

If you have access to the worldwide inter-web, you may have encountered the raging debate that occurs, usually around this time of year, in the blogosphere: What is the true meaning of Christmas? And there are so many things that are offered as the true meaning of Christmas, and we won't go into all the many offerings. But we gather one day in seven as God's people, week in and week out, to discover, discuss, rehearse, rejoice, and proclaim the true meaning of Christmas. That's what we've come to do today again, whether it be December the fifteenth or July the third---we rejoice in the meaning, the message of Christmas.

This past Monday morning was pretty tough for me. I was awakened in the middle of the night with a severe sinus pressure headache. I haven't had one of those in a long while. And there's no truth to the rumor that it was a result of the Ravens-Vikings last two minutes Sunday afternoon, but maybe the barometric pressure had something to do with it. I don't know. All I know is that I could not sleep. So in order to try to not disturb Dana and try to get some sleep, I went downstairs to my Lazy Boy recliner---so named after me. Thinking if I could just sit up, maybe I could get some relief. So picture the scene, if you will. I'm feeling sorry for myself because I can't sleep. I'm wrestling with not too small amount of physical pain. But to get the full picture, in our dining room we hang this clock at Christmas time. And on the hour, every hour, it electronically chimes a Christmas tune. It could be "Joy to the World" or "Jingle Bells." It chooses randomly, we think. We've had kids try to log the times and the songs, and they've come up with 48 different songs.

So the scene is set. I'm there trying to find a comfortable position, and quite frankly feeling the weight of our shared reality of living in a fallen world. And it must have been right at 3 a.m. at this point, because all of a sudden pealing forth through the darkness was the tune, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Now it took my 3 a.m. fog about half a verse to figure out what song was being played, but as soon as I grabbed it, the second verse of that hymn came immediately to mind: Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. That's the true meaning of Christmas. There in the midst of my own encounter with human need, the sovereign God was reminding me with an intimate reminder---personal for me that moment, public now for you---that Christmas is about God's sovereign plan to make right all that is wrong with the world.

And I was drawn to a couple of facts at that moment. One is my headache did not miraculously disappear when that Christmas carol pealed forth electronically. I was still trying to find a comfortable spot, still wrestling for sleep. But as I rehearsed that verse in my mind, my mind was drawn to the little word that Charles Wesley, the hymn writer, used in that verse: *pleased*. It's the motivation for God to send forth his one and only Son. He was *pleased* to do so. He *delighted* to do so. He rejoiced over his people with singing. So pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. It's an astounding truth. It's a bewildering truth. It's a humbling truth, when you think about it. God took on flesh for us.

We're in the midst of this Advent series of sermons where we're taking a look at the Pauline letters that reference the mystery of Emmanuel. Last week, you remember from Pastor Randy's message from Philippians 2, that though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped tightly, but he willingly laid it aside. He freely emptied himself. And taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death---even death on a cross. Now that's Christmas. That's the true meaning of *Emmanuel*. The good news at Christmas or Easter or the Fourth of July, or any given day of any given year in our existence, is that the same God, who, because of our sin cursed the earth and levied a death penalty against all of his creatures is the same God, who, because of his love came himself to reverse the curse by encountering the death that we deserve to die. And not only that, but [by] encountering that death he secured for us a relationship with God

that is eternally secure, and it's beyond anything that we can ever hope or possibly imagine. That's Christmas. Jesus, our Emmanuel.

So the text we look at today in Galatians 4 is right in the middle of a set of arguments that Paul is making, describing the God who delivers his people from slavery to sin. God graciously delivers all enslaved to sin and then amazingly adopts them as sons, giving them a status that they do not deserve. Paul presents Jesus as this one and only Savior completely capable to save and wondrously willing to do so.

Let's read God's word together. Galatians 4.

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.

May God add his blessing to the reading of his Word, to this preaching of his Word as well. Let's pray together. Father, we pray that you would---please, Lord God---instruct us once again of the good news of Jesus Christ. And Lord, draw us, we pray, to see you more clearly, to give our lives to you in a willing and complete way so that we might bring glory and honor to you, as you are pleased to give us the faith to believe. And strengthen us by your grace. We pray for this time now. In the name of Jesus Christ, we ask. Amen. Amen.

