

The Medium is the Message

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together as we stand. Father, we thank You for that great faith that we have just confessed.

And we thank You for this night. And we ask that by the power of Your Holy Spirit, You would grant us to see the glory of Your Son. And as we see His glory, will You grant us to love Him.

And it is in His name that we pray. Amen. Please sit down and... And please keep your service sheets there in front of you.

We're going to be looking at both the readings, but we're going to look at them in reverse order. So we're going to start with the second one first. So keep that in front of you. I don't know if you have ever been to a Jewish Passover Seder before.

But one of the aspects of a Seder service is one of the children is tasked with asking a series of questions.

[1 : 09] And one of the questions that comes up is the question, Why is this night different from all other nights? And that gives usually the Father the opportunity to tell the Passover story.

And I want to borrow that question tonight. I want to ask the question, Why is this night different from all other nights? Because it is really different.

I mean, there's a lot of people here. And it's really late at night. And we should all be at home asleep, shouldn't we? I mean, what are we doing here?

And it's not just us. I mean, all over the world, in most places of the world, this midnight on Christmas Eve has already passed.

But over the last 24 hours, millions of people all over the world have gathered in places just like this to hear this story and to rehearse it. Now, why is this night different from all other nights?

[2 : 08] And we know the outline of it, right? We know why we're here. We know that we're here because this is the night we remember that Jesus was born in a little stable outside Bethlehem to a young girl called Mary.

But why is that so significant? I want to point out two things very simply tonight. Two reasons that makes this night different from all other nights. The first one is this.

This is the night God finally became clear. And the second thing is this is the night God invited us into his family. First of all, this is the night God finally became clear.

Take a look at the reading from Hebrews, chapter 1, verse 1. It's on page 3. We read, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son. Now, pause there. This may sound strange.

[3 : 15] But one of the most frustrating things about God is that he is notoriously obscure. What do I mean by that?

Down through history, if you look at human civilization, if you look at the various cultures around the world, almost all of us have had a sneaking suspicion that there's something called God that exists somewhere.

You know, some sort of deity, some sort of divine being. Almost all of humanity has believed in some sort of divine being. I mean, even the exceptions, even atheists are kind of defined by the fact that they don't follow in with the majority view.

Most of us have a sneaking suspicion that somewhere there's something that we refer to as God. But notoriously, humanity has been really vague on the details.

I mean, God has been notoriously obscure. And that's created for humanity just, you know, a whole set of problems. And we've tried to, and we have the sneaking suspicion that he exists.

[4 : 24] We don't know much about him. And so what we've done, quite often, is we've boiled down our thoughts about God to conjecture. We've tried to imagine and think about what, you know, God might be like.

And we've ended up projecting kind of the highest and best of our own values and called that God. And so we've kind of limped along oftentimes in that way.

Now, the verses I just read tell us that that situation began to change with the prophets. He's talking about the Old Testament prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures.

People like Moses and Jeremiah and Isaiah and ending with John the Baptist, who we read about in the first reading. And they gave us, they helped immensely.

I mean, they, God used them to speak an enormous amount of clarity into the world for the first time. For the first time, we saw the outlines of who God is.

[5 : 24] We saw his qualities, what he likes, what he dislikes, all of those sorts of things. But for all of that benefit, and it's a measurable benefit we received through the prophets, there was still an element of obscurity about God.

We still couldn't see the full picture. We had pieces of the puzzle, enough for the outlines, but we couldn't see the center of it all. And so we were left, nevertheless, in a strange waiting position.

We know God exists. We know from the Old Testament a lot more about him, but we still don't see him quite clearly. Now, back to the question, what makes this night different from all other nights?

This is the night that that obscurity changed forever. This is the night that God finally made himself clear. Why?

Look at verse 2. Hebrews chapter 1, verse 2. But in these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son. What does that mean?

[6 : 32] It means that when Jesus was born in a stable outside Bethlehem to a young girl called Mary, it means for the first time in history, God spoke to humanity with absolute pristine clarity.

Let me show you what I mean. Look at verse 3 of Hebrews chapter 1. The writer is still talking about Jesus, and he says, Jesus, verse 3, is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

Now, take that first phrase. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God. Think about the sun for a moment. The sun that is not currently up right now, that is up during the day.

I don't mean to insult your intelligence, but things have to be clear for me. The sun, the only reason you can see the sun is because it radiates out light.

