

# Lessons and Carols: Bright Hope For Dark Times

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[ 0 : 00 ] Last year was a hard year if you were in the TV business. Most cable TV networks saw plummeting ratings last year, for whatever reason.

Many, many networks suffered in their viewership, save one, which is currently one of the fastest growing TV networks out there.

You want to guess what it is? Hallmark. The Hallmark Channel. They are growing like crazy. And this Christmas, for your viewing pleasure, they have prepared for us all 33 original Christmas films. So when you go home tonight, if you have access to the Hallmark Channel, you can probably watch one of those films.

Titles include The Sweetest Christmas, Marry Me at Christmas, Enchanted Christmas, and my favorite, Romance at the Reindeer Lodge.

[ 1 : 07 ] And what's so great about these films is that they are unapologetically formulaic. They all follow, it's all the same story. Overworked city girl meets small town farm boy, whose family happens to own a Christmas tree farm.

But the Christmas tree farm has fallen on hard times and is in danger of going bankrupt. So big city girl and small town guy work together to save the Christmas tree farm.

In the process, they fall in love. And the movie ends with the farm saved, the town utterly united, the couple kissing, the family celebrating, a dog frolicking, the snow falling, all to the sound of a Christmas carol as the credits roll quickly to prepare for the next Hallmark movie, which is about to start at the top of the hour.

Now, why are these films so popular? Why the soaring ratings? What do you think? It's because people are desperate to escape.

They're desperate to escape the darkness. It's because the 24-hour news cycle is churning out stories of fear and hatred and violence.

[ 2 : 34 ] And so people just want a momentary escape. You know, Christmas for many people has become just that. It's a way to temporarily escape the darkness of the world by diving into sentimentalism and consumerism to just get a break from the stories of fear and violence and hatred.

But the thing is, Christmas is not just meant to be an escape from the darkness. If you understand Christmas, you recognize that at the heart of Christmas, there is actually a story.

But it's not just sentimentalism. It's a true story about the actual end to darkness, about a true light that has come into the world that will one day bring an end to all darkness everywhere.

And so Christmas is an escape from the darkness. Christmas actually gives us a way to deal with it head on. So for a few minutes, I want us to look at Isaiah chapter 9.

And I want to look at this story. And I want to look at the promise at the heart of the story. And we're just going to ask two questions. One, why is the world so dark? Why is it so dark?

[ 3 : 54 ] And then two, how does Christmas enable us to deal with the darkness? Not just to escape it, but to actually face it. Let's pray.

Our Father, my voice is about to give out. I pray that you would give me a few more minutes before it's gone. But Lord, it's actually your voice that we've come to hear.

The great promise and joy of Christmas is that you're a God who is with us. You're not distant in some otherworldly plane or dimension, in some place on a mountaintop, that you're here with us now in this room.

And that you're a God who speaks to your people because you love your people. So Lord, we crave and long and yearn for your voice, that you would speak to us and tell us what we need to hear.

In your love and truth. In your Son's name, Amen. So why is the world so dark? Why is the world so dark? You know, living in D.C., a lot of people point to the political sphere.

[ 5 : 02 ] And they say, well, it's really politics. That's at the heart of what's wrong with the world. If you had asked people in Isaiah's day, they would have said, yeah, it's, you know, it's kind of a foreign relations issue.

That's why we're in such darkness right now. We have the Assyrians. The Assyrians are perched just outside like a giant wave, ready to crush the kingdom of Judah.

And so if you had asked anybody in Judah, why is the world so dark? They would have pointed to the Assyrians and said, we've got a serious situation brewing over here. What about today?

Well, people still have political reasons, right? We point to the world of politics and we say, that's why the world is so dark. If our leaders could just get their act together.

I recently had the pleasure of hearing Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs speak. And at one point in his speech, he said, people on the right dream of a golden past that never was.

[ 6 : 02 ] People on the left yearn for a utopian future that never will be. And I thought there was real insight there. You know, people on the left blame traditionalists.

You know, you're holding us back. You're hindering progress. We need to make the world a better place. We need to get on the right side of history. Right?

It's the traditionalists. Those people on the right, they're the reason for the darkness. Well, if you ask people on the right, they blame the left. And they say, you know, it's all those progressives.

