

## INCARNATION

Open your bible with me to Galatians 4. One of the many things I love about the Christmas season is how it rings with songs of the Savior's birth. Advertisements choose carols for background music, department stores broadcast the baby born in Bethlehem over loudspeakers, concerts are conducted that center around this good news of great joy. The gospel echoes all around.

Standing among the most familiar songs of the season, and probably my favorite hymn of all time, is Charles Wesley's beloved "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." The carol was first published as part of a collection entitled *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in 1739. While the entire lyric fills our thoughts with the truth of Christ, the traditional second verse rings with the mystery of the incarnation: how the eternal God took on flesh and was born as a helpless baby to bring salvation to His people. Wesley writes for us to sing these truths on our lips and hold them in our hearts:

Christ, by highest heav'n adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord:  
Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail th' incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus our Immanuel.

This single verse contains the melody line of the entire Christmas story. We learn of the child whose birth was attended by the praise of angels proclaiming, "Glory to God in the Highest." The phrase "incarnate deity" contains two truths for the price of one. The word incarnate means 'embodied in flesh.' Deity means simply 'god.' The poetic phrase is teaching that this baby being sung of was not merely a baby but God in human form. Somehow the "everlasting Lord" had come from heaven and was now "veiled in flesh." And of course, this is

the very truth Scripture teaches. The invisible God becomes visible. The Creator becomes creature. The Deity takes on humanity. Finally, we hear the good news that God is “pleased as man with man to dwell.” He is pleased, not irritated, to dwell with us. We discovered in our study of Exodus how God’s heart was to dwell in the midst of His people, and here the verse concludes by calling on “Jesus our Emmanuel.” The name Emmanuel means “God with us.” So, when we sing those words, we are confessing that God has come to dwell in a spectacular way and for a saving purpose. Athanasius said it like this, “He became what we are that he might make us what he is. (2 Peter 1:4)”<sup>1</sup>

While our annual calendar comes to a close in December, the traditional church calendar begins here with the season of Advent. This ancient church practice is where we consider how God’s people of old waited for and anticipated the coming Messiah. We remember that we too are a waiting people – anticipating the promised return of Christ. Over the next four Sundays we will explore four verses from Galatians chapter 4, all with one aim in view: to know and worship Christ more fully. We will look at the incarnation through the lens of fulfillment, remember the redemption that has been won for us, and marvel at the gospel gifts that are ours in Jesus. As we come to another Christmas season, does the incarnation still cause amazement in your heart?

### **Sermon Summary**

While the truths of Galatians 4:4-7 may take less than a minute to read, they offer a lifetime of fruitful study. The Apostle Paul shows how the coming of Christ was neither early nor late but came to pass according to God’s eternal plan and purpose. The opening verse reveals what uniquely qualified Jesus to bring salvation to His people once and for all. Our Advent exploration of this text begins where the Apostle himself does, with “Incarnation.” We will

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<sup>1</sup> Athanasius and John Behr, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series, no. 44a (Yonkers, N.Y: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 54.

organize our thoughts under two headings regarding the incarnation as: *1. The Patient Plan of God, and 2. The Perfect Plan of God:*

### **The Patient Plan of God**

The first aspect I would like to draw to your attention is *The Patient Plan of God*. The center of Scripture's entire story is the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is the good news that the whole Bible is telling of. So, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance of the moment when God Himself broke into the timeline of history in the incarnation. The birth of Jesus grew to be so significant in the world that eventually all of time was divided by His arrival: B.C. and A.D.

Through reading the letters of Paul, we learn that the center of his theology and in fact his entire life centers around God's redeeming work in sending His Son - in the fullness of time.<sup>2</sup> Paul uses this language not only here but also in his letter to the church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 1:7-10, he explains more about this moment in time and what Christ accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection:

<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> *as a plan for the fullness of time*, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

### **An Unfolding Plan**

Here we learn that a plan had been made 'for the fullness of time:' a plan that God had decided upon through which He would bring redemption, forgiveness, and restoration. But it makes us wonder, when was this plan designed and why did it take so long to carry out? I'm so glad you asked. The first part of the answer is that this was *A. A Plan Made in Eternity*. With the phrase, "the fullness of time," Paul is pointing to the promised moment God planned from before

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<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022), 418.

time began to bring salvation to His people. Just a few verses earlier in Ephesians 1:4-5, Paul wrote:

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

We see here that God’s plan of redemption – including who would come to know His redemption – was drawn up even before the foundations of the world were laid. Believer, this is how long God has loved you and how long ago He chose to show His grace to you – even before you had taken your first step, even before you had drawn your first breath, even before time began.

