

The Continuing Story of Christmas

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[0:00] What a blessing it is to come to the Christmas season, not just because of the remembrance, but because of the music.

! I just love the music of Christmas. And they couldn't have been better positioned this morning just to help prepare our hearts for the subject that we're going to be dealing with today.

If you've looked at your bulletins and if you're looking at the screen, you see Christmas and the second coming. And you might be asking yourself the question, time out, wait a second, go back to seminary.

I think you need to get your theology straightened out here, Andrew, because Christmas and the second coming just don't go together. I mean, come on. And then for our Christmas passage today, we're going to be in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5.

How many of you have ever had a Christmas sermon from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5? All right, it's a first. Hopefully not the last.

[1:22] Because we hope to be here again next week to fill out our discussion about how in the world does Christmas go with the second coming.

And what I'd like to help us understand today is it really is just a matter of perspective. And any of you who have heard stories about the significance of perspective would be familiar with the story of the six blind men who are on their journey.

Okay? And on their journey, all of a sudden, one of them runs into this elephant. And we're going to see that here in a moment here. So they're running into this elephant.

And the first guy, he's feeling around. He's blind. He doesn't know what this is. But he hears this is an elephant. And he says, ha-ha, I know what an elephant is.

It's large like a wall. It can't be pushed. This is what an elephant truly is. Then the second guy says, are you kidding me?

[2:28] I can put my arms around this elephant. You can't put your arms around a wall. Certainly, a wall is not a good description of an elephant.

He's holding on to the leg. And he says, what a better description of an elephant is as a tree. I can feel the texture. I can feel this bark-like substance.

And I can put my arms around it just like a tree. Of course, the third guy says, no, no, no, no, no. I can feel texture, yes. He's holding on to the trunk.

And it is small. It's not like a wall. But it's not as big as a tree. And it's really flexible. And it's curling around my arm. No, this is more like a snake.

An elephant is like a snake. And the next guy says, you are all wrong. He's holding on to the tail. He says, yes, it does have some texture.

[3:28] And it is small. I can put my hands around this. But can't you feel the hair? It's more like a rope. Not like a wall or like a tree or like a snake.

No, it's like a rope. And the final guy says, you are all crazy. He's holding on to the tusk. And he says, yes, it's firm.

And it's not flexible. It's smooth. I don't feel any texture at all. And the end is sharp. This elephant is like a spear.

And certainly, they all bring their different perspectives to the table. Not one of their perspective is wrong. They all have a measure of truth inherent to what they are describing in this elephant.

But because they all have a limited perspective and don't see the elephant in its totality, their perspective is narrow.

[4:33] Their perspective is small. And so they have a limited understanding of what an elephant really is. Now, when we come to the Christmas story this morning, I would say the first century Jew was less like these blind men and more like those who see the elephant as a whole.

Because their prophetic experience in reading from the Word is to see what the coming of Jesus was going to be like from start to finish.

They saw the beginning of Jesus' ministry and they also got to see the end that we're going to look at this morning. So it's no surprise why those living in the first century in expecting the totality of Jesus' ministry were dumbfounded when Jesus didn't meet their expectation.

To the extent that the wise men come into Jerusalem and they go to the palace and they ask Herod, where is he who is born king of the Jews?

Now, this greatly concerned Herod as he's considering this. He'll have some competition going on. So he calls in for the scribes. He calls in for the chief priests.

[5:56] And he asks them, where is this individual? Where is this Messiah-like figure who will come and will be the king of the Jews? Where will he come to be born?

And of course, their answer was, well, obviously he is going to be born in Bethlehem. That's what was foretold of the prophets long ago. He will be born of Bethlehem.

He will be a king. But did you ever find it surprising that the scribes and the chief priests leave those wise men in Jerusalem?

They stay put while the wise men make their way to Bethlehem? For all that they knew about the prophecies, their limited perspective kept them fixed and planted in Jerusalem instead of going to worship the king.

I would like to present to you this morning that the same happens for us in Christmas, but not because we have a broad perspective of what Christmas is, but because our focus about Christmas is too narrow.

[7:09] Our understanding of the coming of Christ is too limited. It's too small. Of course, we think about Jesus. He was born of a virgin, Mary, and he traveled along with Joseph, of course, in his mother's womb as they were going to Bethlehem.