Right? That's pretty straightforward. The sun is millions of kilometers away, and yet part of its nature is to radiate out light.

[7 : 43] That light hits us. Apparently, it takes about eight minutes to reach us. And because we can see the light through the light, we see the sun as it is. The writer of Hebrews is saying the exact same thing happens with Jesus.

When you look at Jesus, the human being Jesus, you see God precisely as he is. Why?

He goes on. Because Jesus is the exact imprint of God's nature. You see what that's saying? It's not saying that Jesus resembles God a lot.

It's not saying that Jesus gives us just a lot of information about God. It's not saying that Jesus is the best guy we've ever seen. It's not even saying that Jesus is merely a prophet.

He's saying, the writer of Hebrews is saying, that Jesus is of the exact same essence as God. And that explains why Jesus is different than a prophet, and why Jesus gives us something so much more clear than a prophet ever could have.

[8 : 51] I mean, prophets are wonderful. Prophets can describe things about God. Prophets can relay a message that God gives them. But the trouble with a prophet, and the reason why they're always limited, is that they're always second hand.

But when Jesus came into the world at that first Christmas and in Bethlehem, for the first time ever, humanity got a first hand view of God.

Now, I want you to see just how brilliant this is. It's just brilliant. I mean, of all the ways that God could have communicated with us, and God is a very creative person.

God was brilliant to communicate to us in just this way. I mean, think about it. Wait. you all look like very intelligent people.

but as intelligent as you are, you and I don't have any hope of ever grasping the fullness of God. Right?

[10 : 00] I mean, if you think you can grasp the fullness of God, I hate to tell you this, but it's very arrogant. God, just by definition, God is far bigger than you could possibly imagine.

He is far more powerful than you could possibly grasp. He is far more complex than you could ever put together. We don't have a hope of ever grasping God.

And because of that, what we're left with, again, is this kind of conjecture about God. What we do is we imagine what we think God might be like. We project our highest values and we call that God.

But the thing is, we're never certain that our ideas about God correspond to the reality of God. But here's the thing, the situation is completely different if God comes to us.

If the Son of God comes to us, the Son of God, according to this passage, the one who, through whom all things were made, the one who upholds the universe by His word, the one who designed the world, the one who maintains the world, the one who owns the world, if that Son of God comes to us and becomes a human being, that changes everything for the simple reason that you and I, we can know a human being.

[11 : 23] We're designed to know a human being. And through this, through knowing this particular human being, we are able to see and gain access to the fullness of God.

I mean, it's just amazing. Let me give you another illustration. I am not smart enough to understand the complexities of modern medicine.

There's a reason I didn't go to med school. It's too complex, changes too much, I can't grasp it. Thankfully, there are a few things I can do.

I can know my doctor. And as I know my doctor, through the relationship with this person, my doctor, I gain access to a whole bunch of information that would otherwise be far too complex for me.

In a sense, that's how, that's what Christmas opens up for us. We can never grasp the fullness of God, but when we know Jesus, the human being who is also fully divine, divine, when we know Jesus, he gives us access to God and for the first time ever, God finally becomes clear to the human race.

[12 : 38] And do you realize what this means? What this means, or one of the things it means, is that we're finally freed from the tyranny of our own conjecture about God. I mean, all of us have ideas about God, all of us have perspectives about God, and typically we hold them very, very closely.

We hold them with great, we treasure them a great deal and we are deeply offended if anybody ever challenges our own personal perspectives and ideas and opinions about God.

But the difficult thing is, if all we have is our own ideas, our own opinions about God, we'll never know how right we are and we'll never know how wrong we are. But when we look at Jesus, when we look at the one who was born in Bethlehem, we are freed from the tyranny of our own opinions.

We're freed to look at God and see him as he is, not as we imagine him to be, but as he is. We get in on God's own perspective about himself.

And that is a beautiful gift. Okay. Why is this night different from all other nights? Well, the first reason is this is the night God finally became clear to us.

[13 : 53] But there's more than that. This is the night God invites us into his family. This is going to sound a bit odd. Some of us here are dreading Christmas dinner tomorrow.

And there's probably a variety of reasons why some of us are dreading Christmas dinner tomorrow. But for some of us, some of us are dreading Christmas dinner because you know that tomorrow you're going to have to deal with a whole lot of disappointing relationships.

