

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (PM)

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[0 : 00] We're edging towards Christmas, and we come to that moment when we come face to face with the utterly unique thing about the Christian faith.

God became fully human while remaining fully God. In other faiths, God may interact with humans. He may appear to humans.

He may come to dwell with humans in temples, but never does God become fully human while remaining fully God. No aspect of his divinity diminished.

No aspect of his humanity compromised. Upholding the universe by the power of his word and depending on Mary for food and warmth and care. In a way that human words can't even capture. In a way that has inspired millions of songs and millions of paintings and millions of poems and all sorts of art forms in order to just capture a little glimpse of the glory of this moment, we here tonight are to wonder at a holy mystery.

[1 : 07] God, the author of history, writes himself into his own story. I love the way that Aaron spoke about this last week when he was talking from Luke chapter two about the Christmas story.

It was Jesus' birth that he was focusing on, and there was this juxtaposition, this contrast between divine humility and human vainglory. It was that the leaders of the world were flexing their muscles and displaying their might that God came low into human humility and poverty.

And so we get this picture in Luke chapter two that God becomes human while humans are trying to become God. The form of salvation is the inverse of human pride.

And it was an astonishing thing to see in Luke chapter two, but what I want to do with you tonight is to rewind the story, to reverse the tape just a little bit and look at Luke chapter one. Not the actual story of Jesus' birth, but the announcement of his birth.

An angel appears to the Virgin Mary. She's startled as we would all be, and the angel tells her that she will conceive and bear a son. But the focus is, interestingly in Luke chapter one, not on the humility and poverty of this son.

[2 : 19] It is on his greatness and his royalty. Twice we are told in verse 32 and 35 that this is the son of the most high. Notice the double definite article.

The son of the most high. So what Luke wants to say to us in chapter one is before we ever get to the humility and the poverty of the nativity scene in Luke chapter two, God wants to show us that this child who is going to be born is divine royalty.

Without divine royalty and majesty, human humility and poverty do not save. It's the combination between the two that counts. Let me give you an example if you're wondering what I'm talking about.

Any of you heard of Princess Diana before? Okay. I hear with the crown, this is a little controversial, so I'm not going to wade into this too much.

But why was Princess Diana so popular in her day? What was the key to her mystique and her appeal? What moved millions to follow her and read the tabloids and adore her with almost religious fervor?

[3 : 27] Many people have talked about her beauty, her accessibility, how she was trying to modernize the monarchy, her vulnerability, her compassion. But there have been many other celebrities that have had this before.

I think the difference with the Princess of Wales is that she was royalty. In the Princess of Wales, we didn't just have a celebrity, we had majesty stooping down.

Who she was as royal princess, who she was as part of the royal family, was what made her presence to a hurting humanity so significant and meaningful and powerful when she was with the normal people.

It was the combination of her royalty and her humility that was so astonishing. And the same is true of Jesus Christ. It was as Son of the Most High, as the King who will reign forever and ever, that his birth in a fragile human form from the Virgin Mary, it's because he's King that that is so significant and meaningful and powerful.

And that's the main point of this chapter 1 annunciation from the angel to Mary. It is to reveal Jesus' royal power and his divine sonship before he was ever conceived and born.

[4 : 44] And I think this is really important for us to get. Because it's kind of a common theme in a lot of modern biographies of Jesus' life that he's painted as a caring, charismatic, sometimes controversial figure who gathered a great following in his day, but unfortunately died an untimely and tragic death.

And in some of these narratives it's told us that he never claimed to be God in his life and others never claimed that he was God in his lifetime. It wasn't until after his death, in the centuries that followed, that his believers, his followers, the church, elevated and deified his human status up to a God.

So according to these narratives, belief in Jesus' divinity and royalty was actually the creation of the church after his life. It wasn't something that was fundamentally true of him from the very beginning. And so the order goes Jesus' humanity first and then the creation of Jesus' divinity second. And whatever you think of this, I think we have to account with the fact that one of the first century historians, one of the first biographers to ever write about Jesus says actually the order is exactly the opposite.

The factual history of the actual events says that the angel came to tell Mary what he was called and what he was to be given before he was ever conceived and born.

[6 : 08] Look with me at verse 30 if you have your Bible open on page 855. The angel said to Mary, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and he will be called son of the most high.

And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And his kingdom, there will be no end. And then verse 35, The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

That's how this will happen. And the power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be, here's a third time, called holy. The son of God.

It's interesting, we still do this when people are born now. When someone's born, what are the first things we do? We name them and then we give them gifts. Here, we're told that this son is going to be called Jesus.

[7 : 11] The son of the most high, great and holy. That's what he's going to be named. And then we're told what he's going to be given. He's going to be given a throne, a reign, a kingdom that will never end.

