

ROBERT A. PETERSON



SALVATION

ACCOMPLISHED BY THE

SON

The Work of Christ



Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ
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Introduction to Jesus's Saving Events

We Are Not Saved by Our Works

Scripture repeatedly says that we cannot merit God's favor by our good deeds. Though it is sometimes overlooked, this is the message of the Old Testament.

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand? (Ps. 130:3)

Enter not into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you. (Ps. 143:2)

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. (Isa. 64:6)

The New Testament also abundantly testifies to the fact that we cannot merit salvation by our good works.

And by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:39)

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Rom. 3:20)

A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:16)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8–9)

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4–5)

God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, . . . (2 Tim. 1:8–9)

We Are Saved by Jesus’s Works

Scripture is clear—we cannot rescue ourselves from our sins. It is just as clear that Jesus Christ saves. Jesus himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). His apostles proclaimed the same message. Listen to Peter: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12). And hear Paul: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

Robert Letham asks a good question and gives it a good answer:

What do we mean by “the work of Christ”? In short, we refer to all that Christ did when he came to this earth “for us and our salvation,” all that he continues to do now that he is risen from the dead and at God’s right hand, and all that he will do when he returns in glory at the end of the age.¹

This is correct. In its broadest sense the work of Christ is vast in scope, stretching from his incarnation to his second coming. And my goal is to explore something of that vastness, but first things first. I must ask, What do people usually mean when they speak of the work of Christ? The expected answer is that Jesus died on the cross to save his people from their sins. While this answer is correct, it is incomplete. Listen as Paul gives his most famous summary of the gospel that he preached: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4).

¹Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 18–19.

Jesus's Death and Resurrection Are His Main Saving Deeds

Jesus's crucifixion saves, but not apart from his empty tomb. A Savior who remained in the grave would not be a Savior. And Jesus's resurrection saves, but not apart from his cross. The two are inseparable in God's plan and should be inseparable in our thinking. What are the two most important of Christ's redemptive events? His death and resurrection.

Jesus himself predicted his two key saving events:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31; see also 9:31; 10:33–34)

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:17–18; see also 2:19)

Paul, in Romans, also joins Christ's death and resurrection:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (Rom. 10:9–10)

Many times Paul combines Jesus's death and resurrection as his primary saving events: Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:15; and Philippians 3:10. Luke does the same in Acts 2:22–24, as do the writer to the Hebrews in 1:3 and the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:11.

Jesus Performed Nine Saving Deeds

Unequivocally, Scripture highlights Jesus's death and resurrection when it speaks of his saving accomplishment. It does, however, paint a fuller picture and mentions seven *additional* aspects of Christ's saving work:

- *incarnation*
- *sinless life*
- *death*
- *resurrection*
- *ascension*
- *session*
- *Pentecost*

- *intercession*
- *second coming*

Brief definitions are in order. The *incarnation* is the Son of God's becoming a human being by a supernatural conception in Mary's womb. Christ's *sinless life* is his living from birth to death without sinning in thought, word, or deed. His *ascension* is his public return to the Father by "going up" from the Mount of Olives. His *session* is his sitting down at God the Father's right hand after his ascension. *Pentecost*, as much Christ's saving work as any other event on the list, is his pouring out the Holy Spirit on the church in newness and power. His *intercession* includes his perpetual presentation in heaven of his finished cross work and his prayers on behalf of his saints. His *second coming* is his return in glory at the end of the age to bless his people and judge his enemies.

New Testament writers frequently mention these nine saving events of Christ. I will cite one sample passage for each of the seven events other than the crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus's incarnation saves. The incarnation of the Son of God is an essential precondition for his saving work, as Paul shows in Philippians 2:5–9:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

Jesus's sinless life saves. Jesus's living a sinless life is necessary for him to be our Savior, as the writer to the Hebrews teaches (while mentioning Christ's ascension): "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:14–15).

Jesus's ascension saves. Jesus's ascension is also a part of his saving work, as Paul testifies in a confession of faith (combined with his incarnation and resurrection):

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,

proclaimed among the nations,
 believed on in the world,
 taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

Jesus's session saves. Jesus's session belongs to his saving events, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb. 10:11–12, 14)

Jesus's work at Pentecost saves. Pentecost is as much a part of Jesus's saving work as his death and resurrection, and Peter affirms its importance in his Pentecost sermon (along with Jesus's resurrection, ascension, and session): "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:32–33).

