



THE PERSON OF CHRIST

LESSON 6

THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF JESUS

To this point, we have been taking a "bird's eye view" of the New Testament portrayal of the Person of Jesus Christ. Each writer has made his own contribution: the result is not one of confusion, but one complements the other. From our present vantage point we are able to see him in clear view. This lesson, however, will draw together the various sources in our New Testament concerning the pre-existence of Jesus. Four passages will engage our attention. These are Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:25-20; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-16.

As soon as the church found itself worshipping Jesus Christ as Son of God and Lord, the recognition of his pre-existence must have followed immediately. If Christ were one with God, if he were himself divine, he could not have had an origin in time. The Son of God could have undergone a human birth and lived a human life, but he could not have begun to exist only at a particular moment during the reign of Herod the Great. His message, person and work alike, compelled belief in his pre-existence. He could not be what the Christian experience of salvation declared him to be if he had not, as God, chosen to become man. The Christian Gospel would lose its originality, wonder and meaning if the Divine Son did not choose voluntarily to come into the world, to share human nature, to live in a human body, and become obedient even to death (Phil. 2:5-8; 2 Cor. 8:9). As P.T. Forsyth said, "Unlike us, he chose the oblivion of birth and the humiliation of life. He consented not only to die, but to be born ... his sacrifice began before he came into the world, and his cross was that of a lamb slain before the world's foundation" (Rev. 13:8; 1 Peter 1:19).

Philippians 2:5-11

It ought to be noticed that this passage is used by the Apostle to illustrate a point of self-renunciation on the part of the Philippian Christians: "have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus"; i.e the best way Paul can teach humility is by turning his friends in Philippi to the example of Christ, that they might let the thought of his compassion and self-giving shape their attitudes.

Because of this, and because also many modern scholars believe this was already a "hymn to Christ" which Paul had taken and used for his purpose, there is a tendency to see it only as an illustration to press home his point. However, there is another point. Dr Vincent Taylor says, "The hymn speaks of the majesty of the glory of Christ's pre-incarnate life, His renunciation of this glory and his full acceptance of a human lot culminating in obedience unto death, and the exaltation which reveals all that is true of him."

So, Paul here is giving expression to a great doctrinal statement on the pre-existent and the post-existent Christ. Here, the whole eternal sweep of things dealing with our Lord in his past, present and future in relation to men and their redemption is reviewed.

Colossians 1:15-20

"He is the image of God, the invisible God, the first-born of all creation."

These words of Paul remind us of Genesis 1:26, that man was created by God "in his own image".



The divine image in man was defaced by sin, but it is still true that man is "the image and glory of God" (1 Cor. 11:7). The image of God in man is a reflection of God's beloved Son and so, when the havoc of sin is removed, new mankind will be like Jesus.

It may be observed in passing that there is a close association between the doctrine of man's creation in the divine image and the doctrine of our Lord's incarnation; it is because man, in the creative order, bears the image of his Creator that it was possible for the Son of God to become incarnate as man and, in his humanity display the glory of the invisible God.

Christ, in addition to being the image of God, is "the firstborn of all creation". The context makes it clear that this title is not given to him as though he, himself, was the first of all created beings; it is emphasised immediately that, far from being part of creation, he is the One by whom the whole creation came into being. What the title does mean is that Christ, existing as he did before all creation, exercises the privilege of succession. Belonging to the first born as Lord of all creation, the divinely appointed "heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2) he was there when creation began and it was for him, as well as through him, that the whole work was done.

The title "firstborn", used of Christ here and in v18, echoes the wording of Ps. 89:27, where God says of the Davidic king: "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." So, it belongs to Christ as the Messiah of David's line.

It also refers to "Wisdom".

In the Old Testament, much is written about "Wisdom". It usually means the personification of a divine attribute, or the Holy Law. However, in the New Testament "Wisdom" usually means a living person and this person was Jesus. Jesus was the incarnate Wisdom of God.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Although few words are spent in an actual statement concerning the pre-existent state of Jesus, it fills a larger place than in any other New Testament epistle because it is woven into the texture of the argument of the writer. Christ's eternal being is repeatedly made a foil to the sorrow, shame and death which he endured in the flesh.

