

Born of a Woman: Atonement *and the* Incarnation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 1:18–25; 3:13–17; 4:1–11; 9:35; Mark 1:12, 13; John 1:1, 2, 14; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3.*

Memory Text: “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5, NIV).

Key Thought: To show that in the person and work of Christ, God was bringing humans back to harmony with Him and with each other.

Scientists concede that no matter how much they are learning, the universe remains full of mystery. The Bible, too, is full of mystery—the greatest one being God’s work for our salvation. This week we will concentrate on a central theme of that work: the incarnation of the Son of God, possibly the greatest mystery in all the cosmos. That the Creator condescended to become a creature in a world of sin and death boggles the mind. How did that amazing event occur? Only the Godhead knows! One thing we do know, however, is that without the Incarnation there would not be forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. The incarnation of the Son of God into human flesh was an indispensable element in God’s plan for the salvation of the race.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 22.*

Mystery of Incarnation

When told that she would bear a special child, Mary responded in wonderment. “‘How will this be . . . since I am a virgin?’” The angel then said, “‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’” (*Luke 1:34, 35, NIV*). This Child came into our history through the creative power of the Spirit in the womb of Mary (*Matt. 1:18*). The verb *overshadow* reminds us of Exodus 40:35, where we find a description of the glory of the Lord on the cloud coming down to dwell among men in the tabernacle. The Lord was coming down in a mysterious way in order to be conceived in the womb of this woman.

The coming of Jesus into humanity is precisely about the union of the divine and the human. Although the two natures remain distinct, what took place was not simply the indwelling of the divine in the human but a *real* incarnation. That is, Christ is truly God and truly man. The Bible does not tell us what took place at the moment the two natures were united in the womb of Mary. In the Incarnation God became human, and the fullness of God dwelt in humanity. This is precisely what Paul says.

Read Colossians 2:9. What does it tell us about who Jesus is?

The point is that Jesus is fully God! Had one or several of the divine attributes been lost during the Incarnation, we would have had less than the incarnation of God. Paul states that the preincarnated Christ was “in very nature God” (*Phil. 2:6, NIV*), equal to God, but in the Incarnation He took “the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (*vs. 7, NIV*).

Though fully God, Jesus placed everything He had under the authority of the Father, but in doing that He did not divest Himself of any of His divine attributes. During the Incarnation there was a concealment of the divine in Jesus, yet Deity was always fully present. For the purpose of the atonement it was indispensable to have God in human flesh, because only God could save us.

Read Matthew 1:18–25. How many miraculous things occurred there, things that can’t be explained other than by the supernatural intervention of God? What should this tell us about just how limited we are, in and of ourselves, to understand the most important truths? Why, just because we can’t understand something, must we not automatically dismiss it as untrue?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 John 3:5*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Christ willingly lowered Himself and became human.

Feel: The sense of assurance that Christ is Adam's substitute.

Do: Celebrate the reality of Christ's being fully God and fully human.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. God Became Man (*Matt. 26:38, Luke 2:40, Gal. 4:4*)

As you study the incarnation of Christ, what part is the most difficult to understand? What is the easiest to accept?

II. The Cleansing Stream (*Matt. 3:13–17*)

A We can see Christ identifying Himself with sinners in His baptism. How would you use His example to bring someone to a decision to follow Him?

B What is meant by Paul's statement " 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving Spirit" (*1 Cor. 15:45, NIV*)? What are the implications of Christ's being the second Adam? What hope does that offer us? Why is this idea important for us as Christians?

III. Seducing With Glitz and Glamour (*Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13*)

Satan launched a full frontal attack on Christ following His baptism. Describe the three temptations Christ faced. What are today's equivalents? Using Christ's response as our example, how can we overcome temptation?

► **Summary:** While we may not completely understand the incarnation of Christ, we can identify with His example of baptism and overcoming temptation. Christ gave us examples to follow in our own lives.

God and Humanity Reunited

What evidence do we have that Christ was not only divine but also human? *Matt. 26:38, Luke 2:40, Gal. 4:4.*

Ancient Greek philosophy considered human flesh to be intrinsically evil, a prison for the soul. Accepting this view, some early Christians concluded that the Son of God could not have come in a material body but only seemed to have done so. The New Testament, however, makes it indisputably clear that Jesus was a real human being. He was born of a woman, grew and developed as a child, learned obedience (*Heb. 5:8*), and suffered and died (*Matt. 26:38, Luke 23:46*). The Bible also is clear that Jesus was divine, God in human flesh (*John 1:1, 2, 14; Heb. 1:3*). The reality of the union of the human and the divine in Christ is indispensable for the atonement.