Jesus's intercession saves. Jesus's intercession is a vital saving event, as Hebrews reveals: "He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:24–25).

Jesus's second coming saves. Jesus's second coming is the final aspect of his saving work, as Hebrews 9:28 explains, juxtaposing it with his atoning death: "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Scripture Gives Many Combinations of Jesus's Saving Deeds

The New Testament puts Jesus's saving events in many combinations. In addition to the passages cited above, Paul brings together Christ's resurrection and session (Eph. 1:20–21), his resurrection, session, and second coming (Col. 3:1–4), his resurrection and second coming (1 Thess. 1:10), his death, resurrection, and second coming (1 Thess. 4:14), and his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (2 Tim. 2:8).

Moreover, there are two passages that each include four saving events (in addition to Acts 2:32–33, quoted above). First, Paul joins Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, session, and intercession: "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. 8:34). Second, the apostle Peter unites Christ’s cross, resurrection, ascension, and session.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit . . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet. 3:18, 21–22)

The classic statement of the breadth of Christ’s saving work is John Calvin’s hymn of praise to Christ:

If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him” [1 Cor. 1:30]. If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Heb. 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Heb. 5:2]. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross [Gal. 3:13]; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood, if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of goods abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.²

Conclusion

The New Testament writers regard Jesus’s death and resurrection as the central acts of history. His cross and empty tomb are redemptive. The same writers regard two prior events as necessary preconditions to his death and resurrection—his incarnation and sinless life. And they regard five subsequent events as necessary results of his death and resurrection—his ascension, session, Pentecost, intercession, and second coming. Christ’s saving accomplishment, then, with a narrow focus, consists of his death and resurrection. But when viewed with a broader lens, it includes everything from his incarnation to his return. It is good for us to study each of his nine redemptive deeds. And that is exactly what the following nine chapters do. Each chapter will trace one event through Scripture and then summarize what part that event plays in Christ’s saving work.

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:527–28 (2.16.19).

Chapter 1

Incarnation

Sinless Life

Death

Resurrection

Ascension

Session

Pentecost

Intercession

Second Coming

Christ's Incarnation

Now it was of the greatest importance for us that he who was to be our Mediator be both true God and true man. . . . Since our iniquities, like a cloud cast between us and him, had completely estranged us from the Kingdom of Heaven, no man, unless he belonged to God, could serve as the intermediary to restore peace. But who might reach to him? Any one of Adam's children? No, like their father, all of them were terrified at the sight of God. . . . What then? The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him. Hence, it was necessary for the Son of God to become for us "Immanuel, that is, God with us," and in such a way that his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together. . . . In undertaking to describe the Mediator, Paul then, with good reason, distinctly reminds us that He is man: "One mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ."¹

Calvin is correct. The Mediator had unique qualifications. He had to be both God and man to save us sinners. He had to be God because only God could save us. He had to become man because the work of salvation had to be performed by a human being for human beings. How God became a man is the subject of this chapter. Orthodox christology begins from above with God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, who, according to the

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:464 (2.12.1).

Apostles' Creed, "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary."

Jesus's incarnation saves. It does not save in and of itself, by the mere fact of God's becoming a man. It does not save apart from Christ's death and resurrection. But it is an essential prerequisite for those saving events. We will investigate the Old Testament, the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, and the Epistles before drawing conclusions.

Old Testament Background

Isaiah 7:14

Seven hundred years before Messiah's birth, Isaiah prophesied: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). It is difficult to understand how this prophecy relates to its historical context in evil King Ahaz's day, and faithful interpreters disagree. Some favor a single fulfillment view that understands Isaiah 7:14 as only predicting the coming of Christ. Others favor a double fulfillment view that understands the verse as finding an immediate fulfillment in Ahaz's day and a long-range fulfillment in Christ. We cannot here deal with the issue in detail.²

The important point is that Matthew regards it as a prophecy of Christ's virgin birth:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:22–23)

Although critical Old Testament scholars have questioned whether *almah* should be translated "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14, conservatives generally agree that in that context it means "a young woman who is unmarried and sexually chaste,"³ and there is no doubt that the Greek word Matthew uses (παρθένος, *parthenos*, following the LXX) only means "virgin."

