

**TO ACCOMPLISH GOD'S PLAN****ROMANS 8:1-4; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11**

Sometimes we can miss the all too obvious. There's the story of a customs officer who observed a truck pulling up at the border. Suspicious, he ordered the driver out and searched the vehicle. He actually pulled off the panels and bumpers of the truck, but found nothing illegal or suspicious. He waved the driver through. The next week, the same driver arrived. Again the customs officer searched and, again, he found nothing illegal. Over the years, the official tried full-body searches, X rays, and sonar, anything he could think of. Each week the same man drove up, but no mysterious cargo ever appeared. Each time, reluctantly, the customs officer waved the driver on. Finally, after many years, the officer was about to retire. The driver pulled up. "I know you're a smuggler," the customs officer said. "Don't bother denying it. But I can't figure out what you've been smuggling all these years. I'm leaving now. I swear to you I can do you no harm. Won't you please tell me what you've been smuggling?" The driver looked at him, smiled, and said, "Trucks." Sometimes we can miss the all too obvious. In the midst of the pressure and stress of the Christmas season we can sometimes miss the obvious meaning of Christmas – Jesus Himself. Your presence here today tells me that you don't want to miss the obvious meaning of Christmas.

This Advent season we're looking at what some of the New Testament letters tell us about the significance of the birth of Jesus. These letters were written a few decades after Jesus left to return to Heaven. What did the very first Christians – people like Paul, Peter, and John – think was important about Jesus' birth? I'm calling this message series "In Hindsight: Understanding Why Jesus Came After He Left." The first Christians in the first century didn't celebrate any day as Jesus' birthday much less December 25<sup>th</sup>. They wouldn't have recognized the word or the event we call "Christmas." Here and there, however, we get important glimpses of what they considered important about Jesus' birth. I want us to look at two passages today from two of Paul's letters. First, let's read a few verses from his letter to Christians living in the city of Rome. Next, let's read from his letter to Christians living in the Greek city of Philippi. Now, both those passages help us remember some great and obvious truths about why Jesus came into the world. First ...

**CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT GOD'S INITIATIVE.**

That's a word we use in everyday life. Initiative. It just means taking the first step in an overall plan. It implies the existence of some kind of plan. If you need a job, you make a plan and you take the initiative to apply for a job opening by sending in a resume. You don't just wait for someone to drop a job into your lap. Taking the initiative is the first act in an overall plan. Lack of initiative reveals the lack of a plan. Christmas is all about God's initiative because He had a plan. Romans 8:3 (NLT) says, "The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son...." That's initiative. When God demonstrated initiative by sending His Son, He revealed that He had a plan.

What's the point? An eternal relationship with God – this whole message about Jesus – is God's idea not yours. You didn't seek God; God sought you. You didn't think up a way to have a relationship with God and then suggest it to Him. No, instead, God thought it up and did it. That tells us something incredibly important and wonderful about God. He's not some all-powerful ogre eager to rain down judgment and damnation on human beings. Instead, He's a loving Father who wants lost people to become His spiritual children and He's provided the way for that to happen. The Bible says, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom 5:8 NLT) Initiative. God was moving towards you long before you made any effort to move towards Him. God was seeking you long before you ever began to seek Him. Any desire to seek God was first put in your heart by God Himself.

God's initiative is clearly implied in the Philippians passage we read earlier, too. "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being." (Ph 2:6-7 NLT) It's important to remember that the birth of Jesus wasn't some accident of history – or some lovely story, myth or fable – stuffed full of scruffy shepherds, fuzzy sheep, a big star, and impressively dressed wise men. This was the opening act of God's plan and mission. It's very important that God took the initiative, because you and I can't. You can't save yourself. You can't initiate a relationship with God. Why not? Sin. God is absolutely holy. He can't have anything to do with anything sinful, evil or wrong. Your sin and mine created a spiritual barrier between us and God. Every single one of us here today has a sin nature meaning a spiritual bent or tendency to do what's wrong. If God had not taken the initiative, we would be forever lost in our sin and doomed to eternity without Him.

