

Extravaganza 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Sometimes good news can feel a bit like indifferent news or maybe irrelevant news. So when that friend of yours comes to you to let you know the good news that they have won the lottery, there's a part of you, the good part, that says, I'm really happy for you, and you mean it genuinely.

But there's the more honest part of you that sits there and says, well, that's good news for you, but that's irrelevant for me. You know, it's external news, maybe. Good news would be, hey, you've won the lottery and you're going to give me half.

Or good news would be, you've won the lottery and I have as well. You know, it was a syndicate ticket or something like that. Good news can sometimes feel like irrelevant news if it feels like news that has nothing to do with you.

Doesn't matter how good it is, if it doesn't connect to you, it falls into that category of kind of irrelevant, kind of unimportant, and you kind of feel a bit ambivalent towards the whole thing.

Now, is it possible that that's where Christmas sits for some of us? Now, you've been through plenty of Christmases. We pull them out every year.

[1 : 1 0] It happens. It's unavoidable. There's bits of it that you know are good. You know, there's family time, which might be good or bad. There's overeating. There's all the fantastic things. Even the Christian part of Christmas, it's a good story.

I mean, we've been doing dramas about this year after year. We never get tired of it. We wheel it out. We invent extra animals to be part of the nativity because it is such a good story. It's good, but it kind of feels like this separate story.

It kind of feels like it's a story over there, maybe a story for the world, but it's not a story for me. It's not good news for me specifically or personally.

I mean, this story has everything. It's got scandal pregnancy. It's got refugees. It's got angel messengers. It's got a virgin birth. It's even got attempted genocide in there when Herod tries to kill all the babies.

But for such a great story, it still feels like kind of someone else's news. It feels like a story. It doesn't feel like something that makes a difference to me.

[2 : 1 9] Even the miracle of Christmas, that God became human, feels like it's a story.

But we need to ask the question as we come to Christmas, as we hear a story that we've heard a thousand times, as we sing carols that we've sung over and over, as we remind ourselves of this incredible narrative of these incredible miracles, we need to ask the question, why Christmas? Why did God do this? Because then we're maybe just a small chance of recognizing that this is not irrelevant for anyone. This is not indifferent for anyone.

As Steve has already encouraged us, you can't respond to the Christmas story with apathy or disinterest. It's either the best news in the world or the scariest, most condemning thing that's going to make you respond in anger.

We need to ask the question, why? Why would an infinite God, who is all-powerful, who existed before the creation of the world, who has no beginning and no end, who created everything that we see, feel, hear, taste, touch, why would that God choose to become a baby?

[3 : 3 8] For a good story? The answer that Hebrews 2 is for you. Not for generally people, for you.

The whole Christmas story, the miracle of God becoming a baby, becoming flesh, is for you. I just want to focus on one verse from that Hebrews 2 passage that was read out, verse 17.

And I'll get Laura to throw it on the screen again. For this reason, this is the explanation, this is the answer. For this reason, he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make

atonement for the sins of the people.

The context of Christmas helps us answer this question. The context for Christmas, the context for Jesus, the context for God becoming flesh, is separation, is gap, is distance.

The reality of God and creation is that from the beginning, it's been a progressive separation and not an accidental and intentional, willful rejection of God.

[4 : 55] So those that were created have consciously and actively and increasingly made the decision to reject God, to ignore him, to pretend like he doesn't matter.

That's the context of the world into which the baby Jesus is born. But it's not just a world context, it's a you context. So as you come to Christmas this year, and as you come to Christmas every year, you've got to come understanding that the context into which you hear this message that God became a human is a context of you in separation from God, of you distanced from God.

You cut off from God, cut off from his goodness, cut off from his grace, cut off from his love. God is holy and powerful, you are not. God is pure and just and good, you are not.

There is a gap, a chasm that cannot be crossed. That's the context for Christmas. A God who is good, a God whose blessing and love is desirable, and then you, who doesn't deserve it, who can't attain it, who can't get it, no matter how much you want it.

The context for Christmas is gap, is distance, is separation. And into that gap, God expresses his heart.

[6 : 23] God expresses his desire to have relationship with people like you and me who do not deserve it. Christmas is God saying, I love you in spite of the fact that you don't deserve it.

In spite of the fact that the gap is your fault. You're the one who distanced yourself from God. You're the one who rejected him. But Christmas in that manger is God saying, I love you enough to cross that divide.

