jesus. A tremendous amount of ink has been spilled over the precise meaning of Jesus being called "the Word." That designation would have had special significance for Greeks in the first century, but the primary context would have been the Old Testament. In the OT, the "word of God" expressed God's thought and God's will. The "word of God" was powerful; it always accomplished what God intended. In the same way Jesus was "the Word": He was the ultimate expression of the mind and will of God; He was powerful and perfectly accomplished what God intended.

The first thing John says is about Jesus as the Word was that He always co-existed with God (the Father). Stated negatively, there was never a time when Jesus didn't exist. "In the beginning" reminds us of Genesis 1:1 which states that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But John effectively goes back before the creation of the universe when he writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And so Jesus existed "with God" from eternity past. Furthermore, Jesus **was** God. This statement is consistent with our understanding of the Trinity, namely that there is **one God who exists in three persons**. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate persons, but they are "one God." The Bible affirms this understanding without really explaining how it can be so.

In verse 3 John makes a statement about Jesus' role in creation. When John writes that "all things came into being **through** Him," he is saying that God the Father created the universe through Jesus the Son. It's interesting how the Scriptures attribute creation to each of the three persons of the Trinity. Genesis 1:1 mentions that "In the beginning **God** created. . ." Genesis 1:2 mentions that "the **Spirit of God** was moving over the surface of the waters. . ." And here in John 1 (and in Colossians 1) we find recorded that "all things were created by **Him/Jesus** and for Him." The Scriptures don't make much of an attempt to explain exactly what each person of the Godhead did in creation; that wasn't the point. The point in the gospel of John is that when people encountered Jesus they encountered the One who had created the earth and everything in it.

Verses 4 and 5 add that in His pre-existence Jesus was full of "life":

4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. 5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

When Jesus became one of us, He brought that life into the world. John describes this life as a "light that shines in the darkness." At the very least, Jesus provided a sharp contrast with the darkness that was so prevalent in the world. Not surprisingly, "the darkness did not comprehend" the Light of Jesus. The term translated "comprehend" literally means "seize" and so it can either mean "seize with your mind" in the sense of comprehend or "seize" in the sense of "overcome" (as in 12:35). It's possible that John

is being ambiguous here (see Carson, p 138): Either way, “the darkness did not *master* the Light.”

In these verses John sets up the rest of the gospel. In other words, John is educating us (as readers) just who will be walking around Judea and Samaria and Galilee. Even though Jesus looks like everybody else, **we** know better.

In our time remaining I want us to consider a passage in which Jesus explicitly mentions His pre-existence. We will understand what Jesus is saying because we’ve read John 1:1-5. But the people to whom Jesus was speaking didn’t have a clue. Let’s consider John 8:31-59. The big point of this passage is that because Jesus was “in the beginning with God,” His words carry an authority that everyone would do well to respect.

Jesus’ pre-existence guarantees His authority (John 8:31-59)

In the gospel of John, not everyone who “believed” had a saving faith in Jesus (see John 6:60-71). That will certainly prove to be the case here in John 8. Let’s pick up the narrative in verse 31:

31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

No other human teacher could make such a claim. Jesus claimed that **His** teaching - rightly understood and accepted - would give them a knowledge of the truth and would make them “free.” Those listening to Jesus got fixated on the word “free” and asked a follow-up question.

33 They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”

They took exception to the idea that they needed freedom. They were probably thinking in spiritual terms here. Politically Abraham’s descendants had been enslaved to Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, etc. But spiritually they believed that they had great freedom; they were “sons of the kingdom” and privileged heirs of the promises. Thinking that they didn’t need freedom was similar to the Pharisees’ thinking that they didn’t need a physician. Notice how Jesus answers their question:

34 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 35 “The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. 36 “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. 37 “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.

When Jesus stated in verse 34 that “everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin,” He was making a statement that excluded no one. Everyone (those who were listening at

the time, you, me, everybody) who commits sin is “the slave of sin.” To one degree or another sin enslaves people; sin becomes our master. You can be in bondage to lust, gluttony, anger, envy, greed, sloth, or pride (the “seven deadly sins”). Jesus made the staggering claim that the path to freedom was becoming His disciple - having Him as your master. Specifically this would involve remaining in His word/teaching to the point where they know the truth in the depths of their souls. And the truth would set them free. Freedom is a function of discipleship.

We don’t have time to read the entire passage, but it quickly becomes clear that they rejected Jesus’ claim that His teaching would set them free. To Jesus, this rejection of Him confirmed that they weren’t children of God; God wasn’t their heavenly Father. Notice Jesus’ rationale down in verse 42. Here Jesus introduces His pre-existence as a reason to accept His teaching/authority.

