

Celebrating the Incarnation

1 Timothy 1:15-17

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Well, I don't know if I speak for everyone here, but I think I speak for most, and I certainly speak for myself when I say that we love Christmas. We love Christmas for lots of reasons. Obviously, our families often get together, we love the traditions, and our family has many of them. In fact, I tease that when my girls marry, they're going to need a manual of the traditions that go on in our household. We love those things. But as we celebrate Christmas this week, I want us this morning to recenter ourselves. What should we really be celebrating on Wednesday?

Well, let me remind you, these are not new ideas to you. But let me remind you that as we gather this week for Christmas, we should celebrate, first of all, that Jesus came. That is the reality of the incarnation. Now, I'm going to use the word incarnation a number of times today, so let me define it. The incarnation is the biblical doctrine that the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, assumed humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. He became, from the moment of the conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, from that time forward, both God and man. Fully God, fully man. That's what the Scriptures teach, that's the incarnation. In the words of John that we read a moment ago, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." The eternal Word, who had always existed as God, came into existence as a man. He continued to be fully God—all that He was before—but He added to Himself real, complete, and permanent humanity. That's what we celebrate at Christmas time.

This is one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes, "By common confession" that is, the common confession of the church of all believers "great is the mystery of godliness: [God] was revealed in the flesh." In fact, the incarnation is one of the watersheds between true Christianity on one side and false Christianity on the other. 1 John 4:2 says, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses"—and he's talking about the spirit behind teachers—"every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." So at Christmas, we

should celebrate that Jesus came, and of course, we're all aware of that.

But secondly, we should also celebrate how Jesus came. That is, the means of the incarnation. The eternal second person of the Trinity, through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, became man. How? As a tiny embryo in the womb of Mary, a first-century teenage virgin. That is truly astounding. True Christians confess the full and complete humanity of Jesus, but we also confess at the same time His full and complete deity. 1 John 4:14-15 says:

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

So this week, you should celebrate that Jesus came. You should also celebrate how Jesus came.

But thirdly, at Christmas, above all else—and this is really where I want us to focus today—we should celebrate why Jesus came: the purpose of the incarnation. You know, over the last several weeks, those of you who aren't a part of our church, let me just let you know that we've been studying the Gospel of Matthew. We began in September, and we've worked our way through the story of Jesus' birth told through the eyes of Joseph. So we studied the event of Jesus' birth; what I want to do today is step back from the event itself and examine the why. And it's the “why” that is Paul's primary point in the powerful passage I want us to study together this morning.

Turn with me to 1 Timothy 1. Now, as you turn there, let me give you the flow of Paul's argument in this first chapter. After two verses of introduction, verses 1 and 2, he begins with a problem; verses 3 through 7, Paul introduces a doctrinal problem in the church in Ephesus, and he commands Timothy to silence those who were teaching it. Then in verses 8 through 11, Paul identifies exactly what that doctrinal error was. That is, there were false teachers who had infiltrated the church in Ephesus who were teaching that salvation is earned in part by your own efforts to obey God's law. And so in the passage we're going to look at, verses 12 to 17, Paul argues for salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in the finished work of Christ alone. And he argues for that by reminding them of his own testimony—how he came from being a

Pharisee who rejected Jesus of Nazareth, to one who called Him Lord. This paragraph is about the true biblical gospel, as it is seen in Paul's own personal salvation. In verses 12 to 14, he expresses his gratitude for what God has done in his salvation and in his ministry. In verses 15 and 16, he expresses God's purpose in saving him. And then in verse 17, as he so often does, Paul breaks out in doxology for his salvation.

So that's the flow of this paragraph. I'm going to focus today on verses 15 to 17, and really primarily on verse 15. But let's read the entire paragraph in order to see its context. You follow along as I read, 1 Timothy 1:12-17:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

When you look at the heart of this passage there in verse 15, we learn that the heart of the Christian faith is captured in one simple statement—a statement about the incarnation. Look at it in verse 15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” As we take this crucial passage apart, we're going to learn five truths about the incarnation that we celebrate this week. And these truths should be at the center of our celebration of Christmas this week. So let's look at them together, here's how to celebrate the incarnation.

