It's just a great story

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Evening everyone, my name's Steve, I'm the city pastor here if I've not met you before. I'm going to pray and then we're going to launch in to the next part of our Christmas story. Gracious God, we thank you for your word as we have just been reminded as we celebrate Christmas of you coming into our world.

I pray that you'd come now by your spirit into our hearts so that we would understand with clarity, build us up in hope, but also bring clarity to who you are, the world in which we live, and what you've done to come and save it.
And we pray for your glory. Amen. 1961, a long time ago, the Russian Yuri Gagarin was the first person into space.
Nikita Khrushchev was the premier of Russia at the time. And Khrushchev said that when Gagarin went into space, he discovered that God was not there.
You know, like he toured the world real quick, had a look out the window, couldn't see God, and so came to the conclusion that therefore God does not exist. In response to that comment by Khrushchev at the time, the Oxford professor C.S. Lewis wrote an article called The Seeing Eye.
[1:28] Lewis writes in that article that if there is a God who creates us, God would not relate to human beings or to his creation in the way that a person on the first floor of an apartment block relates to the person on the second floor of an apartment block.

Both are the same beings, they're just at a different level. Lewis wrote in this article that God would relate to humanity as the creator, and we the creatures, he would relate to humanity the way that Shakespeare relates to Hamlet.
Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet and the world that Hamlet exists in. Hamlet would have no way of knowing Shakespeare existed, no way of knowing his creator, unless Shakespeare chose to reveal himself to Hamlet.
And to do that, Shakespeare would need to write himself into Hamlet, the play. Lewis's point in the article is that the only way we can know God is if God himself writes himself into his creation, into the story of history, so that the other characters within the story of history would know their creator.
Now the claim of Christmas, the claim of Christianity, is that that is exactly what God has done. God did not just write about himself, but that he wrote himself into the drama of history.
[3:48] And so, is that just too unbelievable? Is it just too unbelievable? That's the question I've been looking at in the last few weeks.

And as we've looked at the believability of Christmas, James has suggested that the story of Christmas isn't just a good story in our minds, something that brings us a sense of joy at Christmas time, once a year, but it's in fact a true story.
It's a historical story. He's looked at the evidence for Jesus being a real person in history, the evidence that the New Testament accounts of his life are not made up.
And that the miracles that are described in the New Testament haven't yet been disproven by science. Which leaves us with the, so what question at the end of it all?
What does this all mean for us? And the main point that I want to make tonight is that if it's not true, if Christianity and Christmas is not true, you don't just lose the wonder of Christmas.
[5:12] You don't just gut Christmas of all its meaning, but in actual fact, you lose everything. Not just Christmas, you lose everything.

We lose life. We lose meaning. We lose good and evil. We lose you and me. So, three points if you've got the St. Paul's app.
No news story, good news story, and which story? So, no news story. In his global bestseller, Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind, Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari tells the story of

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humanity from the beginning.
Harari rejects the claims of Christianity himself personally, but what he does do is he recognises the significant influence of Christianity on the history of humanity.
And he actually argues in his book that our deepest moral beliefs, our sense of good and evil that we have, are not in actual fact self-evident truths, which are things that our culture argues today.
[6:38] Racism. Well, it's just self-evidently true that racism is bad. What he argues, Harari argues, is not actually self-evident truth at all. They are, in fact, biblical beliefs.

This is how he puts it. The idea of equality, for instance, as one self-evident truth, is inextricably intertwined with the idea of creation.
If you do not believe in the Christian myths about God, creation and souls, what does it mean that all people are equal?
Most people in our society have a sense that human rights are good, that racism is wrong, that women and men are equal, that murder is evil, and that rich should not oppress the poor.
General acceptance of those things being right or wrong. But why? You see, if there is no God, if God does not exist, as Khrushchev says, or said, then these things are not moral facts.
[7:57] They are, in fact, opinions, and only opinions. British historian Tom Holland makes a similar point. He stopped himself, stopped believing in God as a child, but after years of historical research, he found himself being drawn back to Jesus.

This was mainly because he found that many of the values that he held dear to him and that were dear to society were intimately connected to Jesus and the Christian faith.
human equality and rights, equality of men and women, love for foreigners, care for the poor, vulnerable and the marginalized are specifically Christian beliefs.
Now, history shows us that it was only as the Christian faith spread in the first century into the Roman Empire and beyond that these beliefs became generally accepted.
The ancient world prior to Christianity, prior to Jesus, laughed at the concept of equality of people, laughed at the concept of good and evil, of the necessity to care for the poor and the marginalized.
[9:21] The temptation of our society nowadays is to assume that you can keep those values, but you can get rid of the God that lies behind those values.