Let me add this additional thought about initiative. Once you become a follower of Jesus, you become part of God's plan to reach lost people with the good news about Jesus. You become like your Father in Heaven by taking the initiative to reach out to those who aren't yet followers of Jesus. Lost people will rarely, if ever, take the initiative to reach out to God. Don't ever expect them to come up to you first and say, "Can you help me find God? Can I come to your church? Can you help me understand the Bible?" They will only ever find God if you and I take the initiative to reach out to them, develop a personal relationship with them, and slowly but surely point them to Jesus with our lips and our lives. Again, that's the whole strategy behind our Christmas events: the Children's Christmas Program tonight, the Celtic Christmas Celebration this Saturday, or the Christmas Eve Service. They aren't intended to be just meaningful events for members and friends of the church to enjoy. We want them to be events that allow you to take initiative. You do that by inviting lost people to them. You bathe that invitation process in prayer. Sharing the event together with these dear people will deepen your relationship and allow for further communication on spiritual matters right now or in the future. As you come to the Lord's Table today, remember this great and obvious truth: Christmas is all about God's initiative. Second ...

**CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT JESUS' INCARNATION.**

What does that word “incarnation” mean again? “Incarnation” is being the embodiment of someone or something else. For example, you might say, “That Brenda is just the incarnation of kindness” meaning that Brenda is the best example of kindness you’ve seen in a human being. Or you might say, “Uncle Bill is just patience incarnate” meaning that Uncle Bill’s a prime example of patience in action. When you come to the Bible, incarnation encompasses those definitions, but enlarges and deepens them. Incarnation means God took on complete humanity in the person of Jesus in order to fulfill His plan of bringing lost people to Himself.

We’re told here, “... He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have.” (Rom 8:3 NLT) God took on actual human flesh and personality in a baby born in Bethlehem named Jesus. Paul’s word choice seems a little odd there, doesn’t it: – “...in a body like the bodies we sinners have”? There were some people in the first century who taught that Jesus only appeared to be human. They suggested that Jesus was like a ghost or a superhuman action figure like the Incredible Hulk. Paul underlined that Jesus was completely and fully human. There is one, all important difference between Jesus’ humanity and ours, however. Jesus never committed sin in any way, shape or form. The Bible says, “This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin.” (Heb 4:15 NLT) Why is it such a big deal that Jesus never sinned? Because of what else Paul says there in Romans 8:1-4. Jesus died for your sins and mine on the cross. If He had ever committed even one sin, He could only have died for Himself. He could not have taken your place or mine. Jesus was and is the sinless, but fully human incarnation of God.

Now the Philippians 2 passage we read today is one of the greatest statements about Jesus in all of the New Testament. It tells us Jesus pre-existed with God the Father in Heaven as the Son of God, that He was and is God Himself, that He became incarnate meaning He became fully human without ever ceasing to be God, and that He died on the cross to make our salvation possible. Imagine Jesus giving up the perfection, beauty, and blessings of Heaven and taking upon Himself all the limitations of being a human being. He had to put up with all the common human hassles we endure like getting tired, getting sick, being misunderstood, or feeling lonely. But, more importantly, God in human flesh had to put up with being scorned and ridiculed by the creatures He had created, being beaten savagely, and then being put to death in about the most hideous, painful way imaginable – death by the cross. But, the only way that you and I could ever escape an eternity in Hell and obtain a restored, eternal relationship with God was for Jesus to do exactly what He did. It was essential to God’s plan.

Paul told the Philippians that Jesus “gave up his divine privileges.” He didn’t give up being God. Instead, Jesus was God living out a truly human life. You athletes out there know what’s meant by the expression, “leaving it all on the field” or “leaving it all on the court.” It means you hold nothing back. You give it your all. Every ounce of effort is expended. You pour yourself out. When it came to the task of rescuing you and me from Hell and eternal damnation, Jesus left it all at the cross. He poured Himself out on our behalf. Everything that could be done and given was done and given. He didn’t just become a human being. He took on the role and attitude of a human slave. He didn’t

just die in our place. He died in our place on a terrible, cruel cross. So terrible was death by crucifixion that when Roman citizens were sentenced to death for some crime, they were never crucified. It was considered too humiliating a kind of death to be endured by a citizen of Rome – even a condemned one.