First of all, the first truth we discover in this passage is the centrality of the incarnation. Notice how verse 15 begins, “It is a trustworthy statement.” In Greek, the word "trustworthy" actually begins the verse and the sentence. It reads like this, “Trustworthy is the statement.” The word

trustworthy means worthy of belief, reliable, faithful, dependable. But that expression, “This is a trustworthy statement” is one that Paul uses five times in his letters, and only in the pastoral epistles. That is, the three books written to his young sons in the faith, Timothy and Titus. He uses this expression “this is a trustworthy statement” here in our text in verse 15. He uses it in 3:1, 4:8-9, in 2 Timothy 2:11-13, and then finally that familiar passage in Titus 3:4-8. In each case that Paul uses this expression, he introduces a common saying in the early church. It might even have been like an answer to a catechism. In other words, it introduces something that people in the early church understood and even memorized, that encapsulated the basic truths of the Christian faith, those things that were really important. They were statements of faith, they were summaries of what the early church believed and taught. Four of the trustworthy statements are about the gospel. Four of the five are about the gospel, two of them are about the incarnation, as the one here is. So, “this is a trustworthy statement” means what I’m about to share with you—or just have shared with you in some cases—is a concise, reliable statement of a key fundamental Christian truth. That means that this statement we’re about to unpack about the incarnation is at the very heart of the Christian faith; it’s central. What we’re going to study today isn’t peripheral, it is central to the Christian faith, and it’s something that, if you claim to be a Christian, you need to truly understand.

But notice Paul adds in verse 15 that this statement is “deserving full acceptance.” It means that this statement deserves the universal acceptance of all Christians everywhere, deserves your acceptance. But he also means it deserves wholehearted acceptance by every Christian; universal acceptance by all and wholehearted acceptance by you, by every believer. This is the centrality of the incarnation. Two of these five statements he makes about trustworthy statements are about the incarnation. It is central, and this week you need to remember that as you celebrate our Lord’s birth.

A second key truth that we discover in our text is the need for the incarnation. Why did Christ need to come? Look again at verse 15, and let me read it to you literally from the Greek text. This is how it reads, “Christ Jesus came into the world sinners to save.” The Greek word sinner here simply refers to a person who fails to live up to God’s moral standard. Now, let’s be honest, most people, if you ask the average person if they’re a sinner—oh, there are a few here and there

that might say yes—but many are going to pause for a moment and be pretty uncomfortable with saying, "I'm a sinner," because most people like to think of themselves as essentially good, but they just occasionally do bad things. That's how most people think of themselves. Maybe that's how you think of yourself, maybe you're uncomfortable with the label “sinner.”

Well, let me just give you a little test, okay? Here's a test—a test I had to take this week. Now I get to share it with you. All right? Here's a test of whether or not you qualify to be a sinner whom Christ came to save. See how you do, I want you to really take this test in your heart and mind. Number one: Have you ever loved anyone or worshiped anything more than God? How are you doing so far? That's what I thought. Number two: Have you ever failed to worship God the way that He prescribes to be worshiped? Number three: Have you ever thought or spoken about God in a disrespectful way? Number four: Have you ever misused your time—and by that, I mean, have you ever failed to work hard at your job during the workweek? Or have you failed or neglected to gather with others on Sunday to worship God as He commands? Number five: Have you ever been disrespectful, either in your heart or with your words and actions, to parents or to others that God has placed over you in authority? Again, how are you doing? That's what I thought too. Let's go on to the next one. Number six: Have you ever been angry with someone in your heart, used abusive speech toward them, or even been physically violent with them? Number seven: Have you ever been involved in sex mentally or physically with someone other than your spouse? Number eight: Have you ever failed to take care of your own possessions, or have you taken something that belonged to someone else? Number nine: Have you ever lied, deceived, or intentionally misrepresented the truth in any way? Number ten: Have you ever been discontent with your life circumstances, ungrateful for what you have, or wanted something that belonged to someone else?

