Nicene Creed Series 3 – Lord Jesus Christ

John 17:1-5

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. 2 For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. 3 Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. 4 I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

This is the Word of the Lord.

As we continue this short series on the **Nicene Creed**, we come to the next great clause — and in many ways, to the very heart of the Creed itself, what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God.

If you’ve been following along the last couple weeks, you might have found it a little strange that we haven’t yet talked about what most people associate with the Nicene Creed: the **Trinity**. So far, we’ve talked about the importance of having a creed, and what it means for God to be God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth — but we haven’t really gotten into how Jesus is God.

Well, that’s where we’re going today.

Slide 4

The question before us is this: **How is it possible that the one almighty Creator God we spoke of last week — the God who is a perfect divine unity, one, almighty, creator — could at the same time be two, or even three?**

The divine unity we proclaimed last week could be confessed by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. But only Christians say, *“This one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”*

If Jesus is confessed as God, how is He God *alongside* the Father? How can He share the same divine nature, a divine nature that is defined by being one, and yet still be distinct?

As the early church fathers wrestled with these questions, they weren’t just playing some theological game. They were defending the very truth of salvation — something handed down to them, something revealed in Scripture. They were defending it with their very lives, as they testified to the truth of it in martyrdom. They were answering Jesus’ question, “who do you say that I am?” A question we must all answer.

Jesus himself emphasized the importance of knowing him in this way. If you think back to our previous series on the Gospel of John, when Jesus gave His final word to His disciples in the upper room, He didn't give them ten principles for a better marriage, or a lecture on influential cultural engagement, or even (as we might assume) a full explanation of why He would have to die.

No — he let them listen in on a holy conversation — **the Son speaking to the Father**.

And it's there, in John 17, that we glimpse the mystery of the **eternal relationship** between the Father and the Son.

That's why the question "Who do you say that I am?" is not just an abstract exercise — it's the question on which eternity turns. A question, whose answer everything else depends.

We answer with Peter: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."*

Slide 5

And what we mean by that is with the words confessed in the Nicene Creed:

> **[We Believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ,**
> **the only begotten 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.**

The Nicene Creed wasn't born out of curiosity — it was born out of crisis.

The church had always worshipped Jesus as God. From the very beginning — from the hymns recorded in the New Testament, from Paul's letters, from the first prayers of the saints — **Jesus was always worshipped as divine**.

But as the church began to express its faith in the philosophical language of the Greco-Roman world, questions arose.

How can God be one, and yet we worship Father, Son, and Spirit?

Some said, "Perhaps Jesus is just a very exalted creature — a divine messenger." Others said, "Perhaps the Father simply wears three different masks: sometimes as Creator, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Spirit."

Both are errors. Both lead us away from the biblical Christ.

The church didn't invent a doctrine — it simply gave language to what Scripture had already revealed and what believers had already experienced in worship.

Slide 6

As one theologian put it, "The church didn't invent the truth about Christ, but the church needed time and careful biblical reflection both to speak the truth and safeguard it from error." [1]

Slide 7

Last week when we spoke about the oneness of God, we confessed God as "Father," but I waited until today to discuss what that means, as it has a lot to do with Jesus being the Son. But what does that mean?

Christians are very used to addressing God as 'father', but it is important to recognize we do so in different ways. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said, *"Our Father in heaven."* When he did this, he was drawing from a rich biblical tradition in which God's fatherhood unfolds in several layers.

First, God is Father as **Creator**.
Deuteronomy 32:6 says, *"Is He not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?"* Isaiah 64:8 says, *"We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand."*

God is Father in the sense that He made all things — He is the rightful ruler of His creation, especially humanity, made in his image.

Slide 8

Second, God is Father in a **special sense toward His covenant people**, Israel.
Exodus 4:22: *"Israel is my firstborn son."*

Slide 9

Third, God is Father in a **unique way to the king of Israel**, the anointed one, the Messiah.
In 2 Samuel 7, God says of David's heir, *"I will be his Father, and he shall be My Son."*

And then — the pattern reaches its fulfillment in Jesus.

