

The truth is out

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Preacher: John Woods

[0:00] Thank you again for your welcome today. Just a sip of water before we begin.!

And thank you David for pointing out the word faithfulness can be translated truth. Both those ideas are worth keeping in our mind as we kind of go forward.

Because truth is always a relational thing. Truth is something which we discover in relationship to the living God. And truth is something which cements relationships between human beings. It undermines trust when truth is not present. It confirms trust when our reliability is seen in the context of human life.

We live in a time of fake news and conspiracy theories. A climate of deception. It's difficult to know whether an employer's words are true, an employee's words when they phone in sick.

[1:23] It's difficult to know whether politicians of any party are telling us the truth, or engaging in some form of spin to pull the wool over our eyes.

Maybe to pull the whole skin of a sheep over our eyes to deceive us. If you can find the truth, I think it's good advice to hang on to it for dear life.

Because it will save your life and keep you sane. The truth is out. And the truth is what we must hang on to.

Because our life depends on it. George Orwell, in the novel 1984, said, There was truth and there was untruth.

And if you cling to truth, even against the whole world, you are not mad. There is a madness, isn't there, in human life. A madness that is perceived to be the way that people think.

[2:26] The way that people live. This is what people do. This is how people are. This is normal, if not new normal. But sometimes, when people profess themselves to be wise, as Paul writes to the Romans, they are foolish.

And the Psalm speaks to us about the importance of not engaging in folly, but discovering the truth. Well, a different person from a while ago, Charles Dickens said, It was the worst of times, the best of times, the worst of times.

He might well be talking about Christmas in 2021. We know, don't we, that Christmas is one of those times in the year when families get together.

And we realize that that's really a pressure at this time. And sadness with those who have not been able to get together. It's also a time when families can frequently fall out.

And experience great difficulties and misunderstanding. Those annoying relatives that we see once a year, and we realize why we only see them once a year.

[3:43] It is the best of times. And it is the worst of times. Of course, that's been true, isn't it?

In the last year or so, people have wondered, you know, are we going to get together? Can we get the turkey? Can we source the toys for the children? Will we be able to actually get this together at all?

We've been living at a very extreme level of anxiety for nearly a couple of years.

And I don't know about you, I think probably the last two or three weeks, it feels as though the anxiety level has been ratcheted up several notches. And probably some people have kind of experienced an anxiety in the last week or two that they've not experienced since possibly March 2020.

What on earth is going on? What's going to come next? What would be the end of it? And I think one of the ways of describing this, and I think it's probably a helpful way of describing it, is that it is a reduced life.

[4:52] A reduced life, reduced spontaneity, reduced opportunities, a reduction of a sense of being at ease, of experiencing peace, and just being able to rest and relax.

Because you just don't know what curveball is going to be thrown at you next. A reduced life is the best of times.

It is the worst of times. And we are celebrating Christmas. We are celebrating the wonderful news, the joyful news that Jesus Christ is born into the world.

Although you can't help feeling that with the words of another psalm, how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Joy to the world when the world appears to be falling apart.

It's quite difficult, isn't it, to square the circle of that one at Christmas time or at any time. A reduced life. The first eight verses of Psalm 85, which we are not going to concentrate on, tells the story of the reduction of the people of Israel.

[6:10] The psalmist there in verses one and two speaks about their restoration, their forgiveness, the anger of God being turned away. But obviously they are in a situation now where much of that has unraveled.

They are not in that situation. They are not in that peaceful, close, harmonious relationship with God. And therefore we have this prayer in verse six and seven.

Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your mercy, Lord, and grant us your salvation. Revive us that we might rejoice. David reminded us that joy is not a kind of an unconditional kind of feeling.

It's not something you can kind of switch on, click and make happen. Joy is something that arises out of life. Joy is something that arises out of the life of God.

Revive us. Bring us back to the home page again, Lord. Revive our life. Revive our sense of the reality of who you are.

[7:19] Revive and restore us. And that's what we want, isn't it? We want to be restored to our factory settings as a society and a world.

We want to get back to not a new normal, but normal. A normal normal. And that's the situation in the psalm as well.

There's a sense in which what they were, what they had experienced, was no longer their experience. And they wanted to get back. Someone once sang, everybody wants to get back to the garden.