²Raymond Ortlund's note on Isa. 7:14 in the *ESV Study Bible* describes both single fulfillment and double fulfillment views, and notes that faithful interpreters are found on both sides of the debate.

³Ibid.

Isaiah 9:6

Later, Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would be a divine-human ruler over Israel (and the world) who would bring peace and reign forever:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

Alec Motyer's words deserve quotation:

The emphasis falls not on what the child will do when grown up but on the mere fact of his birth. . . . He is *born* as from human parentage and *given* as from God. . . . The decisions of a king make or break a kingdom and a kingdom designed to be everlasting demands a wisdom like that of the everlasting God. In this case, like God because he is God, *the Mighty God (el gibbor)*, the title given to the Lord himself in 10:21–22. . . . God has come to birth, bringing with him the qualities which guarantee his people's preservation (wisdom) and liberation (warrior strength).⁴

Isaiah looked forward and saw the coming one, who was to be virgin born, even God himself entering into human life. He would sit on David's throne forever and bring freedom to Israel and the nations (Isa. 9:7). Although we cannot be certain how much Isaiah understood when "the Spirit of Christ in" him "predicted the . . . Christ" (1 Pet. 1:11), the prophet saw dimly the things promised "and greeted them from afar" (Heb. 11:13).

The Event in the Synoptic Gospels

Before Jesus's birth, God announces to Israel that he will send the promised Redeemer. The priest Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, filled with the Spirit, prophesies that in sending John as the forerunner of the Messiah, God

has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation. (Luke 1:68–69)

⁴J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 101–2, italics original.

Mary in her Magnificat rejoices that in sending the Promised One, God “has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” in fulfillment of Old Testament promises (v. 54). Astonishingly, the glory of God shines on poor shepherds in their fields at night, and an angel of the Lord announces to them, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11).

Before Jesus’s birth, God proclaims concerning Mary, “That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,” and the newborn is to be named Jesus (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:31). Why? The angel of the Lord’s reassuring words to Joseph link the Messiah’s name to his mission: “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). “Jesus” means “the Lord saves.”

The godly Simeon was told by God that he would live to see the Messiah. He does that very thing when he holds the eight-day-old baby Jesus in his arms and blesses God,

My eyes have seen your salvation . . .
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:30, 32)

The aged prophetess Anna remained in the temple worshiping night and day. And when Jesus was presented in the temple, “at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (v. 38).

So, God brings an amazing message to those who have ears to hear his words and eyes to see his kingdom: the baby Jesus is the Savior. He saves not as a baby, however, but as an adult, who will live a sinless life, die on a cross, and rise to live again.

Teaching in the Gospel of John

Jesus Is the Light

The prologue to John’s Gospel is justly famous. It introduces many themes that the rest of the Gospel develops. But its main theme is the incarnation of the Son of God. John does not call him the Son right away, but rather the Word and the light. John uses a literary form known as a chiasm to highlight the incarnation. Regular parallelism follows the pattern AB AB or ABC ABC, and so on, in which letters stand for ideas. Inverted parallelism, or chiasm, reverses

the pattern: AB BA or ABC CBA, and so forth. John's prologue forms a chiasm using the pattern AB BA.

The Son of God is called "the Word" in verse 1 and "the light" in verse 7. If John were following regular parallelism, he would first speak of the incarnation in terms of the Word becoming flesh and next in terms of the light coming into the world. Instead, he reverses the order. Verse 9 says, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Then verse 14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Here is the pattern:

- A** The Word (v. 1)
- B** The light (v. 7)
- B** The light comes into the world (v. 9)
- A** The Word becomes flesh (v. 14)

By using this pattern John rivets readers' attention on the incarnation. He shows that the incarnation was to bring salvation to humankind. When he writes, "The true light was coming into the world" (John 1:9), he pictures the world as dark, devoid of the knowledge of God. Christ comes as the light, the divine-human illuminator, who enlightens everyone with whom he comes in contact in his earthly ministry. Jesus as the light brings saving knowledge to all who believe in him, although sadly many reject him (vv. 10–11).

