

WHY CHRIST CAME

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31 Meditations on the Incarnation

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and
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PREFACE

Traditionally, at Christmastime we think about the story of Christ's birth. It *feels* like Christmas when we picture Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the angels, and the manger containing the Christ child. But to appreciate the magnitude of the main point of the story—that the eternal Son of God assumed our flesh-and-blood human nature—we need to learn from the rest of the Bible why Christ came to earth.

Sadly, many who vehemently argue the need to “keep Christ in Christmas” can probably say very little about the reality and practical significance of the incarnation. Learning the reasons for Christ's advent will help us more deeply celebrate His birth, allow us to see more clearly how it is connected with the rest of His ministry, and help us understand its importance for our lives. Understanding why Jesus came to earth also has apologetic value. Suppose someone asked you, “Why did Jesus come to earth?” You could probably come up with one or two reasons. As true as those reasons might be, they would only begin to communicate the richness of Christ's incarnation.

“Why” is a marvelous teacher because it helps us identify the meaning of the events we observe. Rudyard Kipling called the interrogative “why” one of the “six honest serving men” who taught him all he knew. Christ Himself

frequently employed this “serving man” as He taught about His first coming. Answering the “why” question should also enlarge our vision for the season of Advent and Christmas, helping us answer important questions like, “Why are we gathering as church and family?” “Why do we have special commemorations at this time of year?” “Why does this season bring us hope?”

The psalmist says all creation declares the glory of God (Ps. 19:1). Nothing, however, glorifies God as much as the incarnation of His Son. As Charles Spurgeon exclaimed, “Sing, sing, O universe, till thou hast exhausted thyself, yet thou canst not chant an anthem so sweet as the song of the Incarnation!”¹ John Owen observed, “We can only adore the mysterious nature of it;—‘great is this mystery of godliness’” (1 Tim. 3:16).²

Likewise, this little book cannot begin to exhaust the riches of the great mystery that God became man. Many more reasons could be given. In addition to the reasons given in this book, Christ came to earth

- to send fire (Luke 12:49–50)
- to redeem us from the law (Gal. 4:4–5)
- to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14; John 12:47)
- to be received in the Father’s name (John 5:43)
- to give abundant life (John 10:10)
- to reveal the Father (Matt. 11:27; John 14:9)
- to preach deliverance to captives (Luke 4:18)
- to be an example of meekness (Matt. 11:29)
- to fulfill God’s promise as the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15)
- to give us the Holy Spirit (John 7:39)

With John, we can say that if all the reasons for which Christ came were written down, “I suppose that even the world

itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25). The number of reasons for which Christ came into the world may ultimately surpass the number of people He came to save.

We offer these thoughts with the prayer of the apostle Paul: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17–19).

Aside from Scripture and biblical commentaries, some other helpful books on the incarnation of Christ include *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* by Athanasius; *Emmanuel, Or, The Incarnation of the Son of God the Foundation of Immutable Truth* by M. F. Sadler; *Christ’s Incarnation, the Foundation of Christianity* by Charles Spurgeon; *The Incarnation of Christ* by Edwin H. Gifford and Samuel J. Andrews; *The Virgin Birth of Christ* by J. Gresham Machen; *The Story of the Christ Child* by Leon Morris; *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* by David F. Wells; *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* by Millard J. Erickson; *The Christ of Christmas* by James Montgomery Boice; and *Why on Earth Did Jesus Come?* by John Blanchard.

TO DO THE WILL OF THE FATHER

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.

—JOHN 6:38

Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.

—HEBREWS 10:7; cf. PSALM 40:7–8

Jesus came to earth to do the will of the Father. Ultimately, the will of God is His righteous decree that determines all that comes to pass and causes all things to work together for His glory (Eph. 1:11; cf. Deut. 29:29). Everything that comes to pass is the will of God, and He accomplishes that in Christ (Col. 1:16–17). But when Christ speaks about coming to do God’s will, He is referring to the will that God has revealed “unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). God’s revealed will is breathed out of His heart and establishes His expectations for His people.

It may surprise us, then, to hear Jesus refer to two wills: His own and His Father’s. In doing so, Jesus opens a window on His humanity. As Andrew Murray says, “Christ had a human will. For instance, he ate when he was hungry, and

he shrank from suffering when he saw it coming.”¹ While His will was not sinful, Jesus still had to deny it. In taking on flesh, Christ undertook the ultimate challenge of conforming His human will to His Father’s divine will.

Jesus met that challenge; He did the will of God in all things. He performed every duty of the law (Matt. 5:17) and resisted all temptation to transgress it. At the end of His earthly life He could say, “I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

James 4:17 says, “To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.” We commit sins of omission every day, but Jesus never did. Indeed, He sometimes went out of His way to heal just one person (Mark 5:1–20). He showed compassion to people who were guilty of notorious sins (John 4:1–30; 8:1–11). The disciples accused their master of being unreasonable when He fed crowds of five thousand and then four thousand, because no one could be expected to provide for such multitudes (Mark 6:35–37). But Jesus had compassion on them (Matt. 15:32). In His entire ministry, Jesus showed that God’s servants must not fail to do all that is commanded them (Luke 17:10).

Jesus’ obedience to God’s will is especially revealed in His fulfillment of the unique task of redeeming and preserving His people according to His Father’s eternal plan. He says in John 6:38–40:

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that

every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

Jesus' obedience was particularly focused on the sheep He came to save. His mother, Mary, sang, "He that is mighty hath done to me great things" (Luke 1:49). As we study Jesus' obedience in the pages of Scripture, we can say, "It was all for us!" (cf. Gal. 2:20).

Not one of the Father's expectations went unfulfilled in Christ. When Christ said, "It is finished," He meant it (John 19:30). By His obedience to God's will, even in the things that He suffered, He secured salvation for us. As our high priest, Christ teaches us that we have no other way of dealing with our moral failure and its penalty than to come to God and say, "Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to thy cross I cling."

As we study the early chapters of the Gospels, it is difficult to feel the full weight of Jesus' statement: "I come...to do thy will, O God." But later, especially as we read about Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, we begin to sense the depth of that commitment. In the garden Jesus wrestles with the reality of Isaiah 53:10: "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him." In the garden Christ was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" and "sore amazed" (Matt. 26:38; Mark 14:33). Paintings of Christ praying while He serenely looks up to heaven greatly distort the reality of His garden experience. In Gethsemane Christ lost His composure, falling to the ground in agonizing prayer (Mark 14:35).² The overwhelming terror of bearing God's judgment against our sins pressed out of Him great drops of bloody sweat.³ Still, Jesus submitted to His Father, praying, "Not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36).

Why Christ Came

According to John Calvin, Christ's coming to earth to do God's will communicates two things. First, it exalts Christ as the only human who was obedient to God's will. Jesus' life clearly teaches us that we cannot and will not do God's will. That being the case, we need a mediator. The good news of the gospel is that Christ has come to do God's will as the Mediator for those who trust in Him.

Second, Calvin explains, this text "stimulates us all to render prompt obedience to God; for Christ is a pattern of perfect obedience for this end, that all who are His may contend with one another in imitating Him, that they may together respond to the call of God and that their life may exemplify this saying, 'Lo, I come.'"⁴

The off'ring on the altar burned
Gives no delight to Thee;
The hearing ear, the willing heart,
Thou givest unto me.

Then, O my God, I come, I come,
Thy purpose to fulfill;
Thy law is written in my heart,
'Tis joy to do Thy will.

— versification of Psalm 40:6–8
from *The Psalter*, no. 109:1–2