

"These meditations are a mini Christology.
I hope they will be read far beyond December."

Rick Holland



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—**Stephen Davey**, pastor of Colonial Baptist Church, Cary, North Carolina, president of Shepherds Theological Seminary, and leader of the international broadcast ministry, Wisdom For The Heart

Introduction

The incarnation is an audacious doctrine. The belief that the Creator of the universe “became flesh” is astonishing. An immeasurable chasm is fixed between the infinite God and finite man—and it was *crossed* when Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem!

Understandably, this doctrine has stirred imaginations. The immortal God Whom heaven cannot contain—*now snug in a manger?* The hands that span galaxies—*now clinging to a mother’s finger?* The voice that boomed in the beginning, creating everything out of nothing—*now cooing nonsensical syllables as an infant?* And all of that from the womb of a *virgin*? It’s marvelous!

But the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem is more than the stuff of Christmas pageants and greeting cards. It is historical fact, and it is the bedrock of the Christian faith—even more crucial to theologians than to poets. B. B. Warfield summarized its importance this way: “The doctrine of the Incarnation is the hinge on which the Christian system turns. . . . No Incarnation, no Christianity in any distinctive sense” (*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, v. iii, p. 259). That is no hyperbole. The incarnation is as vital to the Christian faith as the crucifixion and the resurrection. To repurpose 1 Corinthians 15:17, “If Christ has not been [born], your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Ah, but He has been born! Our Maker *did* become flesh, revealing the unseen God and redeeming fallen people. It’s as true as it is incomprehensible. We do well to meditate on it, not only in the few weeks preceding Christmas, but perpetually. To that end, it is our prayer that these devotionals will magnify the Lord Jesus Christ before you, helping you both understand and marvel at the incarnation. May God be magnified as we explore the wonder that Charles Wesley so beautifully extolled:

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th’incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

—CHRIS ANDERSON, EDITOR

Once again, I am grateful to our copy editor Abby Huffstutler, and to our artistic editor Joe Tyrpak. Both do excellent, meticulous work. While it may be awkward to dedicate a book to one of its contributing authors, Michael Barrett has more than earned my gratitude. He has exalted Christ before my generation with his podium, pulpit, and pen. He has shaped my understanding of Scripture like no one else, and his teaching lies behind the hymn “His Robes for Mine.” I can’t thank him enough for his influence on my life, and I’m honored to write alongside him. Grace!

And he shall be their peace. MICAH 5:5

Peace is a word that can describe relatively insignificant experiences such as a nice morning commute or a quiet moment in the living room after the little ones have been tucked in bed. Peace can also describe experiences that change your life, such as what occurs when a husband and wife are reconciled after unfaithfulness. Or peace can describe events that change world history such as the Paris Peace Treaties that brought a formal end to the Second World War. When Micah prophesied that the Lord would send a King Who would bring peace to His people, what kind of peace was he talking about? The New Testament reveals that Jesus was this long-awaited Savior Who brings rich, multi-faceted peace to all who follow Him.

First, the Bethlehem-born King makes possible our peace with God. Humanity's fundamental problem is that God's just judgment is against us because of our disobedience. Our Creator gave us laws to live by. He said, "You must never love anything more than you love Me, never disrespect your parents, never lie, never flippantly speak My name, never desire things I haven't given you." Yet all of us disobey Him in these ways. So, God is at war with us because rebellion characterizes our lives. But God graciously sent His Bethlehem-born King to be our Peace. Jesus came to make a way for us to be reconciled to God. He lived in perfect obedience to God the Father, then died as the God-appointed Substitute for all who would turn from their rebellion and trust in His sacrifice. Paul wrote that disobedient sinners who trust Jesus are declared "not guilty" in God's sight, and all who are "justified by faith . . . have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Experiencing this peace with God is the fountainhead of every other kind of peace we can experience.

Second, the Bethlehem-born King gives us peace with others. To make peace among people in a dog-eat-dog, look-out-for-number-one culture requires a Leader Who can transform individual hearts from being driven by self-centered ambition to being controlled by unselfish love. Jesus can bring such relational peace (Ephesians 2:14), and every blood-bought local church should be a little (albeit imperfect) demonstration of Jesus' ability to do so (Colossians 3:15).

Third, the Bethlehem-born King gives us peace through trials. While Christians live in a cursed, tumultuous world, knowing Jesus gives us "peace that surpasses all human comprehension" (Philippians 4:7). Jesus "guards our hearts and minds" with many "soldiers" of peace. One soldier is *Jesus' sovereignty*: We know that Jesus is in control and is coming soon to set things right, so we can "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). Another soldier is *Jesus' assuring presence*: Through every tribulation, Jesus is with us by His indwelling Spirit to assure us that we are God's children (Romans 8:15–23); He is with us in experiential empathy (Hebrews 4:14–16); He is with us in mystical union (Acts 9:4–5). Further, the soldier of *Jesus' likeness* guards our peace of mind: We know that every ounce of hardship we endure is ordained by God to make us more like Christ in our character.

