



Justifying Christmas

LEADER'S GUIDE



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SESSION 1: Is. 64:1-9

Introduction to the Bible study series

“Justifying Christmas”: that’s the title that has been chosen for this Bible study series. What thoughts and expectations come to mind when you hear it? Most of us probably begin running through a mental list of the various apologetic questions and challenges we Christians face every year as the celebration of our Savior’s birth approaches — “How can you justify spending so much money on gifts when so many people have nothing?” “How can you justify incorporating Santa Claus into your family traditions?” “How can you justify celebrating Jesus’ birth during an originally pagan festival?” And the list goes on and on.

That, however, is *not* what this Bible study will be about. “Justifying Christmas” will not help us learn new and clever ways to justify what we do every December; rather, it will help us see how the Scriptures connected with the birth of Jesus proclaim the good news of justification by grace through faith. In other words, we’ll be studying how *Christmas justifies* us as part of God’s gracious work in Christ Jesus to justify sinners. And if that’s what the Advent and Christmas Scriptures are proclaiming, then we will better see how everything we do at this time of year — our readings and songs, our worship gatherings and family gatherings, our customs and traditions — is or should be a celebration of how “God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ (the hidden center of the Old Testament and the manifested center of the New) creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.”¹

¹ Martin Franzmann, *Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1969), 4. Franzmann added an explanatory footnote to

[If part or all of the above is used in the announcement of an invitation to the Bible study, the instructor need only briefly review this series introduction for the class at the first session.]

Introduction to Session 1: Is. 64:1–9

There is a little lectionary irony in the fact that this “500th Christmas since the Reformation” should fall during Year B of our three-year lectionary, the year “devoted to” the Gospel according to Mark. Mark offers us no account of the birth of our Lord. For the purposes of our study, however, this is a blessing in disguise, for this forces us to consider a variety of texts rather than focus on one (familiar) longer narrative. And this year we have what is easily the most urgent and demanding of Advent beginnings in the almost desperate plea of Isaiah that God would burst the heavens and come down.²

Isaiah 64:1–9 will likely raise many questions for the participants of this study (and hopefully even more by the end of the hour), but we will let our series theme provide the focus and control the boundaries of our discussion in this Bible study. Still, some introduction to the passage is required, especially if the class is not familiar with Old Testament history. The instructor will be the best judge of just how much introduction is needed, but both instructor and students

his summary statement of “radical gospel,” which reads, “To avoid any possible misunderstanding, it may be noted that ‘may’ signifies ‘is permitted and enabled by God’ and ‘must’ indicates that there is no second way.”

² The Old Testament Reading for the First Sunday of Advent, Year B, is Is. 64:1–9. Cf. Year A is Is. 2:1–5 (“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord”) and Year C is Jer. 33:14–16 (“I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David”).

can find brief introductions to the prophet and his historical setting in our study Bibles.

Isaiah is the prophet quoted most frequently in the New Testament,³ so many of us are familiar with certain passages from his writings. What do we remember of the career of this eighth-century B.C. prophet? Horace Hummel provides the following one-sentence summary of Isaiah's career:

Isaiah lived through, witnessed, and commented on one of the major turning points in Israel's history—from the halcyon days of empire and independence under Uzziah through the fall of Samaria and the semi-escape of Judah only by accepting colonial status under the relentless pressure of the Assyrian colossus.⁴

With respect to Isaiah 64, three brief introductory points should be made here:

1. It is very difficult to determine the historical setting of Isaiah 64. In his brief "Excursus: The Historical Setting of 63:15-19," John Oswalt describes the challenges of determining that historical setting (including that of subsequent chapters) and the problems this difficulty has led to in the history of the interpretation of this section of Isaiah. Oswalt shows that the evidence is inadequate to support any of the "creative" theories proposed and adds,

This [passage] is a cry that would have particular poignancy in the light of the deliverance from Babylon, but the theological necessity of such action was as clear in the prophet's own day as it would be in any coming day. There is no justification for an attempt to interpret the perennial message of this passage on the basis of a hypothetical historical setting that is neither explicit nor implicit in the book, and that is not supported by any historical source.⁵

If the theological issues and necessities that Isaiah addressed are still facing us today, we need to hear the prophet as much as his original audience(s) did.

2. Although Isaiah's vision is far-reaching in both time and space, his book is intended to be read as a unified

whole. Students may be familiar with critical approaches that divide the book of Isaiah (and even the person of Isaiah) into first, second, third and so on; however, Oswalt reports that "the idea of several independent books of Isaiah is in the eclipse."⁶ The instructor is referred to the very helpful section of Reed Lessing's introduction, which provides a detailed argument as to why such segmented approaches should be "eclipsed" by a more careful and congenial reading of the whole book. His section "The Relationship between Isaiah 40–55 and Isaiah 56–66" concludes,

Chapters 56–66 are not an awkward addendum to Isaiah, but the culmination of the book's overall message. They must be interpreted as an integral part of the original book of Isaiah and not as an independent literary work that is only marginally connected with chapters 1–55. The inspired book is divinely intended to be read as a whole.⁷

In response to such unsupported theories of multiple authorship during distinct periods of history, Oswalt argues,

It is an easier supposition to imagine one author who receives a theological vision so large that it must be extended out beyond his own time and place to encompass other times and places whose details he can only dimly perceive and that are significant only insofar as they provide backdrops for the theological issues being addressed.⁸

3. Righteousness is one of the main themes that unites the book of Isaiah into a literary unity. One of the two main themes that Lessing uses to show the unity of the whole book of Isaiah is that of righteousness, the very theme we need to focus on. Pages 12–15 of Lessing's introduction provide invaluable introductory material for this study as well as for anyone interested in reading Isaiah as a unified text. Lessing notes that instances of the *ṣedeq/šəḏāqâ* (*ṣedeq/šəḏāqâ*),⁹ or "righteousness" word group, appear 81 times in the book and "bind together all sixty-six chapters."¹⁰

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

⁴ Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 191.

⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 617.

⁶ Oswalt, 40–66, 4.

⁷ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 20.

⁸ Oswalt, 40–66, 452 footnote 23.

⁹ The study follows the Hebrew transliteration convention (Academic style) presented in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 56–57.

¹⁰ Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, 12–13.

The entire section is well worth reading, but this key paragraph summarizes Lessing's approach to our passage:

As chapters 40–55 end, then, an apparent contradiction arises between Israel's unrighteous behavior (chapters 1–39) and Yahweh's promise of a righteous standing regardless of personal righteousness or worthiness. Israel is called to be righteous, but fails, for only Yahweh is righteous. Yet, Yahweh promises salvation to the unrighteous. Should Israel, then, continue to sin so that grace may abound (cf. Rom 6:1)? The answer comes in Isaiah 56–66.¹¹

The Text: Is. 64:1–9¹²

The passage should first be read aloud in everyone's hearing. The comments and questions that follow will focus very specifically on only a few of the passages, so it is important that the whole passage be heard and seen at the start.

Perhaps the chief reason for choosing this passage as the first of the series, and indeed for even offering an Advent-Christmastime Bible study on the theme of justification, is the need to remind ourselves that the Bible's teaching about justification includes much, much more than a simple “*not* by works.” Justification speaks to our entire relationship with God, including the way we view Him and His actions. The prophet Isaiah immediately forces us to wrestle with these greater issues by his opening words in chapter 64: “Oh that You would rend!”

Isaiah 64:1

We cannot finish even the first line of our text before encountering points that require some clarification, discussion and reflection. More specifically, there are two issues that arise when we try to get Isaiah to speak English. The second is not quite so difficult, so we'll consider it first.

The word translated by the ESV as “rend” is קָרַעַתָּה (qāra'attā), the Qal perfect of קָרַע (qāra'). The verb is very commonly used for the tearing of garments, but also is used in a variety of figurative ways (cf. BDB s.v. קָרַע [qāra']). The question here is not so much what the verb means as what sort of picture it is to evoke in our minds. “Rend” may not be a familiar word to everyone in the class, but even the idea of

“tearing heaven” will strike most as strange. Oswalt's explanation may be helpful: “The language here is the classical language of theophany in the OT, with God breaking through the apparently solid dome of the heavens (cf. 51:6; Ps. 18:10 [ENG. 9]; 144:5) to shake the most solid of the earth's foundations, the *mountains*.”¹³ Isaiah himself, in 40:22, describes God as the one who “sits *above* the circle of the earth” and “who stretches out the heavens *like a curtain*” (emphasis added). An image of tearing apart the cosmic fabric and descending into earthly reality corresponds perfectly.

The more important question, however, has to do with the force of this impassioned plea. The line we read translated as “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,” begins in Hebrew with the particle לוֹא (lū') Lessing explains the significance of the particle in this way:

The particle לוֹ [lū] (spelled לוֹא [lū'] here and in 48:18) introduces an unreal condition (Joüon, § 167 f) in the form of a prayer. Such a condition can refer to the past, present, or future. לוֹ [lū] has an optative sense, expressing a desire for something that has not (yet) been achieved, “oh ... !” or “would that ...” (see [Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley], § 151 e; Joüon, § 163 c; Waltke-O'Connor, § 40.2.2d) ... When לוֹ [lū] is followed by a perfect verb, it can denote “a wish that something might have happened in past time,” but in both 48:18 and here the construction is used to “express a wish that something *expected in the future* may already have happened” (GKC, § 151 e; emphasis added). On the Last Day God will rend the heavens and come down; Isaiah prays that it would happen now or would have already happened in his day.¹⁴

Oswalt brings out the force of this in his translation of the passage: “If you would have just split the heavens and come down ...”¹⁵ He explains,

Having already called on God to see how bad the situation is (63:15), the prophet now goes farther still and pleads for God to break in on that situation. How he would love to see that bloodstained Warrior coming up from Edom ([63:]1). Where is he? Their sins have utterly defeated them, and as a result the adversaries of the nation and of God are gloating. Is this what God wants? ... Although the Creator is

¹¹ Lessing, *Isaiah* 56–66, 14.

¹² The commentaries can explain the reasons for the differences between the Hebrew and English versification for our text. In short, English Bibles almost all include 63:19b as part of 64:1. It is important to note this difference if the Hebrew text and/or commentaries based on it are being consulted and used for the class.

¹³ Oswalt, 40–66, 620.

¹⁴ Lessing, *Isaiah* 56–66, 354.

¹⁵ Oswalt, 40–66, 617.

other than his creation, he can break into it at any point, and when he does lightning flashes, thunder rolls, and the earth shakes. In the voice of his deeply discouraged people, Isaiah cries out for God to do it again. Nothing else but God's direct intervention can break the power of the people's sin and make them a witness to the nations instead of a laughingstock ... [T]he wistfulness of [Isaiah's] wish is enhanced by the verbs being in the past tense: *If you would have just split the heavens* is not first of all a hope that God might do something in the future; it is a wish that he had already intervened long ago. Isaiah knows God, he thinks he knows God's heart, and it is hard for him to understand why God would let the situation get so desperate without having done something about it.¹⁶

Oswalt adds a footnote to this section that is very much to the point for us here today:

This point is especially forceful if this material was written, as the book claims, during the lifetime of Isaiah. The prophet sees the tragic condition of his own day and recognizes that while the far distant future is bright, nothing but deepening darkness is immediately ahead. It is a darkness that by no means culminates in the exile but extends beyond it, even into the time of the return. Although Isaiah manifestly cannot see that period in any detail (with the single exception of Cyrus), he does know that even after the return the problem of the peoples' sin will not be solved. It is no wonder that he is heartbroken, wondering how long God will let this go on.¹⁷

We, God's people, know or can at least imagine the forcefulness of His sudden, heaven-rending entry into our world. What a show that would be! What a proof of His reality! Certainly, if God were to do that, *all* the nations would know that He was God, *all* our enemies would tremble at the sound of His name, right? If only He would have already, think how nice things would be now.

Discussion Questions

1. **Advent is not about remembering Christmases past (and so trying to feel good about Christmas again) or looking forward to the end of the world (and trying not to feel bad about that); it is both discipline and**

celebration for the here and now in light of all that God has done and all that He will do. In the same way, the doctrine of justification is not simply a matter of knowing how sins get forgiven or how we “get saved”; it also involves our understanding of who God is and how He works — and whether or not we can trust Him. Have there been moments in your life when you pleaded with God, “If only You would/would have ...”? What was going on in your life at those times? What did you want God to do?

2. **When you look around at the situation in our community and church, nation and world today, do you wonder, like Isaiah, how long God will let this go on?**

Isaiah 64:5a

Isaiah turns to the past and reminds God Himself of the way He has acted: awesomely, unexpectedly, fearsomely, faithfully. From the beginning of time — from the earliest, mistiest memories of mankind — not a single witness can claim to have heard with his ear or seen with his eye a god besides the God Isaiah is praying to. Isaiah brings this happy reminiscence to its summary in verse 5a: “You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways.”