Everyone wants to get back to the place of fellowship with God. That's our aspiration. That's our primary desire. And it's this last part of the psalm that I particularly want to focus on.

Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation. What we need is a revelation. What we need is a clear sense of seeing.

[8:24] We need our eyes opened in order to see the reality of the living God and experience him in a fresh way again. Show us. Children love the experience, whether it be in school or church, of show and tell.

It's great to be able to show what we've done, what we've discovered to others. Well, the Christmas message is a real show and tell.

God has been at work and this is what he's done. Blind eyes need to see. Tired hearts need to be reawakened.

People who have experienced hope deferred that makes the heart sick need the healing balm of the revelation of God's love to them that this psalm speaks about.

Surely his salvation, we read there, is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in the land.

[9:32] Do you see the kind of echoes of the Christmas story? Salvation, fear, glory, that hillside bathed in light, the angels announcing the news to shepherds, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One thing that strikes me about this psalm, those verses that we're going to particularly focus on in verses 10 and 11, is the contrasts.

The great contrasts between those great statements that the psalmist uses and the contrasts that we see at Christmas.

Love and faithfulness, verse 10, or love and truth, meet together. Righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs from the earth.

And righteousness looks down from heaven, or truth springs from the earth. And righteousness looks down from heaven. The Christmas story is a story of contrasts.

[10:39] I read, or I've been reading for the last year or so, a daily sermon by a man called Augustine. He lived 1,500 years ago. But I find that he speaks to me in a very fresh way today.

And the early church loved Psalm 85 as a Christmas text. And Augustine preached on this Christmas text. He captured this idea of contrasts. He said, Christ's feebleness is our firmness. Christ's infant inability to talk is our eloquence. Christ's need is our abundance. Because years later, Christ's death became our life.

The bread of heaven is lying in a manger. Yes, great abundance is ours. Because Christ has come. Now we feel our feebleness, don't we? But Christ has become feeble for us. That we might be firm. We might be strong. We feel our poverty and our lack.

[11:40] The one who is rich for our sakes became poor. That we, through his poverty, might become rich. Augustine in another sermon on this text said, The foundation hung on a tree.

Strength growing weak. Eternal health being wounded. Life dying.

The Christmas story, the story of Jesus is about very powerful contrasts. Things that don't normally go together.

That combined produce an amazing result. Sometimes it's true in fashion. You know, that doesn't really seem to go with that.

But it somehow works. Or in food, some brilliant chef suddenly decides that this ingredient, this ingredient, that you don't normally think of going together, goes together and produces a brilliant dish.

[12:48] And here in the psalm we have these wonderful qualities, these contrasting qualities at work in Jesus. Love and faithfulness meet together.

Righteousness and peace kiss each other. God's beautiful character revealed.

If we are to have a life that's not reduced, that's full, that's abundant, we need to see this God. We need to connect with this God in a very clear and powerful way.

We have God's industrial strength, love, his truth and love combined, revealed to us here in the psalm.

And of course, eventually revealed to us in Jesus. In a recent Doctor Who episode, the Cybermen say, Life, love is not a mission, it's an emotion.

[13:53] Now, of course, we know that love is a verb. Love is not an emotion, but an action. And at Christmas time, we remember that God's love has acted in the dramatic form of God becoming man.

Love coming down at Christmas. God's love is not an emotion, it is an action. God is love, and the truth of God's love is out at Christmas.

It's been revealed. Love does things. And what God's love has done is that he has come. God so loved that he gave.

God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream.

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[14:59] God so loved that dream. God so loved that dream. moment and it shows Jenna Coleman standing in front of a chest of drawers with a with a large bag on it which does some surprising things that see if we can get it.

Merry Christmas. This is what love smells like. This Christmas shop thousands of offers at Boots. You don't need to go to Boots has to be said I release you from that. You know I'm not getting any commission from them. But it begins with Jenna Coleman looking into this this bag and and the bag

produces hundreds and hundreds of presents.

It's a bag of joy. It's a bag of abundance and it's a reminder that when God does give when God shows his love it's not kind of like those gifts you sometimes get at Christmas.

You know you've seen it and people open it up and they kind of have a look inside to see if there's anything else in there. They don't say it but they're almost you know they're thinking is that it?