It's all those people who want to abandon the good old days when America was great. And the answer is to do everything we can to make America great again. To go back to the way things used to be. And of course, unless you were a white male, chances are things were probably worse.

Right? But people on both sides blame one another. It's people on the right. It's people on the left. That's the reason the world is so dark. I think that we're a little more insightful than that.

[ 7 : 05 ] I think that we know it's probably not that simplistic. So let me ask you, why is the world so dark? Politics may be a part of it, but why is the world so dark? Since Harvey Weinstein, dozens of powerful men have been exposed.

Their atrocities that they've committed. People are finally having the courage. Women are finally having the courage to speak out. To name the things that have been done to them. And one after another, we see these powerful men falling.

Resigning. Leaving. And the outpouring of anger and outrage has been epic. As it should be.

As it should be. And so every time we have a new revelation. A new unmasking. It's as though we are unmasking a monster who had been in hiding.

And it gives you the sense that the world is full of monsters who are in hiding. You know, people we thought. You know, I thought he was one of the good guys. And now we realize. Now the truth has come out.

[ 8 : 19 ] And we realize he was a bad guy all along. He's been unmasked. And so you have this sense that the world is full of monsters in hiding. Who need to be unmasked and revealed for the evildoers that they really are.

And much of the press has been to that tone. So is that why the world is so dark? Are there monsters hiding in our midst?

Maybe some in this room. I don't know if any of you saw a piece that came out by Claire Diederer. In the Paris Review. It was called, What do we do with the art of monstrous men?

It grabbed my attention because it was markedly different than a lot of what I've read out there. The first half of the article, if you haven't read it, is pretty standard stuff. How do we have these brilliant people?

You know, going back to people like Woody Allen. Who produced these amazing works of art. And who are at the very same time horrible monsters. And do monstrous things. And what do we do?

[ 9 : 20 ] Do we boycott all of their work? Is that the answer? That's the first half of our article. Second half of our article is where it gets interesting. Because she turns the spotlight around.

And she focuses it on us as the audience. As the outraged. And then she begins to ask in the article, why are we so quick to pour on the outrage?

Why are we so quick to jump on the next thing? And to let everyone know just how much we hate what this, that or the other person did. Where does that come from? And here's what she says.

It could be that what the audience feels in its heart is pure and righteous and true. But there might be something else going on here.

When you have a moral feeling, self-congratulation is never far behind. In other words, when we voice our moral outrage over a Kevin Spacey or a Roy Moore.

[10:24] Part of that, she says, is coming from a place of goodness and righteousness. That we have a sense of the way things should be and this is not it. And we're right to condemn these things.

But she says, that's not all there is to the story. There's also a part. A part of each of us. That she says is motivated by a desire for self-congratulation.

It's our way of saying, I would never do something like that. And I just want to make it clear to all of my friends and followers out there. That I'm not that kind of person.

And she begins to ask, why would we be motivated to make that clear to everyone around? Why do we feel the need to congratulate ourselves?

And she goes on to say this. It's a bit of a long quote. I can sense that there's something entirely unacceptable lurking inside me.

[11:26] Even in the midst of my righteous indignation, I know that on some level, I'm not entirely upstanding myself. In everyday deed and thought, I'm a decent enough human.

But I'm something else as well. Something vaguely resembling, well, a monster. I suppose this is the human condition, she says.

This sneaking suspicion of our own badness. You get what she's saying there? That we all have, we all live with, day in and day out, this sneaking suspicion of our own badness.

This voice tugging at the edges of our conscious awareness. This question about our core. What kind of person am I really on the inside?

That deep down, we all have this sneaking suspicion. When we look at these men, we say, you know, I would never do something like that. And in God's name, may no one here ever do anything like that.

[12:32] And while we may be able to say that and be honest, I would never do anything like that. That at the same time, there is in each of us a kind of inner darkness.

And we suspect that it's there. And she says, you know, she suggests that our outrage is partly a way to deal with that suspicion.

She calls it a form of misdirection, right? When somebody makes the news, some horrible thing comes out and all the feeds are glutted with responses to it. Part of the reason that we're so quick to jump on and say, how horrible, how horrible.