Why? Because after the Fall, Adam and Eve and all of their descendants were separated from God, a separation that threatened their existence. Because it was impossible for humans by themselves to be reunited with God, the Lord took the initiative and reunited Himself with humans, and this He did with the Incarnation, when God became human. Christ became the “place” where the divine intersected the human in a permanent reunification. In the Incarnation, “divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 30, 1896. This unity was deeper than the unity that originally existed between God and humans.

How does Paul refer to Jesus (*1 Cor. 15:45*), and what does that mean?

In Jesus there was a new beginning for the human race, a “new” humanity that was united to God. He was the Creator and the Head of that new humanity; He was the new Adam from whom a new human race was coming into existence. Outside of Him there was, and still is, the old humanity, the one in fallen Adam, the one separated from God and heading to extinction (*1 Cor. 15:22*). The only hope for that humanity is the incarnated God, in whom the divine and the human were united in eternal bonds of love. Through Christ every human being who so wishes it can be brought into complete harmony with God.

Look up at the stars at night. Think about the incredible truth that the Power who created all those stars (and so much more) took upon Himself humanity and in that humanity died for your sins! How should this incredible truth change your life?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

According to all the laws of aerodynamics, the bumblebee should not be able to fly, but it does anyway (apparently, the bumblebee does not understand aerodynamics). It is one of nature's mysteries. As humanity pushes the barriers of science, many of nature's mysteries have been explained, only to be replaced by new mysteries—phenomena that we see but cannot explain. It's kind of ironic, but the more we learn and the more we explore, the more advances we make, the more mysteries we uncover, and the more we realize how little we really know!

The same is true in the spiritual realm. One mystery that we will not fully understand until we get to heaven is the Incarnation, that of Jesus, God Himself, coming down to earth and taking upon Himself humanity. Though He was fully God, He was also fully man. How can we understand that?

It is important to help the class to understand, too, that although it is a mystery, the Incarnation is a key part of the plan of salvation. It was the only possible plan that would demonstrate the true character of God and at the same time save humanity.

Ask your class to think of everyday things that they cannot explain and that they accept by faith. How does this make them feel? How is this similar to, or different from their feelings relating to spiritual things that they cannot explain? Why do we sometimes feel uncomfortable about things that we cannot understand?

Ask your class to try to envision: Could the plan of salvation have been possible if Jesus had not been willing to be incarnated and born as a baby? What would be left of the atonement? Why was it so important that He become a human being and live in human flesh as we do?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

The creative work of the Holy Spirit is seen in Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:35. The Bible makes clear that Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit. His role is confirmed in John 1:14. Compare these three verses and con-

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The Baptism of Jesus

Read Matthew 3:13–17. What important truths can we learn from the story of Jesus’ baptism by John?

The significance of Christ’s baptism cannot be overemphasized. First, by requesting baptism, Jesus was identifying Himself with sinners. He who was not in need of baptism requested it—not for Himself but for us, for our benefit, and by so doing He left an example for those who want to follow Him. But His baptism was more than an example; it made it possible for us to be joined to Him through our baptism and to receive the benefits of His at the hands of John.

Second, as Jesus was coming out of the water, He knelt down and prayed to the Father (*Luke 3:21, 22*). The Bible does not record the content of that prayer, but the answer given by the Father gives us an idea of its content. By declaring, “ ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’ ” (*vs. 22, NIV*), God was telling Him that His prayer was heard. More so, “To every one of us they are words of hope and mercy. Through faith in the provision God has made in the behalf of man, you are accepted in the Beloved—accepted through the merits of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, Nov. 12, 1894.

What great hope can you find for yourself in those words by Ellen White?

Third, the Godhead was involved and present in the baptism of Jesus. The Father’s voice was heard from heaven, and the Holy Spirit made Himself visible through the symbol of a dove. God’s love was flowing down to His Son as a member of the human race, accepting Him as its Representative. Humans were no longer separated from the love of God, because in Christ a channel through which divine love could reach them was found.

What is the essential message to us from today’s lesson about how we, though fallen, can have acceptance with God? Is that acceptance found in ourselves, in how well we perform or keep the commandments, or in Jesus? Why must we always keep that answer before us, especially on “bad days”?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

sider what they tell you about the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of the atonement.

Because of the involvement of the Holy Spirit, the son of Mary could be called the Son of God (*Luke 1:35*). Compare how John and Paul expound upon the Holy Spirit's creative power from physical creation to spiritual rebirth in John 3:3–8 and Romans 8:11.