The grand illustration of this is when Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5), gives physical and spiritual sight to a man born blind. The former blind man believes in Jesus, worships him, and enjoys the forgiveness of sins found in him (9:38–41). But for those who reject Jesus, his light blinds them and hardens them in their sins (vv. 40–41).

John's favorite way of showing Jesus as the light is to present him as the revealer of the invisible Father. As such the Son brings messages from the Father into the world. The Son reveals the Father so well that to believe in the Son's word is to believe in the Father and gain eternal life: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

Jesus's role as revealer and light is made plain in John 12:44–50:

Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does

not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.

Of course, the saving knowledge that Jesus the revealer imparts is not apart from his saving death and resurrection. He himself teaches: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), and “I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (John 10:17). A crucial part of the revealer’s message is that he must die and be raised from the dead on behalf of his people.

Jesus Is the Word

John also portrays the Son as the preincarnate Word. In this role the Son was face-to-face with the Father before creation. He was also equal with the Father as the phrase “the Word was God” demonstrates.⁵ In addition, he was the Father’s agent in creating everything, as the affirmations and denials in John 1:1–3 show. This same eternal Word “became flesh and dwelt among us.” The second person of the Trinity became a flesh-and-blood human being. Furthermore, he lived among his fellow human beings for thirty-three years, three and a half of which were devoted to public ministry. As a result the apostles and other witnesses saw “his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” That is, the incarnate Word revealed in his humanity divine qualities of glory, grace, and faithfulness as John points out in 2:11 and 11:4, 40.

Jesus received a divided response from humankind (his creatures and covenant people Israel). Most “did not know him” and “did not receive him” (John 1:10, 11). “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (v. 12). Even as we use words to reveal our inmost thoughts, so God used the Word, his unique Son, to reveal his mind as well (v. 18). The Word came as the Savior, and all who believed in him were freed from their bondage to sin (8:34, 36) and adopted into the family of God. The incarnate Word is the God-man who “from his divine fullness” gives “grace upon grace” to needy sinners (1:16).

⁵For discussion, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 117.

Once more, it is important to remember that the incarnate Word does not save apart from the cross and empty tomb. Indeed, the Word is also “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) by giving himself as a sacrifice. The Word made flesh is the one who predicted his resurrection when he said of the temple that was his body, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19).

Teaching in the Epistles

If the Gospels tell the story and provide some theological interpretation of it, the Epistles assume the Gospels' story and provide much theological interpretation. So it is that Paul speaks of the incarnation when explaining God's intention to redeem his new covenant people.

Galatians 4:4–5

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

Paul has been speaking of three covenants: the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant coming 430 years later and subordinate to it, and the new covenant in Christ, which fulfilled the promise made to Abraham (Gal. 3:16–29). Now Paul speaks of the arrival of the One who ratifies the new covenant: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (4:4). Paul views the incarnation from the perspective of heaven; it involved God's sending his Son into the world.

Viewed from the perspective of earth, the Son was “born of woman” (v. 4). This succinctly speaks of the Christ's virginal conception in Mary's womb and subsequent birth. Why did God send his Son into the world to be born of Mary? The next words provide a hint: he was “born under the law” (v. 4). Paul means that the Messiah was a Jewish boy, whose birth obligated him to keep the law of God's covenant people. And that is what Jesus did, perfectly, his whole life.

Next Paul connects the incarnation with its purpose—redemption: “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (v. 4). The purpose of the incarnation was to facilitate redemption. For the Son to redeem us, he had to become one of us. No incarnation, no redemption. But the good news is: *incarnation*, and therefore redemption.

The apostle gives an important result of redemption—adoption. The Son came “so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4). “Adoption is an act

of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God."⁶ Paul thus mentions Christ's redeeming work but does not expand on it. He did that in the previous chapter: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (3:13). That is, the Son endured the penalty of the law, condemnation on the accursed cross, in order to redeem all Jews and Gentiles who believe in him.

The purpose of the incarnation was to bring about redemption, which involved Christ's bearing in his person the law's threat of judgment, so that his people might become the sons and daughters of the living God.