[16:25] Don't give gifts like that. We all love the gifts that keep giving don't we? And God's gift is the gift that keeps giving.

What does what does Christmas feel like is the sign on that bag. It feels like abundance. Now have you ever had someone really make a fuss of you?

They've maybe taken you out for the day. They're taking you to your favorite place. They're taking you somewhere where you have your favorite food. And at the end of the day you think I couldn't have thought of a more perfect day.

You've thought of everything. And of course in the Christmas gift of Jesus God's son God has thought of everything. He is the gift of gifts.

All other gifts in one. At the end of the ad, Jenna Coleman gives her nan a present of some perfume. And on the little note on the perfume it says, This is what love smells like.

[17:38] And of course those who went to the stable with the straw and the animal noises and the animal smell, they got to see what love looks like.

Love looks like God getting down in the muck and mire of human life and coming right down to where we are. He knows our postcode.

He knows our circumstances. He knows our needs. For Jesus has been there. It's one of his names. Emmanuel. God with us.

That means that Jesus has been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt. This is what love looks like.

Love is not just a concept. It is a person who has come to us. The son of God has come to us. He's made himself known to us.

[18:46] Righteousness and peace kiss each other. Now, people writing about this psalm say that the first two qualities, love and truth, often appear in the Old Testament.

But righteousness and peace don't so often appear together. The one who does the right thing and the one who establishes peace, they're sometimes diametrically opposed, aren't they, in their temperament.

The person who wants to do it the right way and the person who makes peace, they're often in conflict. Maybe you've got parents like that.

Someone who always wants it right. You know, dinner on the table at 5.30. And the peacemaker.

Hey, let's smooth this over. Let's try and get the relationships right. Let's try and make some peace in this matter. Righteousness and peace kiss each other.

[19:51] There is a dramatic confrontation. This kiss of the God who does the right thing and the God who wants to establish peace in the earth.

Not as separate activities, not as conflicting activities, but activities which come together in harmony. What is God doing when he comes to the earth and the son Jesus?

He is coming to a reduced earth and he's offering abundant life. He's coming to a fragmented world and he's bringing a message of peace.

He is coming to reconcile all things to himself. That's what Jesus is doing. He is our peace, as Paul writes to the Ephesians. Ephesians. Righteousness and peace kiss each other.

If you come from Scotland, you might have heard of the phrase, the Glasgow kiss. Do you know what a Glasgow kiss is? It's a headbutt.

[20:55] And you know, Glaswegians, they would perhaps understand this text. That righteousness and peace kiss each other.

In fact, some would argue that the word kiss ought to be translated combat. But the way that righteousness and peace is experienced by us is that Jesus, quite literally, takes a bullet for us.

That righteousness and peace kissing each other is an explosive Glasgow kiss that fells the Son of God in order that we might experience life and healing.

The Son of God is smashed in order that we might be made whole. He is crushed. He is abandoned that we might be put together again and welcomed by the living God.

My, that's good news, isn't it? That's good news. No wonder the angels were excited. No wonder the shepherds ran to Bethlehem. It's good news. You know, it's important for us, isn't it, at Christmas time, to understand why this news sets the pulse of racing.

[22:20] It's important for us to recognize why this news quickens our steps. Sometimes you get the impression that the Christians are bored with the Christian message, the Christmas message.

How can we expect those who are not Christians to be interested in it? This is good news. Faithfulness or truth springs up from the earth and righteousness looks down from heaven. And, of course, this image of truth springing from the earth is quite confusing, really, isn't it? Because we said at the beginning we live in a society, a climate of deception, where more likely than not, people are not telling us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth springs forth from the earth because God has come to the earth. He has become man and truth emerges from the earth because God has come right down to the earth to expose it. It's not going to arise any other way. We're not going to encounter true love without love coming down. We're not going to encounter true truth unless truth comes down and then arises.

[23:47] And righteousness looks down from heaven. It is finished. The Father is pleased with His Son.

His Son has done the work. He has come. He has died. He has risen. Faithfulness springs from the earth and righteousness looks down from heaven.

Now, the beginning of the psalm almost has a picture of a barren landscape. And, of course, when people are spiritually disconnected from God, they are barren.

There is no life. There is no possibility of fruitfulness. It is like a lunar surface. But from that unpromising soil sprung life.

