

Session 2

***Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas***

By Adam Hamilton

Chapter 2: “The Savior and Our Need for Saving”

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**Introduction Recap...**

The word “incarnation” comes from a Latin word that means, “embodiment” or “become flesh”. One of the foundational beliefs of Christians is in the incarnation, that God actually became flesh in the person of Jesus. The church has struggled throughout centuries to explain the “how” of this mystery. Instead of focusing on the “how”, Hamilton in this book seeks to answer the questions “why” and “to what end” for Christians today.

Some of the questions that will be asked include:

- Why would God come to us in Jesus?
- What was the purpose of the Incarnation?
- How are we meant to respond to the Incarnation, to God’s coming to us in Jesus, today?

In each chapter, Hamilton will focus on one or more names/titles used by the Gospel writers as they introduce the story of Jesus. Hamilton encourages each of us to read one chapter each week during the Season of Advent, with the Epilogue read after Christmas Day or during Epiphany Sunday.

**Opening Activity – Meanings of Names**

- **What is your name’s meaning and origin?**
- **Why and how were you given your name?**
- **Have you ever wanted to change your name? If so, what would you change it to and why?**

In this week’s chapter, Adam Hamilton looks at the “meaning” of Jesus’s name, and why it is appropriate for Him. (This reveals the “name” that we most often attribute to Him).

## Chapter 2 Recap...

Adam Hamilton begins this week's chapter by talking about a boy's letter to Santa (and then to Jesus) about "being good". I agree with Hamilton when he said not one of us could write a letter to Jesus claiming that we had been perfectly good for six months, three weeks, or maybe even three days! We all have sin in our lives that we need "saving" from.

Scripture tells us that shortly after Mary found out from Gabriel about her role in bringing Jesus into the world, she shared the news with her fiancée Joseph. Joseph became the first person in history to "doubt" Mary's story, but definitely not the last. Going to sleep with that doubt, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:20-21) saying, "...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will SAVE his people from their sins." In Luke, Gabriel tells Mary that she should name her son, Jesus. What is the significance of his name?

Jesus is derived from the Greek version of his name. The Hebrew name is *Yeshua*, shortened version of *Yehoshua*, coming from the personal name of God, Yahweh, and *yasha*, which means, "to save/deliver". Yeshua (Jesus) literally means "God saves/delivers/helps". This name points to His role and the purpose of the Incarnation – Jesus came as an instrument of deliverance or salvation. "Every time we speak his name, we recognize him as our Savior, Deliverer, Rescuer, and Helper." (p. 48) Jesus's name appears more than any other name in scripture (over 1,600 times). When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they proclaimed that Jesus would be "a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord". (Luke 2:10-11)

What does it mean to call Jesus a Savior? Why do we need a Savior? How does He save us? Just a few questions that will be answered in this chapter.

Have you been asked, "Are you saved?" If so, the responses usually refers to a specific day or time or the time they put their trust in faith in God. For most, the initial understanding of being "saved" is simply Jesus forgiving us of our sins and deliverance from hell. However, being "saved" means so much more (and it closely ties with our Advent roots). "Saved" is often used in church circles, but outside those walls, it seems murky and unclear. Even those in the church still seems unsure of its meaning, even though it is used over 150 times in New Testament.

The Hebrew word *yasha* and Greek word *sozo* (both which can be translated as “saved”) can be translated as deliver, rescue, or help. When we speak of Jesus “saving us”, we can also mean his work to deliver, rescue, or help us. The word “saved” in the New Testament can refer to physical healing, forgiveness, rescuing one’s enemies, rescuing from disasters, deliverance from suffering, and internal transformation, and God’s deliverance on the last day. Jesus and New Testament authors speak of “having been saved” – a past action. Paul speaks of our “being saved” – a continuing present action. Jesus and the apostles use the term in describing those who “will be saved” – a future action. Past. Present. Future.

Joseph is told that Jesus will “save his people from their sins”. Sin is prevalent and needs to be a focus for Christians, but not an “over focus”. The good news of Jesus is that he is our Savior, not that we are sinners. In the New Testament, the term used most often for sin (Hebrew *hata*, Greek *hamartia*) means to stray from the path. This indicates there is a right path that we struggle to stay on. Sin is used to describe both the inner inclination to stray from the path and the actual act of doing so with our actions.