Finally, the Bethlehem-born King will soon bring complete peace on earth. Micah prophesied: "He shall be great to the ends of the earth" (5:4). Jesus' government will eventually rule over every individual and every square inch of real estate on planet Earth. On that day He will end selfishness, discord, and war. And on that day we will proclaim that the Bethlehem-born King is our Peace in every sense of the word—spiritually, relationally, circumstantially, and internationally.

Let the gospel of peace "guard your heart and mind" with peace today.—JOE

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. PHILIPPIANS 2:6–7

Philippians 2:5–11 is unrivaled in its presentation of the condescension of the incarnation. Its purpose is practical as well as theological. Christ's unselfish descent from heaven to earth and from glory to agony depicts the humility and service Christians should show to one another. Still, its portrayal of Christ's work is exquisite. The passage might be compared to a grand spiral staircase in a lavish estate. Christ stepped down, down, and further down in order to save us from our sins.

Jesus was equal with God—Deity. Before His conception in Mary's womb and before His birth in Bethlehem, Jesus existed. He has *always* existed. He is coeternal and coequal with God (Colossians 1:15; 2:9). He didn't have to "grasp" after equality with the Father and Spirit because it was already His. Yet, He humbled Himself. He didn't cling to the privileges that were His own, but willingly relinquished them. Unlike a frightened child who sits at the top of a slide, white-knuckling the railing lest he descend, Jesus willingly let go, spiraling downward.

Jesus emptied Himself—Incarnation. Though equal with God, Jesus "humbled himself" (v. 7 KJV). The ESV accurately renders the Greek term *kenosis* as "emptied"—Jesus "emptied himself." Of what? "Of all but love," as Charles Wesley wrote in the hymn "And Can It Be?" Well, Jesus certainly didn't empty Himself of His deity. He retained His deity when He added to it humanity. It seems best to understand this "emptying" as an explanation of Christ's voluntary and temporary relinquishing of the *glory* that was His as the eternal Son. There are a number of reasons for this interpretation. First, it is glory that is restored to Him at His eventual exaltation (vv. 9–11). Second, Christ speaks of the loss of His glory and eventual return of His glory when He prays on the night before His crucifixion (John 17:5, 24). Finally, it fits with His glorious appearance at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–2), at Paul's conversion (Acts 9:3; 22:6, 11), and at John's exile (Revelation 1:12–16).

Jesus' humility was displayed not only in the glory He lost, but in the human nature He gained. He emptied Himself and showed His servitude specifically by "being born in the likeness of men" (v. 7). It's impossible to overstate the humility required for the infinite God to take on finite flesh. For God to become man—for the Word to be made flesh (John 1:14)—was the *Creator* becoming like the *creature*. Shocking! Had Christ been born amid the pomp and circumstance that surrounds a human prince, it still would have been a deep step down from the glory that was rightfully His in heaven. But He came to a *stable*, not a castle. He was born in dire humility and squalor, even by human standards. To return to the picture of the grand staircase, the descent into humanity was astounding. But there was more to come.

Jesus was obedient unto death—Crucifixion. What could be more of a descent than a move from heaven to a barn? A move from heaven to a *grave*. Jesus' downward spiral reached its greatest depth at His death. He was already humbled by taking on our finite nature, but "he humbled himself"—again!—"by becoming obedient to the point of death" (v. 8). What could be lower than death? The most ignominious of all deaths—"death on a cross." Jesus stepped down to the brink of hell by submitting to the painful, penal, propitiatory death of the cross.

Christ's descent was terrible, but not final. He ascended, first in the resurrection, then in His return to heaven's glories. God has highly exalted Him in response to His condescension (v. 9). So should we now, and so will all soon (vv. 10–11). Glory!

Let the gospel of Christ's condescension move you to highly exalt Him.—CHRIS

They shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us). MATTHEW 1:23

A virgin birth alone would be wondrous, but the Son born of the virgin magnifies the wonder beyond wonder. The miraculously born Son is *Immanuel*—"with us is God."