Isn't that right? And that brings up a very difficult dilemma about being human. My guess is that almost everyone here would agree that relationships are just the most important thing in life.

but at the same time, almost all of us here have been deeply disappointed by some of the relationships that matter the most to us.

All of us, almost, I would expect, have very high expectations about relationships. We value them a lot but we have also been deeply disappointed, we have been deeply unfulfilled by some of the relationships we value the most.

[15 : 14] and it creates a dilemma. Why is that? Why can we value them so highly and yet experience the disappointment so vividly and the unfulfillment so bitterly?

What's going on there? Christmas gives us some help. Christmas gives us insight into that dilemma. Why? Because Christmas tells us that we were designed for relationship but that we were designed for a bigger relationship.

relationship. We were designed for a more fundamental relationship. We were designed for a relationship with God. And the long story of the Bible is a tragedy of human beings having been designed for a relationship with God but rejecting, consistently rejecting that relationship and running out and trying to fill that need with a bunch of other things.

And the problem is again and again we're disappointed. Again and again we find ourselves unfulfilled. And friends, Christmas, Christmas, the thing that makes this night different from all other nights is that this is the night that God invites us home.

This is the night that God invites us back. This is the night that God says come, come, come back. Look over at the first reading. the Gospel of John chapter 1 and look down at verse 11.

[16 : 43] Again the Apostle John, the writer of this Gospel, is talking about Jesus and he says, Jesus came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all that did receive him who believed in his name, he gave the right to become what?

Children of God who were born not of blood or nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but born of God. Friends, Jesus didn't merely come to clarify God.

That's part of why he came but he also came. He also came because God had a bigger vision than just telling us who he is. Jesus, the Son of God, became human so that humans could become children of God.

Did you catch that? The Son of God, the eternal Son of God who is the radiance of God's glory became what we are, became human so that we humans could become what he is, the child of God.

And friends, that's the key to Christmas. Christmas is God's invitation, come and be my child. child. Now let me ask you a question.

[18 : 02] When you think about Christianity, when you think about the essence of Christianity, what comes to your mind? Because a lot of people think that when you boil it all down, if you boil down Christianity, really what it's all about is be nice, behave and don't do bad stuff.

Don't be naughty. Friends, that's a terrible distortion. Christianity is about the relationship you were designed for.

Christianity is about the relationship that stands behind all the other relationships that you value. Christianity is about the relationship that breathes life into all those other relationships.

It's about the relationship that is so valuable, so valuable to God, that God's Son died to give it to you. It's so valuable to God that Jesus died to purify you from sin.

He died in order that He could give you His status as God's child. I mean, it's remarkable when you consider that. And when you consider the fact that love is always measured by its willingness to sacrifice.

[19 : 15] And you think about the Son of God who became man and humbled Himself to the point of death that He might give to us this precious status as God's children.

Friends, you will never find a love greater than that. You will never find a relationship more valuable than that. It's the one relationship that's never going to disappoint you. So why is this night different from all other nights?

Well, this is the night that God made Himself clear. And this is the night that God invited you to be His child. And let me end just by changing the question a little bit.

How should this night change all other nights? Let me say this. Make this Christmas, let this night, be the time when you decide to investigate Jesus.

Not just superficially, but deeply. Like, really get in to who Jesus is and try to figure Him out. Because Jesus is, I mean, He's arguably the most influential man that ever existed.

[20 : 27] As Christians, we would believe that quite certainly. And He made huge claims. He claimed to display God with absolute pristine clarity.

Friends, you can't afford not to figure out if that's true. I mean, you've got to figure out if He's right. Because if He's right, He changes everything. Absolutely everything. And it is the most glorious and precious gift you could possibly receive.

In a few weeks, in the new year, we're going to be running a course here called Christianity Explored. And it's designed for people who want to investigate Jesus, who aren't sure about Him, who don't know a lot about Him, and want to read Him and figure out who He is.

And I invite you to sign up for the course. You can sign up for it and get more information about it by emailing Aaron Roberts. And his email is on the back of your service sheet. But friends, take the time to investigate Jesus.

And for those of you who are convinced already about Jesus, friends, you need to hear that Jesus is inviting you to share His status as God's child.

[21 : 36] And tonight as we come to the communion table, we're coming to the family meal. Jesus is inviting you to take your seat at God's family table.

And let your heart feast under the bright light of God's fatherly affection. That's what makes this night different from all other nights. Amen.