This past week as we were having our little snowy evenings, the Flora family got out the Wii game to play Wii. And we played Wii archery. Are you familiar with this? You take the one thing and it's connected to the other thing, and if you want to, you can stand up and actually look like you're pulling a bow back. So we're at Wii Resort and we're playing Wii archery, and there's three levels---there's beginner, there's intermediate, and there's expert. Yeah, we were playing expert. That's right---you can be impressed. And in the expert level of Wii archery at Wii Resort you're like, standing in the midst of a volcano and there's a lava flow and there's a wind gauge---you've got to figure out this, and you've got 45 yards or 55 or whatever it is and so you've got to....there's a lot of stuff that goes into this. It's really hard. So as we are prone to do as a very supportive family of one another, somebody hit a 3 or shoot it into a rock behind the target.... "Aaaaaw. Aaw, that's a shaaaame." You know, you could hear the support almost oozing out of us. But then somebody would manage to get it over the lava flow with a 7 mph wind blowing in from the left and the moving target behind the wooden thing and they'd hit a 7 or an 8 even. And you'd hear, "Ah, yeah---perfect! And then the snark would occur. "Uh now, listen....if it was perfect..." (we heard this more than once) "....if it was perfect it wouldn't be an 8 or a 9. If it was perfect, it'd be a 10."

You see there's no substitute for perfection, no substitute for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Paul is presenting to the church in Galatia. These were people who were looking for all kinds of substitutes---not necessarily the really nasty ones, the really good one---keeping God's law. That was the substitute they were running to, and Paul says there is no substitute for Jesus Christ our Savior. He's the perfect one. Paul says when the fullness of time had come God showed forth perfect timing of his wisdom. That God sent forth his Son, he presented to us the perfect person, the second person of the Godhead. He was born of a woman---he's the perfect mediator between God and man. He was born under the law, and he exacted perfect obedience to God's holy law at every point, every time. And he came to redeem those who were under the law, to provide the perfect redemption, perfect redemption. So that why? We might receive our adoption as sons and daughters---perfect security. Paul says Jesus Christ is the perfect Savior. We need him.

So Paul says when the fullness of time had come. In the three verses that precede the text we read, Paul is using this illustration that would have been very familiar to the first century reader. It's that, as a son who is destined for the inheritance from the father, that son has no real right acknowledged until the father declares

in his appointed time that the son is now the recipient of the inheritance. It was a public proclamation. That son before that time had about the same right as the slave in the house. And so Paul is putting this illustration there, that in the perfect timing, God's wisdom was revealed. In all of created time, that moment in time was when God's wisdom decided that it was best for the Almighty Creator to step through history and take on flesh.

We read theologians talk about the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace that allowed trade routes, and the industry at that time could spread the gospel. We read of the Jewish synagogue system and how when those first century Jews converted to Christianity there was already a weekly experience of meeting together so that the preaching of the gospel could take place. All those things have part and parcel to do with the fullness of time. But we marvel at the wisdom of God, that when he stepped through time he stepped through time himself as a young, helpless baby in an obscure backwater town when a tax had been levied by Caesar Augustus, in the most meager of settings, a place set aside for livestock---in order to secure the salvation of his precious bride, his beloved.

A Savior wrapped in swaddling cloths. A Savior wrapped in swaddling cloths. So why is he the perfect choice? Well, he's the perfect person. God sent forth his Son. That word *sent* is particular there, and it draws our attention to the fact that this one being discussed doesn't have a beginning. He is everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting. He is the Creator God. God sent forth his Son. We sing and celebrate the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, co-equal, consubstantial, equal in power and glory. And the second person of the triune God was sent forth in the wisdom of God to be our deliverer. John 1 tells us that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through him, and without him not anything made was made. In him was life. In him that life was the light of men. The perfect person came to rescue you and rescue me.