This was a plan made in eternity, yet it was also *B. A Plan Unfolding in Time*. Beginning in Genesis 3:15 we hear the whisper of a promise of the day when the seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the serpent. Yet it did not happen in the time of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. The day of this promise did not arrive in the time of the kings, the judges, or the prophets. Rather, at the appointed time, not a moment too soon and not a moment too late, God sent forth His son to save His people from their sins. We are not told why God chose the time He did, but we see some kind providences in His plan (each with Latin references). The first is *Pax Romana*. Jesus was born in the golden age of Roman power which came with it a transportation system that would enable the gospel to spread to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The second phrase is *lingua franca*. Greek was the common language enabling the message of the gospel to be shared among multiple people groups, cultures, and places. The third Latin word is *Adventus*, where we get our word Advent. What I want to pull into view here is the Advent the people of God were longing for. The law of Moses had done its work of preparing God’s people for Christ, holding them under its instruction and watch, leading them to long for one who could fulfill the laws demands and bring the

kingdom they had waited on for so long.<sup>3</sup> As the gospel of Mark is just setting sail, he records in 1:15 that the first words of Jesus' public ministry were in fact, "*The time is fulfilled*, and the kingdom of God is at hand." In a real sense, the birth of Christ was the signal that that end of history had begun.<sup>4</sup> The incarnation was the eventide of one age and the dawning of the age to come.

### **Waiting and Trusting**

One way we might think of applying this phrase to our lives is to simply remember that our God has perfect timing. He is never hurried or delayed. His plans are never frustrated. Everything is running according to plan, and everything is running according to schedule. At the close of another calendar year, likely there were times of this past year that were challenging for you. What situations have you walked through this year where you have learned to wait on the Lord and to trust in Him even when you cannot see how things will turn out? Just as the saints of old waited and trusted in the Lord, so must we wait and trust in the Lord. We must "walk by faith in things unseen and on His promise stand," believing that a good and gracious God holds every one of our days.

### **The Perfect Plan of God**

The next aspect of this text I would point you to is *The Perfect Plan of God*. Paul writes, "In the fullness of time, God sent *his* Son, born of a woman." Just as in the lyric we looked at earlier, here we have two truths for the price of one: Jesus is both the Son of God and Son of Man (or woman in this case.) Here we come to this most amazing truth of the person of Christ. The baby who lay in the manger was fully man and fully God. Theologians call this the hypostatic union: at the same time, beginning with the incarnation, Jesus is 100% God and 100%

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, Revised edition (Downer's Grove, IL, London: InterVarsity Press ; Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time*, 268.

man. It would not be an understatement to say that in the incarnation, Christ brought God to us in a way we had never imagined. At the center of this plan of redemption was a baby of whom the angels declared, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

When it comes to the identity of Jesus being the Son of God, it is vital that we understand what Scripture teaches about Him. From the time the letter to the Galatians was written, to our day, there is not a period when the identity of Christ has not been warred against and disbelieved. In the fourth century, a man called Arius concluded that Jesus could not have been God and must have been created by the Father.<sup>5</sup> As Arius began spreading these false notions, the first council of churches gathered in 325 to decide on this theological issue. The Council of Nicaea rejected what Arius was saying and re-affirmed the teaching of Scripture about the identity of the Son. In what is now known as the Nicene Creed, they confessed their belief:

(And) 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **Details of Salvation’s Plan**

As we think about the details of Salvation’s plan described here, there are at least three things that stand out to me that I would like to show you about this baby born in Bethlehem. *A. The first is that He is Christ, the Son of God.* Jesus did not become the Son of God in the act of incarnation. He has eternally been the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus was born and took on human flesh, he already ‘was’ – Jesus doesn’t have a birthday in the true sense of the word because He has always existed. Before Mary and Joseph made their pilgrimage to Bethlehem, before the shepherds were keeping

