

Of Christ's Incarnation

Christ became incarnate, or, which is the same thing, became man, to put himself in a capacity for working out our redemption. For though Christ, as God, was infinitely sufficient for the work, yet to his being in an immediate capacity for it, it was needful that he should not only be God, but man. If Christ had remained only in the divine nature, he would not have been in a capacity to have purchased our salvation; not from any imperfection of the divine nature, but by reason of its absolute and infinite perfection: for Christ, merely as God, was not capable either of that obedience or suffering that was needful. The divine nature is not capable of *suffering*; for it is infinitely above all suffering. Neither is it capable of *obedience* to that law which was given to man. It is as impossible that one who is only God, should obey the law that was given to man, as it is that he should suffer man's punishment.

And it was necessary not only that Christ should take upon him a *created* nature, but that he should take upon him *our* nature. It would not have sufficed for Christ to have become an *angel*, and to have obeyed and suffered in the angelic nature. But it was necessary that he should become a man, upon three accounts.

1. *It was needful in order to answer the law, that the very nature to which the law was given, should obey it.* Man's law could not be answered, but by being obeyed by man. God insisted upon it, that the law which he had given to man shall be honoured, and fulfilled by the nature of man, otherwise the law could not be answered for men. The words, "Thou shalt not eat thereof," etc. were spoken to the race of mankind, to the human nature; and therefore the human nature must fulfil them.

2. *It was needful to answer the law that the nature that sinned should die.* These words, "Thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2.17) respect the human nature. The same nature to which the command was given, was that to which the threatening was directed.

3. *God saw meet, that the same world which was the stage of man's fall and ruin, should also be the stage of his redemption.* We read often of his coming into the world to save sinners, and of God's sending him into the world for this purpose.—It was needful that he should come into this sinful, miserable, undone world, in order to restore and save it. For man's recovery, it was needful that he should come down to man, to man's proper habitation, and that he should tabernacle with us: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Concerning the incarnation of Christ, I would observe these following things.

I. The incarnation itself;

in which especially two things are to be considered, *viz.*

1. His conception; which was in the womb of one of the race of mankind, whereby he became truly the Son of man, as he was often called. He was one of the posterity of Adam, a child of Abraham, and a son of David, according to God's promise. But his conception was – not in the way of ordinary generation, but – by the power of the Holy Ghost. Christ was formed in the womb of the Virgin, of the substance of her body, by the power of the Spirit of God. So that he was the immediate son of the woman, but not the immediate son of any male whatsoever; and so was the seed of the woman, and the son of a virgin, one that had never known man.

2. His birth. Though the conception of Christ was supernatural, yet after he was conceived, his human nature was gradually perfected in the womb of the virgin, in a way of natural progress; and so his birth was in the way of nature. But his conception being supernatural, by the power of the Holy Ghost, he was both conceived and born without sin.

II. The second thing I would observe concerning the incarnation of Christ,

is the fullness of the time in which it was accomplished. It was after things had been preparing for it from the very first fall of mankind, and when all things were ready. It came to pass at a time, which in infinite wisdom was the most fit and proper: "But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Gal. 4:4).

It was now the most proper time on every account. Any time before the flood would not have been so fit a time. For then the mischief and ruin that the fall brought on mankind, was not so fully seen. The curse did not so fully come on the earth before the flood, as it did afterwards: for though the ground was cursed in a great measure before, yet it pleased God that the curse should once, before the restoration by Christ, be executed in an universal destruction, even of the very form of the earth, that the dire effects of the fall might be seen before the recovery. Though mankind were mortal before the flood, yet their lives were almost a thousand years in length, a kind of immortality in comparison with what the life of man is now. It pleased God, that the curse, *Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return*, should have its full accomplishment, and be executed in its greatest degree on mankind, before the Redeemer came to purchase a never-ending life.

It would not have been so fit a time for Christ to come, before Moses; for till then mankind were not so universally apostatized from the true God; they were not fallen universally into heathenish darkness; and so the need of Christ, the light of the world, was not so evident. The woeful consequence of the fall with respect to man's mortality, was not so fully manifest till then; for man's life was not so shortened as to be reduced to the present standard, till about Moses' time.