You say, “Tom, I came for a warm and fuzzy Christmas message. What are you doing?” Well, you probably recognize that this is the Ten Commandments. This is the summary that God gave us of His law; I've simply phrased them in keeping with the way Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount. If you've broken one of those commandments, you have sinned. And if you have broken one or more of them repeatedly, you are a sinner. And guess what? The truth is, every one of us has broken all of those commands throughout our lives, repeatedly. We are

sinners. Our problem is not that we are good people who occasionally do bad things, our problem is that we are sinners. That is who we are. And here's the good news: that's who Jesus came to save. If you don't think you fit this list, that you're not a sinner, Jesus didn't come for you.

Before his conversion, Paul was outwardly religious. Remember, he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, as he says in Philippians 3, and he gives a list of all that was true about him. Read Matthew 23, where Jesus gets into the Pharisees, and you'll see what they were like. But, just listen to the way Jesus puts words in the mouth of a Pharisee like Paul in Luke 18 when He tells the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. Here's what Jesus describes a Pharisee to be like, "The Pharisee stood" this is Paul "and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank you that I'm not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'" And the list could have gone on and on. That's how Paul thought of himself before his conversion. But how did he think about himself after his salvation? Look at our text, verse 12-13:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.

Notice in verse 13 how Paul describes himself before Christ. First of all, he says, I was an unbeliever, "I acted in unbelief." He had heard the gospel, but he refused to believe it. Maybe you're here this morning and you're an unbeliever. Paul was like you, I was like you at one point, everybody around here was like you at one point. Notice he goes on, and this is shocking: he describes himself as biblically ignorant. He acted in ignorance. Although he prided himself on his knowledge of the Scripture as a Pharisee, having memorized large portions of the Old Testament, he was actually ignorant of the Scripture. It was like those Jesus described, the Pharisees He described in Matthew 23, you tithe your garden herbs, but you've neglected the weightier provisions of the law. You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

He was biblically ignorant, but he was also, notice verse 13, a blasphemer. He ridiculed and insulted the name of Jesus of Nazareth and tried to force others to do so as well. He was a

persecutor. In Galatians 1:13 he says, “I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure.” And then notice he adds: a violent aggressor. That's an unusual Greek word. It means somebody who demonstrates outrageous violence toward those that he arrogantly views beneath him. He was a violent aggressor. You want to see what that looks like? Turn back to Acts 26, look at Acts 26:9. Paul is giving his testimony before King Agrippa, and he says:

So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem, not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.

Paul was a murderer, he was complicit in murder. Verse 11, “And as I punished them often in all the synagogues”—don't just read over that. You know what that is? That means he oversaw the flogging of Christians in synagogues, in many cases almost to the point of death. And then he says, as I was doing that, as I was beating them, “I tried to force them to blaspheme [Jesus]; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.” That was the apostle Paul. You see, Paul's making a point that he had shattered God's law, that's why he could never be saved by keeping it. By being a blasphemer, he'd broken the first four commandments. By being a persecutor and a violent aggressor, he had broken the final six. He hadn't just broken one or two, it was like the law of God was a plate glass window, and he hit it with a ball-peen hammer, shattering it into pieces.

And folks, that's true of us as well. But even before Paul realized on the Damascus road that he had sinned in those ways there in verse 13, he had already begun to realize that he was a sinner. How? He tells us in Romans 7. It was the tenth commandment, he thought, “If I kept all those things outwardly, I was okay.” But he came to the tenth commandment that said you shall not covet, and he realized, “Oh, God cares about what goes on in my heart. And I have to keep all the rest of those in my heart,” which is what Jesus said. And he began to realize that he had no hope.

