

Our Christmas Hope: *God with us*
Ephesians 2:4-7

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name **Immanuel**, which means, **God with us.**”*
Matthew 1:23

Introduction: Christmas traditions are enjoyable, and are shared in our culture and society, as well as many around the world. Lights, gifts, food, and family are all part of the holidays in America. But it is intriguing to observe how we have also created a symbol for Christmas, the hero that is imagined by children who gives gifts magically. (Disclaimer: this is not a bashing on Santa Claus – Santa should inform our understanding about Christmas the same way Snow White and Prince Charming should inform us about love and marriage) Santa, as explained in song and story is a benevolent, sovereign being who is able to bestow gifts to children all around the world on a single night after creating them all year with slave/elf labor. But let’s be honest: **Santa’s lame.** He gives gifts based on a standard of goodness that he does not communicate, never answers any letter to him, and refuses to actually BE with people, but simply eats their cookies and leaves.

Again, my point is NOT to diminish whatever traditions or fun practices you may have at Christmas, but to make this simple statement: *some/most people view God the same way.* God is there (probably), is worthy to be prayed to, especially in crisis or once a year, rarely/never answers, wants us to be moral and will judge those who are bad. So be good, for goodness sake! Now no one in this room or listening may say it that directly, but there are subtle ways this thinking leaks out. How can a good God pour out His wrath on people who only live out the way they were born, who were dead by nature? Is God just vindictive and mean? How can it be that we don’t contribute *at all* to our salvation? Why does God seem so distant, uncaring, and unresponsive to the needs of His people?

It’s this last thought that we want to pick up. Santa deprives people of his presence (stick with me), but God promises something better, the exact opposite in terms of Christmas. We looked at a purpose statement last week as to **why Jesus came to the earth: *He will save His people from their sins.*** (Matt. 1:21). If there is a foundational verse for Christmas, it’s this one. But the glory of Christmas does not end there. There is something equally magnificent later in Matthew’s narrative. In a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, where it was promised, ***“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”*** This is extraordinary. God could have saved us in a number of ways, even requiring a sacrifice and substitute, but He did it through the means of an **incarnated Messiah**, God becoming a man. We will see that this displays the *epitome of love*. But it also informs us of the mystery and majesty of God’s plan for us.

Jesus came to be with His people, to lead and shepherd them. It was out of desire, not duty, that He met with His disciples the night before He died (Luke 22:14). Though He left us for a time, He said it was to our advantage since we got the Holy Spirit (John 16:7), and He went away to prepare a place so that He could come again and bring us back to Himself (John 14:3). But Jesus also said that He is **with us always** (Matt. 28:20), and promised *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* (Heb. 13:5). But we are NOT with Him now, so what is the hope? *“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”* (1 John 3:2), with the culmination of the age being, *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people,*

and God Himself will be with them as their God.” (Rev. 21:3). This is what the incarnation of Jesus as a baby, taking on flesh and living out true humanity signaled. He not only saved us, He wants to be with us, not as subservient slaves under His thumb, but as willing sons and daughters who will joyfully serve in His presence forever and ever! That is the hope of Christmas, not only that we are saved from hell, darkness and futility, but that we are **SAVED TO** a real, intimate, loving embrace of a relationship with the God of the universe that we **WILL SEE** and be with (see, Santa IS lame!)

This morning we will look at a concentrated passage of God’s character and work in salvation which will all be focused at Christ. Not only will this prepare us to know and revel in Him, it will prepare us to worship our Savior at Christmas, who came as humanity to save humanity, and **died for us so that He could be WITH US!**

God’s Response to our Condition: *MERCY*

But God, being rich in mercy,

Last week we left the first three verses of Ephesians 2 with this stark reality: by nature, and birth, we were all in a condition of spiritual death, were under the influence of this worldly system controlled by delegated authority by Satan himself. Not only were we bound and shackled to it, we loved it since it appealed to our desires and lusts. There was no way to save ourselves, to make ourselves alive, to wake ourselves up from darkness. Not only were we lost, we were bound to our disobedience and under God’s wrath. We went where the system told us to, could not glorify God, and are awaiting judgment eternally. Everyone finds themselves in one of two camps: this **WAS** your condition, or it **IS** your condition. There is no middle ground. But this also signaled the reason for Christmas, that Jesus came to save His own from their sin!

