



session 5

God con Carne

Incarnation

Prepare

FOCUS STATEMENT


In Jesus, God becomes human and so understands our ups and downs, our hopes and disappointments, our achievements and failures. Because God understands us so fully, we can be confident of God's great love for us.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

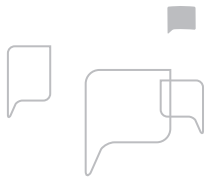
The first major section of the Bible, named by Christians the Old Testament, tells the story of Israel, the community God establishes, and of their tumultuous relationship with God. It's an exciting story, with lots of ups and downs, as Israel regularly tries—and fails—to live up to God's expectations and hopes for God's people. God regularly pursues Israel—sometimes in warning, sometimes in judgment, sometimes with comfort—in order to restore relationship with Israel and, indeed, with all humanity.

In time, Israel's prophets look forward to a new and different relationship with God that isn't based on law. Christians confess that God established this new relationship through Jesus Christ. Christians also confess that in Jesus, God became human, sharing our life as one of us.

The theological name for this is the Incarnation, which literally means “in the flesh.” The festival associated with the Incarnation is Christmas, when God was born in the person and flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.



While we often give Christmas little thought beyond it being a favorite and rather tender festival celebrating the birth of the baby Jesus, the doctrine of the Incarnation itself occasioned considerable controversy in the early church. In fact, early Christians discussed and disagreed about the doctrine for more than two centuries. In particular, two major concerns were raised about the Incarnation, each of which sheds some light on why it continues to be very important to us today.



TIP

Participants may be anxious about getting deeply into the “doctrine” of the Incarnation. They may worry about asking what sounds like a foolish question. Assure everyone we all have questions and that in this course there are no dumb questions.

First, some were concerned that asserting Jesus is God meant Christianity was professing two Gods instead of one. In time, the early Christians resolved this debate with the doctrine of the Trinity, that God was one God in three persons. It was important to confess that Jesus was fully God so that the one responsible for our salvation was not simply a creature made by God, but really God, so we can count on that promise and salvation.

The second concern about Jesus was just the opposite. Some believed that it was also problematic to describe Jesus as human. Humans are so messy, so vulnerable, feel so much emotion. It’s hard to imagine God this way. But those who defended the Incarnation said that this is precisely why it’s important to describe God in Jesus as being fully human. Because he is fully human, we know that God knows—completely and fully—what our life is like and therefore understands and sympathizes with us.

So there’s the Incarnation in a nutshell, that Jesus was fully God and fully human at one and the same time. Or, as Matthew’s Gospel says it: “Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us’” (1:23)—a mystery, to be sure, but one fraught with importance.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity—the ground we cover in today’s session—are complicated and challenging to comprehend. Don’t be alarmed if you don’t feel you fully understand them. It’s most important to focus on why the doctrine matters, not simply on what it means. That is, what matters in the Incarnation is twofold: God is the one who saves us, and God has been human and therefore knows and understands us.

Spend some time reflecting on what it means that God became human. What difference does that make in your life? What difference does it make that Jesus also is God, a being beyond human understanding?

SESSION INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read chapter five in *Making Sense of the Christian Faith* and this Leader Guide session completely. Highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note also any bonus activities you want to do.
2. As always, it will help to have a whiteboard or newsprint available. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you’ll need, if any.
3. Photocopy the session handout (p. 48) to distribute to each participant at the beginning of the session.

FACILITATOR'S PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer for those who will be coming to this class, for yourself, and for the session ahead. If it is helpful, you may use this prayer as a guide:

Dear God, bless each one who comes to this study and bless me as a leader. Bless our time and study together so that we may understand just how much you love us. Amen.

Gather (10 minutes)

WELCOME AND CHECK-IN

Welcome the group. Take special care to recognize and welcome anyone who is new since the previous week. Take time to ask if anyone has had an additional insight or question about the session and conversation last week that they would like to share.