It should be noted here that Lessing understands verse 5a differently. Although the instructor may not feel it necessary to address this particular question to the class, a brief explanation of why this study differs from Lessing here will also provide an opportunity to summarize the logic of the passage through verse 5.

Lessing translates verse 5a — his verse 4a — as “[Oh that] you would meet one joyful and doing righteousness; in your ways they remember you.”¹⁸ He explains, “These clauses are the conclusion to the prayer that begins in 63:19b [English Text 64:1] with the words ‘oh that you would tear the heavens.’ Hence, פָּגַעָהּ [pāga‘əttā] is rendered as an optative, ‘[oh that] you would meet.’”¹⁹ In support of his interpretation, Lessing cites Jan Koolé's work *Isaiah III*. Koolé outlines the way he understands the logic of the passage to run:

Verse 3 proclaimed that Yahweh is the only true God, who acts as can be expected of a real God, on behalf of those who await Him. Meanwhile the people had despondently declared that they no longer

¹⁶ Oswalt, 40–66, 620–621.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 40–66, 621 footnote 21.

¹⁸ Lessing, *Isaiah* 56–66, 342.

¹⁹ Lessing, *Isaiah* 56–66, 357.

hope, v. 2. But v. 4a goes on to express the wish that there may be an individual (for יִתְּנָה [*et-*], cf. Joüon § 125b) or perhaps even some individuals who live in covenantal communion with Yahweh. It is hoped that He will meet such another in his theophany. But what follows makes it immediately clear that this is not to be expected, because ‘we all’ (vv. 5a, 5b, 7b, 8b) are sinful and can depend only on grace.²⁰

Why should the prophet wish for this? He is all but demanding that the Lord descend from heaven and mightily intervene to save His people. Is it righteous to think that He might do this if He were to find one or even a few? Is Isaiah bargaining with God for Jerusalem the way Abraham did for Sodom (cf. GEN. 18)? That seems out of place coming between a brief remembrance and celebration of God’s action in the past and the clear declaration of the tragic truth that all are now sinful and that there is no one who “takes hold of God” (Is. 64:6–7).

Delitzsch, on the other hand, argues,

After the long period governed by $\text{לִי$ [*li*] has thus been followed by the retrospect in ver. 3 (4), it is absolutely impossible that ver. 4a (5a) should be intended as an optative, in the sense of “O that thou wouldst receive him that,” etc., as Stier and others propose. The retrospect is still continued thus, ver. 4a (5a): “*Thou didst meet him that rejoiceth to work righteousness, when they remembered Thee in Thy ways.*”²¹

Delitzsch’s “*platterdings Unmögliches*”²² may seem too strong a response to the proposal to read verse 5a as part of Isaiah’s optative prayer; but his objection does have weight. We would need a clear reason to take this as optative after the long intervening retrospective section, wouldn’t we? Those who hold to that view have not offered such a reason. How, then, should we read it?

Delitzsch refers to it as a continuation; Oswalt, as an expansion:

The thought of v. 3 (Eng. 4) is expanded here. Waiting on the Lord is not passive but active. It is to do

righteousness (cf. 56:1) with joy, which is, in effect, to *remember* God’s ways. Thus to wait for the Lord is to live the covenant life, to commit the future into God’s hands by means of living a daily life that shows that we know his *ways* of integrity, honesty, faithfulness, simplicity, mercy, generosity, and self-denial.²³

The thought of the section coheres nicely if the following progression is seen:

- In 63:19, Isaiah laments that the people have become like one over whom God had never ruled.
- In 64:1–2, Isaiah pleads with God, who alone can save in such a desperate situation, to intervene with force, making Himself known once again.
- In 64:3–5a, Isaiah supports his plea by recalling that God has acted in the past in such dramatic, unexpected ways, that He alone has acted in a way to show that He is God, that this is, in fact, the way God acts toward those who are right with Him and walk in His ways.
- In 64:5b–7, Isaiah must admit that the people have no right to expect God to act as He always does toward the righteous, for they have all sinned and do not now put their trust in Him.

Before turning to the second half of verse 5, we need to consider more carefully what it means for the Lord to “meet” someone. Although the verb פָּגַע (*pāga*) can be used in situations of kindness or of hostility, the context here requires the former. Delitzsch suggests the sense “coming to the help of” and paraphrases the half-verse: “When such as love and do right, walking in Thy ways, remembered Thee (*i.e.* thanked Thee for grace received, and longed for fresh grace), Thou camest again and again to meet them as a friend.”²⁴ Oswalt comments at greater length:

What may the person who lives his or her life in this way expect? God will meet them. But what does that mean? Elsewhere this verb (*pāga*) does not have a particularly positive connotation. It is either neutral (to encounter someone, 1 Sam. 10:5; to make a request of someone, Jer. 7:16), or negative (to attack someone, Josh. 2:16). What can it mean here? Perhaps the word was chosen carefully (esp. in light of the second bicolon in the verse) to convey the thought of divine-human interaction. Let a person begin to

²⁰ Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah Chapters 56–66*, vol. 3 of *Isaiah: Part III*, trans. Antony P. Runia (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 392.

²¹ F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, vol. 2, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 467.

²² “flatly impossible.” Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblicher Commentar über den Prophet Jesaja* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1866), 616.

²³ Oswalt, 40–66, 623.

²⁴ Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 468.

live according to (*remember*) God's ways, joyfully doing righteousness, expectantly waiting for him, and sooner than we think, we are going to meet him coming to meet us. Jesus spoke in a similar vein when he said that doing must precede knowing in God's economy (JOHN 7:17). If we wonder where God is in our lives, the key is to begin doing what we know, allowing him to manifest himself when and where he chooses. According to Isaiah, the lesson of sacred history is that he will meet those who wait for him in this way.²⁵

3. We often speak of Advent as our season of waiting.

How do you think you should spend this season of waiting in light of the words of Isaiah? What are ways that you can “do righteousness”? What specific things do you do that you would regard as “remembering God in His ways”?

4. John Oswalt says in his commentary on this verse, “Thus to wait for the Lord is to live the covenant life, to commit the future into God's hands by means of living a daily life that shows that we know his ways of integrity, honesty, faithfulness, simplicity, mercy, generosity, and self-denial. The person who does not do these things may be waiting for something, but he or she is not waiting for the Lord.”²⁶ What do you think he means? Do you agree? How does our behavior reflect our trust in the Lord?

5. We have argued that this verse should be seen as the way God acts. (Cf. Delitzsch's statement above, that God comes to meet us again and again as a friend.) In what ways does God come to meet us now?

6. There is a tension in this passage already that the commentators seem to pass by on their way to the bigger tension that the second half of this verse will introduce. Isaiah seems to be pleading insistently with God to act how we expect Him to act — to come and deliver His people, to intervene and rescue them from their enemies. At the same time, Isaiah admits that God acts in unexpected ways. How well do you think you know how God works? Do you expect Him to act in unexpected ways in your life? If God acts in unexpected ways, can you still trust Him?

Isaiah 64:5b–7

Oswalt explains the abrupt (non)transition between the two halves of this verse with a comment bordering on understatement: “But the prophet's reverie is brought up short by some hard facts.”²⁷ Isaiah may be able to say that God must come and deliver them because of *His* character, but Isaiah knows that he cannot say God must deliver them because of *their* character. In a passage that reminds us of Romans 3, we see the breadth and depth of Israel's sin:

- The fact of God's anger itself indicates that they have sinned, for He meets the righteous as a friend.
- This sinful rebellion has persisted for a long time, it was no brief memory lapse of God's righteous ways.
- All have sinned, and this sin is defilement, “defilement in the presence of the absolutely Clean One.”²⁸
- In fact, they can no longer distinguish clean from filthy; in fact, what they regard as righteousness is in reality disgustingly unrighteous.
- Sin's wages are manifested in them — they wither and dry up like a leaf until the sheer force of their sins severs them completely from their source of life.
- “[N]o one is even concerned enough about the situation to cry out to God for help.”²⁹
- Israel won't even wrestle with God anymore — won't take hold of Him, cling to Him for rescue and blessing, hold on to His promises for dear life.

In 63:17, Isaiah asked of God, “O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?” He ends this section by repeating his complaint. Why does no one call upon the name of the Lord? Why does no one rouse himself to take hold of God? “For/ Because (כִּי [kî]) You, O LORD have hidden Your face from us” (64:7b). Luther explains the Biblical idea of God “hiding His face”:

God's face is God's very presence either in the Word, the promise and the sacraments, where God's thought is set before my conscience, or in deed, when God removes evils, pestilence, and murder. Summary: The face is called the design, or the ap-

²⁵ Oswalt, 40–66, 624.

²⁶ Oswalt, 40–66, 623–624.

²⁷ Oswalt, 40–66, 624.

²⁸ Oswalt, 40–66, 625.

²⁹ Oswalt, 40–66, 626.

pearance; the “face” of a house or the “face” of a tree. Therefore when God hides His face, both Word and deed, nothing remains but the face of the devil, of death, and of sin. So he says here, *You have hidden Your face from us*, that is, “We see no joy and peace. We see nothing but death and sin.”³⁰

What might this hiding of God’s face look like in “real life”? Setting this idea back into the context of Isaiah’s career, as Oswalt does, can help us answer that question.

This was not something foreign to Isaiah’s experience; it was directly out of his own life. Despite his most inspired and impassioned preaching, nothing seemed to move his people. Indeed, as God has said, their hearts only grew harder. God was hiding his face (8:17). Would the prophet stop recording what he was hearing from God? Would he stop imploring God for his people? No, he would continue faithfully, recording what he heard and calling out to God, waiting with eager expectation for a day he would not see in the flesh when God would indeed turn to his people (63:17), split the heavens (63:19b [Eng. 64:1]), and give them a heart to believe (64:4a [Eng. 5a]). This is a believer’s heart: one that does not deny the grief and even the anger that stem from God’s hiddenness, yet all the time waits with glad expectancy for the sure moment when he will reveal himself (8:17; 64:3 [Eng. 4]).³¹

Oswalt points out the dilemma we find ourselves facing:

If joyfully doing righteousness is the key to meeting God and having him work on our behalf, but we are fundamentally unable to do righteousness until God makes it possible, we are in a vicious circle. We cannot do righteousness until God enables us, but God cannot work in our lives until we do righteousness.³²

And we are brought to the following realization:

God is angry and justifiably so, but does he want to remain angry? If so, the people can do nothing about it. They cannot somehow produce enough righteousness to mollify God, because they are helpless before their sin, as vv. 5–6 (Eng. 6–7) show so graphically. God will have to satisfy his righteous anger for himself. No one else can do it.³³

³⁰ AE 17:370–371.

³¹ Oswalt, 40–66, 627.

³² Oswalt, 40–66, 624.

³³ Oswalt, 40–66, 624–625.

7. The image that Isaiah uses in verse 6 is both embarrassing and offensive.³⁴ It is not the sort of thing that Christians talk about on Sunday morning — or ever. And yet, the metaphor is extremely well chosen. In a way, the image of the menstrual cloth is even more forceful than that of the corpse. The corpse may illustrate the loss of life and the rotting of the body that follows, but the menstrual cloth symbolizes an opportunity for new life that will never be realized. It is the chance for life now turned to waste. What other images does the Bible use for man’s complete inability to rescue himself from his own sinful condition? See Psalm 38 for another cluster of images.

8. Oswalt suggests that one of the ways we experience God hiding His face is when His Word seems to be ineffective. Have you experienced this when trying to share God’s Word with another person to comfort them, encourage them, admonish them or warn them? How was your response similar to or different from Isaiah’s?

Isaiah 64:8–9

The dilemma that verse 6 brought us to has no humanly instigated or humanly managed solution. Sinful humanity can neither pacify God’s anger nor claim a right to His friendly aid. The prophet and the people for whom he speaks are left with nowhere to turn, except to God.

“But now.” After all that Isaiah has said since 63:7 — the recounting of God’s steadfast love, His saving and suffering and redeeming love, the recounting of Israel’s rebellion and God’s mighty deliverance of Israel by the hand of Moses, the questioning of God’s reasons for making this people whom He rescued to become like a people He had never ruled, the complaining against God for His not having acted already, the admission of the sin that is killing Israel from within and of her apathetic resignation to her doom — after all that, how can there still be a “but”? Because God is still Israel’s father.

The dilemma is brought to nothing by God’s fatherhood. Oswalt writes,

³⁴ Even the ESV avoids the embarrassment by using what is, to some degree, a euphemism: “polluted garment.” Cf. Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, 359: “The noun בגד [*beḡed*], ‘garment,’ is in construct with the plural noun עדים [*‘idīm*], probably derived from the root עד [*‘dd*], having to do with a period of time (cf. עד [*‘ad*], ‘until’ or ‘perpetuity’). Both BDB (עדה [*‘idāh*]) and DCH (עדה [*‘idāh*]) render the hapax legomenon עדים [*‘idīm*] as ‘menstruation.’” Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, 342, translates the phrase as “garment of menstruation.”

