

Christmas Day 2024

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[0 : 00] A while back, I saw an interview with Matt Damon, and he was talking about how he basically only does action movies now. And the reason why, I never really knew he did anything but action movies, but he used to do, I guess, non-action movies.

But why he only does action movies now is because with streaming services, people go to the movies primarily to see action and big special effects, big kind of epics. And those are the movies that make money. So it's changed the industry for him and the industry in general. And it just got me thinking about how the majority of movies that are in the theaters, there are fantasy or superhero movies or some kind of big epic good versus evil.

And oftentimes, the plot surrounds a villain who tries to become some kind of all-powerful being or a god-like person. That's pretty common.

Never in those movies is a villain satisfied with anything but taking over the entire world or the entire galaxy or whatever it may be. In every case, when those finite characters seek to become like the infinite god, nothing goes well.

[1 : 28] They don't become loving and benevolent or just, but rather evil, maniacal, and tyrannical. Power corrupts, and so it does.

And this is a case in our world as well. Idiomin, he was the ruler of Uganda for years. He came with promise, left, and they called him the Hitler of Africa.

Power corrupts. It's never enough. And regular people become tyrants when regular people try to become like gods. Human beings ought not to become gods.

It's something that is germane and key all throughout the Bible whenever human beings fashion themselves as God's bad things happen.

So what do we make of God becoming man? If humans shouldn't become God, what happens when God becomes man?

[2 : 32] And this is what Christmas is about, the incarnation. God, the Son of God, the eternal Word, being made flesh. He doesn't cease to be God, but he becomes fully man.

I bring this up as just a bit of a background because the 4th century church father, Athanasius, wrote a small book. It's worth your time.

Maybe you read it every year. It's excellent. Apart from scripture, it is the most thorough and worthwhile examination of the incarnation. It's actually called *On the Incarnation*.

And among other things that Athanasius says, he says a very provocative and scandalous line. He says this, God became man so that man might become God.

What did Athanasius mean by such a provocative statement? Is this a good development in human history? Or do we have a closeted heretic here in Athanasius?

[3 : 34] Why is it that when man becomes God, or tries to, I should say, things go terribly wrong? The story of humanity is not one of joy.

There's pockets of joy. There's beautiful things within the human story. But by and large, it is a story of angst and frustration. It goes back to the beginning of creation itself.

A few weeks ago, we had a lessons and carols service. And if you're unfamiliar with it, that's okay. It is a service where we sing Christmas carols.

And interspersed with those Christmas carols, we read nine portions of scripture that, in a way, that's not exhaustive, but in a way tells the entire Christian story leading up to John 1.

We start at Genesis chapter 3, the very beginning, at the fall of man and original sin, where mankind sins and then the plague of perpetual sin continues on.

[4 : 37] So we start in Genesis chapter 3. And we actually end in John chapter 1. And we see in the biblical story that humanity is plagued with brokenness and sin, angst and frustration, desire to

be like God.

And when they do, things, again, go terribly, terribly wrong. So the biblical story is one of, among other things, recounting and examining the darkness of the human condition.

The angst that death is coming and cannot be avoided. The angst that there is no happy resolution to the story. That when men and women, but oftentimes men, fashion themselves to be gods, they become devils instead.

God, in his love and wisdom, sees the brokenness. Oftentimes, if I start a project and I mess up at the initial kind of bit, I usually scrap it.

Or I start from the beginning. I strip down what I've done. I am not super handy. I'm not a train wreck either with some hammer and nails. But seldom do I start a project and it's mistake-free from the beginning to the end.

[6 : 06] Seldom, if ever. So it makes sense to me that God creates everything. He calls it good. He creates mankind. He calls it very good. And then mankind sins.

In my mind, just hit the reset button. Start again. You messed it up. It's okay. People mess things up. God is perfect. I'm not saying somehow God is not perfect. But in my mind, you just start again. You figure it out. You know? You regroup. Okay, it went wrong there. We're going to adjust. But instead, we see something different. The angst, the darkness, the brokenness, the sin, the death. How does God deal with it? Well, we see how he deals with it in John 1, verses 1 to 5. And if you have your Bible, follow along. We read it already, but it bears repeating.