OPENING PRAYER

Dear God, you have come to us in covenant, law, and community so that we might live in peace with each other and with you. And when we needed even more, you came to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Come to us now to help us understand the material we will discuss and, even more, to feel your profound love for us and for all people. We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS (IQ) TIME

Invite participants to share any insights they had while reading chapter five. List these insights on chart paper where all can see.

Ask the group to share any questions they have about what they read. Collect these on chart paper as well. There may be more questions than usual, given the complexity of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Remind people that we all have questions about this mystery and answering questions definitively is not as important as hearing in the doctrine the gospel message of God's great love for us.

Set the lists aside so you can return to them at the end of the session.

SUPPLIES

- Name tags
- Pens
- Snacks or a meal (optional)
- Chart paper
- Markers
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*

TIP

Encourage all to suggest an insight or question, but make it clear that it's alright to "pass" and not offer an insight or question.

Join the Conversation (20 minutes)

TIP

Preview the DVD segment and take some notes. Set up DVD equipment before the session begins. If you will not be showing the DVD, summarize the “Chapter Overview” for the group.

SUPPLIES

- Making Sense of Scripture* DVD
- TV and DVD Player (or computer, projection system, and screen)
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*
- Session handout (p. 48)
- Bibles

TIP

Encourage the group to follow along in their books as you (or volunteers) read each quotation.

VIDEO INTRODUCTION

Watch the video segment for session five. The course author will introduce the key concepts from the book and prepare the group for the activities that follow.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Read these quotations from chapter five of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*; then invite participants to discuss the questions that follow.

- I think that when you read the Bible carefully, it’s clear that God is a God of love, that God is committed to this world and the people God created, and that God intends to restore our broken relationships with God and with each other. . . . Further, I think God made all those promises—both the big covenantal promises and also the many and varied small ones—precisely because God loves and is totally committed to restoring God’s creation. At the same time, I don’t think we know how that’s going to work out, and I think God’s left a lot of room for us to participate. Not just play a role, but actually participate in the world God made. And that means this: God may very well bring things to a good end, but it’s probably going to be something of a wild ride in the meantime. (p. 117)
- If God is going to make you a promise—particularly a promise about raising you from the dead and redeeming the whole cosmos—you want that promise to come from God, not from a demi-god, angel, or super human. You want the promise from God so that you know you can trust it. In this sense, Jesus is God’s “enfleshed promise.” (p. 125).
- If human birth is too messy for God, then so are we. But by becoming human—even by being born as we are—God in Jesus totally promises that God is for us, that God is on our side. (p. 131)

Discuss:

1. It is easy to think that the Bible is a little boring, because it is an ancient book and can be challenging to read. But what happens to our understanding of the Bible when we think of it as an adventure or “wild ride,” the story of a passionate God committed to saving God’s beloved children?
2. Does it matter *who* makes a promise? For example, does it make a difference if a sales clerk or the store manager promises you a discount on an item? Does it make a difference if a colleague or your boss promises you a raise? How are promises affected by the person and the authority of the person making them? Does this help to explain the importance the early Church put on Jesus being really and fully God?

3. In Greek philosophy during the time of early Christians, God was sometimes described as an unfeeling, unchanging, powerful deity. How do you think the argument that God becoming and experiencing human feelings, pain, and hope would have played in a culture heavily influenced by Greek philosophy? Why do you think it was important for the early Christians to argue that Jesus was truly God and fully human?
4. What difference does it make to your faith to say that God not only knows that you exist, but understands what it's like to be you and cares very much for you?

ACTIVITY: A SYMPATHETIC READING

The word *sympathy* literally means “feeling with.” One way to understand the Incarnation is that it shows God as being literally sympathetic, experiencing and feeling all that we experience and feel *with* us. While we cannot, like God, totally sympathize with another person, we can try putting ourselves “in the shoes” of another person.

