

Jesus Christ, the only begotten, very God of very God

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[0 : 00] So let's pray and let's get into the sermon. Light of light, very God of very God, as we look today at the great mystery of who you are, It's been a long day for Jesus.

He has spent the entire day teaching. And now that evening is here, he's ready to make a move. So he asks his disciples to prepare for a trip to the east shore of the Sea of Galilee.

So they get into a boat, and Jesus lies down on a cushion, in the stern, and falls asleep. But without warning, a storm hits.

And this is no ordinary storm. There are waves breaking over the boat, and water fueling the howl. It is so bad that these experienced fishermen, Peter, Andrew, and the rest of the crew, are panicking.

They think they are going to die. But where is Jesus? Still dozing off.

[1 : 35] So these panic-stricken disciples wake Jesus up. Teacher, teacher, don't you care if we drown? So Jesus gets up.

He looks at the storm. And he speaks. Quiet. Be still. And just as there was a great storm, there was also a great calm produced instantaneously, not gradually.

And if this was a Hollywood movie, you would expect the next moment to be the disciples crying with relief, and clapping, and cheering, wouldn't you?

Way to go, Jesus. Well done, you. But they don't. Instead, they become even more terrified. Why? Why?

Because on the one hand, they know Jesus as an adult Jewish man, the son of a carpenter who looks and talks just like them. But on the other hand, the way the wind and the waves die down cause to their minds scenes from the Old Testament, when such things only happen in the very presence of God himself.

[2 : 57] And so they cry out, Mark 4 verse 41, Who is this? And that is the most important question anybody could ever ask.

Who is Jesus? Who is this person whom billions of people from every background over centuries and centuries claim to follow?

Is he a teacher? Perhaps the most profound one who has ever lived? That's what the disciples call him in verse 38. And surely he is at least that.

But is he more than that? Because Mark 4 says, Look, even the wind and the waves obey him. And so we must ask again, Who is this?

You see, The very shape of your life changes depending on how you answer this one. For if Jesus is a great teacher, then he deserves our respect.

[4 : 11] But if Jesus is who the Nicene Creed says he is, then he deserves our worship. So getting this right is absolutely crucial.

And the creed exists partly because not everyone got it right. Come with me now to the early 4th century.

And we're going to meet a pastor in the Egyptian city of Alexandria named Arius. Now, by all accounts, this man loved God. He was utterly devoted to the scriptures.

He was well liked by the people. And he was trying to protect something precious. Do you remember last week, what we said was possibly the most fundamental thing we could say about God's nature?

God is one. That's what the Nicene Creed itself clearly states. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty.

[5 : 15] And Arius believed that with all of his heart. So when he looked at the scriptures, he asked himself, if God is truly one, and Jesus is called the Son of God, then what does that make Jesus?

What is the relationship between the Father and the Son? And his conclusion was, only the Father alone can be said to be uncreated and eternal.

After all, think about human fathers and sons. As all fathers here know, there was once a time when they had no children.

Perhaps that time of your life now seems like an eternity ago. But let me assure you, it did exist. That's just how things work in human procreation, right?

Fathers always come before sons. You have no children until you do. There is a beginning to your son's existence. And well, Arius' reason, so it must be with Jesus.

[6 : 31] He coined a famous line saying, there was a time when he was not. In other words, there was a time when Jesus did not exist.

And therefore, we cannot put him on par with the Father. Now, it is important to acknowledge, Arius still thought of Jesus as great and glorious.

But he insisted Jesus was not identical, in essence, or being, to God. He is still lesser. And because Arius, as one historian puts it, was someone with a powerful mind, a clear message, and a gift for public relations, he knew how to make things go viral.

And so he turned that line into a popular song. Now, do you remember a year or two ago when everywhere you went, you would be sure to hear, Ah, Apatru, Apatru, Ah, Apatru, Apatru, right? Well, Arius' song, there was a time when he was not, was the Apatru of his generation. It was the slogan you see on T-shirts everywhere, the bumper sticker on every other car.

