TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

He Came!

Galatians 4.4–7

Introduction

1. In a 2014 article, church historian Timothy George included an examination of the themes in the Christmas letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Written to former students and friends, they reflected the themes he favored in the sermons he preached at that time of year. In his 1942 letter, he associated Jesus' manger with the prisons of poverty, agony, sin, and death:

   > The joy of God goes through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible and irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it (George 2014).

2. A year later, his 1943 letter connects the birth events with a literal imprisonment: "A prison cell is a good analogy for Advent; one waits, hopes, does this or that—ultimately negligible things—the door is locked and can only be opened *from the outside*" (George 2014).

3. Bonhoeffer's circumstances had changed between the two letters. In April 1943, he was sent to Berlin's Tegel military prison where he awaited trial for his involvement in the German resistance movement. He would be executed in April 1945, weeks before the war's end.

4. He was not the first to appeal to the hope of the Messiah to deal with desperate circumstances. In about 5 BC, the people of Israel did the same, longing for the Deliverer who would bring release from similar circumstances of poverty, suffering, imprisonment, and, at times, unjust death under the rule of Rome and its puppet king, Herod the Great.

5. They would not have connected their deliverance to a Roman cross, however. Nor do many people today, including those who love the Christmas story of the sweet baby Jesus but are dismissive or even hostile to the teaching and way of the adult Christ. It's why it is wise to review the biblical account of the story, not merely its facts, but also its meaning.

Body

I. He came (Gal 4.4).

   A. Paul's summary statement in Galatians 4.4 is elaborated elsewhere, notably in Luke's extended treatment of the events surrounding Jesus' birth (Luke 1—2).

   B. While the passage celebrates the coming of the "Savior who is Christ [anointed] the Lord" (Luke 2.14), Luke emphasizes that the circumstances of his birth were very different from those typical of the world's movers and shakers.

1. The story's main players are characterized by humility and lowliness.
   a) Mary twice uses forms of the word ταπεινός (*tapeinos*) to describe her station and those whom the Lord exalts over the mighty on their thrones (1.48, 52).
   b) The shepherds who heard the angelic announcement were among society's outsiders; Simeon and Anna were as well (2.8–20, 25–32, 36–38).
   c) The turtledoves or pigeons Joseph and Mary offered in the purification sacrifice were the exceptional items to offer when a mother "cannot afford a lamb" (Lev 12.8) (2.22–24).

C. The conditions of Jesus' birth also emphasize his identification with the lowly (2.6–7).
   1. "Manger" is not a bad translation of φάτνη (*phatnē*), but, in a world where nativity scenes have sanitized the event, "feeding trough" is both accurate and better serves to emphasize the lowly conditions of the birth.
   2. "Guest room" (ESV footnote, NIV 2011, et. al.), understood in its cultural context, also reinforces the theme. A concise summary of the evidence says:
      a) "The typical Greek term for 'inn' (*pandocheion*) is used in the Gospels only in the parable of the good Samaritan (10:34). The term in this verse usually translated 'inn' (*katalyma*) can also be understood as 'guest room.' This term is elsewhere used in the Gospels only for the room in which Jesus held his Last Supper (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). Every private home had a room, usually located close to or at the entrance of the house, that was used to receive and lodge guests or to hold events to which groups of people were invited, such as special banquets or wedding feasts. In contrast, at the opposite end of a house was the 'innermost room' (Ps. 128:3; Amos 6:10) used for the private activities of the homeowner. *The lower level of traditional village housing typically served as a stable for the family's animals* (Currid & Chapman 2017, ¶ 9282; emphasis added).
   3. The description in Luke 2.7 fits with those of Judean lower class homes and further accentuates the emphasis on Jesus' lowliness and identification with the poor.[1]

D. The lowliness emphasis helps us better appreciate part of Paul's statement in Gal 4.4: "God sent forth [ἐξαποστέλλω, *exapostellō*][2] his Son"; not "to *become* his Son."

II. He came to rescue and liberate (Gal 4.5).

A. Paul reminds us that Jesus' birth was just the beginning of his mission, a point he elaborates in the poem/hymn in Philippians 2.5–11, a text that stresses Jesus' vulnerability (vv. 7–8).

B. Vulnerability was necessary to accomplish his mission: "in order to" [ἵνα, *hina*, NRSV]:
   1. "Redeem" – "to secure deliverance of, *deliver*, *liberate*" (Bauer 2000, 343). Cf. Isa 61.1–2; Luke 4.18–19).
   2. "Receive adoption as sons."
      a) In the Roman world, adoption was widespread, but was typically practiced by the elite who adopted grown men.
      b) The adopted child was equal to the natural child in the eyes of the law and society, with all the rights and privileges that entailed, especially the right of inheritance (Currid & Chapman 2017, ¶ 11253).

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[1] N. T. Wright translates vv. 6–7: "So that's where they were when the time came for her to have her baby; and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him up and put him to rest in a feeding-trough, because there was no room for them in the normal living quarters" (NTFE).

[2] "to send someone off to a locality or on a mission; … fulfillment of a mission in another place" (Bauer 2000, 345).

C. Liberation and the inheritance of adoption are what Jesus came to provide for us!

III. He remains with us (Gal 4.6–7).

A. Paul does not stop with our liberation; he continues to reassure us that the liberating Son will remain with us, providing the support we need to grow as God's children.

B. As his adopted children, we receive "the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (v. 6; cf. John 14.16–17, 26; 15.26; 16.12–15).

1. Coupled with Romans 8.15, we learn that the Son's spirit enables us to cry "Abba, Father," as he intercedes for us, even when we are perplexed (vv. 26–27); this is the same prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden (Mark 14.36).
2. Thus, each of us is indeed "also an heir" (Gal 4.7), "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8.17).

Conclusion

1. As we reflect on the above ideas, we should celebrate! But first, did you know that, as of 2009, the most-published Christmas carol in North America never mentions the birth of Jesus? (planton 2009); it was published in 1,387 hymnals (2nd place: 974 hymnals). It's not even based on a New Testament text.

2. It was written by Isaac Watts in 1719 under the title "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom" in his collection *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian State and Worship.* It's a Christological interpretation of the last half of Psalm 98, with an interlude from Genesis 3.17–19 (3rd stanza).

3. "The hymn celebrates God's involvement with His people" which began in the feeding trough in Bethlehem. It reminds us of the twin needs "to look back and praise God for the glorious gift of His Son" and to "look forward to Christ's return, when God will bring a righteous conclusion to all things." (Brown and Norton 1995, December 25).

4. The song reminds us that Jesus came, liberates, and lives with us We know it as "Joy to the World!" Let's celebrate together!

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This sermon is adapted from the chapter, "He Came!" in my book, *Reinforcing the Foundations: Expositions on God, Sin, Salvation, and Service*, CarChlex Books, 2025, pp. 101–112