It's a way of saying, don't look over here. There's nothing to see here. Everything is perfectly fine right here. You might want to take a look at that guy, though. Look at that shady stuff that was going on.

Everything's fine here. She says it's misdirection. Most of us work hard to convince ourselves and to convince other people that we are good.

[13:35] We pour a lot of psychological energy into convincing people of our righteousness. And condemning the unrighteous is a great way to do it.

You know, Carl Jung talked a lot about this. The psychotherapist, the kind of disciple of Freud until they're falling out. Carl Jung talked a lot about what he called the shadow. If you're familiar with the shadow, it's the idea that we take all those parts of ourselves, the sneaking suspicion of our own badness.

And instead of dealing with it, we suppress it. And we deny it. And it's like stuffing it into a big black sack that we then carry around behind us. All these parts of ourselves that would be entirely unacceptable if anyone ever saw them.

He calls that our shadow. I think you especially see this among religious people. You know, religious communities.

I'm perfectly fine. I've got all the answers. I don't need anything. So maybe you're sitting here and you think, well, I don't think this really applies to me.

[14:46] I mean, maybe that guy up there has got some issues, obviously, but I don't, right? And, you know, and maybe, probably, many of you are a better person than I am.

But let me ask you this question, a little thought experiment. Imagine a smartphone comes out one day, and it will. The iPhone 20. And imagine it has the ability to read your mind and then to

automatically tweet every single thought that comes into your head.

I think Trump already has one of these. We're not going to get any more political than that. Listen. But imagine you have a phone that you think it, and before you can do anything, you don't have to hit a button or anything. You think it, and bam, it's out there on your feed for the world to see. And imagine it's just running all the time, tweeting, tweeting, tweeting, tweeting, tweeting, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam.

So imagine this happening when you're sitting in traffic, you know, and you're, ah, tweeting all the time, right? Right? Imagine that you're out in public, and your kids are completely melting down.

[ 15 : 58 ] The thoughts that you're having about your kids in that moment. And the tweets are going out, right, the whole time. You know, imagine that the tweets start to go out when you find out that the flight is overbooked.

Or the only seat left is a middle seat. And imagine sitting down in the middle seat, and the person to your left and to your right, and you see them opening Twitter.

And you just think, oh, no. Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet. It's going out there right now, right? Imagine the next time that you're swiping profiles on a dating app. And the Twitter feed is just running.

Right? Imagine this is happening. And imagine people who may not really know you just read your feed. What kind of things would they say about you? What an upstanding citizen.

What an amazing person. What a specimen of human excellence. Not my feed. So imagine this.

[ 16 : 57 ] You know, I think we like to think of ourselves in a certain light. But if people really knew what was going on on the inside. You know, deep down in all of us, there's this core of selfishness.

It's this core in us, this conviction that ultimately I matter more than you. It's this selfishness that says it's worth sacrificing other people to benefit me.

Now, you may not go out and sexually assault people, right? But is there some thread of that that feels the slightest bit familiar?

I would rather take than give. I would rather destroy than I might flourish rather than allowing myself to suffer in order that others might flourish.

Is there some common thread there? Right? So this inner selfishness, this kind of rotten core is what the Bible calls sin. And frankly, I think the media has no idea how to handle these situations as they come out.

[ 18 : 00 ] Because, you know, a while ago we lost the word sin in our vocabulary. And so I think we're spiritually very ill-equipped to deal with these horrible things as they happen.

You know, we blame it on a lack of education. Or this person needed to learn more about equality.

Or we needed better regulations in place. No. No, I won't even scratch it. Instead of loving God and our neighbors, ultimately human beings, we've come to love ourselves.

Because we actually want to be God in our own lives. And you know what that does when that happens, when that core takes root in you? It turns people who were created for goodness and beauty into monsters.

And people who were created for goodness and beauty do monstrous things to each other. So back to our first question. Why is the world so dark? Right?

Is it people on the left? Is it people on the right? Is it monsters hiding in our midst? No. Why is the world so dark? It's because of me. I'm the reason.

[ 19 : 09 ] Because as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either. But right through every human heart.