God's presence with His people is a theme that runs throughout the Scripture, and in one manifestation or another was the experience of His people in the old dispensation. So often in times of crisis, God assured His people that He would be with them. God was with the Patriarchs when they were threatened in their travels. He promised Abraham, "I will be with you" (Genesis 26:3). He assured Jacob, "Behold, I am with you. . . . I will not leave you" (Genesis 28:15). "The LORD was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2, 21). Generations later, as Joshua prepared for the conflicts in Canaan, God promised to be with him just as He had been with Moses (Joshua 1:5). Centuries later, God's presence with David in his walk through the valley of death produced fearlessness and comfort (Psalm 23:4). It was Solomon's prayer that God would continue to be with his generation as He had been with previous generations. Indeed, He prayed that God would never leave nor forsake them (1 Kings 8:57). With wide-sweeping application, the Lord promised that He would be with all who would call on Him in times of trouble (Psalm 91:15).

God's presence was not just for protection or comfort but for fellowship as well. The Tabernacle and then the Temple, particularly with the Ark of the Covenant, manifested Immanuel theology—God's being with His people.

But there was a greater manifestation of God's presence yet to come. The presence that was known only by faith and via symbol in the old covenant was visibly and concretely realized with the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The virgin brought forth the most extraordinary Person: The Son of God became the Son of Man. The invisible God became visible in the Person of Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of God's elect, the only Mediator between God and men.

The coming of Immanuel into the world in human flesh is the climax of redemptive history. From the first promise of the Curse-Reverser coming into humanity as the Seed of the woman, to the promised Seed of Abraham, and then to the Seed of David, all of time was moving steadily, unfailingly, and sometimes mysteriously to this fullness of time when God sent forth His Son made of a woman (Galatians 4:4).

Immanuel, the incarnate God, came to redeem His people by destroying the great enemy, the devil (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14), to deliver them from the bondage of death (Hebrews 2:15–16), and to make reconciliation for them (Hebrews 2:17). That God was with us visibly in Jesus Christ was and is the only hope for the world.

Although Immanuel is no longer physically in our presence, the truth of His name remains, for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He is in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), and our prospect is that we will always be with Him (1 Thessalonians 4:17). He continues with His church, and His desire is that He will be with us forever (John 17:24). "O come, O come, Immanuel!"

Let the gospel of Immanuel assure you of God's indwelling presence now, and let it increase your longing to be in God's immediate presence forever.—MICHAEL

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 TIMOTHY 2:5

A *mediator* is someone who brings two opposing sides together. Scripture teaches that there is only “one mediator between God and men”—Christ Jesus. Notice the three parties who appear in this great text:

- God—the one true and living God; the Offended
- Men—sinners who have rebelled against God; the offenders
- Christ Jesus—the Son of God, significantly called “the man”; the Mediator

Jesus is the singular Mediator between God and man for this specific reason: He Himself is both God and man. He bridges the infinite gap between us because He alone has merged two natures in one person. In its answer to the question, “Who is the Redeemer of God’s elect?” *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains:

The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man, in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever. (Question 21)

Jesus has bridged the gap between God and man in two ways: through His incarnation and through His crucifixion.

Jesus brought God to men through His incarnation. Through the miracle of the virgin birth, Mary’s womb became the place where the unimaginable happened. As I have written in a hymn,

*Praise our Savior, Jesus Christ; adore the Father’s only Son.
Holy God and lowly flesh in virgin’s womb have joined as one!*

Through the birth of Christ, two warring parties found common ground. Think of it this way. Imagine if Romeo and Juliet hadn’t committed suicide. Imagine if the feuding Montague and Capulet families had been merged in the lovestruck couple’s son—both a Montague and a Capulet. (We’ll call him *Montulet*.) In a sense, that’s what happened when Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18, 20). God and humanity came together in one person. Did that make peace? No. But it made peace *possible*, as the next point explains.

Jesus brought men to God through His crucifixion. Mediation—and its greater goal of reconciliation—required more than commonality. The incarnation alone didn’t make peace between God and men. Only the crucifixion could do that. Jesus had to suffer death, bearing the wrath of God that man’s rebellion incurred. First Peter 3:18 explains the transaction with perfect clarity: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” The righteous One (Jesus) died for the sins of the unrighteous ones (us). Why? To be our Mediator; to “bring us to God.” Only as man could He die as a substitute for other men. And only as God could He suffer infinitely, paying for the sins of all the redeemed.