[7 : 48] So, this wasn't a debate among scholars, this was a movement sweeping through ordinary churches. And remember, Arius was trying to work all of this from scripture.

So, for example, he noticed how Proverbs 8 spoke of the beginning of wisdom. And then in 1 Corinthians 1, Jesus is described as the wisdom of God.

So, since wisdom appeared to be created by God, and Jesus is the wisdom of God, therefore, Arius' reason, Christ must have been created. by God.

And that's also why he was also gaining a hearing. After all, Arius could plausibly say he was being Bible-based. So, the question is not really about whether Arius was drawing his ideas from the Bible or not.

He clearly was. The question is how he read his Bible. And like most potent heresies, Arius was almost right.

[8 : 55] He was right that Jesus is genuinely, truly human. But he was wrong that because Jesus is human, he cannot also be truly God.

You see, here is how heresies often work. They go wrong by over-emphasizing one truth at the expense of another. they take one truth God says about himself and make it as if that's the only thing God says about himself.

But the bishops at Nicaea knew very well that cannot be the way. To get an accurate picture of who Jesus truly is, they must take into account the whole counsel of God.

And so they produced the longest and most carefully worded section of the Nicene Creed. You've probably noticed already that the section on Jesus is where the Creed spends the most time on. Because they recognize, as I hope we will also see by the end, that the gospel itself is at stake. So this morning, I just want to walk you through what they said.

[10 : 06] In particular, I want to walk you through the two big claims they make about Jesus. Firstly, that Jesus became truly human, and secondly, that he never stopped being God.

And I want to walk you through how carefully they tried to think through these two big claims and why they remain absolutely essential today. So firstly, Jesus became truly human.

That's what the Nicene Creed unambiguously affirms. Let me read the relevant section. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.

He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human. Now let's pause a little to take that in. You see, I wonder if sometimes this truth has become a little over familiar to us.

Every Christmas we hear how God has come into the world as a baby and we go, oh, great, and then we move on. God. But back in the fourth century, this would have blown people's minds away.

[11:18] You see, today we often ask, how can Jesus really be God? But back then, they often asked the reverse. How could God really be human?

How could this even be possible? The distance between us is just too great. But the creed says, yes, it really happened.

That's why the theologians of old used to write often of the incarnation as the greatest wonder God ever did. As Thomas Goodwin, writing in the 17th century, said, when God became man, it was as if heaven kissed earth.

For the second person of the Trinity, has assumed a human nature and come to earth as Jesus Christ. Now, when we say the Son of God became human, we have to be clear.

He did not just slip on a skin suit. He didn't just appear to be like us. The Bible makes clear he is really, truly human.

[12:33] So, whatever is natural to the human nature, apart from sin, must be affirmed of Christ. That's what we mean when we say Jesus is truly human.

Indeed, is that not what we see in Mark chapter 4? Jesus falls asleep in the boat. Why? Because he is genuinely tired.

He has been teaching since the morning. And now his body is exhausted. He needs rest. This is not God play-acting. This is truly the word made flesh, lying on a cushion, genuinely staying unconscious while a storm rages around him.

And isn't that what we keep seeing in the Bible? In John 4, 6, Jesus is also weary after a journey. In John 19, on the cross, he gets thirsty.

In Matthew 4, after fasting for 40 days, he gets hungry. And the Gospels also consistently depict people interacting with Jesus as a real man.

[13:45] I've put the verse references on your handout, but here are some of the things people can do with him. They touch him. They lodge with him. They feel his hands wash their feet.

They eat with him. And certainly Jesus could grow troubled and even sorrowful. His humanity is on full display.

But why is this so crucial? You see, although the creed was developed mainly in response to Arius' assertion that Jesus was not fully God, it made sure not to swing to the other end of the pendulum. After all, in the early centuries, there were also people who were uncomfortable with Jesus' humanity, who thought that it was beneath God to get tired and go hungry and weep.