He was delivered and put in place in a manger. And yes, there were angels that came to sing and to proclaim the message of Christ's birth there in the fields outside on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

And yes, they did come, but that is just a narrow view of what Christmas really is. It does include his life in ministry.

It does include his death and his resurrection. But I want to present to you and help maybe present a case that the coming of Christ includes all that we think of, including the future events of Christ's coming.

Christmas and future events. And when we think about the future, we can think about the future with certainty. We can think about the future with expectancy and anticipation because of what he has accomplished in the past for us, which was yet future for the prophets and present for those living during the first century.

[8:47] But before we look into our word, let me pray for us that God will direct our hearts as we think about Christmas and future events. Let's pray.

Father, we have come here this morning as those who desire to worship. We desire, like the shepherds, to bow down before your throne, before your manger, before the person of Jesus today. And we desire to give you the gifts that we have. Really, the ultimate gift that we can give to you is the gift of ourself.

That's what you want from us. You want us to lay it all down at your feet. You want us to give you the totality of ourselves, our heart, our mind, our strength.

That's what you have called us to, to love you in totality, to worship you in wholeness. Not to compartmentalize in any way. So Lord, as we think about Christmas today, we ask that you would also help to fill up our appreciation and understanding of what you came to accomplish in that first

visit.

[10:00] And what you will secure in your final visit, your second coming. help us to walk away this morning with a fresh sense of anticipation and enthusiasm and excitement and being blown away, Lord, by your amazing grace.

All that you have accomplished for us and all that we have to look forward to because of what you've done in your first coming. So Lord, this morning we ask that your Holy Spirit would occupy our attention, that you would direct our thoughts, that you would help to orient our perspectives, that you would lead us into truth, and that you would lead us into the kind of life that is representative of those who are true followers of Jesus today.

We thank you for this word that you've given to us and placed in our hands. And we ask that you would be honored and glorified through our conversation and our study in your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. So I'd like you to open up your Bibles, if you would please, to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. As we look at this great Christmas passage, in verses 1 through 3. Here's what it says. Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.

[11:42] For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying there is peace and security, then the sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman.

And they will not escape. As we look this morning at Christmas and we come to understand what Paul has in mind with these events, we'll begin to appreciate that all the totality of the prophecy in predicting what the Messiah would do not only begins to culminate in the person of Christ as a baby but will culminate completely in his coming as king.

The future king that has been predicted by prophets of old. I want us to look at Christmas and future events through the lens of three different venues.

I want us to see first of all that it is connected for us by the prophets. There are pages and pages of scripture that we could go to this morning but I'm not going to bore you with all the details.

I want to just point out for you a few passages that begin to fill up our understanding of what the people in the first century were expecting. When they heard the Messiah was coming what did they anticipate?

[13:17] What were they expecting? So keep your finger if you would in 1 Thessalonians and move with me back to Isaiah. I'm going to Isaiah because it is one of the better books to help us recognize the fullness of Jesus' ministry but also because it's a little bit more familiar for us having studied it last year.

So Isaiah chapter 2 is where we're going to begin our time this morning. There are 42 times in the book of Isaiah that it says the prophet says in that day in that day in the later days and the day of the Lord all of these events culminating together and setting the expectation for what the time of the Messiah will be like.

So look with me beginning in verse 2 of chapter 2 of Isaiah. You'll notice you may want to even underline this opening phrase it shall come to pass.

That's what I'm referring to when I talk about expectation. It shall come to pass in the latter days.

The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it and many peoples shall come and say come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths for out of Zion shall go the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Now drop down with me to verse 11. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low.

[15:16] The lofty pride of men shall be humbled and the Lord alone will be exalted here it is again in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty against all that is lifted up and it shall be brought low against all the cedars of Lebanon lofty and lifted up and against all the oaks of Bashan against all the lofty mountains against all the uplifted hills against every high tower and against every fortified wall drop down again now to verse 20.

Do you see it?