Consider This: Consider how the Holy Spirit's creative power enables you to be called a child of God.

The mystery and miracle of the atonement: The Incarnation lies at the core of the atonement. It is a mystery beyond our comprehension, while, at the same time, it is a miracle that fills us with wonder. Ask the class to dwell on the implications of the Incarnation. What does it tell us about our worth before God? What does it tell us about our importance in the universe? What does it tell us about how we should treat other human beings?

Let's identify the constituent parts of the mystery and miracle:

- The mystery of infinite wisdom that combines justice and mercy, fulfilling the requirements of the law while providing an escape from its penalties (*Rom. 6:23*).
- The miracle of being born-again (*John 3:3–9*). What does it mean to be born-again? How does it happen? Why is this so important for a person to experience for himself or herself?
- The miracle of a sinful person living in harmony with God's law and having peace with God (*Rom. 8:7, 5:1*).
- The miracle of being transformed into the image of God (*Rom. 12:2*). What does it mean to be transformed into the image of God? What changes should occur in our lives as this process takes place?
- The miracle of becoming a son or daughter of God (*John 1:12, 13; 1 John 3:1–3*).
- The mystery of God's love for sinners (*John 3:16, Rom. 5:8*).

Consider This: Ask the class to consider the personal implications of each of these verses.

Temptations of Jesus

Summarize the three temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness after His baptism. *Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13.*

The temptations of Jesus reveal some contrasting parallels with those of Adam and Eve. First, the fact that Adam was tempted while in the Garden of Eden, in an environment free from the corrupting reality of sin; Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, in an environment under the influence of evil powers. Second, Adam had an abundance of food, while Jesus was deprived of food. Third, Adam was not fasting; Jesus was. Fourth, both Adam and Jesus were tempted to satisfy their desire for food apart from the will of God; Adam accepted the food, Jesus didn't. Fifth, Adam was tempted to question what God had said and showed a lack of trust in God's word. Jesus also was tempted to question the trustworthiness of the word of God, but He rejected the temptation. Sixth, Adam openly went against the Lord and joined Satan in his rebellion against God and His government. Jesus was offered the kingdoms of this world if He would only worship and join Satan in his struggle against the kingdom of God. Jesus, however, remained loyal to the Father.

By overcoming Satan on the fundamental points in which Adam failed, Jesus was undoing Adam's failure and making His (Christ's) victory available to those who will put their faith in Him. The new humanity will not receive from the Head of the race a spirit of disobedience and rebellion, as the old humanity did from Adam, but one of humble submission to God's will.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. What does Jesus' victory over all sin mean for us and for the process of atonement?

That deep bond of unity between the Father and the Son was not broken through the temptations and attacks that Satan launched against the Son of God. He overcame every one and remained totally dependent on the Father. No other human being has been, is, or will be exactly like Him. He was by nature and by personal election sinless. It is there that we find the very ground of His capacity to save us. The Sinless One became sin for us in order for us to receive by faith the righteousness that was not ours but His. The perfect sacrificial Lamb took on Himself our sin in order to restore us to unity and harmony with the Creator.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Christianity makes no excuse when it declares that the plan of salvation is a mystery and its outworking in an individual's life is a miracle available to all, no matter who they are or what their sins or character is like. The greatest mystery is God's love for sinners.

► **STEP 3—Practice**

1 The Holy Spirit was active in the Incarnation and as the atonement unfolded in the life and ministry of Jesus. In Acts 1:4 Jesus promised to send His Holy Spirit to His disciples. Following their baptism by the Holy Spirit, these people were transformed by His creative power from cowards into courageous witnesses (*Acts 2:1–13*). What evidence of the creative power of the Holy Spirit do you see in your life?

2 Consider the following quote from Ellen G. White in *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 19, 20:
 “By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. . . . But not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. God’s wonderful purpose of grace, the mystery of redeeming love, is the theme into which ‘angels desire to look,’ and it will be their study throughout endless ages. Both the redeemed and the unfallen beings will find in the cross of Christ their science and their song.”

3 When you consider that the revelation of God’s redeeming love is to be the study of the ages, what impact should this have on how we prioritize how we spend our time here and now?

Ministry of Healing

“And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (*Matt. 9:35*).

Through His healing ministry Jesus was overcoming the incursion of death in the fabric of suffering humanity. His future victory over the very kingdom of death was anticipated in His daily healing works. The power of death that came into the world from sin was being defeated. This was particularly illustrated in cases of the various resurrections, including the resurrection of one who had been dead for four days (*Mark 5:35–43, Luke 7:11–17, John 11:38–44*).

