

GALATIANS 4:4–5. (EHV)

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons.

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.” God directed these words at Satan. This was God's response to mankind's fall into sin. Humans had lost the image of God in its proper sense, but God immediately informed Adam and Eve of his plan to save them. The Seed or Offspring of the woman would crush the devil's head, would undo the curse of death that Adam and Eve had brought into the world through their sin.

And Adam and Eve understood—sort of. Moses tells us that Adam now named his wife Eve. Eve means *Life*. God had warned Adam and Eve that on the day they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely *die*. And now they had eaten from that tree. But God had promised that the Seed of the woman would crush the devil's head, would undo the curse, so Adam didn't name his wife *Death*; he named her *Life*.

Not long after that, Eve became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and with her husband's agreement she named him Cain. Cain means *brought forth* or *acquired*. Many Bible translations tell us that she gave him that name because, in her words, she brought forth or acquired a man “with the help of the LORD” (Gen. 4:1), and that is one possible translation. But another translation is also possible, namely that Eve said, “I have brought forth *or* acquired a man, namely the LORD.” In other words, Eve may have thought that Cain was the Seed of the woman who would crush the devil's head and undo the curse of sin. Perhaps Satan thought the same; perhaps that is why he went to such great lengths to tempt Cain and turn him into the first murderer.

Little did Eve realize that the Seed of the woman wouldn't be born for at least another four thousand years. She should have known that any child she had with Adam was not going to be the promised Savior. First of all, sinful flesh gives birth to sinful flesh, and the promised Savior could not be sinful. Secondly, if she had paid closer attention to God's promise, she would have noticed that what he had promised was the seed of a *woman* as a savior—an extremely strange thing. Seed technically comes from a man, not from a woman. The seed would come from Adam for each one of their children, and so none of their children could be the promised Savior.

Why did God wait so long to fulfill his promise? The Bible doesn't give the answer to that question, other than to say that the time when the promised Savior was eventually born was exactly the right time. Perhaps God waited so long to show and stress from the very beginning that his best and greatest blessings are only and always received through faith in his promises, even when it appears that he is not keeping them and will not keep them. Perhaps God waited so long so that people would study his Word more carefully to make sure they had not missed any detail about who this Savior would be and when and how he would appear.

We will talk more about faith and its importance in a later sermon. For now, we want to fast forward more than 4,000 years from the time God first promised to send a savior to the time

when he did send him. We want to focus on two important doctrines related to this savior—the doctrine of his virgin birth, and the doctrine of his active obedience.

1. Virgin Birth

Around 2 BC, God sent one of his angels, Gabriel, to a virgin living in Nazareth in Galilee who was pledged to be married. The virgin's name was Mary. Gabriel had an amazing announcement for her: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus," which means *Savior*. "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Mary asked the obvious question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Gabriel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1).

What an amazing announcement! On the one hand, Mary would conceive and give birth to this son; he would be a truly human child. He would have a beginning; he would celebrate a birthday. On the other hand, Mary would conceive this son not through the seed of a man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her child would be holy and have a never-ending kingdom and would be called the Son of the Most High and the Son of God. He would be truly divine, yes, God himself.

Right here, even before the promised Savior is born, we have very clearly the doctrine of the two natures in Christ, namely that Jesus Christ was and is 100% true God and 100% true man. These two natures would exist at one and the same time in one and the same person, so that in Christ, God and man would share each other's attributes. According to his human nature, Jesus would have a beginning, grow in wisdom and knowledge, travel from place to place, get tired, and cry. According to his divine nature, Jesus would be eternal, omniscient or all-knowing, omnipresent or present everywhere, and omnipotent or all-powerful. So in Christ, God can be said to have a beginning, and a man can be said to have no beginning. Everything Jesus would be and do, he would be and do as 100% true God and 100% true man.

Then it actually happened. Mary became pregnant even though she had not been with a man. It wasn't easy for her. She doubtless endured scorn and ridicule from her family and relatives. She almost lost the man to whom she was pledged to be married, because he logically concluded that she must have been unfaithful to him. It was only when an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him the truth that he believed Mary. And when the two of them headed down to Bethlehem in Judea for the census, they probably traveled alone as outcasts. Even though they doubtless had other relatives staying in Bethlehem who were also descended from David, none of them put them up, and they couldn't get a room in the inn. They had to make their stay in a stable, which is where Mary also gave birth to her firstborn son, the one whose birth the angels announced to the shepherds by saying, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2).

But the Bible doesn't teach us this so that the Christmas holiday can take on a "magical" aura or so that we can be entertained with an unbelievable story. The Bible doesn't teach us this for the shock factor of being able to say with 100% accuracy that Mary is the mother of God, since Jesus is true God. The Bible teaches us this because it happened and because we need this fact in order to be saved.

First, if Jesus were not born of a virgin, God's word and promises would have been proven false, starting with the very first one, that he would be the Seed of a woman and not of a man. Later too, God promised explicitly through Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bear a son and would call him Immanuel, which means "God with us." And there are many more prophecies about the Messiah, some which explicitly call him God and say things of him that can only be said of God, and others which call him a man and say things of him that can only be said of a man.