They affirm a view that theologians today call docetism, that Jesus only seemed to be human, like he was some kind of divine hologram.

[14:50] And the creeds rejected this emphatically because they could see the scriptures say otherwise. But why does it matter so much that Jesus is fully human?

The creed itself, in fact, tells us why. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. Now, next week, we will unpack more of Jesus' work of salvation.

But the key thing to understand today is that Jesus had to become what we are in order to reach us where we are. That's what Hebrews 2 verse 17 to 18 teaches us.

Verse 17 says, he had to be made like them, that is us, fully human in every way. But why was it necessary for the eternal son to become truly and fully human?

Well, because you cannot save what you have not joined yourself to. One of the early church fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus, famously put it this way, for that which is not assumed is not healed.

[16:15] In other words, if Jesus did not truly take on our humanity, then our humanity remains unredeemed. And so that's why verse 17 goes on to say Jesus became human so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.

You see, in the Old Testament, the high priest represented the people before God. He stood in their place, he bore their names, he acted on their behalf.

But if Christ is truly to be our representative, like a high priest, how can he do so unless he becomes truly human?

And that's exactly why Hebrews says he did this as one of us. In fact, that is the logic running through Hebrews 2. Notice the repeated language of solidarity.

He shares our flesh and blood. He calls us brothers and sisters. He partakes of our humanity. He stands with us. And that is why later on Hebrews 4 verse 15 can say something so deeply comforting.

[17 : 32] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are.

You see, friends, when we read in Mark 4 that Jesus sleeps, that should come as a comfort to us. For it tells us that the one who saves you knows what it is to be exhausted and even overwhelmed. He's been there. He's felt it. He knows what weakness feels like. He has entered it. But the difference, as Hebrews 4 verse 15 puts it, is he did not sin.

And that's why to come back to Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17 again, he is able to make atonement for the sins of the people. You see, in every part of his human life, Jesus shows us not only what humanity was meant to be, but he begins to heal what has gone wrong in us.

It is as though every part of our brokenness meets its remedy in him. So, for instance, where we are proud, his humility heals.

[18 : 53] Where we are greedy, his generosity heals. Where we are angry, his patience heals us. And so, the life of Jesus is not just an example to admire from a distance.

It is part of how he saves us. It is one of the ingredients of the medicine, the antidote. Verse 18, because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. In other words, because he knows the full force of temptation, temptation, in a way that we don't, because we have given in long before temptation has even turned up the volume, he alone can break the power of sin over us.

And that is why the creed insists so much on Jesus' humanity. On this front, they have no quarrel with areas.

But here is the crucial question. When the eternal son became human, what happened to his divine nature?

[20 : 08] Did he set aside his divinity in order to become human? Was he actually, as Arius insisted, not 100% God after all?

That brings us to our second point. He never stopped being God. Let's listen again to the relevant section of the creed. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only son of God, begotten from the father before all ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence as the father, through him all things were made.

Now, notice what the creed does. Last week, the creed said we believe in one God, the father almighty. But now, they also confess that we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.

So, Jesus Christ is also called one. Is this bad maths? No, it's good theology.

because the creed wants to make sure we understand that when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord, we are not adding a second God alongside the father.

[21 : 33] It is not dividing God into two beings. We still believe in one God. And we'll see how the creed unpacks how exactly that can be as we keep working through this section.

But for now, let's go back to the Bible to understand why the creed is so insistent we should identify Jesus as the Lord, even when we say we believe in one God.

So, come back with me to Mark chapter 4. Why are the disciples so terrified at what Jesus has just done? Because think about it.

In the Old Testament, how many times do a regular Israelite, or even a prophet, calm the storm? Just like that. Answer, zero. It never happens. The only person who ever stills the storm in the Old Testament is Yahweh, God himself.