It says this, verse 1. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

[7 : 06] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. Here it is, verse 5. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The Word, who is God, the Son of God, the Eternal Word, the Creator of all things, the very source of life and light, does not hit the reset button, but enters into the story itself.

He shines light in the darkness, which is to say that he seeks to fix and restore and redeem. The incarnation promises that good will triumph over evil, that humanity will not suffer indefinitely in darkness and despair.

It's this beautiful picture of God's mercy and His kindness and His great love for us. And yet, such a wonderful gift is not embraced by all, for it threatens the status quo.

The thing is, we often enjoy darkness a little too much. Not because we are necessarily evil, diabolical, tyrannical people, but because the devil we know sometimes can be better than, in this case, the God we don't know.

We're unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable with our sin, our brokenness, our angst, the darkness, being exposed and being healed.

[8 : 34] We're going to skip over the portion, verses 6 to 8, that speaks of John the Baptist. But look with me in verse 9 to 11, and it says this, The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Although what Jesus did in the incarnation, and when I say the incarnation, you can think the entirety of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, his entire ministry, although it would be for all people, not everyone would experience the light, for darkness has a hold on the human heart.

Our good and godly desires are all too often disordered because of sin. So, we want to be loved, but we take that desire to be loved, and all too often turn it into selfishness.

And we hurt others. We want to have security, but that desire manifests itself in insatiable greed. We want to enjoy pleasure, but instead our eyes lust and covet after things that are not ours, and we ought not to have.

[9 : 55] We want to be appreciated. Again, all these things are very good, but when they get disordered, bad things happen. We want to be appreciated, but what ends up happening is we develop anger and bitterness when we're overlooked.

You see, darkness has an interesting hold on our lives, because there's always bits of light that get distorted, bits of goodness that become bits of evil.

And what ends up happening is when we reject the light, we claim authority over the light. We say that the light is really darkness, and the darkness is really light, and we start to see confusion about within the human condition.

But what happens when we do embrace the light? When this creator enters into creation, and he shines life and light into darkness and death, what happens when we embrace that?

When we bend a knee to Christ the King, the very essence of everything good and holy and just and loving. Look with me, verses 12 and 13. It says this, But to all who did receive him, that is the word, that is Christ, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God.

[11:19] You see, the God of Scripture, the real and only God, doesn't interact with mankind to manipulate our affairs, like Greek gods, or subjugate us, like the God of Islam, or get a hold of our hearts, like the God of secularism and materialism.

But what does he do? He comes into our experience to remove our sin and to remedy our death and conquer the foe of our soul.

The God of Scripture does not command us to come to him, but he comes to us, and he shines the light into every dark corner of our being, if we would but bend a knee and receive him.

He offers a gift. Will we say yes? And what does he do? He takes humanity upon himself. And this brings us back to the first part of that Athanasius provocative statement, that God became man.

Verse 14 says this, And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[12:42] You see, the Word became flesh in the original language. It's literally, the Word became enfleshed and then set up a tent amongst us, which is to say, came into the very existence that he created.

There is no more, there's not an aspect of the human creation that he didn't enter into. Everything that it was to become human, he became.

God himself, the light that enlightens everything, the Word that created all things, becomes like you and I. It's scandalous to think. Literally human flesh, skin, muscles, blood, hair, nails, Jesus had kneecaps and big toes, lips, kidneys.

The Word became flesh. Light has taken on humanity and he dwelt among us. The incarnation proclaims the entire light, life of Christ.

When we gather on Christmas Day and of course we think of the baby in the manger, but really we're thinking that God lived amongst us and died on our behalf.

[14:01] It's the full life of Christ. God became man yet remained God and he never stopped becoming God. This God again descends to earth to become man and descends even further to the point of death, dying as a sinful man even though he was without sin.

He did not take a death, did not die on the cross taking upon the sin of himself but taking upon our sin. He died and was buried in a borrowed grave and then he rose again to new life.

It is a beautiful picture but also a wondrous mystery how the Word was made flesh and how he did this. And it says that we are invited to embrace this.