The perfect person sent forth from God, John goes on to say, that that same Word took on flesh---became flesh and dwelt among us for a time, so that we might see the glory of the One and Only, full of grace and truth. He took on flesh and became the perfect mediator. He was born of woman. Just as we have [in] 'God sent forth his Son' the view of Jesus' full divinity, we have here the view of Jesus' full humanity. The full humanity is in view. We don't have a direct proof for the virgin birth in this text, but what we do have is the full humanity of Jesus Christ, our mediator. He got hungry, he needed to eat. He got tired, he needed to sleep. He knew what it was like to feel deeply the loss of a loved one, he stood outside the tomb of Lazarus and wept. He knew the sting of betrayal by a close friend. He was misunderstood. He was hated with no cause. He saw up close and personal the damage of sin. And he witnessed in others the futility of turning to sources of comfort that are never, ever, ever going to supply the comfort that they promise. He experienced the full force of temptation to turn away from God as the source of life and health and peace.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us that he is the great high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses because he took on flesh. He was fully human. He was tempted in every respect that we are tempted, and yet never once did he commit any sin whatsoever. Tempted in every respect that we are. We succumb to temptation long before we can imagine what 'every respect' means, but he withstood the full force and never once sinned. Now isn't that sweet comfort? When you think about your life in the face of trial and turmoil and tribulation, the things that we encounter on a regular basis, isn't it sweet comfort to know that our elder brother has gone ahead of us in the fray. He has withstood all, and he offers himself as the one who goes between the holy God and sinful man. Hebrews 2:14 tells us that since therefore the children---that's us---share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same thing. Why? The writer of Hebrews says through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. That's the nature of temptation. That's the nature of living in the fallen world. We are subject to death like Rick reminded us earlier. And death has been

defeated in our great, perfect mediator. In his humanity Jesus experienced the reality of death. The God-Man died, willingly, for us.

Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his apologetic work, *Why the God-Man?* written in....well, it was completed in 1098...he argues that it's absolutely necessary that both the divine nature of Christ and the human nature of Christ be full in one person, without any mixture of the two. Quote from Anselm: "If these two complete natures are said to be united in some way, but still man is one person and God is another person, so that the same person is not both God and man, the two natures cannot do what needs to be done. For God will not do it because he does not owe it. And man will not do it because he cannot do it. Therefore, the God-Man, to do this---the person who is to make the satisfaction must be both perfect God and perfect man, because none but true God can make it, and none but true man owes it." That's the mystery of the incarnation.

So Jesus is the one who is the perfect person sent from God, becomes fully man, and is our perfect mediator to die as a substitute for sinners, because he lived a unique life like none other on the planet has ever lived. He was born under the law, and he presents to us a perfect obedience to that law. Jesus was born to the tribe of Judah in the line of David. He was circumcised on the eighth day, according to the law. He was in Jerusalem for the various feasts. He celebrated the Passover. He obeyed the Ten Commandments. He obeyed the two greatest commandments. Never once did Jesus Christ ever waver in his full and one hundred percent obedience to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your mind, all of your soul, and all of your strength---never once wavered from that. Perfect obedience. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, those who outwardly kept the Commandments---unless our righteousness exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, he says. Let that rest on you for just a moment.

We've got our two college students with us in the second service. We had everybody else in the first service because this is finals week and they needed a little extra sleep. Finals week. Does that phrase bring terror to your mind? Do you still at age 49 wake up in a cold sweat that you've missed the final, and you haven't been in school for 35 years? Imagine a final exam that's on a pass/fail basis. Pass/fail? No problem. Okay, we got it. But the standard set is 100% perfection. Miss one---you're done.

So it is with the righteousness of God. See, Paul's writing the letter to the Galatians, who believe they could keep the law. That's why he's saying who has bewitched you? You foolish Galatians, you cannot keep God's holy law. And he's presenting to us the perfect substitute, the one with perfect obedience. As the tension of the finals mounts in our heart and our mind and the sweat breaks out, let that tension be appeased by these words from Jesus himself. In Matthew 5:17 in the same sermon he said: Do not think that I have come to abolish the law. I did not come to abolish the law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. You see, the way we might deal with the standard of righteous perfection is, can we just throw the law out? Because then we're not held accountable. But Jesus says we don't abolish the law, because the law reveals the perfect character of our Almighty God. He says I didn't come to abolish it---I came to perfectly obey it, and in so doing, fulfill it on your behalf, on my behalf, because we're weak and frail. He knows our frame. We cannot do that, even with the best of intentions. We fail miserably.

So he lived his life under the law, and I would offer this as well---he died his death under the law, that same law. When our sins were placed on Christ, the law demanded justice. The wrath of God for sins, shedding of blood. And Paul tells us in Galatians 3, just one chapter earlier, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it's written in the law, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.' He died his death under that same law. So we see in Christ perfect redemption. You see, because we're born of woman we have that same humanity, and we're born under the law. But if we're just born of woman and born

under the law, we stand condemned. And Jesus came to redeem us, to provide salvation perfectly, to redeem those who were under the law. The language Paul references here is a direct reference to the ancient practice of redeeming a slave from bondage. If someone was willing to pay the price of a slave, then that slave's freedom was secure at the moment of payment. God was willing, and we are secure. Simple. Period. God made him, Jesus, who never committed sin, to be sin for us, to take our sin, so that in Christ---baptized into Christ, receiving Christ by faith---we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 gives us that precious truth.

