

More than just a feel good story

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[0 : 00] earlier when Harry asked us the key to a feel-good story, he showed us those clips where there was a problem or a crisis that needs overcoming. And then talking in Miro, we said, you need a happy ending.

Good must triumph over evil. And on the face of it, this Christmas story, it has all the boxes ticked, doesn't it? There's a problem, so Mary's pregnant, and she and Joseph aren't married. It was the first shotgun wedding, if you like. And in their culture, it was a huge problem. Add to that the one that we all know of, there was no room in the inn.

But then you've got a problem overcome because what you get is a barn with soft lighting. You get the most polite farm animals the world has ever seen. And then you have this beautiful baby just laid there in that lovely, poop-free food trough.

And then to really pump up the feel-good factor, you've got the shepherds. You've got the wise men bringing their gifts. Throw in a little drummer boy. You've got that star in the sky and give it the greatest soundtrack, which we're hearing this evening.

[1 : 16] There is plenty of feel-good factor for any school play. The trouble is, the only one who doesn't know he's writing a feel-good story is our author, Luke.

And that's because he ends this story not with happy ever after, but where Christmas Jesus has a horrible Easter death.

No feel-good story has the hero dying. And what's more, all feel-good stories start with the classic once upon a time or my personal favourite, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

That's a Star Wars reference for those of you who don't know. You see, our author Luke wasn't writing a feel-good story per se, but rather he is presenting real history.

He's writing real eyewitness courtroom testimony. Lawyer friends of mine tell me that this is the sort of documentation they deal with every day. He wrote his book, which forms part of the Bible, in about 60 AD.

[2 : 25] That's around 30 years after the lifetime of Jesus. But still within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Back in chapter 1, Luke tells us that he's compiling an eyewitness account.

He wants to give his readers certainty about the life of Jesus. And you can see that at the start of chapter 2. If you've got your Bibles, can you please open them again to page 1026?

And as Jeff said, there's one of these A5 printouts of the Luke passage. I'll be trying to bring all those readings together, but mainly this Luke one.

So if you've got that, that would really help me. Have a look down at sentence number 1, or verse 1. It talks about the days of, during the reign of Caesar Augustus.

Verse 2 goes on to talk about when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke details places. Further down, sentence 4, verse 4, names the towns of Nazareth in Galilee and Bethlehem in Judea.

[3 : 30] These are real towns that you can really visit today. Luke includes a specific event, the first census of the Roman Empire, and he includes specific people, Caesar Augustus, Joseph, of the lineage of King David.

And actually Luke includes these historical markers over the page in chapter 3 as well. So just quickly, can you just flick over the page if you've got a Bible? If you've got a Bible, that is.

Chapter 3, verse 1, Luke details another specific time during the rule of Tiberius Caesar a little bit later. During the governor of Pontius Pilate, he tells us that Herod was the local governor.

And in verse 2, he even tells us who was the high priest. It was Annas and Caiaphas. You see, if you're inventing a feel-good story, you must locate it in a time or location far away, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, away from historically checkable things.

Now here we have real places, real people, real events, a real baby, a real manger, a real mother, a real birth. Luke tells us in verse 10, just turn back to chapter 2, that's the last bit of flicking around, chapter 2, verse 10, that the shepherds heard the angels speaking to them.

[5 : 00] They hurried to see the baby. Then in verse 20, it says, the shepherds glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen.

And so it's real eyewitness testimony we are dealing with. And this is really interesting because out there, everyone in Melbourne still thinks that Christmas is just a feel-good story.

But Luke demonstrates that these events are so much more than a feel-good school play. And there's loads more to say about the historical certainty of Luke's gospel and the New Testament. Do come and chat to me if you're interested in those sorts of things. I'd love to talk to you about them. But for the rest of our time, I just want us to focus on and follow these shepherds because I think Luke is drawing our attention towards them.

Have a look at chapter 2, verse 8. It says, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

[6 : 07] I don't know what comes to your mind when you think of angels. Maybe it's those chubby baby things with wings. And I don't know where that came from because actually in the Bible, angels are terrifying creatures.

And every time angels appear in the Bible, they first have to calm everyone down before they can deliver their message. That's probably because they reflect the glory of the Lord, which is a terrifying thing for us to sort of behold.

And our terrified shepherds here, they're no different. The angel says in verse 10, Do not be afraid. And why? Because I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah or the Christ. He is the Lord. Now, if someone, probably Mel Gibson, decides to turn this into a Hollywood movie, this is the part of the movie where Mel needs to really amp up the soundtrack.

He needs to bring in the brass and the really triumphant music because this is actually the moment the whole world has been waiting for. In fact, the moment that God's people had been waiting thousands of years for since the Garden of Eden.

[7 : 29] You remember our first reading of that famous Garden of Eden and the guys, they said that this was our problem. I'm not sure what you think our greatest problem is.

If you ask the person next to you, I wonder what they would say. Perhaps it is political uncertainty. Maybe the rise of ISIS. Maybe it's greed and corruption.

Maybe it's global warming. What about a bit closer to home? Maybe it's brokenness in relationships. Perhaps that earth shattering phone call from the doctor.

Maybe the thought of another Christmas with your family just stresses you out completely. The Bible says that our biggest problem is none of those things, in fact.

But rather, our biggest problem is that we're all facing God's just judgment. All people, yes voters, no voters, old, young, Australian, Chinese, this age, ages past, all of us facing God's just judgment.

[8 : 43] And just judgment is the correct wording, actually, because all people have rebelled against their creator. We've all dethroned God and set ourselves up as God in our own lives.

The Bible calls that sin. In verse 13, there's a sky full of angels glorifying God, but down here on earth, a world full of people rebelling against him.