Slide 10

[1] Kevin DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed*, 15.

When Jesus spoke of the Father, He wasn't using metaphor. Jesus spoke about himself not as a metaphorical son, but as a natural son.

He alarmingly said, *"I and the Father are one."* (Jn.10:30)\

Slide 11

And that's what got Him killed. The Jewish leaders understood what He was saying — He was "making Himself equal with God." (Jn.5:18)

To make this important distinction, the Creed speaks about Jesus as "begotten" (three times in fact), taking its language straight from the most famous passage in Scripture:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." (Jn.3:16)

John is even more explicitly calling Jesus God when he says in the first chapter, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The "one and only" is the same word as "only begotten" here and in the Creed.

But that raises a question. If God is eternal and unchanging, **how can He beget**? Doesn't "begetting" imply change or beginning?

Slide 12

And that's where the controversy begins. [here we see Nicholas of Myra, also known as St. Nicholas, or more popularly Santa Claus, hitting Arius, the chief heretic at the council of Nicaea]

For the first few centuries, no one in the church really questioned the worship of Jesus. It was simply what Christians did. One of the earliest books in the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Philippians, includes an excerpt from a hymn where it says Jesus is, "being in very nature God…" to whom "every knee should bow…and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord."

Slide 13

But in the early fourth century, a gifted teacher named **Arius** began to teach something new. Arius was a something like a seminary professor in one of the biggest and most important intellectual centres in the Roman Empire, Alexandria. As Arius started to get a better idea of what it meant for God to be God as he interacted with the philosophy of his day (some of the kinds of things we spoke about last week), he began to have troubles understanding how Jesus might also be God if God was a perfect divine unity.

Slide 14

He said, He says, “If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten has a beginning of existence; hence it is clear that there was a time when the Son was not. It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existent.” In other words: Jesus was the first and greatest of God’s creations — exalted, yes, but if there are two categories of creature and creator, Jesus is a creature.

Slide 15

Arius wasn’t trying to stir the pot for no reason, he was trying protect God’s unity. He didn’t want to make God divided or composed of parts. But in doing so, he denied that Christ was God— and that strikes at the very heart of the gospel. Because if Jesus is not God, then we are worshipping a creature. And to worship a creature is idolatry.

You see, this isn’t an abstract debate — it’s a **worship issue**.

Slide 16

As the angel in Revelation says, “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. **9** But he said to me, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!” (Rev.22:8-9). If Jesus is not true God, then our worship is false. But if He is true God, then to withhold worship from Him would be blasphemy.

And the Scriptures are clear: **Jesus is worshipped from the beginning to the end of the Bible.** It’s not some sterile philosophical thing, it is how we understand God’s word to us. What is it for the Son to be begotten?

The bishops gathered at Nicaea in AD 325 to settle the matter. How can the Son be begotten, and yet divine?

And what they gave us is one of the most beautiful and careful statements of faith in all of Christian history.

They affirmed that the Son is:

“Begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one essence with the Father.”

Let’s pause on those phrases.

Slide 17

So, if the Son is God, then to be "Begotten" cannot mean that he is "created."

The Creed makes a distinction, saying "begotten, not made." When you **make** something, you make it out of material different from yourself. When you **beget** something, it shares your own nature.

When we beget a child, we take something of ourselves and our spouse and from that something of the same essence is made. On the other hand, when we make a table, we take something other than ourselves and craft it. Even if we shed a little of our blood in the table's production, and it seeps into the grain, it does not have a human nature as a child does.

You make a table — but you beget a child.

When the Father begets the Son, the Son shares **the same divine essence**.

And this begetting is **eternal** — not something that happened in time.