With Paul, we too are all sinners. I love the way Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:3. He includes himself, he says, “We,” he means himself and the believers in Ephesus, he means each of us,

“We too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” Or Titus 3:3, where Paul again says we, “We also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice.” The word malice means; I just want to hurt somebody, I'm angry enough I want to hurt them. “Spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.” Folks, that is our spiritual biography, just like it was Paul's. If you're here this morning and you've never believed in Christ, that's still your spiritual biography. The need for the incarnation is the simple fact that we are all sinners.

That brings us, thirdly, to the reality of the incarnation. Now look again at verse 15, here it is, “Christ Jesus came into the world.” There's the reality of the incarnation. Let's take it apart, first of all, I want you to notice the person who came: Christ Jesus. You know this, but just to remind you, Jesus is His personal name, His historical name, Jesus of Nazareth. Christ is the Greek equivalent to the title in the Old Testament, Messiah. It's a title that means "the Anointed One." Jesus of Nazareth is the one that God anointed—that is, that God chose, empowered, ordained, and appointed to save His people. Now, this is really important to understand because sadly, some people begin to realize they're sinners and come to the tragic conclusion that they need to do something to help themselves. They try to clean up their lives, become a better person, be more religious. You know, a lot of people during the Christmas season will say, “You know what? I just need to go to church more.” And they'll come in January and then won't come anymore. "I want to turn over a new leaf, I want to be better. I know I'm not where I need to be, I need to do something to fix myself." The world is filled with people who choose the path of self-help or self-rescue.

But if God decided to send His Son to rescue us, then clearly what's true? We can't rescue ourselves, and no one else can; Jesus is the only one who can. He is—and I know this is contrary to our postmodern age—but He is the exclusive Savior. It's what the apostles taught. Acts 4:12, I want you to—you're familiar with this, if you've been in Christ any time at all you're familiar with this—I want you to really listen to what this says, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” It's what the apostles taught, and it's also what Jesus taught. John 14:6, He said, “I am

the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” Jesus is the only one who can rescue us, He’s the person who came.

But notice in this reality of the incarnation, the fact that He came. Notice what he says, “Christ Jesus came into the world.” Now, that expression is an interesting one. It’s one that the early church borrowed from Jesus Himself. If you go back to the Gospel of John, often Jesus will say something very much like this. My favorite is John 16:28, where Jesus says this, “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world.” Now that’s a unique expression. I mean, I might say something like, “You know, on September 19th, I came into the world,” meaning that’s when I was born. Jesus says something entirely different, He says, “I came from the Father, and I have come into the world.” That speaks of His preexistence; He lived before He was born, before He was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary. So this "came into the world" is our Lord’s own way of describing the incarnation: Christ Jesus came into the world.

Now, that phrase "into the world" refers, as Hendrickson points out, to three massive changes that happened with the incarnation. The first is a change in location. That’s the obvious one, right, from heaven to earth. The second is a change in moral and spiritual environment. He came from the holiness and joy of heaven to the sin and misery of this world. But thirdly, it was a change in His state; that is, from His having the divine nature only, in the incarnation He added human nature so that He now has both divine and human natures. Christ Jesus came into the world, or in the words of John the apostle, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That’s the reality.

That brings us to a fourth key truth, and that is the purpose of the incarnation. Look again at verse 15, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Folks, this is the core of the Christian faith, it is the core of the gospel message. He came, literally, “sinners to save.” But we need to define that, what exactly does this mean? So let’s start with this question: what does it mean to save? He came to save, what are we talking about? Christ Jesus came into the world to save.

But the question is—from what? You know, you share the gospel with certain people, and their response is, “What do I need to be saved from?” Well, here’s what Scripture teaches: we need to

be saved or rescued from three spiritual realities. Number one, we need to be saved from the enslaving power our sins have on us. Jesus described it this way in John 8:34, “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” If you doubt you’re a slave of sin, just try stopping, see how that goes. Jesus said, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.” We need to be set free from our slavery to sin. Jesus says a couple verses later in John 8, “If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.”

