



Justifying Christmas

PARTICIPANT'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*

Introduction to Session 1: Is. 64:1–9

Isaiah is the prophet quoted most frequently in the New Testament,² so many of us are familiar with certain passages from his writings. What do you 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.³

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

1. It is very difficult to determine the historical setting of Isaiah 64.
2. Although Isaiah’s vision is far-reaching in both time and space, his book is intended to be read as a unified whole.

the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1969), 4. Franzmann added an explanatory footnote to 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 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

³ 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.

3. Righteousness is one of the main themes that unites the book of Isaiah into a literary unity. Reed Lessing introduces the importance of this theme for 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 56–66.⁴

The Text: Is. 64:1-9⁵

Read these verses together.

Isaiah 64:1

We cannot finish even the first line of our text before encountering points that require some clarification and discussion and reflection. There are two issues that arise when we try to get Isaiah to speak English:

- “rend the heavens”
- “Oh that you would”

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?

⁴ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 14.

⁵ 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.

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.”

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.

“You meet him who joyfully works righteousness.”

Before turning to the second half of verse 5, we need to consider more carefully what it means for the Lord to “meet” someone.

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.”⁶ 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

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:

⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 623–624.

- 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.”⁷
- 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.”⁸
- 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.

“You have hidden your face from us.”

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 appearance; 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.”⁹

John 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.¹⁰

⁷ Oswalt, 40–66, 625.

⁸ Oswalt, 40–66, 626.

⁹ AE 17:370–371.

¹⁰ Oswalt, 40–66, 624.

7. The image that Isaiah uses in verse 6 is both embarrassing and offensive. 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.

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.”¹¹

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.

¹¹ AE 17:371.

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.”¹² 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. ROM. 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 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)

¹² AE 17:372.

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? (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!"

[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.¹³

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:¹⁴

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!

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,

¹³ Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship: Hymnal Companion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 40.

¹⁴ 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

Read Matt. 1:18–25.

We are beginning our study with 1:18, but that should not be taken to mean that verses 1–17 are unimportant. 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.¹⁵

In this session, 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?

¹⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1988), 18.

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 majority view: Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant.

The “other” view: Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant through the working of the Holy Spirit.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of these two different readings of the text?

2. Why is any of this material important for Matthew?

Why does it need to be included in his narrative at all?

3. What if Mary had become pregnant before the engagement?

4. What if Mary had become pregnant after the wedding?

5. Why should Joseph’s internal deliberations even be recorded for us?

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. Truly, 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” (verse 22).

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?

Raymond Brown outlines three ways in which Joseph’s righteousness and his “decision” have been related to each other and to the rest of the verse.¹⁶ As we will immediately see, this discussion is inseparable from the question of what the word *δικαιος* (*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.

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?

¹⁶ The three positions below summarize Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 126–128.

8. Which of the three positions do you prefer? On what do you base your preference?

9. What, then, should we think that Matthew would mean 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 ourselves at this point in his story.

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.¹⁷

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?

¹⁷ *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 30–31.

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?

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 [MATTHEW 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.¹⁸

But, again, why is this all so important to Matthew (and, therefore, should be to us)?

Jeff Gibbs points out the significance of Jesus being the “Son of David”:

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.¹⁹

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 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 promised David.²⁰

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.”^[21] 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.²²

²⁰ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 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.

²¹ 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.”

²² Raymond E. Brown, “The Annunciation to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25),” *Worship* 61, no. 6 (1987): 487-488.

¹⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 47.

¹⁹ Jewish literature written between the years (roughly) 500 B.C. and 70 A.D., the time of the “second temple” in Jerusalem, which was built by Zerubbabel and renovated by Herod I.

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.

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 others) 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.*²³

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!²⁴

[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.]*

²³ Paul Gerhardt, *Paulus Gerhardts geistliche Lieder: Getreu nach d. b. seinen Lebzeiten erschienenen Ausgabe wiederabgedruckt*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Samuel Gottlieb Liesching, 1869), 26.

²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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. Second, 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.”²⁶ 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.

Luther offers 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

²⁵ *AE* 52:7–31.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ *AE* 52:14.

²⁸ *AE* 52:14.

