

Pleased to Dwell: Why the Incarnation Matters

He was Born

Galatians 4:4-7

Mark Vroegop

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:4–7, ESV)

For the last few weeks, our 10-year old daughter, Savannah, has been asking me to check the TV listings to see if there are any Christmas specials showing. I’ve tried to explain to her that those shows do not start until after Thanksgiving, but I promised that I would check regularly.

Now I understand her interest. When I was her age, I marked the Christmas season with the special programs, and I’m sure that you have some of your favorites, too. After all, who could resist *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, or (my new favorite) *Prep and Landing*? Truth be told, there are some times when I still watch them with her.

Now this week *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* was on, and Savannah was excited to watch it. I set it up, as promised, but before she sat down, she stood behind the couch watching the first few minutes. I thought she was mesmerized with the stunning creativity of a claymation movie. But I was quite wrong. Instead, she turned to me and said, “Um, Dad? For some reason, I’m just not interested in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* anymore. I don’t know; I’m just kind of bored with it. I’ve seen it before. And I think I’m too old for it now or something.”

When she walked away, I felt a little sad that I’d be watching Rudolph all by myself this year. No, actually I was sad because there is no one in our house who is excited about that particular Christmas special. It is so familiar, and we’ve all seen it so many times that it is just kind of “ho-hum.”

Sometimes familiar things can become so familiar that we lose interest. And that got me thinking: I wonder how many of us feel the same way about Advent and the story of Christ’s birth. Now, obviously, the significance of a TV special and the story about the coming of Son of God are not comparable in terms of their importance or even truthfulness.

But I wonder what your perspective or emotional frame of mind is like when it comes to sermons around the Christmas season. I remember visiting a church about ten years ago during December for a benchmarking visit, and everyone was extremely apologetic about the sermon on Sunday, not because it was bad, but because it was about Christmas. And everyone knows about Christmas, right?

Pleased to Dwell

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, I would like to help you better understand or remind you why the Christmas season is really important. I want to cut through the parties, the festivities, the shopping, and the familiarity of the story and show you what the incarnation (the coming of the Christ Child) is a moment worth pondering and celebrating.

My aim in this series is to show you why *you* should be pleased that *Jesus* was pleased to dwell among us. Therefore, I'm going to walk you through four important realities about the incarnation:

Week #1 – He was born

Week #2 – He was tempted

Week #3 – He died

Week #4 – He is coming back

Today we are beginning this series by looking at one of the most important, succinct, and doctrinally loaded texts on the incarnation in all of Paul's letters to churches in the New Testament era. And we will see very quickly how revolutionary the incarnation of Jesus was in history and in the lives of those who are His followers.

Our text in Galatians 4 shows us how the birth of Jesus, His incarnation, is the intersection between my need and Christ's rescue. It is the means by which Jesus delivers people, like you and me, from our sins. The incarnation is the means by which God does some amazing things in our lives through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my aim is to show you the beauty of what it means that Jesus was born. You may understand factually that he was born, but I want you to understand and fully appreciate what happened in and through the birth of Jesus.

Allow me to show you what this text tells us about the incarnation. Or, let me put it in the form of a question: Why does the birth of Jesus matter? I have three personal reasons:

1) Jesus entered my world

Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus. It is the season when we celebrate the coming of the Son of God as a baby. That reality has stunning realities and sweeping implications to it. The entrance of Jesus into the world is more than just an historical fact. It is loaded with meaning.

There are four key phrases here that help us understand what Paul is saying. Let's look at them in a particular order that builds toward the meaning.

First, we find that Paul says "born of woman." This is a very simple statement for us. Birth is how human beings enter the world; it is where all of us started. It is something that we all share. Every one of us was born of woman. To be human is to be born. But that is the thing that makes this so amazing, because in the incarnation, we see the second member of the Godhead become a baby.

He doesn't become a man immediately. He doesn't appear as a warrior or some great and powerful ruler. Jesus, the Son of God, is born, and with that comes the experience of our humanity. Just think of it: Jesus was a weak, dependent child. He needed to grow. He was hungry, grew tired, shed tears, and experienced temptation (something we'll talk about next week). His feet were dusty. He needed to sleep. His heart was disappointed and even upset at the things that He saw or experienced.