Author and pastor Leith Anderson writes about visiting Manila, the capital city of the Philippines, and being taken – of all places – to the main garbage dump of the city. There he saw something beyond comprehension. Tens of thousands of people have made their homes on and in that dump site. They've constructed shacks out of things other people have thrown away. They send their children out early every morning to scavenge for food out of other people's garbage. People have been born and grow up there on the garbage dump. They have families, children, and they live in shacks made out of trash. Some of them die there without ever going anywhere else – even just to other parts of the city of Manila. It's truly astonishing. But some Americans live in the garbage dump, too. They're missionaries – Christians who have chosen to leave their country and share the love of Jesus Christ with people who otherwise would probably never hear about it. Isn't it incredible that people would leave all that we have here and go and live in a garbage dump voluntarily? As amazing as that might be, it's nothing compared to the Son of God leaving Heaven to come to Earth and becoming enfleshed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As you come to the Lord's Table today, remember this great and obvious truth: Christmas is all about Jesus' incarnation. Thirdly ...

### **CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT OUR SALVATION**

Just like the birth of Jesus, the death of Jesus on the cross wasn't some random event. Of course, it was unjust and terribly wrong; nevertheless, Jesus dying on the cross was the plan of God Himself. The birth of Jesus – Christmas – was necessary to get to the death and resurrection of Jesus – Easter. Each of us and all of us are in desperate need of salvation. Jesus' death on the cross was the only way the guilt of my sin, your sin, and the sins of everyone else could be addressed. Romans 8:3 (NLT) says, "... He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins." The Bible also says, "For the wages of sin is death... The person who sins is the one who will die." (Rom 6:23; Ezk 18:20 NLT) When you and I commit sin, we earn death in every way that you can die – physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death. The deepest meaning of that word "death" in both passages refers to spiritual or eternal death where a person is forever banished from God's presence.

Many people in our culture really struggle with this idea of a deeply offended God. They say, "God isn't mean-spirited and vengeful. He's a loving, forgiving God. The idea that sin has to be paid for is just repulsive to me!" Not if you believe in justice, it isn't. God is indeed loving and forgiving. He's also just and righteous. Because He's the Judge of the Universe, He must punish sin. He can't just overlook it or pretend it's not there. Each of us has fallen far short of God's standard of moral perfection. God would be within His rights to send all of us off into a godless eternity. But instead he did something wonderful that staggers the imagination. He sent Himself into this world in

the person of Jesus to pay the death penalty assigned to you and me. Because Jesus was sinless, He was able to take the guilt of your sin upon Himself as He died on the cross. Jesus literally became an offering or a sacrifice back to God. He made things right with God. He satisfied the need for justice to be done to sin. He absorbed in Himself the penalty of our sin. The Bible is very clear about this all important fact, “For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” (2 Cor 5:21 NLT)

That’s why Paul starts off Romans 8 with this wonderful declaration, “So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.” (Rom 8:1 NLT) Through Jesus, God made it possible for you to escape being held accountable for your own sins. You’re off the hook. You don’t have to pay the penalty yourself. You were facing eternal death, but God looked at the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and said instead, “Your penalty has been paid. Your guilt has been covered. I declare you to be not guilty.” That’s how God now sees everyone who belongs to Jesus. What does it mean to “belong to Christ Jesus”? Paul doesn’t say, “So now there is no condemnation for anyone.” Paul makes an all important distinction. Apparently, there are some who don’t belong to Jesus. What’s the criteria? Is one group sinless and the other sinful? No, we’re all sinners. Is one group morally superior to the other? No. Quite simply, people who belong to Jesus trust in Him and what He did for them on the cross while those who don’t belong to Jesus refuse to trust in Him. Instead, they trust in themselves – their own efforts, their own good deeds, whatever - to get into Heaven. Or maybe they completely discount the whole idea of needing salvation or even the existence of God Himself. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.” (John 5:24 NLT)