Philippians 2:5–8

After calling for unity in surrounding texts (1:27; 4:2), Paul exhorts his beloved Philippians to unity in 2:1–4:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

What is the apostle's strategy to promote unity in the Philippian congregation? He urges them to follow Christ's example of humility in their dealings with one another.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

This is Scripture's boldest statement of Jesus's two states, the state of humiliation (from birth to burial) and the state of exaltation (from resurrection to return). Paul begins and ends this section with references to Christ's deity. First, he says that Christ existed "in the form of God" (v. 6), something only true of God himself. He ends this section (vv. 10–11) with an allusion to Isaiah 45:22–25, where God himself says, "I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22).

⁶Westminster Shorter Catechism, 34.

Paul applies directly to Jesus what Isaiah said was true of God alone. He regards Jesus as equal with God.

Within this picture frame of affirmations of Christ's equality with God, Paul speaks volumes about the condescension of God. He paints a vivid picture of the incarnation and its effects. The divine Son "humbled himself," "made himself nothing." Does this mean that he divested himself of his divinity, as some have taught, taking the words "he emptied [ἐκένωσεν, *ekenōsen*] himself" literally as an "emptying" of some divine attributes? No, because the very next words show that Paul's language here is metaphorical. The Son "emptied himself" ["made himself nothing," *esv*] by "taking the form of a servant." This is how God condescended—he became a servant. And Paul does not have an angelic servant in mind, for he says that the Son was "born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). The One who existed in "the form of God" took "the form of a servant." Almighty God became a servant! He did this when he was born in human likeness.

But even this is not the full extent of the Son's humiliation. He also "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (v. 8). What condescension! God the Creator became one of his human creatures and then not a king or a prince, but a bondsman. He humbled himself by obeying his Father unto death to fulfill his mission. And not just any death, but a scandalous death by crucifixion!

So, the apostle Paul interprets the incarnation of the Son of God as a great act of condescension, an act that led to his crucifixion. It was also an act that led to his exaltation as the next three verses so eloquently testify.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

The state of humiliation is followed by Christ's triumphant state of exaltation (vv. 9–11). God does not leave his Son on the cross but highly exalts him (v. 9). This includes everything from Jesus's resurrection to his future return. A discussion of these glorious things will have to wait for a later chapter.

Now the question begs to be asked, why? Paul answers in another epistle: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). In context Paul portrays the incarnate Son as the great example of love and humility. Christ's example is powerful. He counted the Philippians (and the rest of his people) as more significant than himself (cf. Phil. 2:3). They were not more significant, but he counted them so when he loved them and gave

himself for them. In addition, he was looking not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (v. 4), namely, the Philippians and all other believers.

Paul wants Euodia and Syntyche (4:2) and the rest of the congregation to remember the reason they are in the congregation—because of Christ’s monumental act of humility and love. Paul wants them to follow Christ’s selfless example. In doing this, they will promote unity in their church.

Hebrews 2:9, 14–15, 16–17

No chapter of Scripture teaches the incarnation more emphatically than Hebrews 2. This chapter contains at least three major pictures of Christ’s saving work, divinely given interpretations of the meaning of the Savior’s death and resurrection. I will not develop these three pictures now but rather note that each one is preceded by an affirmation of the incarnation.

But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:9)

The writer to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 8, which, within a frame of praise to God for his majesty, celebrates the creational blessings of Adam and Eve. Two blessings are singled out: the glory and honor with which our first parents were endowed and their dominion over the animal kingdom (Ps. 8:4–6, quoted in Heb. 2:6–8). After quoting the psalm, the author refers to Jesus. Though Psalm 8 originally referred to Adam and Eve, what it says pertains to Jesus in his incarnation. He too “for a little while was made lower than the angels” (Heb. 2:9). He, the second person of the Holy Trinity, became a man so as to be “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (v. 9).

Jesus is here portrayed as “the last Adam” and “the second man” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). He is only the second human being created as God intended—in fellowship with him and without sin (Eve is not included in the Bible’s headship theology). And he is “the last Adam” because he does what no one before him or after him could do; as the unique Redeemer he has no successor. Via his death and resurrection he restores the creational blessings of glory and honor and dominion forfeited by the first Adam in his fall. And it is his incarnation that makes all of that possible.