And through all human hearts. That's the origin of the darkness. So if that is the case, then how does Christmas help us deal with that darkness?

And the thing that I hope that becomes clear is once you realize the source of the darkness, where it really comes from, Christmas begins to make a lot more sense.

If you read Isaiah 9, Isaiah 9 is all about the coming of this king. You know, a light has come into the darkness.

A light is shining on people who have been walking in darkness. What is that light? That light is a king. A king who will sit on the throne of David in the lineage of the great king David.

[ 20 : 09 ] But this king is unlike David or any other human king. If you look at the titles, it makes it clear he's going to be a wonderful counselor. A mighty God. Everlasting Father.

Prince of Peace. And these titles go far beyond anything that you would ever use to describe a human ruler. And this king, it says what this king is going to do. He's going to bring ultimate judgment to the world. He's going to bring judgment in the form of breaking the rod of the oppressor. Judgment in the form of taking all of the implements of war and burning them to ash. Judgment in the form of establishing everlasting justice and peace for all time. What that means is that all of the monsters of the world will be unmasked. And they will be punished. And all of the victims will be vindicated and restored. Every tear wiped away. [ 21 : 14 ] Every memory of suffering eradicated for all time. Now most people dislike the idea of judgment. You think of the person on the street corner with the sign talking about the end of the world is coming.

But every time we voice outrage over something like sexual assault. Or racism. Or poverty. Or injustice. Or exploitation. The list goes on and on and on. Every time we voice outrage over that. We're actually crying out for justice. Which means we're crying out for judgment. Because we're saying somebody needs to come and make this right. Somebody needs to punish that guy. Somebody needs to say this is not okay. How is this okay? Somebody needs to restore this person. This person is broken. They need to be restored. This pain needs to be atoned for. You're crying out for judgment. But the problem comes when we begin to realize what we just talked about a moment ago. [ 22 : 17 ] See if the darkness was just confined to a certain people group. Well it would be very easy to deal with the problem. And you've seen that kind of thinking all through history. It's their fault.

Eradicate them. And the world gets better. Right? But if it were that straightforward. Then we would know what we had to do. But as we know it's not that straightforward. It's not that easy. If the line between good and evil truly actually does run through every human heart in this room. We've got a serious problem. When we cry out for judgment. What does that ultimately mean? About our future. Right? So the question becomes. How can this king who is coming. Possibly offer hope. Both for the world. And for the human race. At the same time. Because if this king doesn't ultimately bring the kind of judgment that we're talking about. There's no hope for the world. [ 23 : 16 ] Things are just going to keep on getting worse. And worse. And worse. But if he does bring judgment. Then what hope is there for us?

And this is the great quandary of the Old Testament. That really doesn't get resolved. Jewish philosophers have wondered about the judgment of God. And the mercy of God. And how could they go together? How could they fit? How could you have a God who brings hope both for the world. And for human beings who live in it? The answer. Is Christmas. Christmas. Isaiah 9. It's not entirely clear until you really look at it. It's not just about one advent. In other words one coming. The word advent means coming. Isaiah 9 is not just about one coming. There are two events represented in Isaiah 9. One day this conquering king will come. [ 24 : 16 ] And he will bring perfect judgment. He will cleanse the world of evil. All darkness will be banished. Everything will be restored. That will come one day. But before that.

Isaiah says that he will come first. As a child. And in the full reading of Isaiah 9. You see that this child will be born in Galilee. And of course we're talking about Jesus Christ. Who comes at Christmas. Not as a conquering king. But as a powerless. Utterly vulnerable infant. The question becomes why? Why this first coming? Well one day Jesus will come to judge the world. But first. He comes not to judge it. But to save it. To actually offer himself as a sacrifice for it. What you might consider the ultimate Christmas gift. For us. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. Given for what purpose? Well this is God's answer to the darkness. [ 25 : 18 ] While we're busy blaming other people for the darkness. Which is human nature. You see it in Genesis 3. In the reading we heard. You know it's her fault. It's his fault. He did it. She did it.

They did it. Government did it. While we're busy blaming others for the darkness. Jesus. Enters the world quietly. Without any fanfare. For one single purpose.