Admittedly last week was a sort of a bummer in the sense of this bleak reality. However, as the Bible lays out truth, we must always understand the bad before the good, the need before the solution, the situation before the salvation. Out of this condition of death comes two of the most beloved, powerful, and precious words in Scripture and thus the world. Now, when I was a senior in college, I had the privilege of preaching Ephesians 2:4 and I made a mistake that I want to remedy this morning. I said these next two words and paused, which caused ascending chuckles from the class and a descending grade on the sermon (my professor was not impressed, though he might have chuckled as well). The words are **“BUT GOD”**. In the bleakest of situations, the darkest of days, the worst of conditions, God breaks through. These words put the onus and emphasis on God Himself, His character, and His work to get us out of our condition. We were headed to death...*but God*. We deserved judgment...*but God*. We were despairing of life itself... *But God*. As we move along in life and experience the reality that we are truly in control of very little and that dependency on Him is the source of all joy, these words grow in their preciousness. *What did this signal as to God’s response to our condition?* Paul lays out **4 precious words of comfort and hope for those who were dead, and possibility to those still in this condition.**

Before looking at these words, we are reminded about this principle: one’s character always reveals itself in action. When examining someone’s character, talk is fine, but it’s also cheap. Who we are will always come out since we always do what we truly believe. One can say they have integrity, or are hardworking, or whatever the quality may be, the proof will be in the pudding. But God is consistent to His character, and we know who He is by how He acts.

The first word of hope is the word **mercy**. At its core, mercy is having pity and compassion on those who are helpless and in need. It means withholding or not giving someone what they actually deserve. In

terms of God's mercy, it means NOT giving sinners what they deserve, which is judgement. **Psalm 103:10 says it this way**, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." Paul enhances this idea of mercy by saying God is "RICH" in mercy, meaning He is limitless and boundless in pouring out mercy on pitiable humanity. This type of wealth is that which does not go down when it is poured out, but is constantly replenished because of His nature.

When we understand and try to come to grips with God's full nature, especially His wrath and justice, it seems like God is uncaring or unloving. *How can He send someone to hell who was born into sin?* But here we see His full nature on display. You see, mercy **indicates emotion**, care aroused by someone in need or who suffered calamity, and seeks to relieve or remove that trouble. God is not unfeeling or heartless. Mercy explains quite the contrary. To illustrate mercy, I want us to watch a quick video that was posted this last week. It is clip of 18-year-old Shelby Houston who gave a eulogy at her father's memorial service. Shelby's dad, Richard Houston, was a courageous and faithful police officer in Texas who responded to a domestic disturbance. Officer Houston was gunned down by Jaime Jaramillo, who then shot himself in the head. Officer Houston died; Mr. Jaramillo lived. Now, I'm not sharing this to try to elicit an emotional response from you, but to show the emotional cost of mercy.

Mercy means God does not deal with us strictly in terms of our sin. ***But what motivates Him to pour out His mercy?***

God's Motive Behind His Compassion: LOVE

because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses

God is love.

John penned these words in 1 John 4:8, and it gives God as the source and definition of love itself. God gives His love outwardly because HE epitomizes love in Himself. By nature, love is selfless, seeing the highest good in the one who is loved. He loves whole we are still sinners (Rom. 5:8). Nothing can separate Him from those He loves (Rom. 8:39), and the love we have in Christ surpasses knowledge itself (Eph. 3:19). So, love motivates Him to act, to give, and even to sacrifice.

We understand this love in our own lives. When you look at your newborn baby, who has nothing to offer except their presence, we automatically are willing to give up sleep, time, and even our life itself for that child. There are some big-hearted people in this room who even do this with pets like puppies and even...it's hard to imagine...cats! We love because there is intrinsic value in the object of our love, so we seek their good, even at great personal cost. But notice that THIS love goes beyond the normal version we experience. He loved us WHILE WE WERE STILL IN A CONDITION OF DEATH. That meant that He loved us at our worst, when we were living for our lusts, were diametrically opposed to Him, and were deserving of wrath. Perhaps the greatest expression of love is when we love the unlovely, the mean, the ugly, and those we cannot stand. It is the love of a parent of the wayward child who spews hateful words at his mom and dad. It is the spouse who loves despite never having that love returned. It is caring for the one who's mental captivity is gone, who can't remember your face, and who is downright ornery. You see, God's love for us is embedded in His NATURE, not our goodness. That means that we can be assured of His love even when we are wayward or sinful, when we chase other pleasures and when we fail to trust Him, slapping Him in the face and acting like He is not enough. There is great hope in this love, since He HAS to be consistent with His nature, and if He has saved us, He WILL CONTINUE TO LOVE US. Just like our kids could never outgrow our love, so God loves us, and demonstrates that love in Christ.