Secondly, we need to be saved or rescued from the legal guilt our sins earn. Now, "legal" is an important word because a lot of people feel guilt. I mean, if you commit a crime, if you’re speeding and you see a police officer—this is just hypothetical, by the way—but you’re speeding, and you see a police officer, all of a sudden you have this twinge of, “Oh no.” There’s this feeling of guilt, "I’m breaking the law; I feel guilty." Well, that’s really different from being in a courtroom, and at the end of a trial in which you’re the defendant, the judge brings the gavel down and says, “Guilty. The defendant is guilty on all charges.” Those are two different kinds of guilt. One is what you feel, the other is a legal reality. I’m talking about the legal reality. We need to be freed from the legal guilt our sins earn. Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin." Did you realize every time we break those commands we just looked at a moment ago, we are earning wages? “The wages of sin is death.” We need pardon, we need forgiveness from our sins. Ephesians 1:7, “In Christ we have the forgiveness of our trespasses.” We need to be saved from the enslaving power our sins have, from the legal guilt our sins earn.

And thirdly, we need to be saved from the penalty our sins and guilt deserve. You say, well, what is the penalty? Well, let me summarize it like this. There are three aspects of the penalty that our sins deserve. Number one, relational alienation: we are God's enemies. You know, most people don't think of themselves that way. If you ask the average person, “Are you God's enemy?” they'll say, "Well, of course not, God and I are on pretty good terms." That's not what God thinks. Romans 5:10 says everybody, before they come to Christ. were God's enemies. That's God's view. So it doesn't matter how close you feel you and He are, if you've not repented of your sins and believed in His Son, you are His enemy. That's how God sees it, and you need to be reconciled to Him. The next verse in Romans 5 says that Christians have now received reconciliation, we've been reconciled to God. That's what we need to be saved from. Secondly,

we need to be saved from the penalty of spiritual death. We are born spiritually dead to God. Ephesians 2:1 says we are “dead in our trespasses and sins.” You have no relationship to God, it's as if He doesn't exist, you're dead to Him. I was as well, that's how we're born. And if nothing changes, that's how we will stay. We need to be made alive to God, Ephesians 2:5, God is the only one who can do that. That's the penalty our sins and guilt deserve. Thirdly, and this is maybe the worst of all, eternal wrath. We will endure God's just wrath forever. This is not something that's normally thought of at Christmas time, but folks, this is why Christ came. Go over to 2 Thessalonians 1. Paul says in the middle of verse 7—he's talking about the second coming—and he says in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, “When the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,” notice what He'll do, He will “deal out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” You say, how do you obey the gospel? Well, the gospel says, “Repent and believe.” You obey by repenting and believing. If you don't repent and believe, you're not obeying the gospel and Jesus says here through His apostle that when He comes back, He will deal out retribution. What will it look like? Verse 9, “These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” Folks, we all need to be saved from that. We all need to be saved from the reality, the penalty our sins have earned us with God, and that's eternal wrath. We need to be rescued. Who can rescue us? Go back to 1 Thessalonians, just a couple pages, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Jesus “rescues us from the wrath to come.” He's the only one who can.

So the amazing and glorious purpose of Jesus' incarnation was to save sinners from their sin. He came into the world to save us from the legal guilt and the legal penalty that our sins had earned, to free us from the enslaving power of our sins. You say, “But why was the incarnation necessary to do that? Why did He have to come as one of us?” There are two reasons. Number one, because only a divine person could save us. Isaiah 43:11, “I am Yahweh and there is no Savior besides Me.” Only a divine person could save us. And number two, only a human could qualify as our substitute. An animal couldn't substitute for us, only a human could satisfy the justice of God on our behalf. So He had to be divine. and He had to be human, and Jesus was both.