And Harari makes the significant point of what happens when you do. As far as we can tell from a purely scientific viewpoint, human life has absolutely no meaning.
No meaning. Humans are the outcome of blind evolutionary processes that operate without goal or purpose.
Our actions are not part of some divine cosmic plan, hence any meaning that people ascribe to their lives is just a delusion.
Now, he's saying that on the assumption that if you take God out of the picture, that philosophically is all that you're left with. And this is a non-Christian saying this. Now, I acknowledge that there are obviously people in our world who think their life has no meaning at all.
[10:34] I suspect, though, deep down, none of us really want what Harari writes there to be right. None of us really wants that to be right and true.

If there is no God, then we are left with the reality that we live, we die, we decay, and that is it.
That is, it's not just a bad news story, it's a no news story. There's nothing to be declared there. But Christianity and Christmas is the alternative.
It's the alternative story. So let's look at the good news story. It is, in fact, Christmas is a good news story. We just read out, Nick just read for us a portion from the beginning of John's Gospel in the New Testament.
John begins not with the birth of Jesus, but he begins with the birth of the universe. He mentions a key figure who he calls the Word.
[11:44] I'll read the first five verses again for us. In the beginning, that's the beginning of the universe, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind.
The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Now, as John unfolds, the Gospel of John unfolds, we discover that the key figure known as the Word is, in fact, Jesus Christ.
The Bible teaches that the creator God, the one who made all things, is three persons. God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, who have always existed in perfect unity and love

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together.
And the very first Christmas marks the moment in history when God, the Son, the Word, the creator of all things, writes himself into his story.
[13:03] He became a human being with a specific purpose. John tells the story of our lives being part of a God and his loving cosmic plan.

Let me pick it up in verse 9 of John chapter 1. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.
He came to that which is his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.
Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or of a husband's will, but born of God. the word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us.
We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth.
[14:15] And from a little bit further down we read in John's gospel that the grace and truth came from Jesus Christ. Christ. So what that text is saying is that Jesus is the author of the story and its lead character.

It's like Shakespeare has written himself into Hamlet and has become the lead character of the story of Hamlet. The God who made the universe enters into it in order to rescue it.
Instead of celebrated we are told there he is rejected. Instead of honoured he is killed. But his death was written into the script. It was written into the script as the central part of the script.
That is his death was not an accident. If it is true that there is a God who made us and loves us then that is fantastic news.
It means that Christmas is fantastic news. It means that because of Christmas our lives have meaning. There is such a thing as good and evil.
[15:37] It means that justice and love and all of God's purposes will end up winning in the end. But Christmas is also terrible news.

It's also humbling news because it means that we actually need saving. Humanity needs saving from the judgment we rightly deserve for rejecting God, for living as if this God does not exist, for trying to find meaning and satisfaction outside of him.
Now some of us are deeply aware of sin even if we don't use that word. If there is a God who sees everything, knows everything, then we ultimately deep down know that that's not good.
On one level, that is good and healthy. The Christmas story, the message of Christianity, in the end, is not a self-help message where you are told that you are mostly good enough but the baby in the manger will just give you that little extra prob that you need to get over the hurdles in the end.
Every time we see Jesus helping someone in the gospel, it's those who knew they weren't enough. They are the ones that Jesus welcomes.
[17:10] Those who were considered too bad or too broken were in fact the preferred company of Jesus in his story. If you're unsure of yourself, let me ask you, how would you feel right now if we projected onto these screens every thought that you've ever had, every action done in secret, if it was projected onto these screens and played, replayed, would you be able to hold your head up high right now?

To be frank with you, I'd be crushed if it was just today's tally. Just today's tally. God sees it all. He sees it all and that is, in the end, terrible, terrible news for us.
Christmas. But it's not the end of the story. In the Christmas story, we are told Jesus is presented with three gifts by the astrologists who come from the east.
And one of those gifts would have totally thrown Mary, myrrh. It was used to embalm the dead. Who gives baby toy coffins to kids at Christmas time?
Under the Christmas tree, there's a toy coffin. Weird, weird thing. It was a symbol of death. Jesus came into this world to die.
[18:46] That was his purpose, to die. That's what he needed to do in order to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity. Jesus would die for the sins of humanity.