Israel is the distinct creation of God. This was a central point of the historical reminiscence of 63:7–14: God did not call Israel into existence, give them his covenant, and lead them into the promised land because they deserved it for their faithfulness, but solely as an expression of his own saving character (“name,” 63:12, 14).³⁵

As Luther expresses it,

“Even in times of darkness and the hiding of Your face, You will act no differently. Your promises are there, and they stand, and you remain our Father.”³⁶

Isaiah reinforces God’s unchangeable relationship to His people as their father with an image he has used twice before in his book: God as the potter.³⁷ In both earlier uses, though, it was to point out the absurdity of the pot complaining to the potter about the way he had formed it. Here the (self-)ruined pot pleads with the potter not to discard it but to still claim ownership of the pot, to still look on it as clay that can be used again. Luther explains the image in connection with its historical setting but with clear applications for later generations of “pots” as well:

So we are in the hand of God, and even though we are evil, He thrusts us into the lump, into a Babylonian captivity, until the clay has been worked through better so that it becomes more pleasing. Then it will become a new lump. It is as if [Isaiah] were saying: “The fact that You have trampled the clay will not harm us who are broken, if only You remain the Potter and will reshape us.” This is the task of a potter.³⁸

The ESV’s “Be not so terribly angry” attempts to render the אֲדַמְּךָ (‘*ad-məḏ*’*d*) of the Hebrew text, but Delitzsch’s explanation of the phrase gives us a clearer picture of its force:

Let Him then not be angry אֲדַמְּךָ [‘*ad-məḏ*’*d*], “to the utmost measure” (cf. Ps. cxix. 8), or if we paraphrase it according to the radical meaning of מֵאֵד [‘*m*’*d*], “till the weight becomes intolerable.”³⁹

Oswalt explains, “Isaiah does not ask that judgment be dispensed with or suspended, only that it not be carried out

to its *extremity*, which would surely mean the extermination of his people ... [God’s] judgment is not an end in itself; it is intended to have an ultimately redemptive purpose in cleansing and restoring the people to purity (cf. 4:2–6; 30:18–22; 54:7–8). Isaiah is here appealing for God to actualize that reality.”⁴⁰

The final “behold” answers to the “but now” of verse 7 (“But now, O Lord, you are our Father; ... Behold, please look, we are all your people”). Although the “forever” of “remember not iniquity forever” leaves us looking to the future and hoping against hope that something might break this vicious circle of sinful rebellion, for the moment we rest here with Isaiah and Israel. All that the sinner can do, in the end, is simply to place himself before God and say, “Look! Your child,” and wait for Him to act.

Concluding Discussion

Our ways of talking together about justification by grace through faith may too often risk making it seem about as significant as getting a rebate check in the mail or paying a traffic ticket online. We don’t begin to really understand and care about justification until we begin to feel the crushing weight of our own sinfulness. Otherwise, as Luther says, “We are only talking about the letters without the experience.”⁴¹ The more truly and fully we know God and the more truly and fully we know ourselves, the more powerfully do we feel the dilemma that this passage lays before our hearts. And keep in mind, Isaiah is not talking about the fate of the nations, not raising the question of whether or not the heathen can ever be found right with God — no, he is speaking of God’s chosen, the nation He called into being and bound to Himself with His covenant of steadfast love. Justification’s dilemma is felt more powerfully by those who know that they are God’s people (cf. Romans 7), so it is “meet, right, and salutary” that we, God’s people today, should return again and again to these questions.

9. What have we learned about ourselves in this passage?

Most of us here would probably say we have known for a long time that we are sinful, but, in light of this passage, we should be asking ourselves why we still feel sometimes that we know better than God does. What do our “Oh, if only You would have ...” complaints say about understanding that we are the ones who need justifying — not God? Do we solve the “justification

³⁵ Oswalt, 40–66, 629.

³⁶ AE 17:371.

³⁷ See Is. 29:16 and 45:9.

³⁸ AE 17:371–372.

³⁹ Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 472.

⁴⁰ Oswalt, 40–66, 629.

⁴¹ AE 17:372.

dilemma” by slipping into thinking, “I can understand why God chose me to be His own; I know that when He meets me it will be as a friend”? How often do we thank God for being the One who justifies us but then refuse to trust Him when He doesn’t act as we expect Him to?

10. What have we learned about God in this passage? Can we confess with Isaiah that “no eye has seen a God besides” our God, the God who makes Himself known to us in Christ Jesus (cf. 64:4)? How is our knowledge of God’s ways even better than Isaiah’s knowledge was? (cf. LUKE 10:23–24; JOHN 14:8–11; HEB. 1:1–2).

11. Is the knowledge that God acts in unexpected ways comforting or disturbing? Why? What has been the most surprising way in which God has ever acted? (cf. PHIL. 2:5–11).

12. Are we confident that God is *our* Father, too? How do we know that? (JOHN 20:17 might provide help with this one.)

13. What have we learned about justification by grace through faith in this passage? The passage begins by raising the question of whether or not we can put our faith in this God — He hasn’t always acted to save His people the way His people expected Him to. And yet, Isaiah, like us, cannot go far without admitting that there is no other God, no one else who acts to save. The description of a sinful condition that we share with God’s people of Isaiah’s day leaves no doubt that, if there is to be a justification, a setting right of things, it can only be by grace. Finally, we place ourselves before God our Father and Maker/Remaker in simple, childlike faith: “Look, God, Your children!”

Closing Thought

The theme of waiting in hopeful expectation and with patient faith comes through clearly in Isaiah’s words, but this may not have otherwise felt very much like an *Advent* Bible study. The opening words of our text were “borrowed” by Friedrich von Spee for the opening words of his hymn, “O Savior, Rend the Heavens Wide” (LSB 355, LW 32). Fred Precht details the connections with our passage and others:

A somewhat unique characteristic of this Advent hymn is its direct reference to numerous bold images, or metaphors, from Holy Scripture. Its theme reflects the ancient Introit for the Fourth Sunday in Advent with its dramatic call: “You heavens above,

[rain] down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up” (Is. 45:8). Closely associated with this are “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Is. 64:1) and “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Is. 11:1). Not to be overlooked are the references to Christ as the sun (more direct in the German) — “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (REV. 1:16B) — and as the “bright Morning Star” (REV. 22:16B), all pointing directly to him as the Redeemer, whose coming is entreated with deep fervor.⁴²

Perhaps, though, in light of our devotion and what we’ve learned from it, we should always pair this hymn with the following poem from George MacDonald:⁴³

THAT HOLY THING.

They all were looking for a king
To slay their foes, and lift them high:
Thou cam’st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

O son of man, to right my lot
Nought but thy presence can avail;
Yet on the road thy wheels are not,
Nor on the sea thy sail!

My fancied ways why shouldst thou heed?
Thou com’st down thine own secret stair:
Com’st down to answer all my need,
Yea, every bygone prayer!

⁴² Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship: Hymnal Companion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 40.

⁴³ George MacDonald, *The Project Gutenberg eBook of Poetical Works of George MacDonald, Vol. 2* (Posting Date: December 7, 2011 [eBook #9984]).

SESSION 2: Matt. 1:18–25

Introduction

As we turn our attention to the second half of Matthew 1, we will feel as though we are now moving into territory that is much more explicitly “Christmassy.” And so we are, but we need to remember that our theme is “Justifying Christmas,” so we come to this familiar and well-loved passage asking the same question we asked of Isaiah: What does this text teach us about justification by grace through faith in Christ Jesus? This passage may not be familiar to everyone in the room, so, once again, it will be best for us all to hear the whole passage from start to finish.

Read Matt. 1:18–25.

While the students still have their Bibles open to Matthew 1, it will be easy to point out that this is not the beginning of Matthew’s account of the Gospel and to show them the way in which Matthew does begin. We may find the first 17 verses of Matthew’s account both tedious and counter-intuitive. “What reader can last through 17 verses of such strange-sounding, tongue-twisting names and even want to keep reading when he finally gets to Jesus?” we may wonder. Raymond Brown provided a very valuable introduction to these verses in his little book *A Coming Christ in Advent*:

If a Christian today were asked to tell someone who knows nothing about Christianity the basic story of Jesus Christ, where would he or she be likely to begin? I am willing to wager that not one in ten thousand would begin where the author of the Gospel that the church puts first begins—where the first line of the first page of the New Testament begins—with the majestic assurance: This is “the story of the beginning/the origin/the genesis of Jesus Christ.” Indeed, we might approximate: “the story of the advent of Jesus Christ.” For Matthew the origin of Jesus Christ starts with Abraham begetting Isaac! In other words the story of the Hebrew patriarchs, of the kings of Judah, and of other Israelites is the opening stage of the story of Jesus Christ. That such an Old Testament component to the Jesus story would not occur to most Christians today is a sad commentary on how far we have moved from our ancestors’ understanding of the good news. Matthew’s list of people who are an integral part of the origin of Jesus Christ contains some of the most significant names in the biblical account of God’s dealing with His people Israel, and I for one wish strongly

that at least once a year their names were allowed to resound in the Christian church on a Sunday when all the worshipping New Testament people of God were there to hear.⁴⁴

Brown’s points are all worth taking to heart. Although this is not the place to devote to this genealogy the time that it deserves, let this at least serve as a reminder to us that we are about to hear the story of Jesus the Christ, who is both son of Abraham and son of David.⁴⁵

In keeping with our series theme, we will move ahead to Matt. 1:18–25. We will focus on three questions:

1. Why does Joseph feel that he should divorce Mary?
2. What is Matthew telling us about Joseph when he refers to him as “just/righteous”?
3. Why is it important that Joseph be involved in naming the Child?

Focus Question: Matt. 1:18–20

1. Why does Joseph feel that he should divorce Mary?

Read verse 18 again carefully. How much does Joseph know at this point? The answer to that question may seem very obvious after a first reading, but there is a question about Matthew’s narrative here that has puzzled readers since ancient times. What did Joseph learn about his fiancée that made him feel that a quiet but legal end to their engagement was the best course of action for all concerned?

The majority of both readers and commentators today read the text as telling us that Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, that he knew he was not the father and that he could not — in terms of God’s will and of his own conscience — take Mary to be his wife. It is not until the announcement of the angel in Joseph’s dream (v. 20) that Joseph learns this child is not the product of marital infidelity but of the work of the Holy Spirit.

However, since at least the time of Origen of Alexandria († c. A.D. 254), there have been readers who understood Matthew to be telling us that what Joseph learned about Mary was that she was pregnant through the working of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was therefore *afraid* to take Mary to be

⁴⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1988), 18.

⁴⁵ See pages 73–77 in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) for a brief but helpful overview of this section of Matthew.

his wife (and to interfere with this divine relationship) until he could see the complete fulfillment of this work of God, namely the birth of this child. The angel comes to assure the terrified Joseph that he need not be afraid to take Mary into his home, implicitly pronouncing God's blessing on the relationship by explicitly calling Mary his "wife." Joseph obeys the angel's instructions, but out of respect for his Lord and for Mary, his wife, he has no sexual relations with her until she gives birth to her son.⁴⁶

[At this point, the instructor should decide whether or not to pause and hear the reactions of the students to these two interpretations. Many of the points for or against either of the interpretations, which are discussed below, will likely arise in such a discussion.]

The dilemma now becomes visible. The first interpretation does not seem to give verse 18 its full weight, or at least seems to take it in its more natural sense:

- Why does Matthew say she "was found to be" instead of just saying that she *was* pregnant through the work of the Holy Spirit?
- Is it fair to the text to assume that Joseph learned Mary was pregnant but did not learn the "origin" of this child?
- The idea of adultery is never mentioned by Matthew; are we right in introducing it here if there is another possible explanation for Joseph's decision?

The second interpretation, on the other hand, seems to render verse 20 redundant:

- The reason Joseph should *not* be afraid is quite clearly that the child is the result of the Spirit's work. How would the angel's message encourage Joseph, according to this interpretation?

⁴⁶ Ulrich Luz provides one of the better surveys of this interpretation in his *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 93–95, although he himself holds that Joseph did not know the child was "of the Holy Spirit" until the angel revealed that to him in his dream. The fragment from Origen's commentary, often referred to but not quoted, reads as follows: "Ἐφοβεῖτο οὐχ ὅτι ἐπόρνευσεν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ παράδοξον καὶ ὅτι ἡγνόμεν, εἰ ἦδη μεμόρφωται τὸ ἐξ ἁγίου πνεύματος [*Ephobeito ouch hoti eporneusen, alla dia to paradoxon kai hoti egnoei, ei edē memorphōtai to ex hagiou pneumatos*] Origen, "Fragment 18," *Origenes, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1941), 23.

A rough translation might read as follows: "He was not fearing that she had committed adultery; on the contrary, [he was afraid] because of the wonder and his not knowing if that which (was conceived) through the Holy Spirit had already been formed."