Slide 18

This is what theologians call the **eternal generation of the Son**. The Father eternally begets the Son — not as an event, but a mysterious eternal relationship within the being of God. It is part of what it means to be an infinite goodness and personality.

The Son is from the Father, but never after the Father. There was never a time when the Son was not.

Slide 19

The creed uses a couple different examples to say this. **"God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God"**

These phrases guard us from thinking that the Son is somehow a lesser divinity.

Light from light comes directly from Scripture, the author of Hebrews says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being…" (Hebrews 1:3).

You can't separate the light from its source — yet they are distinct. Again, all analogies have their limits, even ones from the Bible itself.

So also, the Son and the Father share one divine being, one glory, one will, one love. Jesus says, "Whoever has **seen me** has **seen the Father**." (Jn.14:9). When we look at Jesus, we are not looking at a reflection of God — we are looking at **God Himself in the flesh**.

Slide 20

This is the phrase that broke the debate open — *homoousios* in Greek.

It means "of the same substance," or "of one being," or as it is translated here, "of the same essence." If you want to know more about the debated, come to the history class after church.

The Son is not similar to God — He **is** God. He does not merely reflect the divine nature — He **shares** it perfectly. All the things that we know about God, that we talked about last week, the Son shares in completely.

This one word guarded the truth that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three gods, nor one person with three masks, but **one divine essence shared by three distinct persons**. It is a *"mystery, not contradiction."*

A contradiction would be to say "one God and three gods" at the same time and in the same way. But we do not say that. Remember, the one describes the 'what', the three describes the 'who'.

We say: **God is one in essence, and three in person.**

That's not nonsense — that's revelation.

Slide 21

Now you might be thinking, "This is all fascinating, but what difference does it make?"

Oh, my friends — it makes all the difference in the world. In fact, the gospel would not make sense without it. We will see that more next week, but even here, we see how the gospel comes out of God's very nature.

The Bible says, "God is Love." If God were only one person, He could not be love in Himself.

Love requires relationship.

But because God is Father, Son, and Spirit, **love is eternal** — love is not something God learned or began when He created us. It belongs to His very being.

Before there was time, before there was creation, the Father loved the Son, and the Son glorified the Father, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Slide 22

God did not create us because He was lonely. He created us out of the overflow of His perfect love. All creation is a gift. It is grace from God's perfect love to even be created to begin with.

That's why the gospel is not simply God tolerating sinners — it's **God drawing us into that eternal fellowship of love**.

Slide 23

To bring it back to the verses from the beginning, Jesus prayed, *"Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory."* We learn about him to gain his life in us.

The Trinity is not just a doctrine to be understood — it is a **reality to be adored**.

We cannot comprehend the Trinity fully — but we can apprehend it truly.

And when we do, our hearts are drawn to worship.

As Augustine said, "If you can understand it, it's not God." A divine being that you could understand could be a figment of your imagination. The God revealed in Scripture is far beyond that.

So, when we confess that Jesus is *"true God from true God,"* we are confessing that **the one who hung upon the cross is none other than the eternal God of glory**. This fact makes sense of the world. Like I said before, the Creed is like a mathematical formula, it makes sense of a huge amount of other data.

And that's the staggering truth of Christianity — that the uncreated entered creation, that the infinite became finite, that the one who upholds the universe by His power was held in the arms of His mother.

So when we confess,

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty…
and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God,"
we are joining a chorus that has been sung for nearly two thousand years.

We are saying: **This is our God. This is our salvation. This is our worship.**

The Father begets, the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds — one God, three persons, perfect in unity, eternal in love. And in the end, theology must give way to doxology. Knowing God comes with praising him. Our minds may wrestle, but our hearts must bow.

Because the God who is beyond our understanding is the same God who loved us enough to send His Son — **true God from true God** — to redeem us.

So let us worship Him —
the Father who loves,
the Son who saves,
and the Spirit who sanctifies —
one God, forever blessed. Amen.