So let me ask at this point...this is what preachers do at Christmas time, Randy and I have talked about....which is [the] more inviting image to you: the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, bundled up tightly in the swaddling cloths of mother Mary, or behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders, stripped naked, beaten, a public mockery, ashamed, not because of sin that he had committed, but because of everything that I have committed. Which image is more inviting?

Let me free you up. You don't have to choose. It's not a choice. It's a 'both-and,' not an 'either/or.' He was fully divine and fully human. The Son of God alone can bring perfect redemption. What Child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping, whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping? Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the son of Mary. You see, it's a 'both-and'---the perfect Savior.

And if we were to stop there, it would be glorious enough that God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law. But the purpose for that coming, the purpose for that redemption, was so that we might have perfect security. One final point: perfect security. I can't hardly utter that phrase without shuddering. I need perfect security. Assaulted by anxiety, fear of the future, discouraged by doubt, I need to know that it is finished, that it is accomplished, that it is secure. And if I look to myself, there is no security in that. There's no sense of anything being completed. There's only discouragement. But if I look to him, the perfect Savior, the perfect redemption---there's perfect security.

Paul says the Galatians that were trying to live under the law were showing that they were spiritually immature and not understanding the gospel. He's saying Jesus came so that our status before God would not be as slaves trying to eke out a merit of favor, but that it would be the status as of sons and daughters, fully accepted. The Shorter Catechism says in question 34 that: Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and we have a right to all the privileges, of the sons of God. Hear those phrases? It's an act of God's free grace. We can't obligate him, by anything that we do, to provide this. It is God graciously giving. And we're received into the number, so that all the rights and privileges of the sons of God are ours. I don't think we can quite fathom that. I can't.

Various preachers over the years have illustrated it this way. Picture the guy on death row. He's completely guilty of the vilest crimes, the most heinous violation against his fellow man. And he's been found---without a shadow of a doubt---guilty, and he is awaiting the death penalty, justly deserved. Now picture that same guy given a full pardon for all his crimes. Clean slate. Certainly an occasion for celebration, to be sure. But picture that same guy with the full pardon, the clean slate---now being given, lavished with the highest honor, the greatest wealth, the greatest status that the world has to offer---freely, not because of anything that criminal had done, but because of the grace of another. That's the picture here. That's the meaning of Christmas. That's what Christ came to do for us. We're the criminal. He's the giver of grace.

Christ has accomplished all that was required. The only requirement on us? Believe. Believe. In Romans 10 Paul puts it this way: If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. If you believe by faith that Almighty God, the Creator, the one

who has no beginning and has no end, was sent forth into the world, born of a woman, fully God, fully man, to redeem those under the law---if you place your faith in him for obedience and for forgiveness, it is yours, by the grace of God.

He sends forth the Son, and God sends forth the Spirit of the Son, whereby our hearts then cry, "Abba! Father!" What God sent the Son to accomplish, God sends the Spirit of the Son to apply to us. And he does so through the ordinary means of his grace through the Word, through the sacrament. In a moment we're going to celebrate the fully human, fully divine, paradoxical God-Man, who willingly laid down his life for your sins and for mine. On the night in which he was betrayed he took bread and he broke it and he said this is my body. It's being given for you. Then he took a cup of wine and he said this cup is a representation of my blood, the blood of the new covenant now established in me. It's for the forgiveness of your sins, and so take and drink.

And we gather at this table---it's for men and women, young and old alike, who have believed that truth and by faith are resting, not in themselves, but in the finished work of Christ. It's for people who have been baptized, they're part of the covenant community through that baptism. They've made a public profession of their faith in Christ, and they are submitted to the authority of the church to help them grow in some form or fashion. This table is for you, weak and wounded sinner, lost, left to die. This is for you. Jesus offers himself in your place.

Let's pray together. Gracious God, we pray that you would now work in this time of worship as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. That you would, Lord, give us the faith to see you clearly, to trust you fully, and to [live] in humble reliance on your grace for this moment of worship, as well as the days that are ahead. Strengthen your church, we pray now, Lord. In the name of Christ we ask it. Amen.