His miracles also served to break down social barriers. The leper felt accepted by Him (*Mark 1:41*), the Samaritan came back to give thanks (*Luke 17:11–17*), and the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter was healed (*Mark 7:29, 30*). The alienation of humans from each other created by sin was being broken down through Jesus’ reconciling ministry. He was creating a new humanity at peace with one another.

But His miracles also served to restore people to harmony and communion with the Father. Very often His victory over the powers of death led people to believe in Him (*John 4:53; 20:30, 31*).

Which other methods did Jesus use in His ministry to restore harmony in society and with God? *Mark 2:15–17, John 4:39–42.*

The gulf of separation between God and humans was bridged not only in His own person—the human and divine Savior—but also through the power of Christ’s words of salvation. To those who received Him, “he gave the right to become children of God” (*John 1:12, NIV*). These individuals were born not of the will of the flesh but of God (*vs. 13*). Jesus Himself was gathering a new humanity reconciled to God, in and through Him. He sought to reconcile humans, not only with God but also with one another, and He did this by eating with them in open fellowship. Through these encounters Jesus was proclaiming that God accepts any person who comes to Him and that His followers should do likewise.

Take a look at your relationships and ask yourself, In what daily, practical ways is my reconciliation with God reflected in the way I treat and accept others?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

4 Considering everything that Jesus has done for us, have we any excuse not to be ready to meet Him when He returns to this earth? Is there any area of our lives that the Holy Spirit cannot re-create and make whole again?

► STEP 4—Apply

When Jesus came as a Baby, a light began to shine in a world darkened by sin—a light that could not be extinguished. Yet, many today still live in the darkness of despair and loneliness, trapped in failure and sin. The failure is not in God's plan but in the choices people make.

Ask the class to consider what their role is in sharing the light of God's love as expressed in the Incarnation. Spend time brainstorming creative ideas to witness to others. Existing programs that are already in operation in your church do not count. Challenge the class to prayerfully try to implement one of the ideas and be prepared to report back to the class next week. From experience we know that not all attempts will be successful. Take time to brainstorm what to do when someone does not respond positively.

Ask the class to reflect on how they prioritize their time. Challenge them to keep a diary during the week and note the amount of time they spend each day on the following activities:

- sleeping
- eating
- working
- Bible study
- household chores
- watching TV

At the end of the week, total up the amount of time spent in each activity and prayerfully consider how this relates to the idea of studying the mystery of God's redeeming love as expressed through the atonement throughout eternity.

Further Study: Purpose of the Incarnation: “Christ in counsel with His Father laid out the plan for His life on earth. . . . He clothed His divinity with the garb of humanity, that He might stand at the head of the human family, His humanity mingled with the humanity of the race fallen because of Adam’s disobedience.”—Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work*, p. 85.

“Christ’s work was to reconcile man to God through His human nature, and God to man through His divine nature.”—Ellen G. White, *Confrontation*, p. 38.

Prayer at Baptism: “He received baptism at the hands of John, and in coming up out of the water he bowed upon Jordan’s banks, and offered up a prayer to Heaven. . . . Jesus was accepted of Heaven as a representative of the human race. With all our sin and weakness, we are not cast aside as worthless; we are accepted in the Beloved; for heaven has been opened to our petitions through the Son of God. The gates are ajar, and the light of heaven will shine upon all those whom Jesus came to save, if they will but come within the circle of the beams of the Sun of Righteousness; for ample provision has been made for the salvation of every soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 28, 1890.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Give as many possible answers as you can to this question: Why was the Incarnation indispensable in Christ’s work of atonement?
- 2 Why is the humanity of Christ so important to us? Why is the divinity of Christ so important to us, as well?
- 3 As we saw in Sunday’s lesson, there are many mysteries about the incarnation of Jesus. What other mysteries are there, such as in nature, and why should these other mysteries help us understand what it means to live by faith?
- 4 What are ways that we can, as a church, as the body of Christ, follow Christ’s healing and reconciliation ministry? What does your local church do? What more can and should it do? Most important, how can you be more involved?

Summary: In the incarnation of Jesus we witness the only human Being who was born on this planet in complete and perfect union with God. Although tempted by the enemy in ways that no other human being has been or will be tempted, Jesus remained loyal to the Father and overcame where Adam failed, thus paving the way to bring salvation to all who surrender to Him in faith and obedience.