Discussion Questions

Read together Luke 2:1–14.

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

Luther provides the following answer to our question:

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.²⁹

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. 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.”

2. Put your thumb over the words “for you.” Is there good news of great joy in anything that remains?

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.³⁰

²⁹ *AE* 52:14.

³⁰ *AE* 52:15.

We may be familiar with Luther’s language of the “wonderful exchange” (*der wunderbarliche Wechsel*) that takes place between Christ and the believer, but we 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, do not look at your own wounds, but fix your gaze on Christ.”³¹

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.³²

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.³³

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.”³⁴ 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

³² AE 52:15.

³³ AE 52:16.

³⁴ AE 52:16.

³¹ AE 17:224–225.

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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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?

³⁵ AE 52:17.

³⁶ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 307.

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.³⁷

Luther points out that neither nature nor human reason nor 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.”³⁸ He illustrates how this is brought out in Luke 2 by pointing out several features of the text:

Luther’s first point:

Luther’s second point:

Luther’s third point:

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.”³⁹

³⁷ AE 52:18.

³⁸ AE 52:18.

³⁹ AE 52:21.

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. 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."⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

"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.'"⁴² 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.⁴³

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."⁴⁴

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).

⁴⁰ *AE* 52:24.

⁴¹ *AE* 52:24.

⁴² *AE* 52:25.

⁴³ *AE* 52:25.

⁴⁴ *AE* 52:25.

SESSION 4: Gal. 4:4–5

Introduction

Did you know that St. Paul also gives us a “Christmas story” in one of his epistles? Today, we turn to Luther’s “dear little epistle,” his Biblical fiancée, his “Katy von Bora”⁴⁵ — Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians.

Paul has said a great deal about the topic of justification 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 Galatians 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.

1. What metaphor does Paul develop as he works his way to our text? (Gal. 4:1–3)

2. What does Paul mean by “elementary principles of the world”? (v. 3)

The Text: Gal. 4:4-5

Read Gal. 4:4–5. 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”

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 αἱ ἡμέραι (eplēsthēsan hai hēmerai)	the days were fulfilled

⁴⁵ AE 54:20.

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?

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.⁴⁶ The verb that Paul uses here, ἐξαποστέλλω (*exapostellō*), is a very common verb used for sending someone out on a mission. 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”

4. What is Paul emphasizing when he describes Christ as “born of woman”?

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*.

⁴⁶ Cf. John 3:17, 34; 6:57; and 7:29.

Sometimes we need the perspective of a nonbeliever 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”

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 F. F. 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).⁴⁷

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 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:

Even if Paul begins this section (vv 3–7) by thinking in particular of Jewish Christians ([“and we”]), who had lived more directly [“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’ ([“in order that . . . we might receive”], v 5; cf. [“into our hearts”], v 6), ‘you’ ([“and because you *plural* are sons”], v 6) and ‘thou’ ([“you *singular* are no longer a slave”], v 7), attests the inclusive emphasis of Paul’s wording and argument (as in 3:23–26).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 196.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 196. For readability, Bruce’s Greek phrases have been replaced by English translations.

It remains for us, then, only to comment on the idea of redemption. We turn back to Gal. 3:10–14 to read how Paul has already described Christ’s work of redemption.

In his comments on Gal. 4:4–5, Luther emphasizes the picture of Christ Paul gives us:

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.⁴⁹

And how difficult it can be to hold fast to such a view!

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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

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?

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.⁵²

⁴⁹ AE 26:368.

⁵⁰ AE 26:368.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² 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.

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”

Ernest Burton has described adoption for Paul as “the establishment of those who have previously not had the privileges of a son in the full enjoyment of them.”⁵³ 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 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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

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 Galatians 4:3, Luther calls Christ Himself, who redeemed

⁵³ Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 221.

⁵⁴ *AE* 26:374.

⁵⁵ *AE* 26:371–372.

⁵⁶ See the fairly balanced discussion in James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 182–206.

⁵⁷ See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 26–32.

us from the curse of the Law, “the throne of grace.”⁵⁸ The “sending out” of the Son by the Father, moreover, calls to mind 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.

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.⁵⁹

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

⁵⁸ *AE* 26:362.

⁵⁹ 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.

