

Pleased to Dwell: Why the Incarnation Matters

He Died

Hebrews 9:11-15

Mark Vroegop

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. ¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. Hebrews 9:11–15 (ESV)

Christmas is important because of where it leads. The story of Jesus' birth is a part of the biblical record because it is the starting point of a much bigger story – the story of redemption. Jesus came. He was born. He became a human. But we should never stop there.

There are a number of passages that help us to remember this. They are part of the Christmas story. For instance, in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, he tells us that Joseph, while engaged to Mary, was inclined to end the engagement quietly. But an angel intervenes and says these words, "...that which has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). Or when the angels appear to the shepherds in Luke's gospel, they tell the shepherds that "unto you this day is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). And when the wise men to visit Herod they inquired about the birth saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews." (Matthew 2:2).

The birth of Jesus was significant and, to some, threatening because of where it would lead. Herod ordered a genocide of every child two years old and younger in the region of Bethlehem. His paranoia of a competitor to the throne led him to kill what must have been hundreds of children. So the birth of Jesus was more than just the entrance of a baby into the world. Herod was tragically mistaken. Jesus had no aspersions to his throne. His purpose was much more significant.

The birth of Jesus set in motion the coming of redemption, forgiveness, and the reconciliation of God to mankind. The first text of our series on Advent captured this purpose so well: "...God sent for this Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

Jesus was born. His birth set in motion the coming redemption. That was the first week. Last week we looked at the fact that Jesus was tempted. His humanity makes him a high priest who not only understands the struggle of our humanity, but also one who invites us to seek divine help – to find grace to help in time of need. Did you come to him more this week? Did you seek him for help this week? Did you remember that Jesus can help you? I hope so.

Now, remember that the purpose of our Advent series “Pleased to Dwell” is to try to answer this question: “Why does the incarnation matter?” Hopefully the last two weeks have been helpful and encouraging.

Today we are going to unpack a third implication of Jesus’ incarnation: his death. Jesus was born to die. He came into the world in order to offer his life as the means by which people could be saved from their sins.

Therefore, Christmas should never be celebrated just because of the birth of Jesus; it should be a season where we consider the total significance the purpose for which he came. In other words, I want to connect Christmas to the cross. I want to connect his birth with his death.

Summary: He died to save me

Let me start by summarizing what this text is about and where it is going. Let’s look not at the beginning of our text, but at the end. The very last phrase of verse 15 is very important. This is where our text is headed, and everything prior to this phrase serves to amplify or explain these words: “...*a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant*” (Heb 5:15b).

Now there are three words that are noteworthy:

- Death
- Redeems
- Transgressions

These three words constitute the essence of why Jesus came and why the incarnation matters. It is essentially the same thing that we heard the angel say to Joseph in Matthew 1. “He will save his people from their sins.” In other words, you can boil down the gospel and the reason for Jesus’ birth simply as “Jesus’ death redeems us from our transgressions.” Or to make it more personal: “Jesus saved me from my sins.”

The word transgression means the ways in which we have violated God’s law. That is why verse 15 says “under the first covenant.” We will unpack this further in a moment, but you could summarize the first covenant by referring to the Ten Commandments. A transgression is breaking or violating the law of God. And every person who has ever lived has violated one of the Ten Commandments. I’ve put this into my own language by saying, “God is holy. I’m not. And that’s a problem.”

So, in order to understand the beauty of the gospel and the significance of the birth of Jesus, a person has to realize that the purpose of Christ’s coming was to die in order to address the enormous

problem of our rebellion against God. Our transgressions are our attempt to run our own lives. If you don't understand sin and rebellion, then you will never understand the beauty of the cross.

This is one of the truths that we teach our children in the Next Generations ministry very early. It is one of the reasons that you should have your children involved in our Sunday School ministry. I would recommend that every parent figures out how to make Sunday work such that your kids are worshipping with you and such that they are in a Sunday School class because our aim is to form a biblical understanding of the gospel in their mind.

