

# The Mystery of His Deity



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2; Matt. 16:13–17; John 1:1, 14, 18; 8:58; 17:5; 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 13:14.*

**Memory Text:** “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (*John 1:1–3, NIV*).

Leaving the historical overview, we come to the Scriptures themselves. We want to see what they tell us about Jesus, whose life has commanded so much attention through the centuries. As we do so, we ought to keep in mind the crucial exchange between Jesus and His disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Upon hearing Peter's confession of Him as the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus reminded him that this insight did not spring from human investigation but was disclosed “by my Father in heaven” (*Matt. 16:17, NIV*). (See *Matt. 16:13–17, also Matt. 11:25–27*.) “Flesh and blood” (*Matt. 16:17, KJV*), our own unaided, human wisdom, is inadequate in the presence of the supreme mystery of the ages.

To believe in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God is to affirm, indirectly, that He did not have His origin in Mary's womb. It is to affirm His essential differentness from the rest of humanity, however much He may be like us in other ways. In short, it is to believe that He existed before His time on earth; that, quite simply, He preexisted. He was “the image of the invisible God,” by whom “all things were created” (*Col. 1:15, 16, NIV*). “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (*vs. 17, NIV*).

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.*

## His Preexistence—What It Means to Us

**Why** should we be concerned about Christ’s preexistence? What has it to do with salvation? What hint(s) toward an answer do you find in Hebrews 1:1–4 and Colossians 1:15–20?

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For all of us, our existence began when we were born (or, as some argue, it began when we were conceived). Christ was different. He did not come into existence in Mary’s womb. He was before that, eternally so. That is what we mean by His preexistence. He was there before all time.

**How** do the following texts give us hints about Christ’s preexistence?

*Isa. 9:6*

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*Mic. 5:2 (compare Matt. 2:1–6)*

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The word *mosa’ah* (KJV: “goings forth”; RSV: “origin”) in Micah 5:2 is not easy to translate. But the other part of the verse clearly refers not only to the preexistence of the coming Ruler but also to His eternal preexistence “from everlasting.” (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1025.)

Isaiah 9:6 teaches the eternal preexistence of this special Person who was to come into the world. It is an extraordinary claim that this One would be called, among other titles, “Mighty God, Everlasting Father.” It is all the more significant when we remember that the prophecy was addressed to an audience decidedly monotheistic; and the fact that Isaiah could refer to this Son as “Mighty God, Everlasting Father” was nothing short of astonishing, nothing short of a divine revelation breaking through the prophet’s own accustomed way of thinking. *The Son is the Father, “the Everlasting Father”*? Talk about having to live by faith!

**What other aspects of our beliefs, contrary to accepted norms, customs, and ways of thinking, do we have to take on raw, naked faith and nothing else? Is there something wrong with having to do that?**

## The Witness of the New Testament

Other evidence exists, now in the New Testament, that reveals the preexistence of Jesus. Perhaps some of the most interesting ones come from the mouth of Jesus Himself, as He says things that imply that He, Himself, was aware of His own preexistence.

We find both direct and indirect indications that Jesus was, indeed, conscious of His own history. As a possible example of an indirect allusion to His preexistence, He said in Luke 19:10 that “ ‘the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost’ ” (*NIV*). For example, if someone says, “I came to London to work at the House of Commons,” the person implies that she was somewhere else before. The person who has been living in London all along does not use that expression. An explicit statement from Jesus came in the words of His great Passion Week prayer when He asked His Father to glorify Him “ ‘with the glory I had with you before the world began’ ” (*John 17:5, NIV*).

**How** do the following passages reveal not only the preexistence of Christ but His own awareness of that preexistence?

*John 3:13*

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*John 8:23*

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*John 8:58, 59*

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*John 17:8, 24*

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“ ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ ” (*John 8:58*). The “I AM” expression in this text and elsewhere suggests the idea of *everlastingness*, of *eternal preexistence*. Jesus’ audience, understanding this point very well, took up stones to kill Him for what they saw as outrageous blasphemy (*vs. 59*).

“In speaking of His pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. He to whose voice the Jews were then listening had been with God as one brought up with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 29, 1900.