It was most fit that the time of the Messiah's coming should not be till all nations, but the children of Israel, had lain long in heathenish darkness; that the remedilessness of their disease might by long experience be seen, and so the absolute necessity of the heavenly Physician.

Another reason why Christ did not come soon after the flood probably was, that the earth might be full of people, that he might have the more extensive kingdom, that the effects of his light, power, and grace, might be glorified, and that his victory over Satan might be attended with the more glory in the multitude of his conquests. It was also needful that the coming of Christ should be many ages after Moses, that the church might be prepared by the Messiah's being long prefigured, foretold, and expected. It was not proper that Christ should come before the

Babylonish captivity, because Satan's kingdom was not then come to its height. The heathen world before that consisted of lesser kingdoms. But God saw meet that the Messiah should come in the time of one of the four great monarchies. Nor was it proper that he should come in the time of the Babylonish, the Persian, or the Grecian monarchy. It was the will of God that his Son should make his appearance in the world in the time of the Roman, the greatest and strongest monarchy, which was Satan's visible kingdom in the world; that, by overcoming this, he might visibly overcome Satan's kingdom in its greatest strength and glory, and so obtain the more complete triumph over Satan himself.

It was not proper that Christ should come before the Babylonish captivity. For, before that, we have not histories of the state of the heathen world, to give us an idea of the need of a Saviour. Besides, learning did not much flourish, and so there had not been opportunity to show the insufficiency of human learning and wisdom to reform and save mankind. Again, the Jews were not dispersed over the world, as they were afterwards; and so things were not prepared in this respect for the coming of Christ. The necessity of abolishing the Jewish dispensation was not then so apparent as it was afterwards, by reason of the dispersion of the Jews; neither was the way prepared for the propagation of the gospel, as it was afterwards, by the same dispersion. Many other things might be mentioned, by which it would appear, that no other season before that very time in which Christ came, would have been proper for his appearing.

III. The next thing that I would observe

concerning the incarnation of Christ, is the greatness of this event. Christ's incarnation was a greater and more wonderful thing than ever had yet come to pass. The creation of the world was a very great thing, but not so great as the incarnation of Christ. It was a great thing for God to make the creature, but not so great as for the Creator himself to become a creature. We have spoken of many great things that were accomplished between the fall of man and the incarnation of Christ: but God becoming man was greater than all. Then the greatest person was born that ever was or ever will be.

IV. Next observe, concerning the incarnation of Christ, the remarkable circumstances of it. He was born of a poor virgin; a pious holy person, but poor, as appeared by her offering at her purification: "And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24). Which refers to Lev. 5:7: "And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtle-doves or two young pigeons." And this poor virgin was espoused to a husband who was but a poor man. Though they were both of the royal family of David, which was the most honourable, and Joseph was the rightful heir to the crown; yet the family was reduced to a very low state; which is represented by the tabernacle of David being fallen. "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof, and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old" (Amos 9:11).

He was born in the town of Bethlehem, as was foretold: (Mic. 5.2.) and there was a very remarkable providence of God to bring about the fulfillment of this prophecy, the taxing of all the world by Augustus Caesar (Luke 2). He was born in a very low condition, even in a stable, and laid in a manger.

V. Observe the concomitants of this great event.

—And,

1. The return of the *Spirit*; which indeed began a little before, but yet was given on occasion of

his birth. I have before observed how the spirit of prophecy ceased, not long after Malachi. From about the same time visions and immediate revelations ceased also. But on this occasion, they were granted anew, and the Spirit in these operations returns again. The first revealed instance of its restoration is the vision of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1). The next is the vision which the Virgin Mary had (Luke 1). The third is the vision which Joseph had (Matt. 1). In the next place, the Spirit was given to Elisabeth (Luke 1:41). Next, it was given to Mary, as appears by her song (Luke 1:46, etc.). Then to Zacharias again (Luke 1:64). Then it was sent to the shepherds (Luke 2:9). Then it was given to Simeon (Luke 2:25), then to Anna (Luke 2:36), then to the wise men in the east. Then to Joseph again, directing him to flee into Egypt; and after that directing his return.