Truth springs up from the earth. Those two words, love and faithfulness or love and truth, we see them in the Christmas story.

[25:00] We could translate the word love, kindness, graciousness, steadfast love. And John writes to us in his gospel of Jesus.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us. Full of grace and truth. Where do those words come together?

Where do those words combine in their perfection? They combine in their perfection in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. He's the one who has come to restore a broken world.

That's what He does. A couple of years ago, when people went to music festivals, the last live Glastonbury, the grime artist Stormzy sang, You fixed me.

Now I'm blinded by your grace. Lord, I've been broken. Although I'm not worthy, you fixed me. I'm blinded by your grace. You came and saved me.

[26:04] It's astonishing, isn't it? 100,000 people at Glastonbury heard those words. Because those are the words we want to say amen to. Amen. That's why He's come.

Jesus has come to mend the broken, to bring peace to those who are far off. Because He is full of grace and truth. Then you've heard of the story of Babette's Feast.

It's a story of a young woman, a cook, a chef in France, revolutionary France, who has to leave France with nothing. And ends up in Scandinavia in a community which is very buttoned down and very restrictive, where there's very little joy and very little excess.

Babette wants to give them a sense of abundance, a sense of overflowing. And she eventually wins the lottery.

Again, I wasn't commending boots and I'm not commending the lottery, but she won the lottery. 10,000 francs. A lot of money at the time. A couple of hundred years ago or so.

[27:18] And she decides she's going to do something for this village. And she imports the best of ingredients from France for a very lavish meal.

And Babette cooks a meal. And they enjoy the meal almost in silence because they're stunned by the beauty and the quality and the care of the meal.

And afterwards, they speak to her and they say, well, can we pay you? And she says, no, it's free. It's a gift to you.

It's my gift to you. And then they realize that she spent all of the 10,000 francs to prepare that meal. And of course, that's what we celebrate at Christmas, isn't it?

Jesus comes to our earth and he spends it all. He spends it all on us. He pours out his life blood for us. Everything.

[28:24] He is full of grace and truth. Someone observing the meal, Babette's feast, says this, man is frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe.

But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness, we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason, we tremble. We tremble before making our choice in life.

And after having made it again, tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us, but that we shall wait for it with confidence and acknowledge it with gratitude.

Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular. Grace takes us all to its heart and proclaims general amnesty.

See, that which we have chosen is given us and that which we have refused is also at the same time granted to us. Aye, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly.

[29:35] For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed each other. The man sees this abundant feast, this pouring out of all the resources in order to elevate the thinking and the experience of those who came to the meal.

And his connection in his mind immediately is with this very text. Because this is breathtaking. Breathtaking.

The character of God, the wonderful character of God revealed in Jesus' coming, born and dying for people like you and me.

Stunning. Life-changing. Amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

How can you not be moved by that? Move to trust this Jesus, know this Jesus, follow this Jesus, worship this Jesus, give everything to him, heart, soul, mind and strength.

[31:04] Receive his gift of forgiveness. Enter into the gift of a freshly minted life. Those last, the last verse of the psalm says, righteousness shall go before him and shall set us in the way of his steps.

The psalm begins with those who have wandered from the path. The psalm, after the revelation of God's character, sees people redirected on the path.

Set right. Set on to the path of life and truth. It's interesting, isn't it? That one of the names that Jesus uses is, I am the path.

I am the path, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. This is the one who mends our brokenness.

This is the one who heals our hearts. This is the one who forgives our sins. This is the one who redirects our steps. He is everything. Everything has been given for us and to us.

[32:24] Praise his name. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we thank you for who you are. We thank you for your character.

We thank you that you combine qualities that sometimes are not seen anywhere else in the universe. We thank you that you are love and you are truth.

you are righteous and you are the God of peace and we thank you Father that we celebrate at this Christmas time that these realities have all been combined in the revelation of your son Jesus for us.

Father, capture our imagination we pray with these things. We pray that you will excite us afresh by this good news. Father God where we perhaps this morning have wandered off the path have experienced a reduction of our lives a reduction of our spiritual lives will you not revive us again that we might rejoice in you?

Will you not restore us we pray restore us to those spiritual factory settings that we might walk in your footsteps and glorify your name for we ask it in Jesus name Amen Thank you.