Not to assign blame. But to take it. He absorbs it. Into himself. The darkness. He absorbs the darkness.

Into his own flesh. You know. And then when he dies. On the cross. He seals. The fate. Of all the darkness in the world. He guarantees.

That one day. It will be no more. It will evaporate. Like mist. As the sun rises. In the early morning. So for Christians.

[ 26 : 12 ] Who trust Jesus. For grace. And for forgiveness. We know that Jesus died. In order to deal with the darkness. Inside us. Which means. We know. When he comes again. The darkness will be banished.

And we will be made new. And that is the hope. Of Christmas. So as we think about Christmas. As a way of dealing with the darkness. Let me give you a few.

Practical ways. That Christmas. Enables us to deal with the darkness. Here and now. Number one. The truth. At the heart of Christmas. Means.

That we should never be surprised. By darkness. We will never be surprised. By darkness. You know. People get. You know. How could this happen? I thought he was such a good person.

How could this happen? People who understand Christmas. Never say. How could this happen? You know what we say? But for the grace of God. That could have been me.

[ 27 : 12 ] That's why Christians. By the way. Value. That's why we value. Being in communities. Where we focus on. The formation of. Virtue. And character. And why we want to hold.

Each other accountable. We're not being legalists. We understand the darkness. We don't deny it. We don't stuff it in a bag. And carry it behind us. Like Jung talked about. We face it. We realize. This is serious stuff. We understand. We understand. That anyone. Under the right circumstances. Can become a monster. And I was just at a. At a. You know.

Not too long ago. I was at an AA meeting. It's one of the few places. You can go. Where you see people. Who have taken off. That mask. And they're looking. That darkness. Square in the eyes. You know. It's a. It's a culture. That they've created. Where people are open. And honest. About that inner monster. Because it has wrecked their lives. Enough times. That they want to do anything. To be free from it.

[ 28 : 07 ] So we're never surprised. By the darkness. Number two. Christmas means. If you understand it. And believe it. It gives you true hope. To endure the darkness. Which means. We don't need sentimentalism.

You can go home. And watch Hallmark. If you want. But you don't need it. You don't need it. And we don't need consumerism. We don't need to escape it. Because we know. That ultimately. Darkness will come to an end.

We know that Jesus. Will come again. And that he will put an end. To all of this. And if you know. That an end is coming. You can endure. Just about anything. So we can endure it head on. We can be honest about it.

Not numb ourselves. So we're never surprised by it. It gives us hope to endure it. The darkness. Number three. Christmas enables us.

To deal with our own darkness. To actually deal with it. It gives us the courage. To admit. That on some level. We are complicit. In the darkness of the world.

[ 29 : 00 ] Our own sin. And selfishness. Because we know. That because of Christmas. And because Jesus. Instead of assigning blame. Takes blame. We know that the minute.

We admit that to God. He immediately responds. With grace. And forgiveness. And mercy. And love. So we can deal with our darkness. You know. In this church.

Every week. We come together. And one of the main things we do. Is we confess. So we can hear again. Be reminded again. God has forgiven you. The darkness has been dealt with. In you. And then lastly.

We're not surprised by it. We're able to endure it. We're able to deal with our own darkness. The fourth thing. Is that Christmas empowers us. To push back the darkness.

In the world around us. To push it back. You know why? Because if you believe. And understand Christmas. You recognize that there is no longer. Us and them.

[ 29 : 54 ] It brings all of those. Dividing walls down. And you begin to realize. That every single human being. Is yes. A victim. A victim of the darkness.

We suffered. We felt pain. And at the same time. Every single human being. Is also. In their own way. A perpetrator. And what that means. Ultimately. Is that every single human being. Is on the same level. Playing field. We all have the same need. For the same savior. Who we know. Will respond. Always. With grace. And mercy.

And forgiveness. And compassion. So it transforms. How we see people. Even our enemies. At the end of the day. We're not enemies. We're exactly the same.

We're both part of the problem. So this is God's answer. To the darkness of the world. This is the true light. Of Jesus Christ. As Isaiah 9. 2 says. The people who walked in darkness.

[ 30 : 51 ] Have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land. Of deep darkness. On them. A light. Has shown. Amen.