What he is called speaks of his divine dignity and what he will be given speaks of his royal authority. So what child is this? We're told he's the king of kings and the lord of lords.

And this is a fascinating thing to think about in our day and age, especially with social media, with the internet. We can see what's happening all over the world. And in a time never before do we have this palpable awareness that kings come and go.

That kingdoms rise and fall. But we're told here, once coronated, this king is never going to go and this kingdom is never going to fall. It's a picture that we're given of ultimate defeat of the power of death and evil and threat that runs rampant in our world and does so much damage.

It's what Handel's Messiah celebrates when it so beautifully proclaims, He is king of kings and lord of lords and he shall reign forever and ever. Slightly tempted to ask the choir to do impromptu Handel's Messiah.

[8 : 22] I'm not going to do that. But the crux of the angel's announcement is this. That Jesus' royal authority rests on his divine dignity.

His kingship depends on and flows from his sonship. I already pointed out to you twice in verse 32 and 35, it's called the Son of the Most High.

And what we're told is that Jesus doesn't become a son at his birth from Mary. Rather, he has always already been son. Think about that for a second.

He has already, always been son. So what we have here in our passage is actually two sonships being described. The first is a human one that has a certain starting point in time.

He was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. But the second is a divine sonship that is eternal and has no beginning and it has no ending. And so the implication that we're told right at the beginning of this biography of Jesus is that his human birth and life and teaching, his healings and parables and miracles, his death and burial and resurrection, all emerge from an eternal reality of the triune life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[9 : 36] We get echoes of this throughout the biographies of Jesus. For God so loved the world that he gave his son. No one knows the father except the son.

And no one knows the son except the father. And to whom ever the son chooses to reveal. And the greatest of them all. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory. Glory as of the only son from the father. Full of grace and truth. And this, my friends, is the reason why he is king.

Because he is the son of the Most High. And this is why his kingdom will have no end. Because he is the son of the Most High that has no beginning and has no end.

And that's why him coming to the world means joy to the world and peace on earth. There's a wonderful little mythical story by an author called Calvin Miller.

[10 : 35] He was a 20th century American novelist. And he did this mythical retelling of the Christian story. The story of Jesus retold through an allegorical poem about a singer who a song cannot be silenced.

Earthmaker and his troubadour, so the poem goes, are sitting on the outer rim of space looking down at the planet. And the earthmaker holds the planet, almost like a snow globe, up to his ear and listens to what he hears.

And he says, they're crying, troubadour. They're crying so hopelessly. And then he hands the tiny planet to his son so that his son may listen too. His son brings it up to his ear and says, year after weary year, they keep crying.

They seem born to weep and to die. And then both of them scratch the surface of the atmosphere with their nail and they behold a bleeding planet.

And then the earthmaker, it goes, sets the earth spinning on its way and turns to his son and says, son, give me your vast infinity. I'm going to wrap it in a little bit of clay.

[11 : 45] And so the son becomes one of us. And in the world, there's a thrill of hope. And the weary world rejoices.

You see, Mary's response to all of this in Luke chapter one is really fascinating. It begins with fear, moves on to questioning. How can this be? Then an affirmation, let it be.

And then finally adoration, my soul magnifies the Lord. It's a movement of grace, somebody slowly being gripped by the mystery and wonder of what's unfolding. Favored by God, Mary shows us what the trajectory of true faith looks like.

It's not something that gets it all at once. But faith in Christianity is a willingness to actively receive what we did not ask for, what we did not prepare for, and what we did not work for, and what we do not fully understand.

The presence of God's son in our lives. And his gracious rule and reign over our lives. And one of the questions that I want to ask you here tonight as we conclude in the next minute or two is, where are you on this journey?

[12 : 56] Are you in that place of fear, of questioning, of affirmation, or adoration? Because there's many of us here, I'm assuming, who may not yet be at that place where Mary is, of saying, yes, Lord, let it be to me according to your word.

You may be more where Mary is saying, how can this be, Lord? And if you are in that place, I want to say two things to you. First, a word of encouragement. I just want to say you're in good company. Christian faith is no stranger to tough questions. There's a lot of people in scripture asking them. And the second thing I want to say to you is an invitation. Metaphorically and literally, come and see this Jesus.

Don't settle for cynical agnosticism or comfortable pluralism. Pursue the truth about Jesus. Is he liar, is he lunatic, or is he Lord?

That's the most significant question we could ever ask ourselves. And if you haven't been convinced of that tonight, and you have further exploring that needs to be done, I would love to chat

with you about this, but I also want to remind you, have this course coming up in January.

[14 : 06] Come and see where we are providing a safe, hospitable space for people to explore this question for themselves. And to have others who are exploring that question as well. Friends, what we behold tonight is a holy mystery.

God became human without ceasing to be God. And he will be given a kingdom that will never be toppled.

And he will rule, and he will reign forever.