This week our staff was sharing what thrills our heart about the ministry and Kristin Gilbert who directs our Children's ministry was commenting on how important it is for kindergartners to understand that they are sinners. She was reflecting on something that my wife has told me about many times. A central part of their curriculum that year is to learn about the Ten Commandments. At the beginning of the year when she asks how many of them are sinners, there are a number of hands that do not go up. In fact, she has told me that kids often say, "I'm not a sinner but my brother sure is." And part of the grace of that kindergarten year is helping five and six-year-olds appropriately understand that they have a problem with their sin. Kristin was sharing how exciting it is to see children change in their understanding of the need for the gospel over the course of the year.

In order to understand the gospel and in order to understand Christmas, you have to understand what it means to be a transgressor. You need to understand this simple message: Jesus died to save me from my sins.

Many of you will be in settings over the next two weeks where you will have direct contact with family and friends who are celebrating Christmas but they have no relationship with Jesus. I'm hoping and praying that this will be a season where you will be emboldened to connect the birth of Jesus to his death, to connect his incarnation to his sacrifice on the cross.

In your bulletin this week there is a copy of a great tract. I want you to take it out and keep it handy because we are going to come back to it throughout the message. I want you to become familiar with it so that you can be better prepared in sharing the gospel with someone simply and clearly. Think of this Sunday as a massive training in evangelism. And secondly, this tract may be something that you could leave with someone that you've talked with. Please, let's not use them to leave on the top of urinals or just inserting them with the restaurant bill, especially if you are a "stingy tipper."

Why not pray and ask the Lord to give you an opportunity? A few years ago, we did a series on evangelism and we talked about it this way: "Open a door, open my mouth, open their hearts." Maybe that is a prayer that you could pray this holiday season?

I just want to encourage you to consider taking the opportunity that this season affords you. Pray about how God might allow you to bridge the coming of Jesus and the death of Jesus. Pray that God would allow you to share your own story. One of the best lead-ins to the gospel is not by telling people that they are sinners, but telling them that we are sinners or transgressors who have been saved by Jesus.

If you only have 10 seconds to share the gospel, just go with “I am a terrible sinner with a really bad heart, but Jesus saved me.”

Everything else in this text serves to make that point more evident, beautiful and clear. Let me highlight four ways that Jesus’ death is more meaningful than you probably realize. I hope you leave with new affections for his death such that you are overflowing with a desire to share the gospel with others.

A Better Way

Verse eleven identifies that Christ’s death was a better way for atonement. Now, by “better” I don’t mean that it is A-rated and the former is B-rated. It is better in a way that is effective when the other is not. Will unpack this further, but for now just think of this category as starting at a very high level or a summation.

The text once again uses the term “high priest” to describe the role that Jesus played in redemption. Last week we talked about this, but it connects the readers back to Old Testament model where the High Priest would enter once-a-year into the Holy of Holies in order to provide atonement for the people. Jesus “appears” on the scene and becomes that kind of person even though he is not part of the priestly line.

Instead, Jesus comes as a prophet-priest-king, and he makes a sacrifice that is more than just an animal that he brings. He is the sacrifice. This is the gospel, the good news that Jesus as our prophet-priest-king made a better way for atonement to happen. That is what “of the good things that have come” means. Jesus ushered the Good News.

When it says that he did so “*through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation,*” it is referring to Jesus presence, even now, at the right hand of the throne of God. The holy of holies was only a picture of this reality, and Jesus stands there as our atonement.

The apostle John picks up on this imagery in Revelation 5.

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...” (Revelation 5:6-9)

Jesus was a better high priest, he made a better sacrifice, he brought the gospel, which is a better way. As we will see in a moment, everything about the Old Testament pointed to another, better way. The sacrificial system was not sufficient on purpose. It created a longing for something more.