[22 : 40] So, take Psalm 104, verse 7, for example. But at your rebuke, the waters fled. At the sound of your thunder, they took to flight. Or Psalm 107, verse 29 to 30, he stilled the storm to a whisper.

The waves of the sea were hush. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. So, Jesus is doing what the disciples know very well, only Yahweh can do.

Or take another piece of evidence. Very early in his ministry, in both Mark and Luke's account, an unclean spirit cries out in a synagogue.

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. What is remarkable is this?

Long before Jesus has done any miracles or any exorcisms, the demons knew exactly who Jesus was. They did not need anyone to introduce him.

[23 : 50] Why? Because they were already acquainted with him. The spiritual powers recognized that Jesus was no mere teacher or prophet, they acknowledged him as God himself.

And that is a big clue of Jesus' pre-existence. The spiritual beings knew who he was long before he first appeared on earth.

So the New Testament clearly identifies Jesus with the Lord, with Yahweh himself, the God of Israel. They apply to Jesus Old Testament texts, titles, actions, and worship that belong uniquely to the one true God.

Contrary to what some people think, the early church did not invent Christ's divinity centuries later. Instead, the creed is simply looking to faithfully confess what they saw revealed in scripture itself. God's And yet, although we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, according to the creed, we also call him the only son of God.

[25 : 12] So the names father and son do point to a distinction. And this was exactly where Arius pressed his argument.

Now, do you remember how Arius reasoned? He looked at human families and he said, oh, fathers always come before sons. There is a beginning.

So there must have been a time when the son did not exist. So if Jesus is the son and the son comes from the father, wouldn't that make Jesus secondary to the father?

father? But here is where the creed pushes back with a single crucial word, begotten. The son is begotten from the father before all ages.

Now, that might be a line that is hard to understand. What does that mean? Well, to begin to make sense of this, let me first show you something about the structure of the creed itself.

[26 : 15] I think this will help us enormously. Now, if you look at the creed, and I'm putting it on the screen, you notice that there is a moment when the creed changes gear.

It moves from talking about who Jesus eternally is to what Jesus has done in history. Now, can you spot where that gear change happens?

It is right there. Through him all things were made. That is the last thing the creed says about Jesus' eternal identity.

And then the very next line says, for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. And that is where the creed switches from eternity to history.

From who the son has always been to what the son came to do. Now, one theologian calls this the Nicene line.

[27 : 16] Everything above the line tells us who the son is in himself. His eternal relationship with the father. And everything below the line tells us what the son did for us.

His mission in history, his birth, his death, his resurrection. Now, here is why that matters. Arius' mistake was taking something from below the line and imposing it above the line.

He looked at human fathers and sons, which is a below-the-line earthly reality, and he projected that onto the eternal relationship between the father and the son.

He thought about how all of our children have birthdays and assumed that the pre-incarnate son of God must have a date of birth too. But the creed says the son is begotten from the father before all ages, before time itself.

This is above the line. Up here, there is no before and after. There is no birthday. There was never a moment when the father existed without his son.

[28 : 41] The father has always been father and the son has always been son. So when the creed says begotten, it doesn't mean what Arius thought it meant.

It doesn't mean created at a point in time. Rather, it simply means the son eternally comes from the father and therefore shares the father's very nature.

Now, think about it this way. A carpenter makes a table, but he begets a son. What is the difference?

The table is wood. The son is human. What is made has a different nature to the one who made it. But what is begotten shares the same nature as its parent. And that is exactly the distinction the creed insists on.

[29 : 46] Arius said the son was made the first and most glorious thing that God created. But the creed says, no, he is begotten, not made.

And therefore, he shares in God's very nature. And to help us understand a little bit what that looks like, the Bible gives us an image. And it is one that the creed picks up on directly.

Turn with me to Hebrews 1 verse 3, I think it's on the screen as well. The writer says this about the sun. The sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

So hold that image in your mind and think of it this way. The sun produces light. And you can distinguish the sun from its light.