And he crosses it by sending Jesus to connect us to him. To be a merciful and faithful high priest. Now I want to stop on that word for a sec, because priest is a word that might have some baggage in it for us. When we think priest, I don't know what your picture is. It might involve fancy outfits. It might involve some sort of primitive tribal thing where the priest is somehow elevated and removed from the riffraff like the rest of us.

[7 : 25] We have this potentially distorted idea of what a priest does and how a priest functions. But really, what a priest is, is a mediator, a go-between.

A priest's job is to bring two parties that are separated by something together. That's how a priest functions. Priests identify with both parties so that the two parties can come together.

That's all a priest is. We don't need to worry about any of the other things. And so here in this verse, Jesus is human. He's like us. In order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God.

So he's the one that steps into the gap and takes a pure, holy, majestic, powerful, just, pure God and can connect him to an impure, powerless, disobedient, sinful person like me and like you. See, priests identify with those they represent. And this priest, Jesus, identifies with the Father who sends him. He comes as the one who can offer mercy.

[8 : 40] And to do that, to be someone who can offer mercy, he has to be the one who's been wronged. He has to be God. God's the one who's been wronged.

God's the one who's been ignored. God's the one who's been rejected. And so for a priest to be able to offer mercy, he has to be the one who's been wronged. So if I was to punch Nick in the face right now and Steve said, you're forgiven, that's very nice.

But Steve's not actually in the position to offer mercy. The one who's been injured, attacked, wronged is the only one who can offer mercy. The issue in our separation between us and God is that we have rejected God.

And so only God can offer mercy. This has been the problem with most problem priests throughout human history. Is they can represent us because they're like us. But they can't stand in the position of God and offer mercy.

Because they're not God. They haven't been wronged. They can't adequately represent him. And even if they were to say that they could, how would you have confidence that their words of forgiveness, their communication that you had been given mercy was legitimate?

[9 : 49] How would you have any confidence based on the words of somebody just like you, imperfect, to then go and face up to a perfect God?

Jesus had to be God to be able to be the priest that could offer mercy. And mercy was what was required because the gap issue was a judgment issue. The context of Christmas is a judgment context.

The reason Jesus had to be not only a priest who was merciful and faithful, but also the one that would make atonement for sins or make payment for sins, is because sin is the problem. Sin is the thing that had to be dealt with.

Sin is the reason there's a gap. Now, when we think about sin, we might instantly think about the obvious sins. We go straight away to drugs and sex and power and all those sorts of things. But really, what the Bible says sin is, in Romans 1, is a failure to glorify God. It's a failure to love him the way he deserves.

[10:59] It's a failure to recognize that he is God, we are not. A failure to recognize that he is creator. He has the right to be in charge, to be in control. A failure to give him the authority and honor that he deserves.

And in its place, to give ourselves authority that is not ours. The result of rejecting one in authority is judgment.

That's what happens. If you ignore the police out of some weird warped sense of entitlement that somehow you should be in charge and they should not, the result will be judgment, will be consequence.

When you reject one in rightful authority, the result is judgment. And the judgment that we experience for our rejection of God is distance. It's the inability to even come to him anymore. Which is why there are things wrong with our world. This week, as you no doubt read the papers, as we see people being murdered just for living in a city that some other people want, the reason for that kind of suffering and injustice is because we have rejected the one who is rightfully in authority.

[12:22] And the judgment we've received is he said, okay, see how you go. See what happens when you're in charge. And even as we begin to realize that it's not working, things should be different, the gap continues to be a gap that we cannot cross ourselves.

Judgment is the distance. Christmas. And so Christmas is Jesus coming to be our substitute, to make the payment that needs to be made for our sin, to close the gap between us and God. Christmas is God taking a step towards you, even as you've been backpedaling through your life. Christmas is God saying, I love you, while we're still saying, stay away. Christmas is you in your most disobedient moment, receiving affection from a loving Heavenly Father.

Christmas is God's first move in bringing wayward children back to himself. The baby in the manger is God's step, not just towards the world, towards you.

[13:44] You've got to catch this. If Christmas has just become that thing that we celebrate every year, you've got to listen again. The why of Christmas, the why of every miracle that we will celebrate in the next week and a bit, is you.

Is God saying, I love you, even though you don't deserve it. Jesus is the priest who can give us access to God because he comes from God, he speaks on God's behalf, he's God's chosen representative and priest.

He's the one who can offer mercy. But there's two halves to it. He can represent God, but more than that, because he becomes a baby, because he becomes a human, he can represent us too.