Divide into groups of no more than four members. Each group will read one of Jesus’ famous parables. Each person in the group will listen to the parable and “sympathize” with one of the characters. Try to experience the action of the story from the point of view of your assigned character. What was he or she thinking, feeling, experiencing? After the parable has been read and a brief time of reflection has passed, have each person report back what it was like to “walk in the shoes” (or, since it’s the Bible, “sandals”) of this person.

The parables and characters you may choose are:

- Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32): father, younger brother, older brother, servant
- Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): man attacked, robbers, Samaritan, Levite, priest, inn keeper
- Day Laborers (Matthew 20:1-16): land owner, manager, laborers hired first, laborers hired last

Discuss:

1. What were your character’s emotions and feelings? What was it like to experience these?
2. Was it hard or easy to sympathize with that character? Why?
3. How did this experience affect your view of the parable, of the character, of Jesus, of yourself?

TIP

The point of this exercise is two fold: 1) to practice actively sympathizing with a character and thereby gain a sense of what God does in the Incarnation; 2) to see how sympathizing with a character in a biblical story can yield greater insight into its meaning. Participants can be encouraged to reflect on both of these dimensions.

Open Scripture (20 minutes)

SUPPLIES

- Bibles
- Session handout

JOHN 1:1-18

This is one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. It is sometimes called St. John's hymn to the Incarnate Word. For this exercise, read it aloud and slowly. Note everything that it tells you about the Word, about God, and about the relationship between the two. Also note what it does not tell you.

Discuss:

1. What are the most important details that stand out to you while reading this passage?
2. What claims is the author making about the Word?
3. This passage is often read at Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation. Why do you think this is?
4. How does John 1:18 help us understand John's story of Jesus in relation to the Old Testament story?

BONUS ACTIVITY: PICTURING THE WORD

Alone or with a partner, create a poster that tries to capture one or more of the key themes in John 1:1-18. You may focus on one word, phrase, or verse; or you may choose to do a collage of images or words. Share your "creations" with other in the group. Was it difficult to come up with an idea? Why or why not?

THE BIRTH OF JESUS—LUKE 2:1-20; MATTHEW 1:18-25

Here are two other passages from the Gospels connected with Jesus' birth.

Discuss:

1. How are these stories of Jesus' birth similar to and different from the other?
2. How are they like or unlike John 1?
3. What light do they shed on the Incarnation?

Extending the Conversation (10 minutes)

LOOKING BACK

Review the list made during IQ Time. Which insights and questions have been answered or clarified? Which remain unanswered? Ask participants to share additional questions or insights that have surfaced during your time together. Discuss these insights and questions briefly as you draw this session to a close, and invite participants to reflect on them through the week.

LOOKING AHEAD

Direct the group to the session handout for your next session together, and review ways to prepare for your next session.

1. Before reading chapter six, write down some thoughts about the cross and resurrection.
2. Read chapter six in *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*, “Life Wins—Atonement.”
3. Jot down any insights or questions you have after reading the chapter. In particular, note your reaction to the various theories of atonement: What is helpful about each one, and what is confusing or not helpful?

Optional: There are many films that try to understand and interpret Jesus’ cross and resurrection and the notion of a “sacrificial death.” Three particularly interesting ones that participants may want to watch are *The Spitfire Grill*, *Gallipoli*, and *Jesus of Montreal*. In each one, the question to ponder is this: What difference did the death of the main character make to the other characters and to the film? What effect did the death have? What, if anything, did it accomplish?

SUPPLIES

- Chart paper from IQ Time
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*
- Session handout

TIP

As usual, and especially for this week and next, you may wish to keep the IQ lists from each study and review them as you prepare for the next session.

TIP

Chapter six is longest chapter of the book and deals with some of the most important and complex issues. You may want to let people know ahead of time that the chapter will cover a lot of important ground, and that they may want to allow more time than usual for reading and rereading this week. Assure participants that you will take adequate time during the next session to cover this material carefully.

Session 5 Handout

God con Carne

FOCUS STATEMENT

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