His birth means that Jesus entered our world by becoming like us! He knows what it is like to be human. He knows what it is like to live in a broken world. The infinite Son of God entered our world.

Second, the text says that he was born under the law. Now that is more than just a statement of fact. The Mosaic Law served as the over-arching guide and requirement for every Jewish person. The Law reflected the character and the holiness of God, so it was something good and helpful in that it showed the people what God was like.

However, the Mosaic Law was an impossible standard to meet. Its regulations, sacrifices, and festivals all pointed to something more. To live under the Mosaic Law meant that you were under the constraints of a standard of obedience that continually affirmed your inability to keep the Law. That is why Galatians 3:23 describes our relationship with the law as being "held captive under the law, imprisoned until faith would be revealed."

Now, Jesus entered into this "rule-dominated" environment. Even though He was Lord, He not only became a child, but He was obedient to the Law. He was circumcised on the eighth day, read the Torah, and attended worship at the synagogue while also fulfilling all the requirements of it as no one else ever could.¹ Jesus, as Lord of all, submitted Himself to the Law. In many respects, Jesus lived under this Law in the same way that a child submits to his guardians and masters (see Gal. 4:22).

So, to be born of woman and to be born under the law are two ways of emphasizing that Jesus entered the fullness of our humanity. He embraced the weakness and limitations of our humanity, and He embraced submission and adherence to the Mosaic Law. Jesus did not rescue people by simply telling them what to do or by pointing the way; He entered the broken world of our humanity and embraced the heavy burdens of the law-keeping that characterize our existence.

This did not happen by accident either. All of this was perfectly timed in God's sovereign plan. When the text says "in the fullness of time," it means when God had designed it to be so. There was nothing accidental or coincidental about the moment when Jesus entered the world. God was behind it all.

Finally, the entrance of the Son of God into the world was the central part of God's plan to reach the world, which is why Galatians 4 says "God sent forth his Son." The redemption that came through Jesus was because God came to us. The Son was sent. Jesus entered our world on a mission.

¹ George, Timothy. *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 303.

How many implications of this do you see? Let me just list a few:

- You should rejoice at how God intentionally and sacrificially worked to reach you
- If you are not yet a Christian, you should marvel at what God is doing even now to reach your heart
- You should be struck by the extent to which Jesus went in order to offer salvation
- You should be in awe at the model ministry that involves a life of mission, humility, and identification
- You should take comfort that you have a Savior who understands and knows what it is like to live in this broken world, a Savior who hears and understands your prayers

You see, all of this is because of the incarnation. At Christmas, we celebrate the simple and life-transforming truth that Jesus entered our world. And that moment was full of redemptive purpose.

2) Jesus saved my life

The second significance of the incarnation is found in verse five where Paul identifies the purpose or intention in the birth of Jesus Christ: “to redeem those who were under the law.” On a personal level, for those who have received Jesus, it means that Jesus saved us. Therefore, the Christmas season is much more than just an annual holiday: it is the celebration of the beginning of redemption.

What does redemption mean? The word has a rich biblical history, and it is loaded with importance. To redeem meant to deliver from evil or harm or to buy something back. In this case, it is in reference to the way in which a slave’s freedom could be purchased by himself or another.

Verse five makes it clear that the redemption was necessary because we were “under the law.” This means that we needed to be redeemed from our spiritual slavery under the law. In verses 1-7, Paul regularly uses the imagery of slave to describe our relationship with the law. And in Romans 6 we are told that we are slaves of sin (Rom. 6:20).

While the law is holy and good in that it reveals the character of a holy God, it only serves to reveal how far human beings really are from God’s righteous standard. Disobedience to the law brings judgment, condemnation, a curse, the heavy burden of hopelessness, and death (see Rom. 6:20-21). It is slavery of the worst kind. The Law of God is like a mirror that shows us how bad we really are, and there is nothing that we can do in order to change the situation. That is why the Bible describes human beings as being dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1, Col. 2:13).