2. The next concomitant of Christ's incarnation is, the great notice that was taken of it in heaven, and on earth. How it was noticed by the glorious inhabitants of the heavenly world, appears by their joyful songs on this occasion, heard by the shepherds in the night. This was the greatest event of Providence that ever the angels had beheld. We read of their singing praises when they saw the formation of this lower world: "When the morning-stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). And so they do, on this much greater occasion, the birth of the Son of God, who is the Creator of the world.

The glorious angels had all along expected this event. They had taken great notice of the prophecies and promises of these things: for we are told, that they desire to look into the affairs of redemption (1 Pet. 1:12). They had been the ministers of Christ in this affair of redemption, in all the several steps of it from the very fall of man; as in God's dealings with Abraham, with Jacob, and with the Israelites. And doubtless they had long joyfully expected the coming of Christ; but now they see it accomplished, and therefore greatly rejoice, and sing praises on this occasion.

Notice was taken of it by Elisabeth and the Virgin Mary before the birth of Christ; not to say by John the Baptist before he was born, when he leaped in his mother's womb as it were for joy, at the voice of the salutation of Mary. Elisabeth and Mary most joyfully praise God together, with Christ and his forerunner in their wombs, and the Holy Spirit in their souls. And afterwards what joyful notice is taken of this event by the shepherds, and by those holy persons, Zacharias, and Simeon, and Anna! How do they praise God on the occasion! Thus the inhabitants of heaven, and the church on earth, unite in their joy and praise on this occasion.

Great part of the universe takes joyful notice of the incarnation of Christ. Heaven takes notice of it, and the inhabitants sing for joy. This lower world of mankind, both Jews and Gentiles, take notice of it. It pleased God to put honour on his Son, by wonderfully stirring up some of the wisest of the Gentiles to come a long journey to see and worship him at his birth. They were led by a miraculous star, signifying the birth of that glorious person who is the bright and morning-star, going before, and leading them to the very place where the, young child was. Some think they were instructed by the prophecy of Balaam, who dwelt in the eastern parts, and who foretold Christ's coming as a star that should rise out of Jacob. Or they might be instructed by that general expectation there was of the Messiah's coming about that time, from the prophecies the Jews had of him in their dispersions in all parts of the world.

3. The next concomitant of the birth of Christ was his circumcision. But this may more properly be spoken of under another head, and so I will not insist upon it now.

4. The next concomitant was his first coming into the second temple, when an infant, on occasion of the purification of the blessed Virgin. We read, Hagg. 2:7, "The desire of all nations

shall come, and I will fill this house, (or temple) with glory." And in Mal. 3:1, "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant." And now was the first instance of the fulfillment of these prophecies.

5. The last concomitant I shall mention is the sceptre's departing from Judah, in the death of Herod the Great. The sceptre had never totally departed from Judah till now. Judah's sceptre was greatly diminished in the revolt of the ten tribes in Jeroboam's time; and the sceptre departed from Israel or Ephraim at the time of the captivity of the ten tribes by Shalmaneser. But it remained in the tribe of Judah, under the kings of the house of David. And when the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were carried captive by Nebuchadnezzar, the sceptre of Judah ceased for a little while, till the return from the captivity under Cyrus: and then, though they were not an independent government, as they had been before, but owed fealty to the kings of Persia; yet their governor was of themselves, who had the power of life and death, and they were governed by their own laws; and so Judah had a lawgiver from between his feet during the Persian and Grecian monarchies. Towards the latter part of the Grecian monarchy, the people were governed by kings of their own, of the race of the Maccabees, for near a hundred years; and after that they were subdued by the Romans. But yet the Romans suffered them to be governed by their own laws, and to have a king of their own, Herod the Great, who reigned about forty years, and governed with proper kingly authority, only paying homage to the Romans. But presently after Christ was born he died, as we have an account (Matt. 2:19) and Archelaus succeeded him; but was soon put down by the Roman emperor; and then the sceptre departed from Judah. There were no more temporal kings of Judah after that, neither had that people their governors from the midst of themselves, but were ruled by a Roman governor sent among them; and they ceased to have the power of life and death among themselves. Hence the Jews say to Pilate, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death" John 18:31). Thus the sceptre departed from Judah when Shiloh came.



Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758) was a Christian preacher and theologian influential in America's 'Great Awakening'.

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