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<sup>5</sup> Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 369.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

their flock by night, and the angels were singing, “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, peace good will toward men,” Jesus existed. Before John the Baptist and Isaiah, before David and Moses, Jesus existed. Before oceans were given their boundaries, and mountains were assigned their height, before time and space were fashioned, there was Jesus, eternally existing. John 1:1 explains, “In the beginning was the word (Jesus), and the word was with God, and the word *was* God.” John goes on to add three more times in the first four chapters of his gospel that Jesus was the Son of God in order to make sure his readers understand the uniqueness of Jesus as the *only begotten one* and *one and only* Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). In John 17:5 he records the words of Jesus, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you *before* the world existed.” Before the world existed, Christ did – ruling and reigning in glory as the eternal God.

The second detail of salvation’s plan is that He is *Christ, The Son of Man*. Paul explains that Jesus was “born of a woman.” Both the title ‘Son of Man’ and the description ‘born of a woman’ are speaking to His humanity. (Matthew 11:11) The fact that God became man is something that ultimately is a mystery to us – but one meant to be pondered and treasured up in our hearts. The God who made us became like us. The invisible God became visible. The Deity became humanity. The Creator became creature. The one who is the theme of heaven’s praises was robed in our humanity. The Son who was exalted humbled Himself so low. The maker of bread knew what it was to be hungry. The creator of water knew the pain of thirst. The one who is perfectly sinless came to know every temptation. He became truly man. This baby would be helplessly dependent on His mother for life. Christ would grow as a boy and learn things. Luke 2:40 says that He “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.” The humanity of Christ was not just an imagination, or some sort of divine trick – Christ was truly human. The Maker of Mary now Mary’s son.

Finally, let us see that He is *Christ, the Perfect Plan*. I agree with J.I. Packer, who once said, “The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.” Don’t you find that to be true? Perhaps that has been a stumbling block for you coming to faith in Jesus. You have a hard

time believing that God could become a man... Packer goes on to talk about the importance of the incarnation:

The real difficulty, the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us... lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation... This is the real stumbling block of Christianity... But once the incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve.<sup>7</sup>

Don't you see that if God truly has taken on flesh and dwelt among us then it would be nothing for Him to perform miracles: to multiply bread, turn water into wine, heal the lame or raise the dead. It would be believable for Him to die in the place of people and then to be raised to life again. If He is truly God in flesh, the rest makes sense. Christ came to do what we could not do. Nothing shows the heart of God drawing near to the sinner, the brokenhearted, the weak and needy, more than the incarnation. When it came to saving His people, God did not send merely a messenger, or substitute... He came Himself.<sup>8</sup> Being fully God, Christ walked a perfect, sinless life. Being fully God, Christ dies a substitutionary death. Being fully God, He was resurrected to eternal life. Being God, He ascended to the right hand of the Father where He rules and reigns forever. Being fully man, He endured humanity's condition and frailty.

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becamest poor;  
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,  
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.  
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becomes poor.

## **Repent and Believe**

Earlier we looked at the first words of Jesus' public ministry recorded in Mark 1:15 which says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." However, that wasn't the whole phrase Mark records. Jesus goes on to say this, "repent and believe in the gospel."

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<sup>7</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 53–54.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy George, *Galatians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2020), 333.



The good news of the gospel is this: In the fullness of time, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17). You may ask the question, “Why?” Why would God wait so long to send His son to bring salvation? Or, even, “Why has Christ not returned for the second time now when all things will be made new and all things made right?” One place we find this partially answered is in 2 Peter 3:9 and reveals something of the heart of God toward sinners, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

I wonder if this Christmas season you find yourself having never received forgiveness of your sin. Here in the fullness of time in your life could be the very day of your salvation. Jesus is very clear about what you must do: repent of your sin and believe upon Him: the one who is fully God and fully man.

### **Conclusion**

For each of us who are in Christ, may we look once again at the mystery of the incarnation and marvel that such provision has been given us through the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ.

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