Second, if Jesus were not born of a virgin, if he were not both God's son and born of a woman, as Paul says here in our passage from Galatians, then we could not be saved and would be doomed to hell. Paul says Jesus was born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law. If Jesus were not true man, he could not be born under law in our place, as our substitute. God as God is above the law; he is not under law. And if he were not God's son, true God from true God, then his life and death could not have counted for others, yes, for the whole world. His obedience could only count for himself. The sons of Korah say in the Psalms, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him. The ransom for a life is costly; no payment is ever enough" (Psalm 49).

We needed a savior who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and who was born of the virgin Mary, true man, to redeem us humans. And that is what God gave us.

By the way, that means that while we should not pray to Mary or worship her as God, we also must acknowledge the incredibly high honor God gave her. She is the instrument through whom God brought his own Son into the world. She is the reason we have the assurance that Jesus is the truly human substitute for us humans. *To pray* to the "blessed virgin" is a sin; *to call* her the "blessed virgin" is almost an understatement.

2. Active Obedience

I remember a lady from one of my former congregations, who has since gone to glory, once telling me that she thought the Apostles' Creed missed a lot of stuff. She said, "It says he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, and then it says he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. But there was a lot in between!" Indeed there was. While I wholeheartedly subscribe to the Apostles' Creed and believe what it says, I also have to agree with that lady that this is one weakness of that creed, that it almost acts as though the roughly thirty-three years between Jesus's birth and his trial before Pontius Pilate were just to fill in space and were not worthy of mention.

But even though the Creed may do that, you can be thankful that your church does not do that. In fact, this is another one of the strengths of confessional Lutheran church bodies like the Wisconsin Synod that you will not find emphasized as much in other church bodies. We stress, as Paul says here, that that Christ didn't just *suffer and die* under the law to redeem those under the law, but that he was *born* under law to redeem those under the law. We stress what we heard Paul say several weeks ago in Romans 5, that it wasn't just through the *suffering and death* of Jesus that we are made righteous, but also through his *obedient life*.

We call this Jesus's active obedience. Jesus's active obedience means that everything he thought, said, and did from his birth to his death was done in our place, to fulfill righteousness

for us. With every good thought, word, and deed that Jesus did, we can picture him weaving another thread into the robe of righteousness that he would give to each of us at our baptism.

In other words, when we see the boy Jesus in the temple, the lesson isn't just: You twelve-year-old boys and girls should pay more attention to your teachers like Jesus did. When we see Jesus resisting Satan's temptations in the wilderness, the lesson isn't just: This is how you should fight the devil's temptations. When Jesus eats and drinks with people that others won't even think about associating with, the lesson isn't just: Quit being bigoted and prejudiced and self-righteous and become more like Jesus. The primary lesson in all of those cases is this: Behold your substitute! See your champion doing battle with the devil and winning, and in the process winning righteousness for you!

When we realize that we have gossiped and slandered and are truly sorry for it, we can think of Jesus, who rebuked the slander of his disciples when the sinful woman anointed his head and feet with expensive perfume, and who told his disciples that she had done a beautiful thing for him and was preparing him for his burial beforehand. Jesus did that for you, in your place.

When we realize that we have hated and held grudges and are truly sorry for it, we can think of Jesus who, when Peter asked him if he should forgive his sinning brother seven times, said, "No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." We can think of Jesus who, even as he was being crucified, said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus did that for you, in your place.

When we realize that we have stolen from our employer at work through laziness, we can think of Jesus who said, "My Father is always at work to this day, and I too am working." When we realize we have cheated the government on our taxes and are truly sorry for it, we can think of Jesus who miraculously provided a four-drachma coin in a fish's mouth for Peter so that he could pay the temple tax for both Peter and himself. Jesus did that for you, in your place.

When we realize that we have failed to regard God's Word as holy and gladly hear and learn it and are truly sorry for that, we can think of Jesus who regularly attended worship at the synagogue and the chief festivals at the temple, even though he was the Son of God! If anyone could say he didn't get anything out of it, it was he, but still he went. We can think of Jesus who, as busy as he was, still made time late at night or early in the morning to pray and meditate on God's Word. Jesus did that for you, in your place.

When we are truly sorry for our idolatry, for putting money, comfort, career, family, pleasure, and a whole host of other things before God, we can think of Jesus who refused to bow down and worship Satan in exchange for the splendor of the world. We can think of Jesus who drove out from the temple those who wanted to turn the temple worship into an opportunity for making money. We can think of Jesus who loved his mother and his brothers, but who also refused to go to them when they thought he was out of his mind and wanted to take him away from his ministry, who looked around at those seated around him and said, "Those who do the will of my Father are my brother and sister and mother." We can think of Jesus who had no home of his own, no place to lay his head, but who still happily and joyfully went about his work on our behalf. Jesus did all of that for you, in your place.

We could go on and on like this. The writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Jesus could even ask his enemies, "Who of you can accuse me of sin?" (John 8), knowing that silence was the only response he would get. The

point is this: Jesus not only paid for our wrong, as we will talk about next time; he also filled up what we lacked. He not only leveled the mountains; he also filled in the valleys. He not only paid for our crimes, but he replaced our criminal record with his own righteous record.

“When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons.” Rejoice in Jesus’s death and resurrection, but don’t just rejoice in that. Rejoice also in his conception and birth as the Son of God and the Son of Man. Rejoice also in his life, lived perfectly as your substitute and mine. This too is the assurance of God’s love for us, the assurance of our salvation. Amen.