His earthly life is shown to be but an episode, though not an episode merely, in a history without beginning and without end. It was the reproach of Christ which Moses bore.

In the divine ordering of the Universe, Christ is its Creator, Sustainer and End. By him it was made. He upholds it. He is its heir. Note that the end is seen from the beginning; the divine appointment of the Son to be the heir of the Universe precedes its creation.

This Eternal Sonship is shown to be entirely consistent with a full doctrine of incarnation. There is nothing docetic in Hebrews,* our Lord actually suffered and passed through all normal human experiences.

*NB. Docetism is a heresy that Christ's body was only apparently human. It was held by Docetists that Jesus only seemed to be a man, and was in fact a pure spirit-being, uncontaminated by this material world.



In Hebrews, "Sonship" is closely linked with pre-existence.

Throughout the New Testament is seen a deepening awareness of the importance of the pre-existence of Jesus. To find its highest expression, we now turn to the prologue of John's Gospel.

John 1:1-18

The other Gospel writers open their account of Jesus with an earthly beginning: John's opens in eternity. He makes direct reference to the pre-existence of Jesus in his opening words: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God" (1:1). We are given no information as to what "in the beginning" means, but it was prior to creation, in that area which man, by searching, cannot find out. Only that which is not self-existent has a beginning, therefore, this much is certain -when anything began, there already was the Word. The undetermined beginning was the point when the Eternal silence was broken and when "all things were made through Him" (1:3).

John's title, "the Word", is of profound significance. In the contemporary Greek of the first century, it was a very convenient term for describing any kind of self-expression. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) frequently uses the same expression. Two groups of passages warrant our attention.

In the first, the word of God is creative ... (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9 etc.,) the creating words of command, summarised (in Psalm 33:6) "by the word of the Lord the heavens were made".

The second group refers to the word of the Lord through the message of the prophets; that is the means by which God communicates His purpose to His people (e.g. Jeremiah 1:4, Ezekiel 1:3, Amos 3:1).

In all the passages in each group, the word is not abstract, but spoken and active. Both creation and revelation are in mind in this passage of John's (1:1-19).

In the New Testament, the word of God is frequently the Christian message of salvation, the Gospel (Luke 8:11, 2 Timothy 2:9, Revelation 1:9 and especially 1 John 1:1). It was spoken by Paul (e.g. Acts 13:5, 1 Thessalonians 2:13), and by other apostles (Acts 6:2) and by Jesus Himself (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Galatians 3:1). So it was with the other apostles (e.g. Acts 2:36, 4:12). The Synoptic gospels show that Jesus proclaimed the approach of the Kingdom of God, (e.g. Matthew 13:19). John represents the kernel of Jesus' message as himself. John draws all the concepts of the expression "word" together and makes this a fitting title for God who became man.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God". John intends that the whole of his Gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this is not true the book is blasphemous.

The New Testament teaching concerning the pre-existence of Jesus Christ never occurs in isolation, it leads on to the great truths regarding his being Creator, Saviour and Redeemer and the fact of his Post-Existence. Divine life is more mysterious than human life, and it is understandable only in terms of Jesus Christ.



Question 1:

What does the writer of these notes suggest are the 2 points which are being made in Philippians 2:5-11?

Question 2:

What does "incarnation" mean? From Colossians 1:15-20, why is it important that man was created in God's image and that Jesus became a man?

Question 3:

What does it mean that Jesus was "pre-existent"? What, to you, is the most convincing statement the Bible makes about Jesus' pre-existence?

Question 4:

What is Docetism? What is wrong with believing it?

Question 5:

How was God's word or message "active" in Genesis 1:3; Psalm 33:6; Ezekiel 1:3; Amos 3:1?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

List all the facts written about Jesus as the Word in John 1:1-18. Are any of these new to you? What has the most significance to you at the moment?