For the question of the force of "until" in Matt. 1:25, see Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 103–104.

- Doesn't this interpretation make all of the characters seem less real?

Much, much more could be said about this issue than time will allow in this session, and at least one commentator has warned that this discussion often turns emotional.⁴⁷

2. A more beneficial approach is to set this dilemma aside for the moment and ask ourselves, why is any of this material important for Matthew. Why does it need to be included in his narrative at all?

In his fourth homily on Matthew, John Chrysostom takes an approach to this material that seems to be both humane and full of common sense.⁴⁸ The spirit of his treatment will serve as more of a guide than the specific content of his homily, but his approach does offer us a way forward.

The point that is important for us to see is the perfect timing of the fulfillment of God's plan through His Spirit and using these children of His.

3. What if Mary had become pregnant before the engagement? Surely even the betrothal would have been seen as Joseph's acknowledgement that the child was his. How, in such a case, could Joseph possibly have had *any* future relationship with this mother and her child?

4. But what if Mary had become pregnant after the wedding? Not a hint of scandal then, of course, but also no chance for God to bring to fulfillment all of the promises leading up to this birth.

5. Why should Joseph's internal deliberations even be recorded for us? Because it is this intricately interwoven situation that allows Mary to give birth to her child in safety, the true story of the child's origin to be told and Joseph to assume the role of legal father/guardian. Origen was right about one thing, at least; this is a wonder, and it should make us all tremble with fear every time we hear it told. Matthew simply summarizes the whole complicated situation by saying, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (v. 22).

In the end, it doesn't seem to be too much of an obstacle toward our understanding of the text that we are unable to confidently resolve the dilemma posed by verses 18 and 20. What is clearly most important to the evangelist is that his

⁴⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 94 footnote 38.

⁴⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, vol. 10 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 20–30.

readers see how God was at work to fulfill His promises, especially the one given through the prophet Isaiah and quoted by Matthew in verse 23. Knowing of the dilemma, though, and now having given careful consideration to some of the issues involved, we are much better prepared to take up our second question.

Focus Question: Matt. 1:19

6. What is Matthew telling us about Joseph when he refers to him as “just/righteous”? In the context of verse 19, we need to expand the question to read as follows: What does Joseph’s decision to end his engagement quietly have to do with the fact that he is righteous?

It will help us understand the discussion of this verse if we first look briefly at the Greek text. Verse 19 reads as follows:

- a. Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, [*Iōsēph de ho anēr autēs*,]⁴⁹
- b. δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν δειγματίσαι, [*dikaios ōn kai mē thelōn autēn deigmatísai*]
- c. ἐβουλήθη λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι αὐτήν.⁵⁰ [*eboulēthē lathra apolysai autēn.*]

A somewhat wooden and “neutral” translation would read as follows (matching the lines of the text above):

- a. Now Joseph her husband,
- b. being righteous and not wanting to expose her to public disgrace,
- c. intended to divorce her secretly.

The phrases “being righteous” and “not wanting” (and the words in Greek that they translate) are constructed in a way that allows them to take on various forces in differing contexts. Raymond Brown outlines three ways in which these two phrases have been related to each other and to the rest of the verse.⁵¹ As we will immediately see, this discussion is inseparable from the question of what the word δίκαιος (*dikaios*, “righteous”) means here.

- A. “*Kindness or mercy* was the key factor in Joseph’s uprightness or justice ...” Those who hold this view would translate 19bc “an upright man *and therefore* unwilling to expose her publicly.”

- B. “*Respect or awe* for God’s plan of salvation was the key factor in Joseph’s uprightness or justice ...” Those who hold this view would also translate 19bc “an upright man *and therefore* unwilling to expose her publicly.”

- C. “*Obedience to the Law* was the key factor in Joseph’s uprightness or justice ...” Those who hold this view would translate 19bc “an upright man *but* unwilling to expose her publicly.”

If the Greek grammar alone could answer this question, there would be just one position and no need for discussion. The additional material in the commentaries and studies also shows that it is not very difficult to find evidence in contemporary ancient literature to support each of the three views of *righteousness* listed above — although the second position is probably weakest in this regard. Here, as is regularly the case in reading the Bible, each reader is required to take upon himself or herself some of the responsibility of interpretation.

Discussion Questions

- 7. How can we as readers move toward an interpretation we feel confident in? What sort of questions do we need to be asking? Where can we look for answers?
- 8. Which of the three positions do you prefer? On what do you base your preference?

Matthew uses the various forms of δίκαιος (*dikaios*) more than any other evangelist, 17 times in all.⁵² It should not be surprising, then, that the word would not be used in the same way even every time it occurs in Matthew. Think, for example, of Matt. 5:45, where Jesus teaches that the Father sends rain “on the just and on the unjust.” Here the word and its opposite are used to encompass all of humanity, and the point is not to define precisely what makes a person righteous and before whom but simply that God shows His love to all and we ought to do the same. When, in Matt. 9:13, our Lord says that He came “not to call the righteous, but sinners,” and contrasts mercy and sacrifice, the word cannot signify those who have been declared righteous by God but, rather, those who think they are righteous on the basis of their own character or nature. Then again, when our Lord says that the “righteous will shine like the sun” in their Father’s kingdom (Matt. 13:43), He does mean those who have been justified by faith in Him.

⁴⁹ The study follows the Greek transliteration convention presented in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 59–60.

⁵⁰ Nestle-Aland, ed., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 2.

⁵¹ The three positions below summarize Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 126–128.

⁵² Mark uses the word only twice; Luke, 11 times; and John, three times.

9. What, then, should we think Matthew means by “righteous” when he uses it to describe Joseph in the opening chapter of his Gospel?

That may very well be just the question that Matthew wants us to be asking at this point in his story. In Matthew, the saints of old are referred to as “righteous” (e.g., *MATT. 13:17; 23:29, 35*), but how can their behavior help us here? What did the Old Testament saints do when their fiancées told them that they were pregnant through the work of the Spirit of God? Joseph *finds himself* in a situation that no would-be righteous man has ever found himself in before or will find himself in again. Old standards and definitions will need to be clarified in the light of what God is now doing through this virgin. And, to return briefly to our first question, would it have been any easier for Joseph to decide upon the right course of action had he known that the child was “of the Holy Spirit”? Would *not* knowing make it easier? Jeffrey Gibbs points out that Joseph’s inability to judge for himself what the right course might be in this situation gives us “the first glimpse of a powerfully important theme in Matthew’s Gospel, namely, that in order for human beings to know the ways of God and his Christ, those ways must be *revealed* to them.”⁵³

Perhaps Matthew chose to write this description of Joseph in slightly ambiguous terms just so that his readers would be forced to ponder these questions. However, Matthew guards against positions either of legalism or of permissivism. Joseph is both just and concerned for the well-being of Mary. He desires to obey faithfully the laws God had given His people concerning marriage and marital fidelity. Whatever the origins of the child Mary was carrying, those origins did not fall within what God had allowed for between fiancé and fiancée. At the same time, Joseph’s behavior betrays no hint that he is seeking to justify himself by a “strict” adherence to the law regardless of what harm that might do to others. Joseph’s internal struggle to determine a right course of action in this very upsetting situation is shown by the relatively rare verb that Matthew uses in the beginning of verse 20. The verb ἐνθυμηθέντος (*enthymēthentos*), translated “as he considered (these things),” appears in only one other passage in the New Testament, *Matt. 9:4*. There it is used twice of the scribes who, having given this same kind of careful thought to the matter, have decided that Jesus is a blasphemer. The verb seems to be used in contexts where people are faced with problems they

are not logically or rationally equipped to solve.⁵⁴ Martin Franzmann explains further:

The strictly divine character of this intervention in history [the conception from the Holy Spirit] is marked, further, by the fact that it cuts athwart the normal thinking of man, even of pious man. Joseph, the son of David, just man though he be, has no eyes for the working of God. His objections must be overcome; the son of David must be compelled to accept the gift God gives to David’s house (1:19–25). God’s ways surprise man and humble him. The disciples who recorded this act of Joseph did so in the consciousness that they, too, had been graciously overpowered. They had not left their trades and their homes at the stirring of their noble impulses but by the intervening will of God.⁵⁵

Franzmann already points us forward to our third question, but one final point needs to be made here before we pause for discussion. In one of his sermons on *Luke 1:39–56*, Luther mentions the events of our text in passing. He paraphrases and then comments on *Matt. 1:20*:

An angel came from heaven and said: “Fear not. There is no dishonor or disgrace. She is with child by the Holy Spirit.” Joseph had nothing to go by save the word of God and he accepted it. A godless man would have said it was just a dream, but Joseph believed the word of God and took unto him his wife.⁵⁶

In the end, Matthew leaves us in no doubt about the course of the righteous man in a situation he cannot possibly comprehend: Joseph believes the word of God and obeys it. For obvious reasons, the adult Jesus cannot say, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my *father*,” but notice how Joseph’s actions in this case bring him within the definition of Jesus’ family — a definition that transcends both biology and law (cf. *MATT. 12:46–50*).

10. What have these first two questions concerning Matthew 1 taught us about justification? Among the points to be emphasized here would be especially the point that, no matter what Joseph might have known

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that a compound of this verb, διενθυμέομαι (*dienthymeomai*; “give serious thought to,” “ponder”) is used by Luke in *Acts 10:19* to describe a very similar sort of situation. Note also the reference to Peter’s (inward) perplexity in *10:17*.

⁵⁵ Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 12.

⁵⁶ *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 30–31.

⁵³ Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 105.

or been able to understand as he was contemplating his future with Mary, “in order for [him] to know the ways of God and his Christ, those ways must be revealed to [him].”⁵⁷ The same is true for us, of course, as Gibbs’ original statement makes clear. As Franzmann said, we have “no eyes for the working of God.”⁵⁸ How could anyone possibly think that they could be justified by doing the works of the law when, from one moment to the next, we find it difficult — if not impossible — to know what the right thing to do is, to know how to love, to know how to obey?

Secondly, Joseph gives us a glimpse of what it does mean to be righteous before God, to be justified by faith, when he believes the message delivered to him by God’s messenger in a dream. Luther’s point above can hardly be exaggerated. Think of the incredible nature of the message itself: “Your fiancée is pregnant with a child through the working of the Holy Spirit.” Then recall that this message was delivered by an angel. Then remember that this angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. Such faith in and of itself cannot be explained in ways that reason will be satisfied with. It, too, is a wonder, a marvelous working of the Holy Spirit of God.

- 11. How often do you find yourself in situations where you simply don’t know what the right thing to do might be? What do you do in those situations? How does God still reveal His righteous ways to us today?**

Focus Question: Matt. 1:21–25

- 12. Why is it important that Joseph be involved in naming the Child?** Our final question on Matthew 1 involves no complicated grammatical analysis or detailed study of ancient languages, but it does have an important point to make about “justifying Christmas.” Our final question simply requires us to be careful readers of Matthew’s story of the “origin of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.” Perhaps the answer to this question is already well known among the students in the class. If so, the following can help show the importance of Joseph naming this child.

In the quote from Franzmann above, he wrote that “the son of David must be compelled to accept the gift God gives to David’s house.”⁵⁹ What exactly does he mean by that, and

why is it so important that Joseph “must be compelled” to do it? R. T. France sets up the question this way:

The “book of origin” [MATT 1:1–17] has left us with an unresolved problem. Joseph has been shown to be the “son of David,” the heir to the royal dynasty of Judah, but in v. 16 Matthew has abandoned his regular formula to indicate that Jesus, the son of Joseph’s wife Mary, was not in fact Joseph’s son (and Matthew carefully avoids ever referring to Joseph as Jesus’ “father”). What then is the relevance of this dynastic list to the story of Jesus, son of Mary? These verses [MATT 1:18–25] will explain, therefore, how Jesus came to be formally adopted and named by Joseph, despite his own natural inclinations, and thus to become officially “son of David”; the angel’s address to Joseph as “son of David” in v. 20 will highlight the issue.⁶⁰

But, again, why is this all so important to Matthew (and, therefore, should be to us)? The history of the discussions and even controversies concerning the identity of Jesus as true God and true Man has often emphasized the virgin birth and the two natures in Christ more than it has questions of Jesus’ lineage. Gibbs points out the importance of the latter for all those — from Eve and Adam to Mary and Joseph — who were awaiting the promised Messiah and Savior:

Given the OT’s view of the king as God’s “anointed,” this second title [“Son of David”] has some theological overlap with the declaration that Jesus is “Christ.” “Son of David” however, specifically evokes what might be the dominant strain of messianic expectation in both the OT and in Second Temple Jewish literature.^[61] The spring from which the expectation flowed is God’s promise to David that a Son from his royal line would “build a house” for God’s name, and God would establish his throne so that he would rule over the people of God forever. This king would be God’s “Son,” and God would be his “Father” and never withdraw his favor from him (2 SAM 7:12–16, 1 CHR 17:11–14). Although David’s immediate son Solomon, who enjoyed a long and peaceful reign and built the temple, clearly was an aspect of the fulfillment of that promise, the subsequent history

⁵⁷ Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 105.