Do you see the blending of all of these events coming together things that we have begun to separate and we call it eschatology we call it the doctrine of future events all of these things beginning to culminate in the person of Jesus Christ and so the expectation had been set that once the Messiah had come once the king would come to this earth we could expect all of these events to take place now turn to chapter four just a page away beginning in verse two it says in that day there it is again the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel who is the branch well we know the branch is Christ now turn to chapter seven here's a familiar

Christmas passage this is one that is more typical for us in this time of year chapter seven in beginning down in verse seven thus says the Lord God it shall not stand and it shall come to pass for the head of Syria is Damascus and the head of Damascus is resin now drop down to verse 10 again the Lord spoke to Ahaz ask a sign of the Lord your God let it be deep as she or as high as heaven but Ahaz says I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test and he said hear then oh house of David is it too little for you to weary men that you weary God also therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel notice in verse 18 in that day the Lord will whistle verse 20 in that day the Lord will shave verse 21 in that day a man will keep verse 23 in that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines worth a thousand shekels of silver will become briars and thorns there is this anticipation of a future event that is that is integral to the coming of Messiah the birth of Jesus Christ as the prophets saw it and as the prophets communicated it it was all bound up in one event it was one big elephant with all of these various aspects that needed to come together in one major event that we happen to see separated into two but actually bound into one the prophets understood the connection and communicated the connection but the angels did as well it was connected the story is connected by the angels and a verse that has always intrigued me is found in first

[19:48] Peter it may be a little small for you to see but let me read this for you it says concerning this salvation the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully what does that communicate to you they're talking about salvation they're looking for the coming of Messiah they know what he's going to do he's going to bring deliverance and they are absolutely riveted by the story they want to know the details they want to know the times they want to understand how this is all going to play out and as a matter of fact one of that he's praying over and over and over again Lord give me a clear indication of when this is going to happen and God piece by piece gives him more revelation and finally has said okay Daniel that's enough I'm not going to tell you any more that's all you get to hear be content with that but they searched and inquired carefully because they knew how amazing this story was the story of deliverance verse 11 inquiring what person or time the spirit of

Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories it was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preach the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven and then this phrase things which angels long to look I wonder if the angels were just as surprised just as enthusiastic just as excited about the coming of Christ and not really understanding all of the details of how that first coming was going to look we get some indication from the announcement that they give to the shepherds there on that Bethlehem hill they say glory to God in the highest and on earth peace goodwill!

to men peace that was connected to Old Testament prophecies peace that anticipated the coming king and the rain on his earth that would establish once for all in Jerusalem the lack of war and the joining of the people of Israel and the subsequent joining of all the nations I think the angels were just right along with the prophets in just okay what's going to happen I can't wait here we go here it is it's right here come on let's sing and their enthusiasm and excitement about this Christmas story was just so so activated because of their comprehension and understanding of all the prophetic messages that had gone before things which angels longed to look into and now we turn to a bit of application because the peace that

God intended to bring to the earth was not the kind of peace that the people were looking for but it was better the kind of peace they wanted was freedom from the oppressors the kind of peace they wanted was the ability to feel liberated and to not be at war and to be able to express themselves as a people of Israel but what they really needed was peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ that was the only peace that really mattered that peace had to precede the other peace and that is true for for all of us in this room today you cannot have future peace until or unless you've experienced spiritual peace you cannot anticipate the future coming of Christ you cannot look forward to it with any degree of excitement or enthusiasm until and unless you have first enjoyed the peace of

God through the Lord Jesus Christ that only comes through faith in Jesus repentance from your sin and cleansing of Christ on your life and fellowship now with God through the Lord Jesus Christ do you have the peace that passes understanding the peace that only comes through Jesus that's the peace that he wants to give you today the angels I believe also anticipated the future peace that we still look forward to because it had to be preceded by the peace of the Holy Spirit next it's connected by the apostles connected by the prophets connected by the angels and connected by the apostles here they are enjoying and participating in the ministry of

[25:25] Jesus Christ for three years they've been able to watch the miracles that Jesus did and to listen to the words that he shared to see his power over nature and to understand his true origin the origin of one who was from God they understood that he was the Messiah he was the one predicted by the prophets it was him and because he was here they expected the fulfillment of what Messiah was going to come to do and that was to establish a kingdom and so it should be no surprise in Matthew 24 they say what are the times what are the seasons in which these things are going to come about by the way we see that same word those same words together here in our passage in chapter 5 verse 1 that opening phrase now concerning the times and the seasons brothers the times that