They are not identical. But has the sun ever existed without producing light? No. As long as there has been a sun, there has been its brightness.

[30 : 57] The brightness comes from the sun, but it is co-eternal with it. And that is the kind of relationship the creed is describing. That is why the creed goes on to call Jesus God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

It is simply saying what Hebrews 1 verse 3 says. The sun is the radiance of the Father's glory. Light that comes from light is itself light.

It doesn't become something dimmer or lesser by being derived. So the sun is not a diluted version of the Father. He is not God at a lower volume.

He is distinct and yet he is the full, exact, radiant expression of everything the Father is. Or as John 1 verse 1 will put it, the word was with God yet the word is God.

And that is why the creed is also keen to stress Jesus is of the same essence as the Father. By doing so, the creed explicitly excluded Arius' teaching.

[32 : 17] In fact, the Greek word used to translate the phrase same essence is probably the most famous word in the creed. Let me teach it to you.

On the screen, it is homo usios. Come say it with me. Homo usios. No one dares to say it. Now, it is composed of two Greek terms, homo meaning same and usia meaning being or essence.

Now, let me show you another Greek word. homo usios. Now, look carefully. Is it the same Greek word as earlier? Any difference at all? No?

Yes? No? I heard somebody say it. Yeah, there is. It's just one letter. It is H-O-M-O I. So, there's an extra I.

So, just literally one letter. Now, does it matter? Absolutely. Because homo usios with the I means similar, not same.

[33 : 27] That's what some theologians on Arius' side wanted to say. Jesus was homo usios with the I, similar to the Father, but he was not the same as the Father.

But the Creed says Jesus is homo usios without the I with the Father. That is, he is of the same essence as the Father.

And that one letter is literally the difference between being biblical and being heretical. Literally one letter makes the difference between whether Jesus can save us or not.

Because just as Jesus must be fully human to be our true representative, Jesus must be fully God because only God can bear the infinite weight of sin.

As Arius' great opponent Athanasius pointed out, what help can creatures derive from a creature that itself needs salvation? If Jesus is not fully God, we are doomed.

[34 : 40] So do you see how the Creed is trying to protect the core of our faith? It does so by being very careful and precise in its language.

And in doing so, it helps protect us from sub-biblical teaching even today. Let me name two of them. One, of course, will be the Jehovah's Witnesses.

You see, they are the Arians of today. They might use different vocabulary, but they are teaching the same theology as Arius. They claim Jesus is not fully God, but rather God's very first creation, identifying him pre-humanly as Michael the arch angel.

And like Arius, they also argue from the Bible. For example, they claim that Jesus being described as the firstborn over all creation in Colossians 1 must mean he is somehow lesser.

But what they are really doing is simply recycling an ancient script that the early church has already evaluated, weighed, and rejected at the Council of Nicaea.

[35 : 55] By denying Jesus is of the same essence as the Father, they leave humans with a Savior who, being a mere creature himself, lacks the divine power to reconcile us to a holy God.

God. But let me name another teaching that has been popularized by another well-known pastor, which, although not obvious at first glance, is essentially anti-Nicene.

Now, this pastor's name is Bill Johnson, and he is the pastor of Beto Church in California. He teaches that while Jesus is fully God, he laid his divinity aside during his earthly life.

In other words, he temporarily paused being God. So, he performed miracles, not because he was God, but because he was a spirit anointed man.

Now, let me quote from him so you can see that I'm not making this up. Now, this is from his book, *When Heaven Invades Earth*. Bill Johnson teaches, Jesus performed miracles, wonders, and signs as a man in right relationship to God, not as God.

[37 : 10] If he performed miracles because he was God, then they would be unattainable for us. But if he did them as a man, I am responsible to pursue his lifestyle.

Recapturing this simple truth changes everything and makes possible a full restoration of the ministry of Jesus in his church. So, according to his framework, in Mark chapter 4, when Jesus calms the storm, it is not because God was commanding the sea.