⁵⁸ Cf. Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 12.

⁵⁹ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 12.

⁶⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 47.

⁶¹ Jewish literature written between the years (roughly) 500 B.C. and A.D. 70, the time of the “second temple” in Jerusalem, built by Zerubbabel and renovated by Herod I.

of the kings of Israel and Judah makes abundantly clear the need for a greater fulfillment of the promise to David. Thus, through prophet and psalmist the hope for a greater “David” remained alive, and Israel continued to look forward to the fulfillment of what God had promised David.⁶²

Brown explains how God provided this greater “David” in a way that satisfied the Biblical and cultural requirements for a child to be a “son of David”:

But for Judaism, as the genealogy indicates, the royal lineage of the Messiah had to be traced through a series of fathers to David. Matthew gives the answer to the modern question [“How can Jesus be Joseph’s son if Joseph did not beget him?”] when Joseph is told, “She is to bear a son, and *you* are to name him Jesus.”^[63] Judaism wrestled with the fact that it is easy to tell who is a child’s mother, but difficult to tell who is a child’s father. To establish paternity, it is not sufficient to ask the wife because she might lie about the father in order to avoid being accused of adultery. Rather the husband should give testimony since most men are reluctant to acknowledge a child unless it is their own. The Mishna *Baba Bathra* (8:6), written some 200 years after Jesus’ birth, is lucidly clear: “If a man says, ‘This is my son,’ he is to be believed.” Joseph gives such an acknowledgment by naming the child; thus he becomes the legal father of Jesus. (This is a more correct description than adoptive father or foster father.) The identity of Jesus as Son of David is in God’s plan, but Joseph must give to that plan a cooperative obedience that befits a righteous man.⁶⁴

Jesus’ identity will be even further clarified by the names given Him by God through Joseph: “Jesus,” and “Immanuel,” — but you already know that!

Concluding Discussion

This final question has important ramifications not only for how we think of Jesus’ identity, but for how we think of our own.

⁶² Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 75. Gibbs provides the following passages as examples of this Davidic expectation: Is. 9:7; 16:5; 22:22; 55:3; Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; Amos 9:11; Zech. 12:10; and Ps. 89:3–4, 49; 132:10–11, 17.

⁶³ In Matthew’s Greek, the angel uses the second person *singular* form of the verb ≈ “you, Joseph, shall name him” rather than the second person plural ≈ “you both shall name him.”

⁶⁴ Raymond E. Brown, “The Annunciation to Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25),” *Worship* 61, no. 6 (1987): 487–488.

13. What are some of those ramifications?

Think of the many ways our identity as God’s sons and daughters is called into question, ways that might even tempt us to doubt our identity as God’s sons and daughters. Against all of these questions, arguments and temptations, we can cling to the following assurances (among other) from God’s Word:

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (JOHN 1:12–13).

“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (GAL. 3:7–9).

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 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, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (ROM. 8:14–17).

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” (ROM. 8:31–34).

“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (JOHN 8:36).

When God said, “Let there be light” (GEN. 1:3), it didn’t get “sorta” light out. In the same way, when He declares us to be righteous, we are not “sorta” righteous, we are righteous indeed. When He calls us sons, we are not “like” sons; we are truly His sons.

Closing Thought

There is a danger that in all this discussion of Matthew 1, we might lose another very important dimension of the text. The word that Matthew uses for “betrothed” or “engaged”

is the usual Greek word for that relationship — yet it is not simply a legal term. The history of its usage includes the ideas of courting, of “wooing and winning” a woman’s heart. The story of our Savior’s birth is a love story on many levels! We must not lose sight of that. How can our lessons about justification taught by this text *enhance* rather than diminish its power as a love story?

*Drum, frommer Christ,
wer du auch bist,
sei gutes Muths und laß dich nicht betrüben.
Weil Gottes Kind
dich ihm verbindt,
so kanns nicht anders sein, Gott muß dich lieben.*⁶⁵

Thou Christian heart,
Who’er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God’s own Child,
In mercy mild,
Joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee!⁶⁶

[The following non-metrical translation of Gerhardt’s verse captures the important thought of the final line that is not represented in the *TLH* translation:

*Therefore, good Christian,
Whoever you may be,
Be of good courage and do not let yourself be dismayed.
Since God’s Child
joins you to Him,
it cannot be otherwise: God must love you.]*

⁶⁵ Paul Gerhardt, *Paulus Gerhardts geistliche Lieder: Getreu nach d. b. seinen Lebzeiten erschienenen Ausgabe wiederabgedruckt*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Samuel Gottlieb Liesching, 1869), 26.

⁶⁶ Translation composite. “O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is” (*TLH* 81:4, *LSB* 372:4).

SESSION 3: Luke 2:1–14

Introduction

This session will follow a different format than Sessions 1 and 2. We will let Luther himself provide our outline for Session 3, an outline found in his sermon on “The Gospel for Christmas Eve,” which comes from his 1521 *Christmas Postil* when Luther was a “guest” at Wartburg Castle.⁶⁷ It is doubly appropriate that we should take a look at this sermon today. First of all, it’s only fitting that we should hear more directly from Luther during this anniversary Advent/Christmastide. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, it’s appropriate that we look at *this* sermon because the *Postil* “does not contain actual sermons, preached by Luther, but sermon guides, homilies written by him for the use of other ministers.”⁶⁸ What we find in this “sermon” is the way Luther instructed his fellow pastors to preach on Luke 2. For this hour, then, we, too, will become Luther’s students.

The length of this session’s portion of text prevents us from giving careful consideration to all of the details it includes. If the instructor discovers, while leading this session, that his students are not as familiar with Luke’s Gospel as he would like, the coming new year would be an ideal time to return to Luke and work through it in greater detail. Our theme and Luther’s outline will give focus to and set boundaries for this session’s discussion; the historical background and literary context of our passage belong to that fuller Bible study of the Gospel as a whole.

Luther apparently struggled with some of these same issues. As Luther works his way toward the exposition of the text, he writes,

The Gospel is so clear that there is little need of learned interpretation. It is only necessary to ponder it well, to contemplate it, and to take it completely into your heart. None will derive more benefit from it than they whose hearts hold still and who divest themselves of material considerations and concentrate diligently on it. This lesson is just like the sun: in a placid pond it can be seen clearly and warms the water powerfully, but in a rushing current it cannot be seen as well nor can it warm up

the water as much. So if you wish to be illumined and warmed here, to see God’s mercy and wondrous deeds, so that your heart is filled with fire and light and becomes reverent and joyous, then go to where you may be still and impress the picture deep into your heart. You will find no end of wondrous deeds. However, in order to start out the simple people and to give them incentive, let me show them a little how to go about it; later on they may go into it a bit more thoroughly.⁶⁹

This paragraph would make a very nice introduction to and rationale for the entire season of Advent, and Christians today need these encouragements as much as did the Christians of Luther’s day. Today, our class will seek to become a still pond for God’s bright sun. Luther continues with a cursory overview of the matters narrated in the text and then gives us our two-part outline for this session:

“Now let us see what sort of mysteries, hidden things, are presented to us in this story. Generally speaking, there are two matters which are expressed in all mysteries—the gospel and the faith, i.e., what one is to preach, and what one is to believe, and who are to be the preachers and who are to be the hearers. Let us have a look at these two matters.”⁷⁰

The First Matter: What One Is to Believe

Like any good preacher who wants to keep his hearers guessing, Luther immediately reverses the order he has just proposed; he begins with faith. It may come as something of a surprise to some students that Luther begins by saying that what follows is *not enough* to believe:

This faith does not merely consist in believing that this story is true, as it is written. For that does not avail anything, because everyone, even the damned, believe that.⁷¹

Surely that “*everyone* believes this” is a bit of “homiletical hyperbole,” even in Luther’s day, but the point he makes is worth considering more carefully. Any number of books on “this story” — including especially those written by and for Christians — offer helps to firm up people’s belief that this story is “true, as it is written.” We might think right away of

⁶⁷ AE 52:7–31.

⁶⁸ Hans J. Hillerbrand, introduction to *Sermons II*, vol. 52 of *Luther’s Works* by Martin Luther, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), x.

⁶⁹ AE 52:8–9.

⁷⁰ AE 52:14.

⁷¹ AE 52:14.

books like Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christmas*,⁷² but even Paul Maier's *The First Christmas*⁷³ provides abundant information along these apologetic lines.

Discussion Questions

Read together Luke 2:1–14.

1. What do you think we are to believe on the basis of this passage?

If your discussion hasn't already brought you here, return to verses 10–11. Anyone who has ever seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas* already knows that the answer to our question must lie somewhere in these words of the angel. And, in fact, Luther writes,

Rather the faith that is the right one, rich in grace, demanded by God's word and deed, is that you firmly believe Christ is born for you and that his birth is yours, and come to pass for your benefit.⁷⁴

What could be *good* news of a great *joy* for *everyone*? “For unto *you*.” It is a little unfortunate, though understandable, that English translations try to smooth out the very choppy sentence that forms the heart of the angel's good news. In the original, it reads as if each word were to be pondered and savored before moving on to the next, and yet each word builds to the climax of the whole:

ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὃς ἐστὶν χριστὸς
κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαβὶδ.⁷⁵

[*hoti etechthē hymin sēmeron sōtēr hos estin christos
kyrios en polei Daud.*] ⁷⁶

Translating word by word, we would have,

“because | there is born | for you | today | a savior |
who is Christ the Lord | in the city of David.”

Notice that the very order of the words emphasizes that this good news is about a birth *for you*. Luther is right; believing only that Jesus was born that night in Bethlehem, even believing that He was born of a virgin mother — believing

only that the historical facts surrounding Jesus' birth are true — won't come any closer to saving us than believing that Humphrey Bogart was born on December 25 in New York City to Maud Humphrey, a descendant of John Howland who “came over” on the Mayflower. Look again at the words of verse 11.

2. Put your thumb over the words “for you.” Is there good news of great joy in *anything* that remains? Why should the fact that another child has been born bring *me* joy? Why should *today* be better than any other time? What good is a Savior unless he's going to save *me*? Can I rejoice at the announcement of a Christ or a Lord without knowing whether or not he will be a merciless tyrant or a cruel dictator? Why should I care where this child is born if he has nothing to do with *me*?

Many of us know the joy of having a child born *to* us, but what exactly does it mean to have a child born *for* us? In answer to this question, Luther introduces a very fundamental theme of his theology and a very fundamental theme of Biblical theology.

For the right foundation of all salvation which unites Christ and the believing heart in this manner is that everything they have individually becomes something they hold in common.⁷⁷

Many will be familiar with Luther's language of the “wonderful exchange” (*der wunderbarliche Wechsel*) that takes place between Christ and the believer, but they probably think more of the connections to Good Friday and Easter than of those to Christmas, more of cross than of manger. Here, for just one example, are Luther's comments on Is. 53:5:

The name of Christ, then, is most agreeable. *The chastisement, or punishment, of our peace*, that is, His chastisement is the remedy that brings peace to our conscience. Before Christ there is nothing but disorder. But He was chastised for the sake of our peace. Note the wonderful exchange [*mirabilem mutuacionem*]: One man sins, another pays the penalty; one deserves peace, the other has it. The one who should have peace has chastisement, while the one who should have chastisement has peace. ... *And with His stripes we are healed*. See how delightfully the prophet sets Christ before us. It is a remarkable plaster. His stripes are our healing. The stripes should be ours and the healing in Christ. Hence this is what we must say to the Christian: “If you want to be healed,

⁷² Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christmas: A Journalist Investigates the Identity of the Child in the Manger* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁷³ Paul L. Maier, *First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story in Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

⁷⁴ *AE* 52:14.

⁷⁵ Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 184.

⁷⁶ The study follows the Greek transliteration convention presented in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 59–60.

⁷⁷ *AE* 52:15.

do not look at your own wounds, but fix your gaze on Christ.”⁷⁸

Although we know we are speaking of wonders that transcend our ability to comprehend them, we have somehow grown used to speaking of Christ “suffering for us” and “dying for us.” What can it mean that He was *born* for us? It is probably easiest simply to let Luther teach us.