If he was just from God, that would be fantastic. It would be amazing that God would choose to express his love like that. But a priest needs to be able to represent both parties. Needs to be able to draw them together.

That's why he had to be made like us in every way. Not human-like, not human-ish. Human.

[14:56] Helpless. Hungry. Tired. Tempted. As God's representative, he takes the first step towards us, towards bringing us back into a relationship with God.

And as a human representative, as your representative, he brings you the rest of the way. He represents you in his life, perfectly obedient to his heavenly father, and he represents you in his death.

Where he makes payment for your sin, for my sin. Christmas, God becoming a human, is why Easter works.

The payment required for human sin is human death. The substitute necessary is like for like. You on the chopping block, him on the chopping block.

For Easter to be hopeful, you need Jesus to come as a human in the manger on that very first Christmas night. Only one who is like us could represent us.

[16:10] Only one who is like us can take our place and pay the price for sin and death. It is true that hope is born at Christmas. Hope for more than your existence right now.

Hope for a world where there is no more Aleppo. No more war. No more suffering. No more injustice. Hope is born on that night because finally the means of fixing those things can be brought near through Jesus.

Hope for your own life where there is not suffering, where there is not discontent, where there is not depression, where there is not loneliness, where there is not unemployment. That is only possible in the power of a God who can deal with all the things that cause that in our life.

With a God who can give us the certainty of his unconditional love, his goodness and his provision.

Hope for you is born at Christmas. Hope for the world is born at Christmas.

If Christmas is indifferent news, you haven't understood it. I remember, I've shared with those of you who have been around here a few times that I'm on a journey from Grinch to Christmas enthusiast.

[17:30] And some parts of Christmas, not all parts of Christmas, some parts are still a little bit annoying to me, but one of the things that used to really anger me at Christmas was walking through the shops and when I say Christmas, I mean like late July when they start playing Christmas carols.

And I'd be wandering through the shops and I'd hear a song like the one we just sung, O Holy Night. And there was a part of me that went, oh man, what an incredible truth that Christ is born, that heaven is offered, that forgiveness is available, that God shows mercy to people like us.

And then I'd look at all these people around me, either oblivious to the fact the song's playing or tapping their feet or humming along, oblivious to what the song is saying, completely indifferent to the reality that is being proclaimed.

See, Christmas is hopeful and or offensive. See, the necessary context for us to understand Christmas is the offensive message that you are cut off from God.

That's what we celebrate, that there is grace and hope in Jesus because we know we need grace and hope because we know we don't deserve it.

[18:51] And so, I used to get agitated because I would look at these people who are oblivious to the fact that they are right now sitting under the judgment of God, right now deserving of the judgment of God, just like I am.

But they are oblivious to that fact. And so, the message that the God who has rightful authority over them, rightful punishment for them, the message that that God has chosen to love them anyway means nothing to them.

And it used to make me so angry that you watch carols in the domain and people who, you know, have no idea who Jesus is or what he does just, you know, smile and happily sing along about the saviour of the world.

He's saving us from judgment. I feel like I want to write a carol about judgment so that people can catch it just for a second. If Christmas is indifferent to you, if it's just another thing that comes around annually in the year, I don't think you've got it.

You know the story, you know the details, but I don't think you get the why. I don't think you understand the heart of God on display.

[20:17] Christmas is God bridging a gap that you made. Christmas is God stepping towards you even though you don't deserve it. The real miracle of Christmas is not so much what happened, it's a miracle, but the real miracle is why it happened.

The miracle of Christmas is that God is making a way for you to be friends with him. God choosing to show mercy to a world that's rejected him.

In the manger is an invitation for anyone who will respond to find mercy, forgiveness, hope, and peace in a relationship with the God who rules all things.

Christmas is truly the day that hope is and can be born for you. If you're somebody who's been following Jesus for a while, I want to encourage you this Christmas to focus on the why.

Focus on what Christmas tells you about how God feels towards you. Enjoy the nativity, celebrate the miracle of the virgin birth, the star in the sky, the wise men.

[21 : 48] It is all miraculous, but focus on the miracle that God shows you mercy when you don't deserve it. That God pays his cost so that you might know what it is to be loved.

And if you're not a Christian, maybe you're a guest here today because it's Christmas and church seems like the right place to go at Christmas, I want to encourage you to look at the story again and understand that it's more than a story.

It's God speaking to you. It's God doing something for you. It's ultimately God's invitation to you. In Jesus is the offer of mercy, forgiveness, hope, and peace to anyone who would respond. Thank you. Thank you.