42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

Throughout this passage Jesus says that sonship is reflected in “likeness”; you can tell whose “son” you are by whom you resemble. If you share God’s likeness, He is your Father. In this verse Jesus goes further and says that, “If God were your Father, you would love Me. . .” Why would Jesus make such a claim? “For,” Jesus said, “I proceeded forth and have come from God.” Jesus wasn’t merely one more rabbi who was teaching the Hebrew Scriptures the best he knew. Jesus claimed that He “proceeded forth from God.” The Father had sent Him into the world. Having read John 1:1-5, we know that Jesus existed **with** God and that Jesus **was** God from eternity past. Jesus’ pre-existence guarantees that His message was from God (and was therefore true). His pre-existence was the foundation of His authority.

Look all the way down in verse 56. There Jesus made a rather bold claim about His relationship to Abraham (to whom the Jews appealed as their “father”):

56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.”

You may remember that God promised Abraham that “in your descendant all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham took great joy in the prospect of his offspring bringing this promised blessing to the nations. Since Jesus was that descendant, He could say that ultimately Abraham “rejoiced to see **My** day.” The “father of the Jews” longed for the day that Jesus would arrive.

57 So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”

They thought it was presumptuous for Jesus to claim knowledge of someone so revered who lived 2,000 years earlier. Their question prompted Jesus to make yet another bold statement about Himself:

58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.”

Jesus was making at last two significant claims. First, He was claiming to be pre-existent: “Truly, truly, I say to you, **before Abraham was born**, I am.” Jesus hadn’t come into existence when He was born in Bethlehem. No, before Abraham was born Jesus existed.

Second, Jesus identifies Himself with YHWH when He said, “. . . before Abraham was born, **I am**.” “I am” is found in several places in the Old Testament as God’s self-designation. In Exodus 3:13-14, Moses asks God, “When the people ask, ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I tell them?” God said, “Tell them ‘I am’ has sent me to you.” And so “I am” was God’s self-designation, referring (probably) to the fact that He is the one being in all the universe who is self-sufficient. He isn’t defined by anyone or anything else; God simply **is**. When Jesus declared, “Before Abraham was born, I am,” He was echoing God’s statement about Himself. Ultimately this is a claim of deity.

John 1:1-5 prepared us for this type of claim: “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus was pre-existent), and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” We see in verse 59 that those who heard Jesus understood what He was claiming.

59 Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

They interpreted Jesus’ claim as blasphemous. Nobody but God can make the claim “I am.” Their solution was to kill Jesus. They couldn’t win a debate with Jesus, so they would kill Him. But, as we see throughout the gospels, Jesus wouldn’t be killed until the appointed time. And so Jesus eluded them and went out of the temple.

To summarize: In the context of John 8, Jesus’ pre-existence guaranteed His authority. It’s as if Jesus were saying, “The fact that I existed **as** God and **with** God (My heavenly Father) from eternity past suggests that **you should listen when I speak**.” Specifically, they should have paid attention when Jesus said to them (in verses 31 and 32):

31 “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Application. By way of application this morning, I want us to see that the issue is exactly the same for us. If we are truly disciples of Jesus (truly apprenticed to Jesus to learn from Him), we too will continue in His word, we will know the truth, and the truth will set us free. If you accept the pre-existence of Jesus - that He was with God and that He was God from eternity past - then you also have to accept that this statement has authority. Jesus is saying to you and to me: “*If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*”

Because this is a familiar concept, it's easy to dismiss (in a sense reject) what Jesus was saying. Whereas those who originally heard this teaching rejected it decisively and aggressively (they picked up stones to kill Jesus) we're more likely to reject it more passively (e.g., by yawning, getting a bowl of popcorn, watching another football game and not thinking about it again).

I guess I'd like to do you a favor and force the issue for you a bit. Think about an area of your life in which you need freedom, an area in which you experience bondage to sin. Maybe it's anger (which can show up in a dozen different ways - some people explode, others withdraw, others are sarcastic and insulting, others are passive aggressive). If you find that you're angry and can't turn it off, how about admitting to Jesus, "You're right, I'm enslaved to this particular sin." And then you're in a position to be apprenticed to Him and learn from Him, letting His word dwell richly within you. You say to Jesus, "Since You are the pre-existent One who dwelt with God from eternity past, I believe You and submit to You. I believe that you can teach me the truth to the point where I have freedom."

Whatever your bondage - whether it involves worry or lust or pride; whether alcohol or drugs or money - this would be a great day to turn to Jesus and believe that His teaching is true. Why? Because His teaching has the authority of One who was with God and who was God. Honestly, you may have gotten used to your bondage and you've learned to manage it. Or you may have come to believe that Jesus' promise of freedom doesn't apply to you; you've lost hope that your life could ever be different. Whatever the case, this would be a great day to turn back to Jesus in faith.

One of the reasons we celebrate the Lord's Table each month is to give us a chance to slow down and dwell on the implications of the sacrifice of Jesus. The bread symbolizes His body and the cup His blood. In Philippians 2 Paul related Jesus' sacrifice to His pre-existence. Paul said this:

6 . . . although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus' sacrifice is the ultimate expression of humility because of His pre-existence. At the Lord's Table this morning, think about the fact that He was in the beginning with God and the fact that He was God. As you dwell on Jesus, notice His humility and submit to His authority.