Christ has a pure, innocent, holy birth. Man has an impure, sinful, damned birth, as David says in Psalm 51[:5]: “Behold, in sin am I fashioned in the womb, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” There is no remedy for this except through the pure birth of Christ. Now the birth of Christ cannot be distributed physically even as that would not be of any help either. For this reason it is distributed spiritually, by means of the word, to everyone, as the angel says, so that all who firmly believe that it is given to them in this manner shall not be harmed by their impure birth; this is the manner and means to become cleansed from the stain of the birth we have from miserable Adam. Christ willed to be born so that we might be born in different manner as he says in John 3[:3-6]. This happens through that faith, as James 1[:18] says: “He has born us of his own will through his word of truth, so that we begin to be his new creation.” In this manner Christ takes to himself our birth and absorbs it into his birth; he presents us with his birth so that we become pure and new in it, as if it were our own, so that every Christian might rejoice in this birth of Christ and glory in it no less than if he, too, like Christ, had been born bodily of Mary. Whoever does not believe this or has doubts about it, is not a Christian.⁷⁹

What a wonderful Christmas exchange! Luther concludes this section of his sermon:

To us, to us, born to us and given to us. Therefore see to it that you derive from the Gospel not only enjoyment of the story as such, for that does not last long. Nor should you derive from it only an example, for that does not hold up without faith. But see to it that you make his birth your own, and that you make an exchange with him, so that you rid yourself of your birth and receive, instead, his. This happens, if you have this faith. By this token you sit assuredly

in the Virgin Mary’s lap and are her dear child. This faith you have to practice and to pray for as long as you live; you can never strengthen it enough. That is our foundation and our inheritance; on it the good works are built.⁸⁰

We’ll add one more point from Luther, then pause for discussion. Luther ends the paragraph quoted immediately above by mentioning good works. Such a faithful Christmas, such a “justifying Christmas” in which God gives us as our own all that His Son possesses and has accomplished for us, leaves us “full and rich.”⁸¹ How else should we celebrate such Christmas bounty than by following Christ’s example? Everything Christ did — including being born for us — was for our good. We, in turn, are to make sure everything we do is for the good of our neighbor. And so, Luther inserts into his sermon a recipe for a sweet and satisfying “Christmas cake”:

[Christ said,] “This is my commandment that you love each other as I have loved you” [John 13:34]. You see here that he has loved us and that he has done all his works for us. The purpose is that we, in turn, do likewise, not to him — he is not in need of it — but to our neighbor. That is his commandment; that is our obedience; and so faith brings about that Christ is ours, even as his love brings about that we are his. He loves, and we believe, and those are the ingredients of the cake. Again, our neighbor believes and is expecting our love. We, then, should love him, too, and not let him look and wait for us in vain. The one is the same as the other: Christ helps us, so we help our neighbor, and all are satisfied.⁸²

Has Luther strayed from his text? In one sense, certainly. Luther has access to centuries of reflection on the meaning of the angel’s words to the shepherds that Bethlehem night. No one would claim that all of this was running through the shepherd’s minds as they were running through the streets of that “little town.” And yet, what did the shepherds hear? “There is born for you *a Savior*.” The word *savior* is so common in our Christian conversation that we forget how *uncommon* the word is in the Gospels. The word does not appear at all in the first two Gospels and appears only once (spoken by Samaritans!) in the fourth. In Luke’s Gospel, the word appears twice: once in 1:47, in the Magnificat, where Mary rejoices in “God, my Savior”; and here. That makes

⁸⁰ AE 52:16.

⁸¹ AE 52:16.

⁸² AE 52:17.

⁷⁸ AE 17:224–225.

⁷⁹ AE 52:15.

Luke 2:11 the only time in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is referred to as σωτήρ (*sōtēr*), as "Savior." At that moment, the shepherds joined the great multitude who have pondered and continue to ponder, meditate on and rejoice in the question "What Child is this?" For us, too, as we grow in faith and as the church's reflection on Christ's birth for us is deepened and enriched, the wonders of this salvation are more clearly "unwrapped" before our eyes.

Consider the following excerpt from W. H. Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio":

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes —
Some have got broken — and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week —
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted — quite unsuccessfully —
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.⁸³

3. Many people, even many Christians, feel disappointed "in Christmas" because the joy of the season fades so quickly. What does Luther suggest is the cause for such disappointing, ephemeral "holiday cheer," and what remedy does he suggest?

4. How would you now summarize "what we are to believe" on the basis of this part of Luke's Christmas story? How is the birth of our Lord already part of His justifying work, not merely "setting the stage" for it?

The Second Matter: What One Is to Preach

The answer to this would seem to be quite obvious after Part 1 of this study, and so it is. Luther begins his discussion of the second matter with a very direct and simple statement:

[I]n the church, nothing other than the gospel shall be preached.⁸⁴

Luther makes clear in what follows that he is using gospel here in its broader sense: "Now the gospel teaches only the two previous things, Christ and his example, two kinds of good works: one kind belonging to Christ, by means of which we in faith, attain salvation, the other kind belonging to us, by means of which our neighbor is helped."⁸⁵ Luther reinforces what he has said about the way faith unites us to Christ and makes all that is ours His and all that is His ours. He asks us how nature or human reason or intelligence could have discovered such a teaching. He concludes, "Hence the gospel and its interpretation are an entirely supernatural sermon and light, setting forth only Christ."⁸⁶ He illustrates how this is brought out in Luke 2 by pointing out several features of the text. Although some of these may be a bit too symbolical for some modern readers, the first three of these features will serve as a helpful way of adding detail and depth to Luther's summary statements.

Luther's first point is his most important: "it was not one human being who announced to another this birth of Christ, but it was an angel who came from heaven and announced to the shepherds this birth of Christ."⁸⁷ Unlike us, who are bombarded with reminders of how many days are left before Christmas, the world was in complete ignorance that God was giving the world His only-begotten Son that night — until He made it known to them through His messenger. This calls to mind Paul's statement that the gospel he proclaimed was not κατὰ ἄνθρωπον (*kata anthrōpon*) — it didn't originate from human sources, nor did it come by means of human agency (cf. GAL. 1:11-12).

Luther's second point reinforces his first point by reminding us that this happened in the middle of the night. "[A]ll the world is in darkness at his advent and [for] that reason is unable to recognize Christ."⁸⁸ This is not the first mention of the dark condition of the world Christ was born into; recall the words of Zechariah that his son, John, would "go before the Lord ... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (LUKE 1:76, 79).

Luther's third point further reinforces this by pointing out that the light comes from heaven. In fact, Luke calls this not "light" but δόξα κυρίου (*doxa kyriou*), "the glory of the Lord." Why?

Since the gospel is a heavenly light, teaching nothing but Christ in whom God's grace is given us and our

⁸³ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 307.

⁸⁴ AE 52:18.

⁸⁵ AE 52:18.

⁸⁶ AE 52:18.

⁸⁷ AE 52:18–19.

⁸⁸ AE 52:19.

doing is summarily rejected, it raises up only the honor of God so that henceforth nobody can boast of a single capability, but is obliged to give honor to God and to leave the glory to him, so that it is purely through his love and goodness that we are saved through Christ ... For man's teaching is this earth's light and is man's glory. It raises up man's glory and praise and makes souls arrogantly rely on their own good works, whereas the gospel teaches them to rely on Christ and on God's mercy and kindness, to glory and to be bold in Christ.⁸⁹

What is to be preached? Christ — born for you, born to be your Savior. This message and this alone comes down from heaven, shines as the glory of God and is delivered by His personal messenger. “If there were something else to preach, then the evangelical angel and the angelic evangelist would have touched on it.”⁹⁰

Discussion Question

5. How does Luther's explanation of what is to be preached support (from Scripture) our emphases on grace alone and faith alone? We could also ask the question this way: When God introduces His Son to the world, what does He tell the world about Him? What is He to do? What are we to do?

The Second Matter, Part 2: Preachers and Hearers

In his introduction, Luther also tells us that this text has something to teach us about who are to be this gospel's preachers and who are to be its hearers. These two points, as well, are instructive for us, but we will treat them only briefly.

When describing the angel who makes the announcement to the shepherds, Luther says that this angel “takes over the office” of evangelist. He doesn't say merely “I preach” or “I proclaim;” rather, he says εὐαγγελίζομαι (*euangelizomai*), which, in this context especially, means, “I bring you good news” — “I am an evangelist and my word is a gospel.”⁹¹

When Luther takes up directly the question of who are to be the preachers of this gospel, he writes,

The preachers are to be angels, i.e., messengers of God, and they are to lead a heavenly life, dealing all the time with the word of God, so that they never

preach human doctrines. It is a most unseemly thing, to be God's messenger and not to promulgate his message. *Angelus* means “messenger” and here Luke calls him *angelus domini*, “messenger of God.”⁹²

It is not only the ordained messenger of God's word who should adorn his preaching with a godly life, but everyone who wants to be messengers of this good news for and to the world should lead “heavenly lives.” And yet, for all messengers, the message always remains more significant than the messenger's life.⁹³

“The pupils,” Luther writes, “are shepherds, poor folk out in the fields. Here Christ keeps the promise made in Matthew 11[:5]: ‘The poor have the gospel preached to them,’ and in Matthew 5[:3]: ‘Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”⁹⁴ It was not to the rich, the powerful or the learned that this message was first delivered. The gospel comes to the poor.

The gospel is a heavenly treasure which refuses to tolerate another treasure alongside it; it cannot get along with another earthly guest in the heart.⁹⁵

Luther adds that the fact that these poor happened to be shepherds can serve to remind us that everyone who receives such good news should be a shepherd to another, “pastur[ing]” him and taking care of him “in the darkness of this life.”⁹⁶

6. This section of Luther's sermon evokes the idea that life is the real Christmas pageant. What thoughts come to mind as you consider playing the role of “angel” for someone this year? And what about playing the role of “shepherd”?

Concluding Thought

Luther concludes his sermon with a reflection on the “Gloria in Excelsis” in Luke 2:14. An appropriate conclusion to this session would be to read — better still to sing — together Luther's hymnic reflection on this text, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” (*LSB* 358).

⁹² *AE* 52:24. Actually, both Luke's Greek ἄγγελος κυρίου (*angelos kyriou*) and the Latin Bible's *angelus domini* should be translated “angel/messenger of the Lord.” Luther's point still stands.

⁹³ *AE* 52:24.

⁹⁴ *AE* 52:25.

⁹⁵ *AE* 52:25.

⁹⁶ *AE* 52:25.

⁸⁹ *AE* 52:19.

⁹⁰ *AE* 52:21.

⁹¹ *AE* 52:20.

SESSION 4: Gal. 4:4–5

Introduction

Students who associate Martin Luther with Saint Paul may well have expected this to be the first text in our “Justifying Christmas” series. Students less familiar with the Bible may be very surprised to learn of a text outside the Gospels that speaks of the birth of Christ. It is hoped that for both groups this session will be a fitting, satisfying and thought-provoking conclusion to the study.

Many Lutherans are familiar with Luther’s great love for Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians and may well have heard of his reference to it as his “dear little epistle,” his Biblical fiancée, his “Katy von Bora.”⁹⁷ Instructors and students alike may be less acquainted with the academic attention that has been paid to this epistle in New Testament studies. Many would point that renewed interest to the publication of Hans Dieter Betz’s commentary in 1979.⁹⁸ Galatians has remained at the center of much of the academic study of Paul and his theology ever since, including such hotly-debated issues as the “new perspective on Paul” and questions about the meaning of the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ (*pistis Christou*)⁹⁹ — “faith of Christ.” As has been true of all of the studies in this series, there will not be time for even a brief review of all of these introductory matters here. Moreover, many of these questions are only indirectly related to our questions, if at all. Here again, the introductory pages in one of our study Bibles will provide an adequate (re)introduction to this letter. It would be helpful to remind students that Paul wrote this letter very early in his career, that he wrote it to a congregation diverse in its ethnic composition and that he wrote with righteous anger to a group of Christians within which many were turning away from the gospel of Jesus Christ to seek another gospel (as if there could be such a thing!).

Paul has said a great deal about the topic of justification by chapter 4, and many of those texts will receive treatment in other “Justification Bible Studies” published by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. A good example and a helpful introduction to the topic is Gal. 3:10–14, a

passage that will come up again later in this study. The class is strongly encouraged to look at this passage while heading toward our text for this session.

A final word of introduction is required for chapter 4 itself. The instructor will need to decide if there is time to actually read 4:1–3, but the contents of those verses should at least be summarized for the class.