And what happens when we embrace it? We are united to him. And this brings us back to the second part of Athanasius' provocative statement. So if God became man he did so so that man might become God.

I'll just spare you any of the fears around Athanasius being a heretic. He was not. He was an Orthodox Christian. He did not truly believe that God would allow and make a way for regular human beings like you and I to become exactly like him.

[15:25] But he said it in a way to articulate that those that are in Christ are united to him. They become a part of his mystical body. They will be made perfect.

So that one day even though God made us our original fathers father, mother Adam and Eve in the garden perfect but they had the propensity to sin the possibility of sin one day we will be made perfect and it will be impossible for us to sin.

This is what Athanasius is getting at. We will enjoy the beauty and majesty and glory of heaven forever in the presence of God himself enjoying his love never exhausting his goodness being with him forever and we will be transformed into his likeness here on earth.

At least we begin that process here on earth. So what does it look like for man to become God?

What does it look like for us to grow in holiness because Christ has marked us out? We are united

to him.

I'll give a wonderful example. I mentioned Idi Amin at the beginning a very horrendous tyrant of the 20th century. I'll talk about his contemporary a man named Bishop Festo Kavengra.

[16:43] Bishop Festo was a Ugandan and instead of going along with Idi Amin's evil instead of being corrupted himself he opposed Idi Amin.

Him and a number of other bishops and clerics were under they were on a government watch list his archbishop was actually dealt with and it caused Bishop Festo to run away and he fled Uganda. He fled Uganda after one of his dear friends was dispatched. Bunch of kids in the room. That was in 1977.

That same year he wrote a book called I Love Idi Amin. He wrote that book the same year that his good friend was dispatched.

I Love Idi Amin and this is what he said when he was asked why he wrote this book. He said this quote the Holy Spirit showed me that I was getting hard in my spirit and that my hardness and bitterness toward those who were persecuting us could only bring spiritual loss.

[17:57] So I had to ask for forgiveness from the Lord and for grace to love President Amin even more. And then he would go on to say we should lovingly pray for those dictators.

We owe them the debt of love for they are part of those for whom Christ shed his precious blood. As long as they are still alive they are still redeemable. By the way he was called the Hitler of Africa. Pray for them that in the end they may see a new way of life rather than a way of death. God God became man so that man might become God or better yet so that we could grow in Christ likeness and extend his mercy and grace and love wherever we go.

And friends this is what it looks like. Bishop Festo would live in exile until Idi Amin was deposed and left Uganda and he came back not necessarily to a hero's welcome because he lived only a short time later and died of cancer.

But I'm telling you this man this man lived as if Jesus truly came in the flesh lived and died took away his sins even though he didn't deserve it and rose again to new life.

[19:18] Bishop Festo is united to Christ. He has become like his savior. It's a call for us and I mean listen we don't have to deal with Idi Amin's.

Children might feel like their parents are a bit like a tyrannical dictator but by and large we're not having to deal with this thank God. But there are people in our lives you might be one of those people in somebody else's life where you just need God's grace to wash over you.

God's love to direct you for God himself to transform you and continually transform you into Christ's likeness so that you can extend the same ministry that Christ extended to you.

John he ends this portion in verse 16 and I didn't read it in the gospel reading but I'll read it for you now. It says this John 1 16 and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

friends it takes nothing less than the grace of God at work in our lives to transform us into Christ's likeness.

[20:36] The incarnation of Jesus this is what it's about. This is what we celebrate on Christmas day. Let us pray. Father in heaven we thank you for wonderful examples like Bishop Festo like his archbishop like countless others who were lost to history but faithfully looked to you and you gave them the grace upon grace they needed to live out this life and they are an example to us of what it means to be united to Christ and to live like him for his glory.

Lord we pray that the incarnation that we are reminded of that we are worshipping you for this morning that it will so change our lives and that we would be conduits of God's grace and love and mercy and joy so that the darkness that we experience in our own lives but also in the lives and situations that we experience in this life Lord we might shine your light and your life and see the world transform.

Lord thank you for the incarnation thank you for your son Jesus Christ fully man and fully God. Amen.