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The Christmas Message in Romans

I am going to start this message today with a bit of a lengthy introduction because I want to be clear as to what this message is about and how it fits. I don’t the intro is entirely needed, but I feel obligated to give it because I want to be sure that what I say today is motivated primarily from the scripture and doesn’t give the impression of reading my own ideas into the text. So todays message is titled “The Christmas Message in Romans”. As many of you know we have studied the book of Romans this year in our group bible study. As many of you also may know, the Christmas story appears in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You may also note that none of these books are the book of Romans. The Christmas story is the story of the birth of our savior Jesus Christ, who fulfilled God’s promise to his people. It was recorded by his disciples who witnessed and recorded it in the four gospels. By contrast Romans, was written by the apostle Paul, a convert to Christianity who never met Jesus prior to his crucifixion. So how does this fit in then? Well, every Christmas in basically every church all around America- pastors give a message talking about how Jesus is the true reason for Christmas. In my experience it the most common Christmas message and every single year I have went to a Christmas service anywhere in the world this has been taught. And it is absolutely correct. Jesus is the reason for Christmas, and the season is to commemorate his birth. We should be “rejoice for Emmanuel who ransomed captive Israel.” But the topic of today is to ask why and how. So what does it matter that Jesus was born? What was so special about Jesus that we ought to celebrate so fully? This is what the book of Romans addresses. Today’s topic underscores the reasons that we should be thankful and joyous this holiday season.

The first reason that we can be thankful and joyous for the birth of Christ is that we are destined to die and doomed without the perfect penitence that was the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. The four gospels contain repeated calls for the repentance of mankind. But its not until the book of Romans that we find a crystallized explanation for the problem facing all mankind. In the first 3 chapter of Romans, we read a dreadful verdict, mankind is doomed. “There is no one righteous not even one.” We later read that “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12) In the gospels Jesus (Mat 4:17) himself call us to repent for the kingdom of Heaven is near. But Jesus’ words don’t mean anything to people (as far as I understand) who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel they need forgiveness. Romans here makes it explicit that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. GK Chesterton noted that “Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." Every day you can turn on the TV or go on Twitter to see increasing evidence of the fall of man. In an age where literally everything is disputed its pretty obvious to everyone on Earth that something has gone wrong. But it is for this reason that Jesus was born and it is for this reason that we have hope. Every generation comes up with a new thing that they think will remedy the fall of man, and without fail those constructs are turned for evil. But Romans explains:

***5****For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.****6****For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,[*[*a*](about:blank#fen-NIV-28075a)*] that we should no longer be slaves to sin—****7****because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.*

***8****Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.****9****For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.****10****The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*

The second reason that Christmas is important is that it demonstrates God’s faithfulness to his promise. The gospels explain this in detail and go out of their way to point out when God is being faithful to specific prophecies. What Romans does however is explain why God is faithful to his promises to the Jews. About half of the book of Romans is an explanation how the new covenant we now have through Jesus (i.e. where faith in Jesus grants us salvation) does not make God a liar with regards to his prior promises to the Jews. If this were not true it would create one of two possibilities, first- that Jesus was not the Messiah or two- that God was not faithful to the Jews. In both cases Christmas isn’t any more meaningful than any other day. Instead, Romans presents the law not as a tool to salvation, but as a mirror to understand the fallen nature of mankind- and in so doing point man back to God (Romans 7:7-13). That God is faithful to his promise is a fact that all Christians are quick to attest to. Survey 100 Christians and 100 Christians will tell you that God keeps his work. But when things don’t go our way, when trials come and when we are overwhelmed, it is often the case that people immediately reject this fact. “Why does it have to be my God. Why again am I to suffer this? Did you not tell me that you would be with me until the very end of the age?” This pandemic has taken so much from all of us. Nearly two years now have our lives been on hold. When will this end? But God never promised an easy life. In fact, he promised the opposite. He commanded us to become like Him, Jesus, the suffering servant. Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. So in Jesus we learn clearly this lesson, that Christ’s death was to fulfill the promise of God, but that in all things God works for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. There will be trouble, but ultimately we are promised that these troubles are not worth comparing to the future glory of Christ. Jesus was more than a conqueror- Romans says that in all sufferings we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And we see that Christmas time is a reminder as to God’s love and faithfulness.