And about 33 years after his birth, he was crucified just outside of Jerusalem. But his death was not the end of the story because three days later the tomb was empty and Jesus appeared to his followers alive.

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He faced death. He defeated death. He paid for our sin so that we don't have to pay for it. He knows every single one of our secret thoughts, our deepest failures and our deepest shame, love.
But he loves us all the way to death and back again. And all you have to do is trust him. The Christmas story is part of God's story of time and eternity.
So I want to ask you which story are you jumping in onto at the moment? God's story has three main parts to it.
[20:06] Sorry, four main parts to it. In chapter one, the God who stands outside of creation always existed, the one who created all things by speaking to existence. It's the only storyline in the history of the world through every great religion and philosophical system.

It's the only storyline that has a divine being that creates all things out of love. The only one.
In chapter two of the biblical storyline, the Christmas storyline, people reject the love of God. All people live life with no consideration for God at all.
Relationship with God and each other is deeply fractured. All brokenness and evil in the world is connected to chapter two. Chapter three is God's plan to reverse all the wrong that we have created for ourselves.
And this plan is worked out through history and finds its culmination in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is in the miracle of the Christmas story and the miracle of the Easter story.
[21:23] Jesus takes the judgment of God for our rebellion against God upon himself. He dies the death that we should have died and he rose victorious over sin and death.

And everyone as we read in John chapter one everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is gathered back into relationship with God and to each other.
chapter four of God's story is not the end of the story it's the beginning of the chapter that has no end. It's a chapter where God reigns forever with his people in the world recreated in perfect peace and harmony.
This is the good news of the Christmas story written of God writing himself into history. You see the Christmas story has got to be connected with the whole story.
It's just one part of the chapters. But we exist in our culture at the moment dominated by many stories but there is one particular story which stands out and it's permeating culture in every kind of way.
[22:40] It's the one that was raised by Nikita Khrushchev. It was highlighted there, Harari highlights it himself. It's a story that's taken up residence in the soul of Western society for the past 60 years in particular.

The technical term for this story is philosophical naturalism. It's a fancy name for materialism, secular materialism. person. It's a three chapter story and it's a story, it's a three chapter story that most people in our world are living to day by day.
The first chapter of that story says that there is no supernatural or spiritual power that rules the physical universe. Everything that can be seen and measured is a result of an explosion that appeared out of nothing billions of years ago.
Scientifically unproven. Can't prove it scientifically. Chapter two of this story is that against all odds humanity evolved from prehistoric soup to be the dominant species of the earth right now.
Despite what people might feel there is no absolute right or wrong. If you feel that something is right or wrong then that's due to a chemical reaction in your brain that is again not scientifically proven.
[24:24] Everything is an accident and so therefore life has absolutely no meaning or purpose at all. And so therefore if that's the case make the most of life right now.

Make it as happy as you possibly can. Buy everything you possibly can. Consume every experience you possibly can because chapter three is coming. And chapter three is just simply the end.
The sun will burn up. Humanity will become extinct and there is no form of afterlife or survival of the conscience. the story of materialism is that only what you can see, taste, touch, feel has any is the purpose of life.
That's it. The Christmas story says that we have a loving creator who has triumphed over evil at great cost to himself to love you dearly.
and we look forward to a day when everything wrong will be made right and we will live with him in joy, blissful joy for all of eternity.

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[25:45] Historically plausible, philosophically satisfying. Science can't disprove it. this Christmas story is unbelievably good news.

So which story is your story? Which story drives you day by day? Joining Jesus story is the most real and wonderful thing that can happen to you in your life.
But to get to that point, we have to start with seeing what humanity is, who we are, we have to come to the awful, awful realisation that in God's story, we're the villains.
love, we have to come to the world. And Jesus is the hero. He's the hero. He's the main character in the story.
And so this Christmas, the biggest thing you can do with your life is to get written into Jesus' story by in fact giving your life to him.
[27:04] make your story a good one, one that will go on living as Jesus himself lives and reigns right now.

Up on the screen, if you're not sure where you sit with the Christian faith, on the screen is a QR code. And I would encourage you just to take that extra step this Christmas to get into Jesus' story with your life.
to his child that'll ...

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