Paul was referring to are the same times that the apostles anticipated the coming of Messiah what would it look like and so they're asking Jesus okay Jesus when are the times going to actually happen when can we expect that you're going to establish your kingdom of course Jesus says well here's what you can anticipate and he goes on to describe what we know to be future events but it ultimately leads to his death and his resurrection here on earth and then right before he ascends to the father they say okay now this must be the moment this must be it and so in Acts chapter 1 they're anticipating that Jesus is going to be captured back up to God the father in heaven and they're asking him the same question are you now going to restore the kingdom is this the day and Jesus says it's just not it's not for you to know the times of the seasons stop being so preoccupied with that event be satisfied in this relationship in the peace that you have with me because of faith in me and the finished work of Christ on the cross don't be so bound up in what's going to still come in this event that is still to be anticipated and then there they are in Jerusalem they're awaiting!

the coming of the Holy Spirit the Spirit comes and their hearts and lives are filled up by the power of the Spirit and they speak in tongues there in Acts chapter 2 and Peter in describing the events again combines all of these Old Testament prophecies into one you find in Acts chapter 2 in his message to those who are listening he says in speaking from the prophet Joel he says and in the last days it shall be God declares that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams and I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below blood and fire and vapor and smoke the sun will be turned to darkness the moon to blood before the day of the Lord comes the great and magnificent day again the the blending of all of these events because they recognize that with the Messiah is coming he has actually accomplished what we anticipate it is a guarantee because of his first coming what we still anticipate in his second coming Jesus accomplished the work of salvation he accomplished peace for humanity through his work on the cross he demonstrated God's view of sin and sets the marker of what will happen to those who exist outside of Christ how God will deal with sin in the lives of those who do not come to faith in

[30:14] Jesus Christ we see even in our in our in the previous passage in first Thessalonians we see this joining together of all of these events not only surrounding the coming of Christ in his first coming but now

anticipating the future coming if you're back there again with me in first Thessalonians you back up to chapter four you can see what I'm talking about Paul says we don't want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep that you may not grieve as others who do not have hope for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus Christ God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep do you see what's happening there the work of Christ in the past has secured his work in the future we as

God's people can anticipate future resurrection because of the finished work of Christ in the past and in the minds of the prophets and in the minds of the apostles in the minds of the angels there was a blending together of these events things that help us to anticipate the future coming of Christ so what do we do with this well first what we need to do with this is we need to live our life in anticipation of the coming of Christ live your life in anticipation of the coming of Christ don't be like the scribes don't be like the chief priests who have all of the academic knowledge the biblical understanding but it doesn't do anything to change your perspective recognize the whole event that is before you and what Jesus his first coming has to do with his second coming that we can anticipate the certainty!

of his second coming because of the work of Christ as a baby his ministry as a baby and throughout the 33 years of ministry on this earth be more like Simeon Simeon who being filled with the Holy Spirit and Anna being filled with the Holy Spirit are looking forward to the coming of Christ let it mark your moments as you wait for the certainty!

And because these events come together I want to present for you four truths that help to shape our eschatology our understanding of future events I'm going to deal with two of these truths this morning and then I'm going to deal with two of these truths next week the first truth is found in chapter 5 verse 1 it says now concerning the times and the seasons brothers this truth is that Israel and the church are unified but distinct the church and Israel are unified but distinct first I want to look at their unity I want to look at their unity because Christmas shapes our understanding of brothers when we step back and look at brothers and think about this term from a 21st century perspective our natural inclination is to think about brothers in terms of

Christianity yes you're a brother or you're a sister we're all part of the family of God we've all been joined together in Christ because of faith we have begun to appreciate and know that but but from a first century perspective and especially in a place like Thessalonica this was an amazing truth because if you remember Paul's ministry moving from one place to the next the first thing that he would do is he would walk into the synagogue he would walk into town he would see where the synagogue is and he would begin to preach to the Jews we know from Romans chapter 1 verse 16 it says I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes what's that next phrase to the Jew first and then to the Gentiles you see everywhere [35:01] Paul went the Jews seemed to be quite happy with the message of the gospel the message of a Messiah until until the Gentiles began to respond and once that happened jealousy and envy filled their heart and they catapulted Paul out of town Paul's ministry was first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles we see that as a trademark throughout his ministry in the first century so don't misunderstand or confuse the fact that unity doesn't also lead to distinction there were difficulties for the church especially in Thessalonica because of the animosity of the Jews towards the Gentiles so when Paul uses this term brother he's he's using it to help them understand their connection to him of course he's using it as a term of endearment but more than that

Paul wants them to understand their connection to Christ and their connection to one another no other New Testament book uses the word brother!