The ideal path is found in scripture – practicing justice, demonstrating loving kindness, walking humbly with God, and sharing your food, clothes, and compassion. This path can be summed up in Matthew 7:12, simply to love God with everything, and to love others as you love yourself. If everyone followed this “path”, the world would be completely different! Yet, as humans, we struggle with sin. Christianity states sin is the fundamental problem in the human condition. The struggle with the tendency to stray from the right path and actually doing it results in suffering, alienation, guilt, and shame. This can be seen from the very beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The story of Adam and Eve is not intended to teach us about ancient history, but instead to teach us about ourselves. We know there is a right path, but we all have heard the whisper of the tempter and battled this temptation. While some sins may be obvious, others may be “hidden” – like pride. Pride may be the most dangerous sin of all, being the root of many others and destroying from the inside out. While some sins may not be “the end of the world” (i.e. eating too many cookies, envying your neighbor’s new car, etc.), examining the general sufferings of the world one would find the seven deadly sins and PRIDE beneath the surface. Paul referred to his body as a “body of death” in Romans,

because of the desires that lurked inside. Who is the one who saves us from these desires/sins? Jesus.

Jesus saves us from both the inner tendency to sin and the guilt/shame that we carry with us when we do sin. Through Him, we find a new, stronger impulse pulling and guiding us down the right path. The more we grow in Jesus, the more aware we are of the tempter and his ways. However, you perceive the tempter or devil – a metaphor or a literal spiritual being – faith in Jesus helps us resist the tempter. When we turn to Jesus for deliverance or transformation, we receive *sanctification* – the process of our hearts and minds being changed by the Holy Spirit to become who God intended us to be.

When the angel announced to Mary that Jesus would “save his people from their sins”, our first thought usually goes to forgiveness. Even more important, however, is God drawing us closer to Him – his right path, transforming our lives, delivering us from the inner desire to sin. Each one of us could testify that we are not the person Christ wants us to be YET, but we are definitely not the person we would be without Him. “His saving” changes us. “It is in his witness, his love, his impact upon our soul, and his Spirit’s work that he is saving us from our tendency to sin.” (p. 61)

Jesus also saves us from the ill effects of sin. Jesus does not save us from the immediate consequences, but he saves us from the guilt, shame, and alienation from God that is a result of our sin. He makes us new. The New Testament has a few terms for this – Christ *redeems* us, *restores* us, *reconciles* us, *justifies* us, or *forgives* us. How? In Jesus’s death, some Christians see this as mechanistically, transactionally, or juridically. Jesus died in our place for our sins. (We see this when Jesus offer forgiveness from the cross.) Others see Christ’s death in terms of God’s attempt to speak to us about sin, mercy, and love. (We see this in John’s Gospel, when Jesus is referred to as “the Word” – instruction.) In Jesus’s death, God is communicating our need for forgiveness, the cost of grace, and the depth of God’s love and mercy. This act is not about gaining God’s forgiveness, but instead proving God’s love and forgiveness. The offering that Jesus provides for us – as God incarnate – on the cross is full and sufficient for our sins. There is nothing more than must be or could be done for our forgiveness than the Incarnate God offering himself for us.

Jesus gives Himself as an act of selfless love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this selfless act in *The Cost of Discipleship*, “Grace is costly because it calls

us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ...Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son..." (p.66) We do not save ourselves, even though we might try. God, in his great love for us, sent Jesus to save us from our sins and its consequences, and to restore, redeem, and heal us.

Each of us, at some point in our lives, question the meaning of existence. We question our worth, our reason in the world, or even our reason to go on living. Jesus, coming into the world as our Savior, says to us, "You matter to God. Your life has meaning. God isn't done with you yet." (p.68) The Incarnate God, Jesus our Savior, demonstrates God's love for us and our value to Him. Jesus continually spent time on this earth with "the least of these" in society. The Hebrew term for these individuals is *am ha'arentz*, which means "people of the land." Jesus showed "value" in everyone. He showed this in the ways he healed the sick, in showing care to the woman caught in adultery, offering living water at the well, affirming the tax collector, casting out demons, and his calling of fishermen to be His disciples.

Jesus was saying your lives have meaning; you are valued and wanted by God. This is grace in the living. "Based upon nothing that they (or we) had done, they were accepted by God." (p.70) Jesus walks with us and has plans for us. Jesus had nothing – not even a place to lay His head – yet He knew He had work to do. Jesus will work in and through us. Our job is to trust Him and keep following Him. Through Jesus, God came to us to save us from the thought that there is no meaning in our lives. His coming, incarnate, shows us that we have value and that there is hope. In Him. There is always hope in Him. Life may not work out as we planned or expected, but in His hands, things always work out.