That is what all systems apart from the gospel are like. They are insufficient. They don't get to the heart of the problem, and that is a great place to start when you are talking with someone about the gospel. Start with how exhausting and discouraging it is to try and earn your way into God's favor. You could ask something like: "How would you ever know that you've done enough?" or "How many good deeds would it take to outweigh our bad deeds?" The gospel provides a better way.

A Permanent Sacrifice

The second way that Jesus' sacrifice is more meaningful is because of the permanent nature of the sacrifice. Verses 12-13 puts in contrast the sacrifices of the Old Testament system with the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Old Testament sacrificial system was bloody. Every morning and every evening a lamb was sacrificed (Exodus 29:38-42), and the sacrifice was doubled on the Sabbath day (Num 28:9-10). There were annual festivals that involved sacrifices. During Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Weeks, and the New Moon all involved various kinds of sacrifices. And those were just the official sacrifices. Individuals would bring sacrifices were brought as peace offerings, thank offerings, offerings connected to vows. There were sacrifices after giving birth, for the purification of lepers, and for unintentional and intentional sins. Can you imagine what the temple sacrificial area must have looked like? What it must have smelled like?

When were at the Indiana fair this summer, I stopped by a display that featured large bulls. They were the kind that I imagined would have been sacrificed in the Old Testament. I was struck with how large the animal was, how costly it would have been to sacrifice a bull, and how much blood would have been spilled.

R. Kent Hughes in his commentary on Hebrews suggests that over the thousand-plus years of the sacrificial system, there must have been more than a million animals sacrificed. Just think of all the blood. In fact, he says that during the Passover a trough was constructed from the temple to the Kidron Valley for the disposal of the blood.¹ The temple must have been a gruesome sight, and it was designed to be that way.

The sacrificial system was meant to show people the extent of the difference between the holiness of God and their sinfulness. It was meant to highlight the gap between God's righteous demands and their inability.

Now if you take out the tract you will see that the first two pages about Creation and the Curse. This is where every gospel presentation needs to start. The gospel has its foundation in God's role as creator, his holiness, and his right to establish the parameters of morality. Since God is the creator and since he is holy, he has the right to establish the boundaries of what is right and what is wrong.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews- An Anchor for the Soul*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1993), 234-235.

What's more, any violation of that rule and law becomes rebellion against God, and that results in physical and spiritual death. Every funeral is a reminder that something is wrong with the world. And the bloody altar in the temple communicated that same message.

Back to Hebrews 9. That is why "once for all" is such a significant statement. The previous sacrifices could never fully address the issue of sin. Therefore, there was sacrifice after sacrifice after sacrifice. Year after year. Festival after festival. The tabernacle and the temple were places of worship that involved blood and death because God is that holy and sin is that serious.

This text tells us that the death of Jesus was the means by which he entered into the holy place of God's presence, offered a sacrifice that was "once for all."

A Total Cleansing

This leads us to the third way that the death of Jesus is different. Verse 14 uses the words "how much more" to describe the sacrifice of Jesus and its effect. There is a kind of cleansing that comes because of Jesus' death on the cross.

If you look at the tract, you will see the next two panels are about Christ and the cross. The next step in sharing the gospel is to be sure people understand that Jesus came as a man, lived a perfect life, was fully God, and did not deserve to die.

When Hebrews 9:14 says, "offered himself without blemish" it is referring to the fact that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice because there was no sin in Him. And because of that, He could take upon Himself (Cross panel) the wrath of God on our behalf. Jesus' death can only be a sacrifice for sins if He was without blemish or sin. When we share the gospel, we have to be sure that the death of Jesus provided a kind of atonement or forgiveness not found anywhere else.

The former system of sacrifice was only able to "sanctify for the purification of the flesh" (13b), and it was never able to "purify our conscience from dead works" (14b). The former sacrifices created temporary cleansing and purification but it never lasted. The system could never get to the root of the problem – the heart or the conscience. The Old Testament was designed to create a longing for something more.