And I think that helps to explain why the world is the way it is. Can you imagine what happens when six billion little gods get together? You get a world of sin, where disasters are the norm, where greed and sickness and terror are running rampant, where good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good.

Our first reading showed us the origins of this problem, where our greatest grandparents, Adam and Eve, they rebelled against their creator. They wanted to run their own lives.

They wanted to be their own little gods. That is sin. And following on the back of sin comes death and sickness and disaster and lastly, judgment.

[10 : 12] And yeah, we here, we weren't in the garden there with them, but every day when we rebel against God in our own ways, we're showing that tragic family trait.

God must judge sin if he is to be just. And actually that's a great thing because that means that the political scoundrels out there, they will have to answer him.

The ISIS terrorists will be avenged. Greed and corruption will be judged. And all those who have ever hurt you in any way will have to give him an account.

God is just. But actually, if that's true for all the baddies out there, it is also true for me as well. All the ways that I've hurt people over the years, all the lies, all the me, me, me, me living. What kind of monster would God be if he just swept all of my bad things under the carpet?

[11:24] Boys will be boys. Our biggest problem is that we're all facing God's just judgments. And since the Garden of Eden, all of God's people have known this to be the case and they've been waiting for something to repair this relationship.

Humanity had many chances at reconciliation. There was Noah and the ark. That was humanity take two. That lasted about 40 days. There was Moses.

He gave Israel some laws to help them live rightly under God. He gave them a sacrificial system where the blood of an animal would be used to atone for your sin.

These were both good things. But again, they only lasted a few days till the people sinned again. God even established a line of kings and a monarchy to lead his people rightly under him.

But that monarchy all but disappeared after a few centuries. Just judgment, human sin. We are miles away from a feel-good story, aren't we?

[12:35] And this broken relationship with God and amongst us, it went on for thousands of years. And that is until our second reading, which is from Isaiah. And Isaiah was God's voice or prophet in the world.

Chapter 9 was read for us. And chapter 9 says that people walking in darkness will receive a great light. Darkness is the Bible's imagery for God's judgments.

Isaiah claims that those who are crushed under the darkness of God's judgments can now stand in the light of his favor. He promises that someone special will come from Galilee, who will increase the joy of condemned people.

He promises a baby. This baby will grow up to be king, the prince of peace, the mighty God.

His kingdom will never end. He will rule in justice and righteousness, not corruption and greed. And he will establish a peace with God that will never end.

[13:44] God and sin is reconciled. We sang that earlier today. And it's no wonder then, at the birth of this special baby, Jesus, that the sky fills with angels praising him.

Verse 14, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Finally, a solution to our biggest problem. The good news of great joy from a glorious God.

God. You see, the popular trimmings of the Christmas story make it sound like any other feel-good story on offer. But I think the problem with a feel-good story is the lack of return.

You see, the most they can give you is to feel good for a couple of hours in the cinema or maybe that 10 minutes on YouTube. But here in verse 10 of chapter 2, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you who is Christ the Lord. Christians call this good news the gospel. And Luke claims that this is the most significant news bulletin that has ever been told.

[15:03] told to us by an angel, no less. Not a mere feel-good story, but a world-saving one instead. And you will not find anything like this anywhere in the universe.

Jesus, as Savior, bringing peace with God for you. Happy Christmas. And in everyday life, I think there are loads of ways that people can change.

So you can change your job, you can change your relationship status. I'm told you can even change your gender these days. People can go from being naughty to nice this time of year.

But trusting Jesus to be your Savior is the only thing that changes you in the only real way, because he takes you out of the darkness of God's judgments and into the favor of his great light.

From condemnation to salvation. From one of God's enemies to one of God's children. All one for those who trust in his atoning death for them.

[16:22] This is more than a feel-good story. This is the best story. But this is really important because Jesus' salvation also wins for us a new life.

An eternal life no less. He wins for us a new relationship with God in a new indestructible cancer-free body in an entirely new creation where death and mourning and crying and pain don't exist.

Where he will take his rightful seat as the king of the universe and there will be no more rebellion no more problem only joy.

At Christmas we reflect on the year that's just gone and maybe you've had a great year this year that's terrific but maybe you've had a shocker this year.

Maybe you've struggled with broken relationships self-worth or identity anxiety mental illness even loneliness but this future under King Jesus this future to look towards to start living for today will give you a joy deeper than any pain you're experiencing now even in the face of death.

[17 : 51] Jesus saves you from sin and judgement we talked about that but for a new life. This is the Christian hope and this is more than a feel good story.

And I don't know what present you want this year but if you've got any sense at all all you should want for Christmas is him.

And if that is you I just want to finish by looking at the reaction of the shepherds to this news.

Chapter 2 verse 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven the shepherds said to one another let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in a manger. These verses tell us that the shepherds went to investigate this Jesus whom they were told about.

And notice that as soon as they go they find him. They meet him face to face. And I guess that's why Luke is writing this part of his story.

[19 : 09] Yes, to give us historical certainty but also that we too would investigate Jesus for ourselves just like the shepherds and that we too will meet him face to face.

Yeah, he's not in a manger anymore. We find him in his word which Luke has documented for us.

And after meeting Jesus in verse 20 it speaks of the shepherds uncontainable joy.

Verse 20 the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told. They returned home lives changed praising and glorifying God because they realised that Jesus was everything they were told.

And that's my prayer for you this Christmas that has been my prayer in the lead up to this evening that you too would return home that you would investigate Jesus for yourselves and that you would see that him and Christmas are so much more than a feel good story just as you have been told.

Fear not for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you who is Christ the Lord.

[20 : 45] Amen.