Jesus coming as the Savior fills that need for each of us that we long to be loved. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is an expression of the love of God. This is clearly seen as Jesus hung on the cross. Jesus, as Savior, saves us from lovelessness. No matter what others or the world might say, you are loved. This is repeated in Paul's words in Romans 8:38-39. The love that came down at Christmas, in the season of Advent, is a love that will not let us go.

Finally, the greatest existential crisis that each human being faces is death. We cannot cheat or avoid it. Nevertheless, in the death of Jesus, He defeated death itself. The saving act of Christ does not take away the pain and loss of death, but it provides an antidote to the accompanying grief. Death no longer has the final word. Jesus's "saving" changes our perspective on loss and death.

“Jesus, the Incarnate God, makes it clear that he “holds the keys of Death and of Hades”, and that “because I live, you also will live.” (p.80) Jesus saves us from death. The angel told Joseph to give the child the name Jesus – “God saves”. Jesus, the Incarnate God, our Savior, saves us from sin, guilt, and shame; rescuing us from loveless, meaninglessness, and hopeless lives. In the end, Jesus delivers us from death. This is why we call Him Savior.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

- Hamilton notes the Advent and Christmas stories in scripture call Jesus “Savior”. How prominently do Christmas celebrations in the church and in our culture focus on Jesus’s identity as Savior?
- Hamilton points out that some Christians find language of “being saved” uncomfortable. Do you use that terminology when you talk about your faith?
- Hamilton believes affirming Jesus as Savior means, in large part, affirming that we and other people are loved and accepted by God. Whom do you know, this Advent season, who needs to hear God loves them, and what specific actions could you take to share with them that love?

### **Scripture Focus – Matthew 1:18-21**

1. Why does the angel tell Joseph to name Mary’s child *Jesus*?
2. The angel says Jesus will save “his people”. Who were and are Jesus’s people?
3. Do righteous people like Joseph need to be saved from sins? Why or why not?

### **Scripture Focus – Luke 2:8-14**

1. How does the angel’s message to the shepherds echo the ancient messianic hopes discussed in Session 1?
2. Luke’s story of Jesus’s birth implicitly contrasts its central characters – the infant Jesus, his parents, and the shepherds – with people who represent military and economic power. Why might people without privilege and status especially welcome a Savior’s birth as good news?

### Scripture Focus – Genesis 3:1-13

1. How does this story serve as an example of “straying from the path” or “missing the mark”?
2. “When the Bible speaks of sin,” Hamilton writes, “it means both the innate *tendency to stray* from the right path and also the *act of straying*” (p. 54). Do you tend to think of sin as individual’s wrong acts or an external, larger problem in humanity and the world? What are the risks of thinking about sin in only one way or the other?
3. What is the “forbidden fruit” the serpent beckons you to eat? What is the lie he tells you to lead you astray or to trip you up? Where do you stray from the path or miss the mark?

### Scripture Focus – Romans 7:18-25

1. What is the conflict Paul describes? Have you ever experienced this struggle yourself?
2. Do you believe “nothing good dwells within” us? Why or why not?
3. Paul calls his body a “body of death”. Is the human body inherently sinful? Why or why not?

### Closing Activity...Past, Present, & Future

In this chapter, Hamilton mentions three “senses and tenses” in which the New Testament speaks of Jesus saving us: Jesus has saved us (past), Jesus is saving us (present), and Jesus will save us (future).

This week, take a piece of paper or index card and divide it into three columns. Write a response, at least one per column, to each of these prompts (listed at the top of your columns)...

- *Jesus has saved me from...*
- *Jesus is saving me from...*
- *Jesus will save me from...*

Spend time in prayer this week thanking God for His saving action in the past, His saving action in the present (lift up sins/actions that He is saving you from right now), and His saving action in the future (areas that you still need to turn over to God).

**Closing Prayer (Read in Unison)**

*Jesus, I need you to save, rescue, deliver, and heal me. I trust in you as my Savior. Save me from my sin and from myself. Save me for you and your purposes. Save me by your love and for your love. Save me from despair and give me hope. Help me to trust in your resurrection, that I might face death not with fear, but with hope. Amen.*

**Next Week**

***“Incarnation”* Session Three**

**Wednesday, December 16    6:30 PM    Facebook Live**

**Reading – Chapter 3 in *“Incarnation”* – “Emmanuel in the Midst of a Pandemic”**

**Scripture – Matthew 1:22-25, Isaiah 7:1-16, Hebrews 1:1-4, 4:14-16**