*Message, Messenger combined—the Son reveals the unseen God;
Showing Him to us by birth, then bringing us to Him by blood!*

Let the gospel point you (and then compel you to point others) to Christ as the only Mediator between God and men.—CHRIS

Isaiah said these things because he saw [Jesus'] glory and spoke of him. JOHN 12:41

In 740 BC the prophet Isaiah was “so shaken and struck dumb as to be laid low by the dread of death” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.3). What made him think he would die? Isaiah saw the Lord—the King. In Isaiah 6, he describes what he saw: the majestic throne on which the King sat, the majestic clothing the King wore, and the King’s majestic attendants—six-winged angels that looked to Isaiah like flickering flames (vv. 1–2). Isaiah heard these attendants speaking incessant praise: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (v. 3). The King that Isaiah saw is, in terms of majesty and purity, in a category all His own. He is “not merely holy, or very holy, but utterly holy” (John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, p. 97). As the angels’ shouts continued, Isaiah felt an earthquake and sensed an impending storm (v. 4). It’s at that point he was certain he’d be annihilated. Horribly aware of his own impurity, Isaiah cried: “My destruction is sealed!” (v. 5 NLT).

How should Isaiah’s experience affect us? Should we expect a heavenly vision, too? No, Isaiah shared his experience so that we, like Isaiah’s original hearers, would learn the way to escape God’s impending wrath. The escape has two phases.

You must recognize that you’re condemned because of impurity (vv. 1–5). If you’ve never been “ruined” by the realization of God’s holiness and your own uncleanness, then you’re still under judgment. It does no good to compare yourself favorably with others. From outer space, Mount Everest and the Dead Sea appear to be on the same level. Similarly, in the King’s eyes, the best sinner and worst sinner are both condemned. “In the presence of God degrees of sin become irrelevant” (Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, p. 60). Escaping judgment begins with acknowledging that you deserve it.

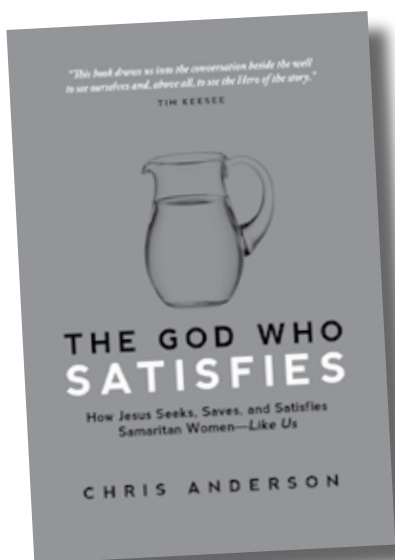
You must be cleansed through sacrifice (vv. 6–7). When Isaiah confessed his impurity, God had an angel take a coal from the altar of sacrifice in the temple and touch it to Isaiah’s lips. What powerful symbolism! Sinners can be cleansed only through the sacrifice that God Himself prescribes. Christians understand that the sacrificial system in Jerusalem’s temple was pointing ahead to Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice at Jerusalem’s hill of execution (Hebrews 10:1–18). We can escape judgment only when we flee for cleansing to the Sacrifice God has provided in Jesus.

Make no mistake: Isaiah 6 is about *Jesus*. Here in Isaiah 6 the glory of King Jesus is on full display, not only in His cleansing power but also in His kingly majesty. John taught that Isaiah saw *Jesus’* glory (John 12:40–41). Isaiah 6 shows us the King before His birth! As Alfred Martin puts it, “The Son of God is always the Revealer of God, before His incarnation as well as after” (*Isaiah: The Salvation of Jehovah*, p. 33). Isaiah had gazed on the glory of God in the face of Christ seven centuries before Jesus was conceived. When Jesus was born, He said goodbye (for a few decades) to the incessant praises of angelic worshippers. It’s no wonder that the sky in Bethlehem lit up with angelic praise! These angels had been singing, “Holy, holy, holy!” to Jesus for thousands of years (since they had been created), and they couldn’t keep silent while their King lay in a feeding trough to save the unclean.

Have you acknowledged that Jesus of Nazareth is holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty—that you’re unclean, and that His sacrifice is your only hope for cleansing? That’s the only way to escape the wrath to come.

Let the King’s holy glory humble you and His holy grace cleanse you.—JOE

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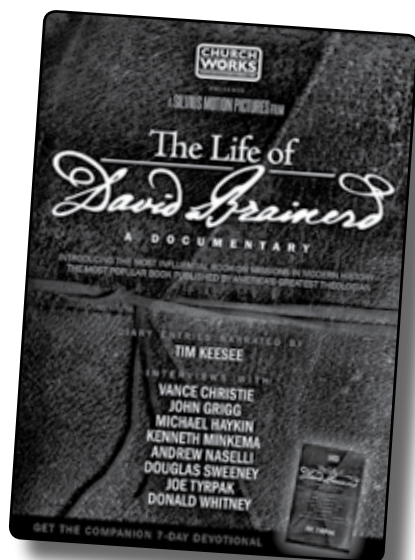


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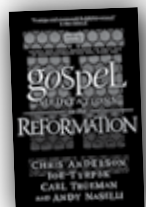
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