**How does Ellen G. White’s quote above, along with the texts we have just looked at, help us to better understand the incredible sacrifice made in our behalf at the Cross?**

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## Apparent Contradictions

Notwithstanding the clearest statements about Jesus' deity and equality with God the Father, we still encounter passages that call for explanation. One example occurs in what is undoubtedly the most beloved and well-known text in all the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his *only begotten* son." The problem is, How can the text say Jesus was "begotten" if He was eternal? Did someone *beget* Him, just like the rest of us?

The expression "only begotten" is one word in the Greek language: *monogenes*, occurring nine times in the New Testament, with five of those references applying to Jesus and all five in the writings of John (*John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9*). It is significant that all five references occur in the writings of the very author who from the start of his Gospel seeks to establish the deity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, he commences precisely on that point: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*John 1:1*). It would have been incredible that this Jewish writer would have attributed the title of Deity to someone he considered a created being.

**In each of the following passages, the word *monogenes* refers to someone other than Jesus. If you are unfamiliar with the Greek, guess from the translation where the word falls. What do you think it means?**

*Luke 7:11–15*

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*Luke 8:41, 42*

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*Luke 9:38*

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The boy from Nain who had died is described as an "only son" ("the only son of his mother"). No emphasis here on the idea of *begetting*. Rather, the focus is on *singleness, onliness, uniqueness*. The same is true in regard to Jairus's daughter—she was his "only . . . daughter," his *monogenes*, the only one of a kind, his only child; in this sense she was unique. That is also the point of Luke 9:38.

**The weight of scholarly opinion favors the view that *monogenes*, linguistically, does not place emphasis on begetting or begotten, but rather on the oneness of a kind, on the idea of uniqueness. How does this idea, too, help us better understand the great sacrifice made for us at the Cross?**

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## The Deity of Christ

The writers of the New Testament make it clear that Jesus deserves the divine title of God. This fact takes on added significance when one remembers that with the exception of Luke, all those writers were Jews, strongly monotheistic, and not predisposed to using the Divine titles carelessly. One must understand, therefore, that their testimony to Jesus' deity sprang from the deepest, Holy Spirit-inspired conviction.

**How** do the following passages make the case for Jesus' deity?

*Matt. 3:3*

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*John 1:1*

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*John 1:18*

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*John 20:28*

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Matthew 3:3 harks back to Isaiah 40:3, where Isaiah uses the word *Yahweh*, the most sacred name for God in the Old Testament. The construction of the John 1:1 passage in the original language leaves no doubt about what John was saying. Some 65 years after His death, Jesus is being expressly called God by one who had been in close association with Him. In regard to John 1:18, the Greek expression used in the passage calls Jesus, in effect, "the unique God."

Then how about John 20:28? Was this simply an exclamation, an expression of surprise on Thomas's part, the same way people today would use the name of God to express astonishment or shock? To come to that conclusion would be to read a modern practice back into the New Testament. In the first place, the Jews, careful as they were to stay clear of blasphemy, did not have the expression in their vocabulary. Furthermore, the very construction of the passage militates against such an interpretation. The passage says, "Thomas said to him" (*NIV*). Thomas, in other words, was addressing Jesus; it was an expression of faith, not an exclamation of surprise. And the fact that Jesus did not rebuke him shows that He was satisfied with Thomas's confession.

**Jesus as God is the same Jesus who offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. How much more should the Cross mean to us, knowing that it was God—*God!*—hanging there for our sins.**

## And There's More

The New Testament is full of evidence for Jesus' deity, but space prohibits more detailed elaboration here. We might have dealt with, for example, such attributes as eternity and creatorship applied to Jesus; *His claim to forgive sins; His claim to be the final Judge of the last day.* In addition, we find *the name of Jesus associated with that of the Father on a footing of equality*, as in the baptismal formula (Matt. 28:19). Also, in John 14:9, Jesus uses *words that would constitute obvious blasphemy on the lips of any other human being:* "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (NIV).

**Take** a look at the following passages. What do they teach about Christ's divinity?

1 Cor. 1:3

2 Cor. 13:14

Rev. 20:6

Rev. 22:3

The above passages put Christ on an equal footing with the One whom we have come to call "God the Father." And this all measures up with Jesus' own declarations when He walked the dusty streets of Palestine. In John 10:30, for example, He declared, "I and the Father are one" (NIV). The neuter form of the Greek used here for "one" implies a union as close as our minds can conceive. Jesus and the Father are of *one substance, one nature*, yet not one and the same Person (in which case He would have used the masculine gender). If you have trouble plumbing the depths of all this, you have lots of company. The deeper you probe the subject, the more keenly you understand the depths of your ignorance.