- 1. What metaphor does Paul develop as he works his way to our text? (Gal. 4:1–3)** Paul uses a metaphor here in such a way that it could almost constitute a parable. His metaphor is inheritance, and he points out that, prior to an heir reaching the age of majority, the heir is little different from a slave in terms of his experience. Legally, he owns everything, but he lives as a “slave” under guardians and managers “until the date set by his father.” Verse 3 begins the transition from the metaphor to reality with its οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς (*houtōs kai hēmeis*), “so also we.” As with the parables of our Lord, here, too, that transition is almost seamless. Sadly, though, many readers do not continue “seamlessly” into verse 4; rather, they see this verse as a new departure. We’ll see momentarily why such an approach to verses 4–5 makes the task of interpretation more difficult. First, though, a brief comment on the strange-sounding phrase “the elementary principles of the world.”
- 2. What does Paul mean by “elementary principles of the world?”** Paul writes that before we reached our “spiritual majority,” i.e., while we were still infants in the sight of God’s laws of inheritance, we were all slaves to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*). As might be expected, this unusual phrase has given rise to widely varying interpretations. Since our goal is not to study this passage per se, we will limit our discussion here to but one approach, though one that has much to commend it. F. F. Bruce provides a fuller discussion of the phrase in his *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, but these summary paragraphs provide a basic understanding of “the elementary principles of the world”:

If Paul had been referring only to the former paganism of the Galatians, the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου [*stoicheia tou kosmou*] might have had the same kind of meaning as in those quotations from Philo and Ps.-Callisthenes, but in the immediate context existence ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου [*hypo ta stoicheia tou kosmou*; “under the elementary principles of the world”] is equated with existence ὑπὸ νόμον [*hypo*

⁹⁷ AE 54:20. For the original text, see *WA TR* 1:69, 146: “*Epistola ad Galatas ist mein epistelcha, der ich mir vertrawt hab. Ist mein Keth von Bor.*” The Latin has for “*der ich mir vertrawt hab*” “*qui me despondi*” = “to whom I am betrothed.”

⁹⁸ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

⁹⁹ The study follows the Greek transliteration convention presented in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 59–60.

nomon, “under law”] (vv 4f.). He speaks of the time during which the people of God lived ‘under law’ as the time they spent in the infant class learning their ABCs — which for them amounted to ‘the rudimentary notions of the world’ ... But this was not merely a time of elementary education; it was a time of bondage ... For the present stage of Paul’s argument it suffices to observe that the law ranks as one of the στοιχεῖα [*stoicheia*; “principles”].¹⁰⁰

Commenting further on the phrase when it reappears in verse 9, Bruce writes,

The στοιχεῖα [*stoicheia*; “principles”] to which the Galatians had been in bondage were the counterfeit gods of v 8; the bondage to which they were now disposed to turn back was that of the law. But in our discussion of 3:13f. and 4:4f. we concluded that Gentile as well as Jewish believers are reckoned to have been redeemed from existence ‘under law’—not, so far as Gentiles are concerned, explicitly under the Mosaic law, in relation to which they were ἄνομοι [*anomoī*, “without law/lawless”] (cf. 1 COR. 9:21; ROM. 2:12FF.), but under legalism as a principle of life. “The demonic forces of legalism, then, both Jewish and Gentile, can be called “principalities and powers” or “elemental spirits of the world.” [G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* [Oxford, 1956], 51)¹⁰¹

These “demonic forces of legalism” sound a little less ancient and esoteric if we think of the kind of contemporary fatalism that finds expression in sayings like “that’s just the way things work.” People today, too, have a sense that the universe operates according to certain unchangeable, inviolable principles — which are almost always “stacked against me.” Like Paul’s Galatian hearers, many people today find it all but impossible to believe that God and the salvation He offers are not also subject to these basic “rules” of how the universe “works.”

[Note: The text for this session is intentionally short. It is hoped that this will allow not only for careful treatment of the passage but also, since this is the final session of this study, for additional questions and discussion.]

The Text: Gal. 4:4–5

Although this is a relatively short text, it’s always a good

¹⁰⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 194.

¹⁰¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 203.

idea to read the whole passage together before discussing it. Since we have the luxury of looking at this text in detail, we will organize the discussion around each major phrase.

4a “the fullness of time”

Many readers may mistakenly insert a complete break between this passage and what comes before, perhaps because Paul’s language here reminds us of Luke’s language in his birth narrative. Note the similarity between this phrase and Luke’s clauses in 1:57 (of Elizabeth) and in 2:6 (of Mary):

Galatians 4:4	τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου (to plērōma tou chronou)	the fullness of time
Luke 1:57	ἐπλήσθη ὁ χρόνος (eplēsthē ho chronos)	the time was fulfilled
Luke 2:6	ἐπλήσθησαν ¹⁰² αἱ ἡμέραι (eplēsthēsan hai hēmerai)	the days were fulfilled

Because of these similarities, we might be tempted to think that, in Galatians, Paul has in mind the same overarching plan of salvation that Luke discusses. That would not be entirely wrong, but it would miss the connection with the immediate context in Galatians, and it would miss the specific point that Paul is making about this point in time.

3. What point in time is it, according to the metaphor Paul has been developing? Recall the metaphors that Paul has been developing. In 3:23–26, Paul has spoken of a time of imprisonment and captivity under the guardianship of law. In 4:1–3, Paul develops the metaphor of the minor who is heir but not yet of legal age to take possession of his inheritance. His enjoyment of the inheritance must wait until that time which the father has set in his will. It is this time, the time when the heirs will be able to enjoy the inheritance that is already theirs, that Paul announces in the opening phrase of verse 4. We will see, however, that it is not simply a matter of the infant-heirs finally reaching the age of majority. No, something else must be done first.

4b “God sent forth his Son”

In the first phrase, Paul sounded just a little bit like Luke. In this phrase, he sounds just a little bit like John, with John’s emphasis on the sending of the Son by the Father.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰² The noun in Galatians is the nominative singular of πλήρωμα (*plērōma*; “fullness”), and both verbs in Luke are aorist passive forms of πληρύνω (*pimplēmi*; “fulfill/fill full”). Both words may most probably be traced back to a common Indo-European root, *pleh-, which has to do with the idea of “fill.” See Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1191. The similarity, actually a little closer in English than in Greek, has more to do with the coupled ideas of “filling up” and “time” than with identical vocables.

¹⁰³ Cf. John 3:17, 34; 6:57; and 7:29.

verb that Paul uses here, ἐξαποστέλλω (*exapostellō*), is a very common verb used for sending someone out on a mission. Although it is used here of God's Son, and elsewhere of the Spirit and of angels, it is also used of Paul (Acts 17:14), of Barnabas (Acts 11:22) and of the Hebrew patriarchs (Acts 7:12). In Christian literature outside the New Testament it is also used of non-personal things like plagues and punishments (Shepherd of Hermas, *Visions* 4.2.6). The verb itself, then, does not indicate anything in particular about the sender or the person or thing being sent — only that it is being sent to accomplish the purpose of the sender.

That said, as Ben Witherington reminds us, “one must exist before one can be sent.”¹⁰⁴ The order of the ideas as Paul arranges them and the logic of the thought do suggest that Paul is thinking of the pre-existent Son of God here, even if the verb cannot be turned into a technical term requiring that concept.

What makes the use of the verb special in this case is, first of all, the identities of the Sender and the One who is sent. Paul is speaking of the sending forth by God of His own Son. Secondly, notice what characteristics of this Son are highlighted.

4c “born of woman”

Luther and some of the other early interpreters were not quite correct in interpreting this phrase to mean “He was born, not of a male and a female but merely of the female sex” and when they argued that “born of woman” is the equivalent of “born of a virgin.”¹⁰⁵

4. What is Paul emphasizing when he describes Christ as “born of woman?” Our Lord uses almost the same words when speaking about John the Baptist in Matt. 11:11, where he refers to humanity in general as “those born of women.” Witherington explains more fully:

Jesus was born of woman, which simply conveys the idea that he was a normal human being, coming into the world the normal way. Job 14.1 and Mt. 11.11/Lk. 7.28 and Josephus *Ant.* 7.21 (cf. 16.382) show that the phrase itself conveys nothing special about the person being referred to.¹⁰⁶

And yet, like Luther, Witherington may say too much. Paul's language neither requires nor excludes the idea of “born of a virgin,” but it does allow for it. This normal phrase for describing a human being is still and even somewhat ironically true of this man who did not come into the world quite “the normal way.” Still, Witherington is correct that the emphasis here is on Jesus' full and true humanity, not on the mode of His conception and birth.¹⁰⁷ And that is where our focus should be, too.

Discussion Questions

In focusing on very specific “small” questions, we sometimes lose the grandeur of the “big thing” that is being said. Paul is saying — and on this everyone agrees — that *God became man*, that God's own Son took upon Himself our human nature and was born of a human mother *just as we are*.

Sometimes we need the perspective of a non-believer to help us realize how *incredible* this sounds. One of the authors of this study was once questioned about his faith by a fellow passenger on a long overseas flight. That passenger was simply astounded to find that anyone “still believed that stuff.” With amazement, rather than sarcasm in his voice, he asked, “So you really believe that God came down to earth and walked around on it as a human being?” Hearing the question put that way restored the author's sense of wonder in the “old, old story” that we so often tell with equal parts pride and nonchalance.

5. What does it mean to you that God's own Son was “born of woman”?
6. How would you explain to your children or to your siblings the importance of this first characteristic of the One sent out by God?
7. How can we help rekindle and enhance for each other this year our sense of wonder at the Christmas story?

4d “born under the law”

Paul's phrase has no definite article before the noun νόμον (*nomon*), “law.” Since ancient times, readers have tried to make a distinction between “law” and “the Law” based on the absence or presence of the article. In a Greek prepositional phrase, however, no article is required to make the noun definite; that is to say, our phrase ὑπὸ νόμον (*hypo nomon*) could be translated “under law” or it could be translated “under the law.” Daniel Wallace explains,

¹⁰⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 288.

¹⁰⁵ *AE* 26:367.

¹⁰⁶ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 288.

¹⁰⁷ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 288.

Thus, when a noun is the object of a preposition, it does not *require* the article to be definite: if it has the article, it *must* be definite; if it *lacks* the article, it *may* be definite.¹⁰⁸

In those cases where there is no article, the context must decide the question of whether or not the noun is meant to be definite. Paul, in fact, often means “the Law” even where there is no article present. Robertson even argues that this is the norm.¹⁰⁹ Our understanding of verse 3 (above) and verse 5 (below) will, however, urge us to see a more inclusive idea here. As Lightfoot explains in his comments on verse 5,

St. Paul refers primarily to the Mosaic law, as at once the highest and most rigorous form of law, but extends the application to all those subject to any system of positive ordinances. We seem to have the same extension, starting from the law of Moses, in 1 Cor. ix. 20, ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος ... τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον [*egenomēn tois Ioudaiois hōs Ioudaios ... tois hypo nomon hōs hypo nomon*]; “I became to the Jews like a Jew ... to those under law like one under law”.¹¹⁰

Born under the Law, Christ was the perfect slave and found this subjection no slavery to Him, yet this is not the first time in this epistle where Paul has talked about what it means to be “under the law.” As Bruce explains,

Paul might have put on the lips of Christ the language of Ps. 40:8, ‘I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is within my heart’ ... but when he speaks here of Christ having been born under law he bears in mind what he has already said about the *curse* of the law (3:10, 13). In Paul’s thinking, for the Son of God to be born under that law which he rejoiced to

fulfil involved his voluntarily taking on himself the curse which others, by their *failure* to fulfil it, had incurred. Only so could he accomplish the purpose of redeeming those who were ‘under law’ (v 5).¹¹¹

8. Does the phrase “under the law” mean nothing more than “Jewish”?

9. How do these two characteristics, “born of woman” and “born under the law,” find expression in the Christmas narratives of Matthew and Luke? As you skim over Matthew 1 and Luke 2, note the vulnerability of the Holy Family, the need to provide for basic necessities and the prominent (and sometimes hostile) presence of political authorities.

5a “to redeem those who were under the law”

We noted that verse 4 gives two characteristics of the One sent. Verse 5 now gives two purposes for His being sent, and these two purposes relate chiastically¹¹² to the characteristics.

The two clauses correspond to those of the foregoing verse in an inverted order by the grammatical figure called chiasm; ‘The Son of God was born a man, that in Him all men might become sons of God; He was born subject to law, that those subject to law might be rescued from bondage.’ At the same time, the figure is not arbitrarily employed here, but the inversion arises out of the necessary sequence. The abolition of the law, the rescue from bondage, was a prior condition of the universal sonship of the faithful.¹¹³

We have already spent some time on the idea of being “under the law.” At this point, we need only add that those who argue that the Jews are the only people properly “under the law” would be forced to also regard the redemption Paul speaks of here as solely for the Jews as well. Surely that cannot be Paul’s meaning. Bruce presents a view that is much easier to defend based on Paul’s own language in this section:

¹¹¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 196.

¹¹² The figure of speech “chiasm” takes its name from the Greek letter that is written in the shape of an “x.” In the figure, an author will list several ideas and then treat them again in reverse order. This gives the argument an “x-shape”:

A B
 X
 B' A'

¹¹³ Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, 168. See note for footnote 120.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 247.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 796: “Νόμος [*Nomos*] is a word that is used with a deal of freedom by Paul. In general when νόμος [*nomos*] is anarthrous [i.e., without an article] in Paul it refers to the Mosaic law, as in ἐπαναπαύῃ νόμῳ [*epanapauē nomō*]; “you rely on the law”] (Ro. 2:17). So ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης [*ean nomon prassēs*]; “if you do the law”] (2:25), etc. It occurs so with prepositions, as ἐν νόμῳ [*en nomō*]; “in the law”] (2:23), and in the genitive, like ἐξ ἔργων νόμου [*ex ergōn nomou*]; “by works of the law”] (Gal. 2:16). Cf. ἐγὼ [γάρ] διὰ νόμου νόμῳ ἀπέθανον [*egō gar dia nomou nomō apethanon*]; “for I through the law died to the law”] (2:19), ὑπὸ νόμον ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ χάριν [*hypo nomon alla hypo charin*]; “under the law but under grace”] (Ro. 6:14).” And yet, not even all of Robertson’s examples would be accepted by all readers.