A third reason for the importance of Christmas is that it demonstrates God’s commitment to peace between himself and sinful man. In Luke’s gospel we find the story of the announcement of Jesus’ birth by the angel Gabriel.

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.****9****An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.****10****But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.****11****Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.****12****This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

***13****Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

***14****“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
    and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

This last line is what I will focus on “On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests”. This is a reference to a prophesy from Ishiah “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6). While the gospels and the prophets announce Christ as the prince of peace and the one who will bring peace to earth, they are not explicit in how this will occur. One might come to the conclusion, as many of Jesus contemporaries did, that the Messiah would bring political peace between the kingdom of Jedea and the Roman empire. But the book of Romans is clear and explicit. Romans chapter 5 explains why Jesus’ death was so meaningful. It explains that through Christ’s death we are justified (ie innocent) of the crimes of our sin **“**Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2**through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” Paul, the author of Romans expands this line of reasoning in Colossians where it is written

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. – Col 1:22-23*

And so, Christmas time is a celebration of the coming of peace. The largest celebration of peace in history was arguably the end of the second world war. Life magazine reported that civilians began celebrating "as if joy had been rationed and saved up for the three years, eight months and seven days since Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941". Over Thanksgiving I met my great aunt’s boyfriend. He is 94 and has grandchildren older than me. He told me about how he enlisted in World War IIand his story. One thing that struck me was that he cited the exact day the war ended he said “I enlisted in April but the war ended on August 14th”. I found it remarkable that at 94 he still remembered the exact day of the year the war ended. Now the date is somewhat different around the world. US normally marks September 2nd as VJ day (this is the day Japan signed surrender documents). The Philippines celebrates it on September 3rd as that’s the day the military governor of Japan surrendered in accordance with the surrender document. But regardless of the exact day, the sentiment is the same- war is a terrible thing and the start of peace is cause for celebration. And so how much more then should we celebrate the coming of the one who “himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14)? Let us celebrate even more full the coming of the prince of peace and may we revel in his goodness and faithfulness.

Before we end I want to personally remark on the nature of Christmas in a new way I have learned this year. We often times meditate on the nature of our Lord Jesus in hyperbolic ways. Jesus is either the “light of the world and King of Kings” or he has been “pierced for our iniquities and crushed for our transgressions”. It is common to see Jesus in one of two extremes, we look on him who was slain and think about how our sins caused him death and untold agony, or we see him as the triumphant Lord “mighty to save”. Of course, both are biblical, both are true. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord or Lords, and it is a testament to the grace of God that we are saved by the death of one so worthy for we who are so anything but. But in this time of celebration when we meet with our families Satan comes in to steal our joy. We are reminded of those who we have lost, we are reminded of all we do not have, we are reminded – no we are tempted to make this season about us. But it is not. It is about God and what God has done for us. And although we celebrate God’s gift of Jesus, God grants us his gifts all year round. Last week my second funding application for my phd study was due. My application required three letters of recommendation and with three days to deadline two of the people who agreed to provide letters had not submitted. I was worried but then at 10:30 last Sunday my college professor submitted. Finally with one day to go at nine at night I got a message from the last person. “Here is the letter. Read it over and let me know if it looks ok.” Reading through the letter nearly brought me to tears. It was clear this person had taken hours to write it. I was stunned but recognized it to truly a gift from God. So at this time let us clearly recognize the significance of the day. Think about the best gift we have ever gotten, and realize that Christ is more- Immeasurable and inconceivable more. Let us know that all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.