But imagine a situation in which the Being we have come to know as God the Father came to die for us, and the One we have come to know as Jesus stayed back in heaven (we are speaking in human terms to make a point). Nothing would have changed, except that we would have been calling Each by the name we now use for the Other. That is what equality in the Deity means.

**Review the life of Jesus, keeping in mind the points we have touched on this week. What does all this tell us about the character of God? Why should we, knowing what we know about God, be so full of hope and joy and trust, even in difficult circumstances?**

**Further Study:** See Ellen G. White, “God With Us,” pp. 19–26, in *The Desire of Ages*.

It is instructive to see how deftly Matthew and Luke deal with the genealogy of Jesus (*Matt 1:16, 18; Luke 3:23; compare 1:26–35*). These Bible writers could not have been more careful on this point. What we find is a complete absence of any confusion on this fundamental point, with John’s Gospel providing perhaps the strongest affirmation of Jesus’ deity anywhere in Scripture (*John 1:1–3, 14*). It shows how critical is the concept of the virgin birth for the whole scheme of salvation. The virgin birth, on which rests the affirmation of Christ’s preexistence and deity, stands rock solid in the Gospels.

“Another dangerous error is the doctrine that denies the deity of Christ, claiming that He had no existence before His advent to this world. This theory is received with favor by a large class who profess to believe the Bible; yet it directly contradicts the plainest statements of our Saviour concerning His relationship with the Father, His divine character, and His pre-existence. It cannot be entertained without the most unwarranted wresting of the Scriptures. It not only lowers man’s conceptions of the work of redemption, but undermines faith in the Bible as a revelation from God. While this renders it the more dangerous, it makes it also harder to meet. If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the deity of Christ, it is in vain to argue the point with them; for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. . . . None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man’s redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 524.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Look at Ellen G. White’s quote above. Why is it so important that we adhere to the doctrine of Christ’s deity and equality with the Father? What would the plan of salvation lose were we to abandon this teaching?
- ❷ How important is the incident of Matthew 9:1–8? How deliberate was Jesus about bringing the issue of His deity to a head? What lessons was He trying to teach? What connection was He making between our physical and our spiritual malady?
- ❸ Dwell on the implications of the deity of Christ, in light of the Cross. Be prepared to bring your thoughts on this topic to class on Sabbath.

## Walking in Faith

José did not attend church, but he loved reading the Bible on his own. He just wished that his wife would study with him. He found new truths that excited him—and some things that baffled him.

One day José met an Adventist pastor who invited him to visit the Adventist church. José went, and there he found answers to many questions. He learned about the Sabbath and decided to ask his boss for Sabbaths off. He prayed for courage and went to see him. To his delight, José's boss agreed to give him Sabbaths off.

Then one day as José sat on the platform at church, he saw his boss enter the sanctuary and stand in the back. When the service ended, José went to greet him. His boss said, "A customer is waiting to see you at the office. You must come to the office—now."

"But today is my Sabbath," José said. "I don't go to the office today." With that his boss turned angrily and walked away. Realizing that perhaps he had not explained the Sabbath clearly, José wrote a letter explaining why he would not work on Saturdays. On Monday he gave the letter to his boss, even though he might lose his job.

His wife learned of the letter and worried that his religion would leave the family destitute. But José assured her that God would provide. José's company gave him Sabbaths off. Because of his steadfast faith, José's wife began attending church.

The couple started a small group in their home, which quickly grew. They needed a larger place to worship. One day José saw some property that would make an ideal location for a church. The little group prayed that God would help them buy the land, and God answered their prayer. They began saving to build a church.

When a hurricane ravaged their area, the group wondered what would happen to their dream for a church. Then they learned that Maranatha International was coming to rebuild churches and schools in Honduras. The little group applied for help, and Maranatha built their church.

The new church holds 150 people, and the believers are working to fill it. José goes door-to-door introducing people to Christ and holds four evangelistic series a year. The congregation now has more than 60 members, most of whom are new believers.

The church members are forming more small groups to help train new believers to lead others to Christ. Following Christ's methods, this group has made a big impact on their community in Honduras. Our mission offerings support lay evangelism in many forms. Thank you for your part in telling the world about God's love.

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