That brings us to a second question about the purpose of the incarnation, and that is “how”. How does Jesus actually save us? How does He rescue us from God's wrath and the legal guilt and penalty of our sins? And folks, there are two words you need to know. They’re at the heart of the Christian faith. You need to know them, understand them, and apply them. Here's how Jesus saves us. The words are, these are theological words, and I'll explain them: penal substitution. Let me define penal. If you've ever lived in California, we did for sixteen years, you pull up, and maybe you're going to park in a place where you're not supposed to park. Maybe it's a handicapped place and you don't have a handicapped sticker. There's a little sign there that says “Handicapped Parking Only,” and at the bottom of the sign, it says “California Penal Code Section 34” whatever. Penal, means having to do with the law. So penal means this: on the cross, Christ suffered the penalty, you recognize the word “penal” in penalty, He suffered the penalty for all the sins of all of those who would ever believe in Him. And He did that through substitution. And that simply means that on the cross He suffered as our substitute. He took the justice our sins deserve, He paid our debt.

This is so clear, let me show you the classic passage. Turn back with me to Isaiah 53. This is everywhere in the Scripture, but look at Isaiah 53, talking about the Messiah, what He would do when He came. Look at verse 5, “He was pierced through for our transgressions”—plural, our sins. “He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being,” our shalom, our peace, “fell on Him, and by His scourging we are healed.” Verse 6 says, “All of us like sheep have gone astray.” This is universally true. We have chosen to stray from God's paths, and “each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity,” the guilt, “of us all to fall on Him.” Look at the end of verse 8, “He was cut off out of the land of the living.” He died. Why? “For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due.” Go down to verse 10, how was He crushed? “The Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief.” Why? The verse goes on to say, because He was rendering “Himself as a guilt offering.” It's talking about the Old Testament sacrifices where if you sinned, you took an animal to the temple. You laid your hands on the head of that animal, you confessed your sin over the head of that animal, and then you cut its throat, and you offered it as a sacrifice, the priest offered it. Christ was our guilt offering. It's as if we laid our hands on His head, confessed our sins over Him, and He died in

our place. Look at the end of verse 11, “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many.” How? “As He will bear their iniquities.” The end of verse 12, “He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.” Folks, the way Jesus saves His people from their sins is through penal substitution. He suffered the penalty as our substitute. God accepted that substitution because on the third day, God raised Him from the dead.

There's a fifth and final truth in our passage. Go back to 1 Timothy 1, and let's look at it, and it's our response to the incarnation. And this gets to the heart of what we should do this week. I just want to touch on this. Most people on this planet—sadly, some in this room—will never be rescued from their sins. Why? Because they're unwilling to come to God on His terms. What are His terms? Well, in our text we learned them, the only legitimate responses to the incarnation. If you want to be rescued from God's coming wrath against your sin, then you must, first of all—and I love this—you must be assured of God's willingness to save you. Paul says in verse 15 that he was the worst of sinners. Why did God save somebody like Paul? Well, we don't have to wonder, he tells us in the next verse. Look at verse 16, “Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example,” a model, a pattern, “for those who would believe in Him.” Literally “those who are about to believe in Him for eternal life.” Listen, friend, if you'll come to God on His terms, repenting of your sins, believing in His Son, He will receive you, He will accept you, He will rescue you, He will save you from the penalty of your sins. Doesn't matter what you've done, doesn't matter who you've become; there are no limits on the mercy of God. God saved Paul to prove to anybody who was thinking about believing, that God would save them if they would come His way.

A second response is to acknowledge your sinfulness in repentance. What was Paul's response to what he learned from God's law about himself? Look at the end of verse 15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.” Literally, “among whom first I myself am.” Paul says, “I'm first.” Now don't misunderstand. That doesn't mean that Paul as an apostle continued to live in an unrepentant pattern of sin; therefore, he says, “I am the worst of sinners.” Listen, Paul was realistic. He knew his obedience was imperfect, he knew, Romans 7, that he still struggled with indwelling sin. But Paul still said, “I have a clear conscience before God.” He still called people to follow him as he was following Christ. He just says “I am” here

because, listen, a pardoned criminal is still painfully aware of his offenses. He didn't mean that of all men who've ever lived he was the worst sinner ever. I mean, think about Judas, for example, Jesus says his judgment will be the worst. He didn't mean that like every other Christian, he felt his sins were worse, even though they really weren't. That's involved, but that can't be all Paul means, because in some way, verse 16, his sins must be worse than others so that Christ's forgiveness of him can be an example.