But the glorious news of the gospel, which we celebrate this time of year, is that we were not left in this spiritual condition of slavery. While we could do nothing to rescue ourselves, Jesus came to our rescue and saved our lives. He redeemed us. He bought us. He delivered us. He rescued us from the slave-market of our sinfulness. God’s aim in the sending of His son was to rescue His people by redeeming them.

In the ruins of the city of Delphi in Greece, there is a treasure trove of archeological inscriptions describing the process of redemption or manumission. If slaves secured enough money for their

redemption, by their own doing or by that of another, their freedom could be bought. But in order for it to be validated, the slave was fictitiously sold to a god, normally Apollo. That way their freedom and change of status could never be violated.² The details, witnesses, and validation by a priest were all recorded.

Although people thought the gods were watching and engaged, the transaction was an earthly one. In Greco-Roman mind, the gods validated what human beings did. Apollo didn't purchase their freedom. They secured their own freedom by being sold to Apollo.

But redemption in the Bible is not like that. It is God who comes to His people. His Son is sent. He is born into the culture of brokenness. And Jesus personally pays for the redemption of His people. He does not watch it or distantly validate it. He does everything, and that is why it is called "grace."

Let me give you two texts that make this point wonderfully clear:

"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—" (Galatians 3:10,13)

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

One author, reflecting on the spiritual significance of this reality, wrote the following:

Christ not only became man, bound to obedience . . . , but he became curse for us. He made our doom his own. He took on him not only the calling of a man, but our responsibility as sinful men; it is in this that his work as our Redeemer lies, for it is in this that the measure, or rather the immensity, of his love is seen.³

Jesus made our doom His own, and that is how we see the immensity of His love. He rescued us, redeemed us, bought us, saved us, delivered us, and paid our ransom. The marvelous beauty of Christmas is the reminder that Jesus delivers people from the deadness and bondage of their own sinfulness. If you are a follower of Jesus, this truth has become the basis for your entire life.

Just think of where your life would be today without the rescuing of Jesus! Just think of where your sinful affections would go, where you would seek fulfillment and happiness, what things would control your life, and what you could do in order to tear your own life apart. All the while you would be convinced – passionately so! – that what you were doing was right, smart, and fulfilling.

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, I want you to know that the purpose of Jesus' birth was to set in motion the deliverance of people like you and me from the destructive effects of sinful desires and

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manumission_inscriptions_at_Delphi

³ George, Timothy. *Galatians*, vol. 30, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 304.

actions. And I wonder if there is something within you today that longs for deliverance. Is there something in your life where you have seen the destructive effects of your actions, and you are wondering, *what is wrong with me?* Well, the Bible not only diagnoses that problem, but it points us to where forgiveness and deliverance can be found: the person of Jesus.

Jesus redeems people from the bondage of self-destruction. And when you become a follower of Jesus, that is your story. That is the story that we celebrate this time of year. But sometimes we miss it in the midst of the familiarity of the moment.

Take, for instance, the significance of both the request of Immanuel (which means “God with Us”) to come, and what deliverance comes through him in the song “O Come, O Come Immanuel.”

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

The Christmas season is a celebration of the coming of the One who saved our lives. But there is even more here. Christmas is a significant time of year, not only because of what we were saved **from**, but also because of what we were saved **to**. And that leads us to the last point in the text as to why the incarnation of Jesus matters.

3) Jesus Changed my Identity

As you read and study the Bible, there are really important words that become road markers along the way. Words like *therefore*, *but*, *because*, and *so* all serve to connect various thoughts together like pearls on a string. In verses 5-7 there are a number of them: *so that* (v. 5b), *and because* (v. 6), and *so you are* (v. 7).

These words all point us toward what being redeemed from under the law actually accomplishes. Jesus saved our lives – true! But He did even more. The incarnation set in motion a new kind of life for those who have been rescued by Jesus.

There are four beautiful effects of the redemption. Let's quickly look at each of them.