Every religious system that is not based upon the sacrifice of Jesus has this broken reality built into it. Every works-based religion must do more and more and more in order to balance out the scales of justice. But when can you ever say enough prayers, give enough money, feed enough hungry people, solve enough justice issues in order to balance things out? You can't. What's worse, it never solves the ultimate problem which is the orientation of your heart.

Only the death of Jesus is able to fully cleanse us from our sins. He is the only one, by the Holy Spirit, who can create new desires, new longings, and new affections. It is only Jesus who can take care of the guilt and conscience problem that lies underneath. Here is how Hebrews 10:19-22 says it:

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we

have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:19–22 (ESV)

It is only through Jesus that sinful people can actually have a clean conscience. Jesus' death offers total cleansing.

A New Relationship

All of this leads to new kind of relationship that we can have with our creator. The aim of the gospel is to free us from guilt, condemnation, and fear so that we can truly serve the living God (v 14b).

As the panel "re-Creation" states, "God is making a new people and a new place." The purpose of the death of Jesus is to change us from the inside out so that we the kind of people "who die to our sinful ways and learn to love God and our neighbor." The gospel changes people's lives!

If you are sharing the gospel with someone this is a great place to help someone understand in specific ways how the gospel has changed your life. What has God delivered you from? What is different about your life? How is your joy different?

When Hebrews 9:25 talks about Jesus being a mediator of a new covenant, this is the kind of life that he is talking about. The new covenant is God's new relationship with human beings when they turn from their sins and put their trust in Christ. It is what Jesus described in John 3 as being "born again." It means that God has profoundly changed the orientation of your heart, and it means that you no longer trust in yourself but are trusting fully in Jesus for forgiveness.

What's more, the text also talks about an eternal inheritance. Beyond just the forgiveness that is offered to us now, there is the promise of being spared from God's judgment for our sins. The Bible promises that when we put our trust in Christ, the atonement of Jesus has been applied to our account. Our sins are paid. God's wrath has been removed. We are saved and made new.

That is what panel "Commitment" is all about. It is the simple message that salvation, forgiveness, and hope is available right now for those who would put their trust in Christ. Jesus' death becomes the object of our trust.

You may be here today, and what I just described to you is finally making sense. It may be that you have heard parts of the meaning behind the death of Jesus before. But I wonder if you feel draw to believe this today? Do you know that this very moment – right now – God can save you? If you believe and trust in Christ, you can be made new. Just think of what it would mean to have all your sins forgiven and to have a heart that is new. I want to invite you and call you to put your faith in Jesus.

If you are already a follower of Jesus, I hope this message serves to reawaken some love, affection, and passion for the gospel in your life. Something can easily happen in our hearts over time. The beauty of the gospel can fade in our minds. We can become so familiar with the message "Jesus died for our sins" that we forget what that really means.

Once for all, permanently, and completely Jesus provided a way for you to be forgiven of all your sins! All of them! He gave you a new heart, and now he calls you to share that news with others. It is unbelievable news.

Several years ago I was struck by a video that I watched. Some of you may have seen what I'm about to show you, but it is worth seeing again. For several months missionaries in Papua New Guinea were working with a particular tribe and teaching them the message of the Bible. Beginning with creation, the missionaries used a chronological approach to walk the people through Bible. They went slowly to be sure that the people really understood who God is and their need.

Finally, the day came when the gospel would be presented. They must have sensed that the Lord was at work because they recorded the moment when the people understood for the first time that Jesus' death gave them forgiveness of sins.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1N-Hdqno4w>

College Park, let's not forget the power and the beauty of what it means for Jesus to have paid it all. Let's not let our familiarity with the facts of Jesus death rob us from the joy of what it means to have that death applied to our account.

Let's move into this Christmas season knowing that Jesus came to die so that I could live. And let's ask the Lord to give us open doors and open mouths this Christmas season.

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