So how were his sins worse? It was because of the unique way he persecuted the church. 1 Corinthians 15:9, "I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Galatians 1:13, "I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." Listen, if Paul had had his murderous plan actually work out, he would have smothered the church in the early days; he would have destroyed it. So his comment is, in the strictest sense, unique to him, "I am the first of all sinners." But it's also true how every Christian feels about himself and herself. If you're a Christian, you understand this. I mean, that's why John Bunyan wrote his autobiography and called it out of this verse, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. We all feel like this, if you're a Christian. And if you want to be saved, you have to acknowledge that you're a sinner in desperate need of rescue. In fact, let me put it to you this way: Jesus said in Matthew 9:13, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." If you're here today and you don't think you're a sinner, Jesus didn't come for you and He's not offering you anything. What He meant was this, "I didn't come to save those who think they're righteous, but only those who have come to the right conclusion that they're sinners." You have to come to God like the tax collector in Jesus' story in Luke 18:13; "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" You must acknowledge your sinfulness, and you must be willing to turn from that sin, to stop doing the sins that made you a sinner before God. The Bible calls this repentance. It's not that you've got to somehow earn salvation, no, it's that you have a willingness to leave your sin and to turn to God. And by the way, this is essential to be saved, Jesus said in Luke 13:3, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish [in your sins.]"

A third response to the incarnation is to accept the person and work of Christ in faith. You see, you have to reject your own efforts at self-rescue. Titus 3:5 says, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done." You have to give that up and you've got to put your trust in Jesus

alone. You see, Jesus didn't come to help you save yourself; He came to save His people from their sins. He's the only one who can, you've got to ask Him. You know, Jesus said, "Come to Me." You say, how do I come to Jesus? If He were here on the planet, you know, I would find Him, I would go there and I'd throw myself at His feet. You can do the same thing today, you can find yourself either in your seat now or at home alone and throw yourself on the mercy of Christ. Just talk to Him, tell Him you deserve what He got on the cross, but ask Him to apply that to you. This is what the Bible calls faith. In fact, notice verse 16, "those who would believe in Him for eternal life." That's what you need to do. If you want to be saved, you must accept, without reservations, the person and work of Jesus Christ that I've talked about this morning.

There's a fourth response, and it's for most of us in this room. Most of us here already have repented and believe in Jesus. How do we respond to the incarnation? Well, adore the God of grace with doxology. Look at verse 17, it's what Paul does, he can't help himself. He's just talked about his own salvation, how does he respond? "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Listen, this Christmas, this week, that's where the incarnation should drive you—to doxology, to praise, to the God of grace who sent His Son into the world to save you from your sins. This Christmas, celebrate that Jesus came, celebrate how He came. But above all, celebrate why He came. "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."

Let's pray together. Father, thank You for Your grace, thank You for the grace shown in Jesus Christ. Lord, thank You that when He came, grace appeared. Grace had a name—Jesus of Nazareth. Lord, we thank You for the reason He came, and for many of us in this room who have already repented and believed in Him, Lord, this Christmas, this week, don't let us be like the unbelievers around us who celebrate Christmas without ever thinking of Christ. Father, fill our hearts with doxology, fill our hearts with love and adoration and worship and obedience; for You sent Your Son to save us from our sins. Lord, may this be a truly joyful celebration as we reflect, not only enjoying the good things You've surrounded us with in this life, but as we reflect on the spiritual reality that You have given us salvation in Your Son, and that's why He came.

Lord, I pray for those here this morning who don't know Him, who are sinners, but unrepentant sinners. Lord, I pray that in this season You would bring them to really see the reality of Christmas. Help them to see that You sent Your only Son into the world to save sinners. Lord, may they see that reality about themselves. And seeing that reality, may they believe that You are willing to save them, proven by the fact that You saved Paul so that nobody can ever say, "He won't receive me." Father, may this be the time—today, this week—when You truly save them. We pray this through and on behalf of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.