First, verse five says that we "have received adoption as sons." The redemption of Jesus resulted in God not only delivering us from the slavery of sin, but also welcoming us into his family as His own children. The spiritual movement is more than just from bondage to freedom. That would be glorious enough. But it goes even further. When a person comes to Christ, he or she has been changed from a slave to a son or daughter.

Now this concept of adoption was a familiar concept in Greco-Roman culture, and it is used all over the Bible. In Ephesians 1:5 we are told that adoption comes because of the sovereign work of God, and in Romans 8:23, our adoption reaches its fulfillment in the resurrection. The biblical roots of this concept are found in God's relationship with Israel and in what He did for them in the Old Testament. God adopted the people of Israel as His own (2 Samuel 7:14) and delivered them from the bondage of Egypt to be His special people, characterized by His blessing and His presence.

In the same way, believers in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, have been brought into the family of God. They were delivered and became the sons of God. In this way, we become the children of God, the spiritual descendants of Abraham, and brothers and sisters with Christ (Heb. 3:10-13).

Second, the change of identity relates to the indwelling of the Spirit of His Son. The sending of the Holy Spirit to mediate the personal presence of Christ is the mark of being adopted by God. Notice how Paul talked about this in Romans 8:15-16.

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," (Romans 8:15-16, ESV)

It is the Spirit of Christ that now provides the spiritual empowerment that we so desperately need – the conviction of sin, the understanding of the Scriptures, the producing of fruit, the heart-based love for God and others, and so many other things. But foundationally, the presence of the Spirit is affirmation that we are indeed and truly the Sons of God.

Third, the effect of the Spirit is a new relationship with the Father, marked by intimacy and closeness. The term "Abba! Father!" is used for the close relationship that children share with their father. It is a name that indicates a unique and special relationship. How special? Well, the phrase "Abba, Father" was also used by Jesus at His darkest moment of struggle in prayer. Mark 14:36 records that Jesus addressed the Father that way in His prayer in the garden, just before being delivered for the crucifixion. So, those who are the children of God have the kind of closeness and intimacy of being the children of God.

Any time that you pray and seek the heart of the Father, any time that you pour your heart out to God, just remember that the relationship that welcomes you into the presence of the Father and even the prayers themselves, borne along by the Spirit, are possible because of the incarnation. Without Jesus becoming a baby, there would be no change in relationship between us and God.

Fourth and finally, verse seven tells us that we are no longer slaves but sons and heirs. While the sonship in verse five indicated a change in relationship, to be an heir means a change in the benefits and blessings. To be God's son means that you receive all the rights and privileges that are a part of that new-found relationship.

To be an heir of God means two wonderful things. First, every blessing and honor given to Christ is also given to those who are the children of God. We have learned in 1 Peter that this inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Peter 1:4). You could summarize the inheritance as simply saying that we share in the glory that belongs to Jesus (1 John 3:2). Since God's glory is the most valuable reality in the entire universe, we receive the most amazing inheritance. We shared in the very nature of God's glory.

"by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." (2 Peter 1:4, ESV)

But the second thing that is amazing about being an heir of Christ is that every spiritual blessing you receive is only because of Jesus. Being an heir simply means you were born into the right family. But this inheritance doesn't come to us that way. Our birth was the problem since it placed us under the condemnation of the law. Being an heir as a Christian comes because God radically changed your identity. If you are a follower of Jesus, you were moved – by God's gracious actions – from being a slave to being an heir. You went from having no hope, no future, no freedom, to having the greatest treasure in the universe, while also being spared from the scariest thing in the universe: God's wrath.

And the only reason you have this is because Jesus came and rescued you. That is what we celebrate this time of year. The incarnation, the coming of Jesus, became the intersection between my hopelessness and God's mercy.

So I hope that this season of the year is so much more than a time for family, festivities, special gatherings, and (especially) Christmas specials on television. Don't allow the familiarity of this season to drown out the enormous significance of what the coming of Jesus means.

That little baby in a manger entered your world, saved your life, and changed who you are. So let us respond to Him and thank Him that He was pleased to dwell among us.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4)

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