The author of Hebrews introduces a second picture of Christ’s saving work with another reference to the incarnation:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Heb. 2:14–15)

This is the Christus Victor theme, made famous by Gustaf Aulén's book, which gave its name to this atonement motif.⁷ God the Son comes into his world to fight and overcome his and his people's enemies: Satan, the demons, sin, the grave, death, hell, and the world understood as an organized system of evil opposed to God (1 John 2:15). How does he win this mighty victory? Through his victorious life, death, resurrection, exaltation to heaven, and return.

What is the essential prerequisite for all of this to occur? The incarnation of the Son of God, of course. Because the people he came to save "share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things" (Heb. 2:14). The Son, a divine title for Christ according to Hebrews 1, partook of human flesh and blood in his incarnation. The Son of God truly became a son of Adam.

Why? The writer gives two reasons: to defeat the Devil and deliver those fearful of God's wrath: "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (vv. 14–15). By his death on the cross Christ, our champion, vanquishes his ancient foe and redeems his people. The Devil is a usurper who uses death to terrorize poor sinners. Christ overcomes the strong man and frees his prisoners (Matt. 12:28–29). Once more we underscore the key fact: it is the incarnation that brings the Son from heaven to earth so he can be Christus Victor.

The writer to the Hebrews introduces yet a third picture of the atonement by speaking of the incarnation again:

For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:16–17)

The dominant picture of Christ the Savior in Hebrews is neither that of second Adam nor that of Victor, but Christ as the great High Priest and sacrifice. Already in chapter 1 the author has introduced this picture in a few words: "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on

⁷Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (1931; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1969).

high” (1:3). And Scripture’s grandest exposition of Christ as priest and sacrifice occurs in Hebrews 7–10.

Perhaps this theme is put last in chapter 2 to give it prominence; readers are left with it still before their eyes as they begin chapter 3. The important point at present is to see that it too begins with the incarnation. After saying that Christ came to save human beings, not angels, the writer specifies, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17).

Hebrews 1 teaches that to be our great High Priest Christ had to be divine. Hebrews 2 adds that to be our great High Priest Christ had to become human. As the divine-human priest, the Son of God made “propitiation for the sins of the people” (v. 17). Here Christ’s sacrifice is a propitiation, not only expiating believers’ sin (Heb. 9:26), but also enabling God to maintain his moral integrity and save sinners.

In Hebrews 2 then, the writer presents Jesus’s work of salvation using three pictures. Christ is second Adam, Victor, and priest. The writer introduces each picture by telling of the incarnation. Plainly, it is the essential precondition for Jesus’s cross and empty tomb.

Connecting the Dots: Christ’s Incarnation Saves

Gordon Fee’s highlighting of the crucial importance of the incarnation for Pauline theology introduces our summary of the teaching of all of Scripture that Christ’s incarnation is essential for salvation:

Paul clearly understood Christ the Savior himself to be divine; he was not simply a divine agent. . . . Thus the full deity of Christ is never something Paul argues for; rather, it is the constant presupposition of everything that he says about Christ as Savior. . . . To be sure, Paul speaks only rarely of the “Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20); but the very fact that in this case he identifies Christ as “the Son of God” suggests that what overwhelms Paul about such love is not simply Christ’s death on his behalf. What lies behind such language is the overwhelming sense that the preexistent, and therefore divine, Son of God is the one who by incarnation as well as crucifixion “died for me.” To put the matter another way, the deity of Christ is therefore for Paul no small matter; it is rather of central significance to his understanding of, and devotion to, his Lord.⁸

⁸Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 511–12.

As Isaiah prophesied, the virgin-born Immanuel, even God himself, would enter human life, rule on David's throne forever, and liberate Israel and the nations (Isa. 7:14; 9:6). In the fullness of time, God does a startling thing—in mercy he sends a baby to redeem his people from their sins, both believing Jews and Gentiles. Incredibly, an angel from heaven appears with God's glory shining at night and announces to lowly shepherds, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

John presents Jesus as the light coming into the world and the Word become flesh (John 1:9, 14). He is God incarnate who reveals the invisible Father to human beings. And, in fulfillment of Jesus's own prophecies, he later lays down his life and takes it up again (10:17–18).