It's because he was a spirit-anointed man channeling supernatural powers. And you can see why Bill Johnson teaches this.

It's because he wants to say that if Jesus could perform miracles simply as a man with the anointing of the Holy Spirit and not as God, God.

So can we. We can do this signs and wonders too. Now, Bill Johnson doesn't deny Jesus is God, of course not, but his theology actually lands in the same place as Arius.

[38 : 20] You see, church, think about the implications of what Johnson is saying. If Johnson is right, then for 33 years, the second person of the Trinity wasn't operating as God on earth.

Now, that in itself is something the Creed rightly rejects. For what the Bible teaches and the Creed protects is this truth. When Jesus came to earth, he didn't subtract his divinity, he added humanity. He veiled his glory, but he never surrendered his deity. He became fully human, but he never stopped being God.

God must never be divided in that manner. And here is another problem. Johnson's way of thinking treats the incarnation essentially as an example for us to follow.

In other words, in this way of thinking, Jesus comes to earth mainly to model a kind of spirit-filled life we are to copy, rather than to redeem broken, sinful humanity as God.

[39 : 37] And that shifts all the burden to you and I, doesn't it? Because if Jesus operated merely as a spirit-empowered man, whom we are to imitate, that means the Christian life is all about trying to produce the same level of spiritual performance, Jesus did.

But if we cannot reproduce the signs and wonders of Jesus, it must mean our faith is not strong enough, or we did not get enough anointing, so the burden falls on you.

And that is the opposite of good news. So this teaching in the end is not just anti-Nicene, it is anti-Gospel.

But here is how the creed protects us. It insists, contrary to Bill Johnson, that Jesus is the true God from true God who came down for us and for our salvation.

If Jesus put his divinity on pause, then the cross is just a man dying for other men. But the gospel tells us that God didn't just send help, he became our help.

[40 : 58] He didn't send a man to represent God, he came as God to represent man. Jesus came not merely as a human proxy, but as the Lord of the universe, entering our misery without ever surrendering his majesty.

this is our gospel, this is the best news in the world, this is what the Nicene Creed wants to protect, and this is how the Nicene Creed wants to encourage us, by giving us careful, precise language, so that we will not move on from the hope held out in the gospel.

That is its value. God is a God is a God that is probably a slightly more dense sermon than what you might usually expect.

And let me suggest that is a good thing. You see, if our brain could easily process everything about God, that must mean he's not a very big God after all.

But if it is a struggle to absorb all of this, that just reveals how big our God is. And that means he is big enough to handle any storms that come our way.

[42 : 25] But I hope that even as your head hurts a little, your heart is also glad. Your heart is glad because Jesus is the eternal Son of God of the same essence as the Father.

And yet in the language of Hebrews 2 14-15, Jesus came to share our full humanity so that he may break the power of death and the evil one by his death.

He is the God man. Fully God so he can save us. Fully man so he can represent us. And both so he can love us.

And if your heart is glad then I hope that when Jesus comes to you and asks you the same question that he asked of the disciples in the boat back in Mark 4, you have an answer.

When he asks you verse 40, why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? faith? And you can say, well Lord, maybe I didn't have faith before, but Jesus, now I do.

[43 : 35] For I really do believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, begotten from the father before all ages. I believe this is who you are Lord, and not only will I declare it, I will live!

like it. Because if I am on Jesus' side, I am on God's side, and there is no better place to be.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, this morning we have come to encounter some very profound and frankly probably some very perplexing truths Lord, and maybe we are still struggling to make sense of it all Lord.

But we thank you that this is what scripture confesses and indeed what the creed confesses. And so Lord, we just want to marvel again at the mystery that the Lord Jesus is of the same essence of the Father, that he is the son whom you sent to become fully human, that we might be safe and we so much for that truth and even as we keep pondering and mowling over this, this is for a lifetime really and for eternity, help us to just grow in our sense of wonder and awe at you.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.