God's Basis for His Actions: GRACE*—by grace you have been saved—*

What is the basis by which He acts and brings us back to Himself? The answer is a simple yet powerful word: GRACE (a great word to describe or mark a church, don't you think!). If mercy is NOT giving us what we deserve, grace IS giving what we do NOT deserve. Grace gives and releases, provides salvation, and enables sinners to live acceptably before the Lord. Grace means **unmerited favor, receiving what was not earned or worked for**. Grace means receiving a gift that was truly undeserved.

Grace is truly a radical and counter-intuitive concept for all of us. We naturally think in terms of reward and earning. Bonuses for job well done, rewards for good grades, and raises for further education or certifications are normal practice. But getting something, we don't deserve, that we didn't earn smacks us wrong. Like getting a commendation for a heroic act we did not actually do, grace leaves us with a feeling that we need to contribute SOMETHING to what we receive.

But this is the scandalous nature of grace. Once we start trying to earn, it no longer is grace. Once we try to describe salvation in any way other than God's gracious act alone, Him moving toward us and making us alive, we not only nullify grace we misunderstand our need in salvation. Grace does what we could never do: granting us faith to believe, which means even our FAITH is a gift of God, not something we could DO or contribute. This leaves us utterly dependent on grace for salvation in all aspects: *justification, sanctification and glorification*. God's grace saves, makes us holy, and secures us eternally. This last aspect is covered in verse 7.

God's Purpose in Graciousness: KINDNESS*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*

Grace is often framed in terms of our salvation, or the act of God's forgiving us and declaring us righteous, which is absolutely true. But notice that God's grace does not quit! I've reflected on this immense promise this week in a new way or in a way I hadn't seen before. He saved us to be with Him (we'll talk about that in a second), but He gave us grace in salvation so that **continue to give us grace, to show us His immeasurable riches of grace forever and ever**. Again, He could have saved us to a slavish existence, but HIS GRACE is marked with kindness. Even the kindest person you may know (for me it's Matt Simms) has limits to their kindness, where tiredness sets in and frustration is let out. But God never tires and never exhausts His grace. He wants to show us a type of kindness into eternity that can never be experienced here. This also signals the fact that He wants to give us grace every day and supplies us with it lavishly. Joy is sourced in our willingness to live by this rich grace instead of trying to do everything on our own, trying to earn, or trying to work for our standing with Him. We work BY His grace, not for it. And that is a revolutionary difference.

God's Means to Accomplish it all: UNION WITH CHRIST*made us alive together with Christ...—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*

There is a part of this text that we left out until now, and this may be the best part and brings us full circle. The means by which God does all of these things, from giving mercy and grace, showing kindness through **Christ**. Christ is the point, the means, the goal of all of this. How did God make dead people live? Through the death of Christ. How did God welcome back sons of disobedience? Through the

obedience of Christ to fulfill the will of the Father. How did God turn His wrath from those deserving of judgment and wrath? Through the sacrificial work of Jesus on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21), where God treated Christ the way we served to be treated and gave us the life we could never live. This is the definition of both mercy and grace. So, we were **made alive, raised up and seated with Him**. These last two words change everything, and remind us of the hope of Christmas.

Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father right now, since He has finished the work on the cross and was raised again by the power of God, the same power that is at work in us. It is His work that makes us alive, raises us up, and seats us with Him NOW, positionally and securely. All three verbs are connected with the Greek word “*sun*”, which means “with”. Christ doesn’t just save us; He does all of this to be WITH US. You see, God came to this earth to be with us, so that we could be with Him! He WANTS to be with us, and moved heaven and earth to do it. That is the message of salvation, the message of Christmas, and the message for ages to come.

As we enter Christmas this coming weekend, we remember our God, **Immanuel, God with us**. WE remember the greatest gift of grace, and undeserved gift of salvation. What is our response to this remembrance? We rest in His grace, cease from trying to earn, and revel in the fact that we are loved according to the depth and riches of His love. When we doubt any of this, or are in need of strength, or rest, or joy, we remember these words...*but God!*