¹¹⁰ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (2nd ed., rev.; London: Macmillan, 1866), 267. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians: With Introductions, Notes and Dissertations*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 168.

Even if Paul begins this section (vv 3–7) by thinking in particular of Jewish Christians (καὶ ἡμεῖς [*kai hēmeis*; “and we”]), who had lived more directly ὑπὸ νόμον [*hypo nomon*, “under law”], it is plain now that the beneficiaries of Christ’s redeeming work (as in 3:13f.) include Gentiles as well as Jews. The oscillation between ‘we’ (ἵνα ... ἀπολάβωμεν [*hina ... apolabōmen*, “in order that ... we might receive”], v 5; cf. εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν [*eis tas kardias hēmōn*; “into our hearts”], v 6), ‘you’ (ὅτι δὲ ἐστε υἱοὶ [*hoti de este huioi*; “and because you *plural* are sons”], v 6) and ‘thou’ (οὐκέτι εἰ δοῦλος [*ouketi ei doulos*; “you *singular* are no longer a slave”], v 7), attests the inclusive emphasis of Paul’s wording and argument (as in 3:23–26).¹¹⁴

It remains for us, then, only to comment on the idea of redemption. Looking at these two verses alone, we might wonder why Paul introduces such an important concept with so little comment. Although the idea should be a familiar one to Bible readers both ancient and modern, Paul is not simply assuming that his readers will know what he is talking about. He has already explained very clearly the way in which Christ has redeemed those under the curse of the law in chapter 3. Read Gal. 3:10–14 (again).

We add a few comments from Luther, then pause for questions and discussion.

These words portray Christ truly and accurately. They do not ascribe to Him the work of establishing a new Law; they ascribe to Him the work of redeeming those who were under the Law.¹¹⁵

Luther goes on to note how difficult it is for those in his generation to escape the picture of Christ that they grew up with. Even the young, though, who are “unspoiled and uninfected” by such false teaching about Christ, because of their sinful flesh will naturally regard Christ as a Lawgiver rather than as a Redeemer. Luther urges,

Therefore you must contend with all your might, in order that you may learn to acknowledge and regard Christ as Paul portrays Him in this passage.¹¹⁶

With regard to the redemption itself, Luther waxes eloquent. We must not, however, let his signature language — both powerful and colorful — encourage us to enjoy it as

Luther’s and thus miss the point. Taking up and expanding Paul’s metaphor of Law as the master to whom we were enslaved, Luther writes,

This was truly a remarkable duel, when the Law, a creature, came into conflict with the Creator, exceeding its every jurisdiction to vex the Son of God with the same tyranny with which it vexed us, the sons of wrath (EPH. 2:3). Because the Law has sinned so horribly and wickedly against its God, it is summoned to court and accused. Here Christ says: “Lady Law, you empress, you cruel and powerful tyrant over the whole human race, what did I commit that you accused, intimidated, and condemned Me in My innocence?” Here the Law, which once condemned and killed all men, has nothing with which to defend or cleanse itself. Therefore it is condemned and killed in turn, so that it loses its jurisdiction not only over Christ — whom it attacked and killed without any right anyway — but also over all who believe in Him. Here Christ says (MATT. 11:28): “Come to Me, all who labor under the yoke of the Law. I could have overcome the Law by My supreme authority, without any injury to Me; for I am the Lord of the Law, and therefore it has no jurisdiction over Me. But for the sake of you, who were under the Law, I assumed your flesh and subjected Myself to the Law. That is, beyond the call of duty I went down into the same imprisonment, tyranny, and slavery of the Law under which you were serving as captives. I permitted the Law to lord it over Me, its Lord, to terrify Me, to subject Me to sin, death, and the wrath of God—none of which it had any right to do. Therefore I have conquered the Law by a double claim: first, as the Son of God, the Lord of the Law; secondly, in your person, which is tantamount to your having conquered the Law yourselves.”¹¹⁷

10. How does Christmas make you feel? Merry? Jolly? Bright? Tired? Overwhelmed? Guilty? At what moments are you most tempted to think that Christ comes to you as a Lawgiver rather than as your Redeemer?

¹¹⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 196.

¹¹⁵ AE 26:368.

¹¹⁶ AE 26:368.

¹¹⁷ AE 26:370–371. Luther speaks very strongly against the Law here, but it is important to keep in mind, especially for those less familiar with Luther’s writings, that he is speaking specifically of the Law in the context of justification. A little bit earlier in this commentary, Luther wrote, “Apart from the matter of justification, on the other hand, we, like Paul, should think reverently of the Law. We should endow it with the highest praises and call it holy, righteous, good, spiritual, divine, etc.” See AE 26:365.

There are probably few of us who would answer the question above with the words “Free!” or “Alive!” Writing centuries before Luther, but expressing some of the same thoughts, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Christians at Ephesus that, when God had accomplished the mystery of the birth of His Son,

all magic and every kind of spell were dissolved, the ignorance so characteristic of wickedness vanished, and the ancient kingdom was abolished when God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life; and what had been prepared by God began to take effect. As a result, all things were thrown into ferment, because the abolition of death was being carried out.¹¹⁸

11. Why should Christmas make us feel like everything is “thrown into ferment,” that this world’s old rules about the way things work no longer apply and that nothing will ever be the same again because this Child has been born?

5b “That we might receive adoption as sons”

We have already noted the chiastic structure of verses 4 and 5, but, even in noting it, we pointed out that there is still progression as Paul moves from thought to thought. The purpose and goal of Christ’s work of redemption was not that we would all end up masterless men. We do not end up as freed men only but as sons. We are in some sense freed in order that we might be the sons God had intended us to be all along.

“Adoption” can be a word heavily laden with emotion in English. Your opinion of whether or not it is a good translation for the Greek word that Paul uses here will depend very much on the emotions and values you attach to the word *adoption*. Paul’s word is υιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*). Andrew Das provides extensive background material for our understanding of the word and its use by Paul in his “Excursus 10: The Metaphorical and Social Context of Gal. 4:1-7.”¹¹⁹ A first point to be noted is that the term υιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*) “is absent from the Septuagint, Josephus, Philo, and other ancient Jewish literature.”¹²⁰ Although we might think of the overarching image of God “adopting” Israel as His son, Paul does not use the language associated with the Exodus

here in Galatians 4.¹²¹ Although helpful information can be gained from an understanding of both Roman and Hellenistic practices of adoption, Paul’s “reasoning remains at a general level and does not depend on the concrete details of any particular legal system.”¹²²

We must be careful, too, not to automatically impose our 21st century American ideas of adoption on Paul’s thought. Ernest Burton has described the term in Paul’s usage in a way that helpfully compares and contrasts it with our various contemporary understandings:

ἡ υιοθεσία [*hē huiiothesia*; “adoption”] is, therefore, for Paul, God’s reception of men into the relation to him of sons, objects of his love and enjoying his fellowship, the ultimate issue of which is the future life wherein they are reclathed with a spiritual body; but the word may be used of different stages and aspects of this one inclusive experience. . . . The meaning “sonship” would satisfy most of the passages in which υιοθεσία [*huiiothesia*] occurs, but there is no occasion to depart from the etymological sense, “installation as a son.” This does not, however, justify reading back into v.1 the idea of adoption, and from this again carrying it back through κληρονόμος [*klēronomos*; “heir”] into the διαθήκη [*diathēkē*; “covenant”] of 3¹⁵, for Paul is not careful to maintain the consistency of his illustrations. He employs here his usual term because he is speaking of the establishment of those who have previously not had the privileges of a son in the full enjoyment of them.¹²³

Burton’s final line bears repeating with added emphasis: Paul is here speaking of “the establishment of those who have previously not had the privileges of a son *in the full enjoyment of them*.” If “adoption” means something less than full sonship, then it should not be used here to express Paul’s meaning.

We allow Luther to conclude this section for us:

Earlier [Paul] had named righteousness, life, the promise of the Spirit, redemption from the Law, the covenant, and the promise as the blessing given to the offspring of Abraham. Here he names sonship and the inheritance of eternal life, for these

¹¹⁸ Ignatius, “The Letters of Ignatius to the Ephesians,” from *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed., trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 102.

¹¹⁹ A. Andrew Das, *Galatians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 427–438.

¹²⁰ Das, 433.

¹²¹ Das, 432.

¹²² Das, 438.

¹²³ Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 220–221.

things flow from the blessing. Once the curse that is sin, death, etc., has been removed by this blessed Offspring, its place is taken by the blessing that is righteousness, life, and everything good.¹²⁴

Concluding Discussion

This passage has much to teach us concerning the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Luther summarizes nicely for us the most obvious connection:

This [duel] also serves to support the idea that we are justified by faith alone. For when this duel between the Law and Christ was going on, no works or merits of ours intervened. Christ alone remains there; having put on our person, He serves the Law and in supreme innocence suffers all its tyranny. Therefore the Law is guilty of stealing, of sacrilege, and of the murder of the Son of God. It loses its rights and deserves to be damned. Wherever Christ is present or is at least named, it is forced to yield and to flee this name as the devil flees the cross. Therefore we believers are free of the Law through Christ, who “triumphed over it in Him” (Col. 2:15). This glorious triumph, accomplished for us through Christ, is grasped not by works but by faith alone. Therefore faith alone justifies.¹²⁵

12. What other connections to the doctrine of justification come to mind?

It is often said of Paul that his writings tell us very little about the earthly life and ministry of our Lord. Some have wrongly concluded on the basis of superficial reading that Paul showed little interest in such biographical information and that his sole concern was the death of Christ. Although there is much material to show both Paul’s knowledge of and high regard for the details of Christ’s life and ministry, the direct references to those details are admittedly few.¹²⁶

With regard to the birth of our Lord, it is also often theorized that reflection on Christ’s birth was one of the final dimensions of Christological reflection in terms of the Gospels as we have them.¹²⁷

Setting those two conclusions from the academic study of the New Testament side by side makes it all the more remarkable that Paul should here, in one of his earliest if not his earliest epistle, speak of the birth of Christ and couple that with His work of redeeming us out from under the power of the Law. Paul’s proclamation that Christ was born of woman so that we might become the sons of God is a powerful statement of the “for us” nature of Christ’s birth that we studied in Session 3.

Luther spoke above of the connection between our passage and justification by faith alone. What about *by grace alone*? Of course, the point made above that no works of ours ever entered into the equation and that this sonship is received solely by faith — neither earned nor bartered for through the commerce of our own works — necessarily implies that this comes to us solely by the grace of God. Commenting on Gal. 4:3, Luther calls Christ Himself, who redeemed us from the curse of the law, “the throne of grace.”¹²⁸ The “sending out” of the Son by the Father, moreover, calls to mind these verses from Luther’s hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”:

Then God was sorry on his throne
To see such torment rend me;
His tender mercy he thought on,
And his good help would send me.
He turned to me his father-heart:
Ah, then was His no easy part;
His very best it cost him!

To his dear son he said: Go down;
Things go in piteous fashion;
Go thou, my heart’s exalted crown,
Be the poor man’s salvation.
Lift him from out sin’s scorn and scathe;
Strangle for him that cruel Death,
And take him to live with thee.

The son he heard obediently;
And, by a maiden mother,
Pure, tender — down he came to me,
For he must be my brother!
Concealed he brought his strength enorm,
And went about in my poor form,
Meaning to catch the devil.

¹²⁴ AE 26:374.

¹²⁵ AE 26:371–372.

¹²⁶ See the fairly balanced discussion in James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 182–206.

¹²⁷ See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 26–32.

¹²⁸ AE 26:362.

He said unto me: Hold by me,
Thy matters I will settle;
I give myself all up for thee,
And I will fight thy battle.
For I am thine, and thou art mine,
And my house also shall be thine;
The enemy shall not part us.

Like water he will shed my blood,
Of life my heart bereaving;
All this I suffer for thy good —
That hold with firm believing;
My Life shall swallow up that Death;
My innocence bears thy sins, He saith,
So henceforth thou art happy.¹²⁹

And this Christmastide and henceforth, forevermore happy
shall we be.

¹²⁹ Martin Luther, “Luther’s Song-Book,” in *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Rampolli*, trans. George MacDonald (Posting Date: August 29, 2003 [EBook #8949]). Cf. LSB 556.



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