Paul testifies that "God sent forth his Son, born of woman . . . to redeem those who were under the law" so we might become the children of God (Gal. 4:4–5). He who existed in "the form of God" took "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" so he could die on the cross. As a result "God has highly exalted him" in his resurrection and ascension and will universally exalt him when he comes again (Phil. 2:6–7, 9).

After teaching the Son's deity in chapter 1, Hebrews 2 puts great emphasis on the saving significance of his partaking of flesh and blood. In order for him to fulfill his roles of second Adam, Victor, and priest, it was necessary for him to become a genuine human being (Heb. 2:9, 14, 17).

So then, does Christ's incarnation save? The answer depends on what exactly is being asked. Does Christ's incarnation save in and of itself? The answer is no. Salvation does not come automatically to humankind when the eternal Son of God becomes a man. But does Christ's incarnation save as the essential precondition for the saving deeds that follow? The answer is yes. Only a divine-human Redeemer would do. If the Son had not become a human being, he could not have lived a sinless human life, died, and risen again to deliver his people. He could not have ascended, sat down at God's right hand, poured out the Holy Spirit, interceded for his own, and come again. To perform these saving works, he had to become one of us. In that important sense, Christ's incarnation saves.

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes memorably underscores the nexus between the incarnation and Christ's saving work:

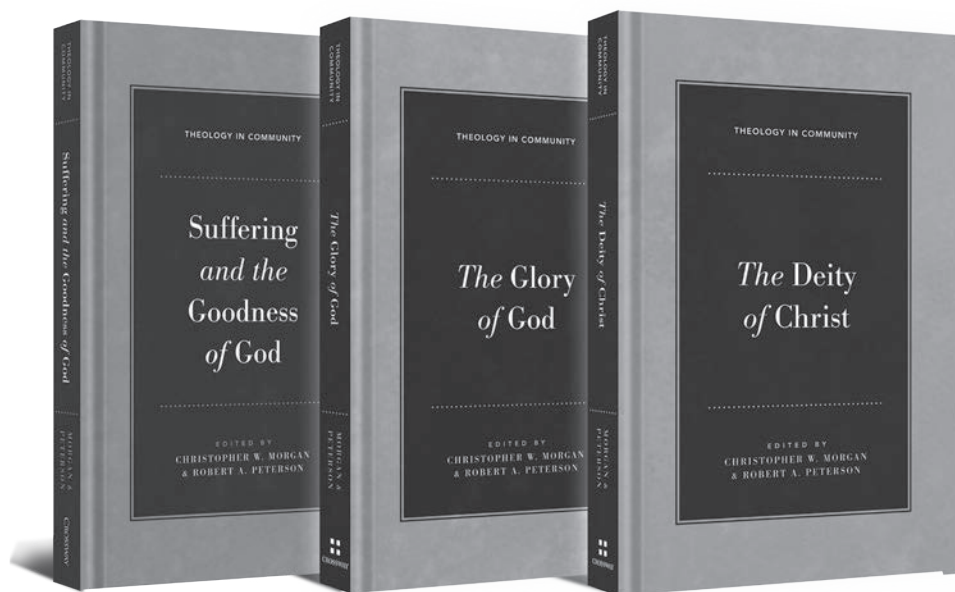
But Bethlehem is not the whole story. The birth that took place there was not an end in itself but a means to an end. The end to which Bethlehem was a means was Calvary, and unless Bethlehem is seen in direct relationship to Calvary its true purpose and significance are missed. The cradle was the start of the road that led to the cross; and the purpose of Christ's coming was achieved not in the cradle

but on the cross. . . . Thus Jesus declared of himself that “the Son of Man came . . . *to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mk. 10:45), and St. Paul proclaimed that “Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15).⁹

Bethlehem is not the whole story, but it is the essential beginning of the story. The center of the story is Jesus’s death and resurrection. But between the incarnation and the death and resurrection lies Jesus’s sinless life, the subject of the next chapter.

⁹Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 219, italics original.

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