than the book of 1 Thessalonians in terms of concentration if you compare the number of words in the book to the number of uses of this word brother no other New Testament book compares to 1 Thessalonians because I believe Paul wants this church to understand their connection their unity as those who are Jews and Gentiles especially in a place that was hot in terms of animosity Paul describes in a number of places what Christ has done to accomplish unity for the people Jews and Gentiles perhaps the most prominent example is in Galatians chapter 3 where he says there is

neither Jew nor Greek there is neither slave nor free there is no male or female for you are all one in Jesus Christ and if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to promise God has made them one because of Jesus but their unity and union did not obliterate their distinction they are also distinct Paul is constantly making a case for his own Jewishness he says that in Philippians chapter 3 he appeals to the orientation of his own heritage as being one who is from Abraham Paul is consistently targeting the Jewish community we find that in Cyprus we find that in Antioch we find that in Iconium and also in Berea which is the place that Paul went directly after Thessalonica it was his custom as he says to consistently go and present the truth to the Jews first why because his heart was for his people but also because he knew the continuing heart of God for the people of Israel that comes front and center to us in Romans chapter 11 verses 1 and 2 Paul says I ask then has God rejected his people by no means for I myself am an Israelite a descendant of Abraham a member of the tribe of Benjamin God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew there is a plan for Israel and we see that plan playing out not only in God preserving the nation of Israel but also in the end times we read in the book of Revelation the specific and unique role that Israel plays in proclaiming the gospel there in Revelation I think it's in chapter 12 where God chooses out 12,000 from every tribe to be ambassadors of the gospel there during the tribulation period now records have been lost as far as

[39:35] Israel is concerned they can't trace their lineage anymore they can't go to ancestry.com to find out what tribe they're from but God knows and God has preserved a people for himself a distinct group of individuals from every tribe who he intends to continue to use well into the future a people who is united but distinct that's an important truth for us to understand as we consider eschatology the second truth is found in the remaining verses in verses 2 and 3 and that truth is that God's wrath will be poured out on unbelievers God's wrath will be poured!

out on unbelievers we'll address this a little bit more next week because our time is running a little bit short but I want to just help you fill this in a bit God will pour out his wrath on unbelievers because there is a demand for justice that we'll look at a little bit more next week there's a demand for justice there is a place for justice but now we are experiencing a delay a temporary delay in the justice of God on this earth look at it with me here in verses 2 and 3 it says for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night while people are saying there is peace and security then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman and they will not escape judgment is coming

God has set a precedent for judgment from the beginning of time beginning in the garden Adam and Eve when they stepped out of line and sin was a part of their lives they were then propelled out of the garden the consequence of sin moved them out of the garden out of fellowship in intimacy with God in the garden a few chapters later as the people of the world are growing in ungodliness there is judgment on the world that God brings a flood and he captures away Noah and his family but he brings justice and judgment on the earth because of sin then we're familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah the judgment that God brings to two cities because of wickedness and being steeped in immorality judgment comes but not only on the nations judgment also comes to God's people who when they consistently rebel against the standards of God

God leads them into captivity first the northern ten tribes because of by Assyria and then the southern two tribes by Babylon God will judge sin and ultimately there will be a future judgment that will come ultimately we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ the question that will be posed to all of us is on what basis can you escape the judgment of God what is your security what helps to alleviate from certain doom for those who are in Christ the only answer is that Jesus is the means by which I can escape future punishment because of the work of Christ in paying for my sin on the cross one of the truths that we're going to get to next week is that although judgment is coming on unbelievers

Jesus absorbed the wrath of God for those who are in Christ and that is an amazing truth that we're going to look at a little bit more next week and because of that truth we will be free from the time of judgment the day of wrath the day of vengeance that God promises to bring on the earth but before we close this morning I want to just pose to all of you will you escape future judgment because of a relationship with Jesus Christ right now has there ever been a time in your life where you said Jesus please forgive me Jesus I understand you are the only way Jesus I need you to cleanse me

from my sin and to be the punishment for my sin so that I can anticipate future peace that I participated in peace today and can look forward to peace in the future for those of you who know [44:44] Jesus we have much to celebrate this Christmas the fullness of Christmas and all that was anticipated coming to bear on our lives as we think about the work of Messiah and what he promised to do not only in coming as a baby and dying on the cross but in coming as king that is part of Christmas too and we can anticipate that we can look forward to that if we have a relationship with him this morning don't leave today without knowing Jesus don't leave today without welcoming the king of peace into your life let's pray as