In 1872 the poet Christina Rossetti wrote a poem that only appeared after her death. About thirty years later the poem was set to music. Today, we know it as "In the Bleak Midwinter." According to Rossetti's poem, there is one thing that all of us can give to Jesus - no matter who we are. She wrote: “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, If I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet what I can I give Him, Give my heart.” Regardless of our broken past or our present struggles, there is one gift that Jesus wants more than anything - our hearts. No matter who you are you can give him your heart. As you come to the Lord’s Table today, remember this great and obvious truth: Christmas is all about our salvation. Finally ...

## **CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT GOD’S GLORY.**

“Glory” is a great, old churchy word, isn’t it? But what does it mean? When the Bible talks about the glory of God it means His limitless worth and His infinite value. It’s a word that refers to His magnificence, His majesty, and His supremacy. Glory. God’s ultimate plan and purpose is His own glory because there’s nothing better or more important. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of Christmas is not your salvation or mine, but God’s glory. Where do I find that? Well, as Paul sums up his amazing statement to the Philippians about who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and why Jesus came into this

world, the great Christian leader writes, “Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Ph 2:9-11 NLT)

We know from history that the two earliest Christian statements of faith were these: “Jesus is risen” and “Jesus is Lord.” One explains the other. Because Jesus is risen, He is now Lord. He is now Lord, because He rose from the dead. By the same token, Paul is saying here that the Lordship of Jesus and the glory of God explain each other. The Lordship of Jesus can never be in some kind of competition with God the Father’s glory. When you call Jesus Lord, you confess that Jesus was and is equal to God thus deserving of your obedience and worship. When you recognize Jesus as Lord with both your lips and your life, that’s the very best way to give glory to God the Father. By the same token, Jesus was and is all about His Father’s glory. That’s why He came into the world at what we now call Christmas. That’s why He died and rose again at what we now call Easter. The whole purpose of Jesus is not His own glory, but His Father’s glory. Just before the crucifixion, Jesus said, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you.... I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:1, 4 NLT) Jesus draws people to Himself so that He may draw us to His Father. As you come to the Lord’s Table today, remember this great truth: Christmas is all about God’s glory.

We don’t simply want to see glory; we want to share in it. We want to touch glory. We want to connect with it. We want to be a part of it, even though we know we’re not worthy. Have you ever noticed how at football or basketball games, you have fans who sit along those entrance tunnels onto the field or the court? They reach out wanting to give players high fives as they run on or off? Why? Those fans just want to share a moment of glory with those players. That can even happen to members of the same team. During the Chicago Bulls amazing run as National Basketball Association champs led by the legendary Michael Jordan, the Bulls had a reserve player named Stacey King. During the 1990 season King only started six games and averaged 15 minutes per game. But one night, during an overtime game against Cleveland, he contributed to an important victory. He said it would always be the greatest memory of his life. That night he and Michael Jordan scored a combined total of 70 points in a NBA playoff game. Michael Jordan scored a career-high 69 points, but King shared in the glory by scoring one point.

We serve a wonderful God who is willing to share His glory with us. How can you share God’s glory? You can confess and profess Jesus as Lord. You can live every day in such a way that you demonstrate to everyone that Jesus is your Lord. You can become an intentional disciple of Jesus. You can become a disciple-maker. You can take the initiative to point people to Jesus with both your lips and your life. True, we can only add something incredibly small to God’s glory. But when God’s glory is the single biggest reality in the entire Universe, no contribution to it is small or insignificant. Christmas is all about God’s initiative. Christmas is all about Jesus’ incarnation. Christmas is all about our salvation. And Christmas is all about God’s glory.