

*Christmas Brings Us Good News of an Unusual Savior*

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I want to read from Luke and chapter two, and the first 20 verses, speaks about the birth of Jesus.

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria and everyone went to his own town to register.” And by the way, that's the reason why we know the year in which Jesus was born, because the Romans kept very good records. In their records, the year in which the census took place is very well known.

Verse four, “So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flock at night. An Angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the Angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby, wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.’

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the Angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.’ When the Angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told that about.’

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherd said to

them. But Mary, treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

Thank you. I think like all of us, we remember Christmas primarily from our childhood days, and the childhood days are not so much about the gospel message concerning the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ as about the gifts that our parents spoil us with on Christmas morning. My only earliest memories go back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when we used to wake up on Christmas morning and find gifts on our bed. And of course we were made to believe in the reality of Father Christmas then and thought that perhaps he came in the night and gave us the gifts that we had.

I remember as a young person, wondering how Father Christmas always knew the size of my clothes. I mean, I was growing every year, but he never got the sizes wrong. Of course, later on I realized my parents used to sneak in at night and put the clothes by the bedside. But I suppose as we have grown we have come to realize that, really that's not the essence of Christmas.

And although, yes, for children we may appreciate them thinking in terms of gifts and later on as they grow, thinking about the gift, the ultimate gift that God has given us in the person of His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we grow up, we ought to think primarily of that ultimate gift, the gift of salvation in Christ, and therefore, Christmas essentially is about good news. It's about the good news that God Himself brings to us, of a very unusual savior that has been sent from Heaven.

And the passage that we have read together clearly demonstrates this reality, of this good, good news, that has come to us from God Himself, that we now have a savior. And I really wants us to concentrate especially on the content of that good news, that we now do have a savior. And I want us therefore to see this from the message of the Angel to the shepherds who were looking after their flocks at night, the shepherds, we're told in verse nine, “An Angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the Angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord, and this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.’”

If you forget so many things about Christmas. Really the thing to bear in mind is that it's about good news to all people. It is about good news to all people. They say that news is not news until it's bad news. But here before us, is the only good news that is

truly ultimately good news. Now, this message was being given to these shepherds that were busy looking after the flock at night. And in order for us to appreciate why this should have been so important and vital news for us, we need to go back to that passage. That's our brother Billy read for us in Isaiah and chapter nine.

I want to more specifically go to chapter eight and the last two to three verses there. Let's quickly turn to Isaiah and chapter eight. Isaiah chapter eight is the prologue or the background for the good news of a baby that is born. And the background is this, verse 21 and verse 22, "Distressed and hungry they will roam through the land. When they are famished, they will become enraged and looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness, and fearful gloom and they will be thrust into utter darkness." And then we hear by the beginning of chapter nine, "Nevertheless," and that's the good news that's going to come. "There won't be no more gloom for those who were in distress." And then the story goes on.

To appreciate what this means, bear in mind that the children of Israel at the time, this message was coming through them, were in a state of captivity. They had been taken into captivity initially by the Assyrian empire. Those tribes that remained around Jerusalem were also taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire. And while they were out in captivity, stronger empires still took over. There was the Persian empire that in due season came in and also overran the land.

And finally, by the time the Lord Jesus Christ was coming on earth, as it was the Roman empire that had come upon them and consequently they were an occupied people, they were a colonized people, they were second class citizens. They were individuals that that were being heavily taxed and consequently whatever little money they worked for was being taken away by the central government. They were in a state of distress. They were in a state of hunger, and all this simply led them into a state of political and religious unrest. And that's what we understand by those words that, "Being famished, they became enraged and looking upward will curse the King and their God."

They had reached such a position where they were sort of looking at their own national leadership and wondering whether there is any hope for them at all in the state in which they were. They were looking at God himself, Jehovah, their covenant God, and saying again, "What kind of God are you, that we should continue in this way in occupation?" And for you to understand something of the downgraded nature in which they were living.

Remember what happened when King Herod heard that there is a child that has been born who is going to be a King, remember how he issued a decree that all children born between such and such a date and such and such a date, all of them should be killed, and what happened? They were killed, slaughtered. And there is no appealing to the high court or the supreme court to try and get compensation for this. Nothing at all. That's how bad it is. In this state of distress, in this state of darkness, in this state of fearful gloom that is being spoken about in this passage. Any decision that is made by the powers that be, immediately can be applied to you.

Even soldiers, remember in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus Christ says, "If someone forces you to go one mile, you go with him to two miles." I mean you and I don't know anything of that in life. Because we are not an occupied people. But in the state in which they were, if a soldier arrived in town and you are passing and he simply said to you, "Take all my things and come on." And you can't even say, "Look, I'm in a hurry to buy my wife a birthday present." There is nothing like that, your agenda automatically changes.

You become his donkey, you must carry his luggage until finally he lets you free. As a people they were going through a state of distress and darkness and fearful gloom. Now, why was that? Well, we only need to familiarize ourselves with the Old Testament to realize that it was because God was punishing them. He was punishing them because of their sin. He had said to them that, "In this promised land that I am giving you, I must be number one, you must worship only me." But what did they do? They instead took on the gods of the Ammonites and the Hittites and Jebusites and so on, the foreign gods are the ones they also begun to worship.

And consequently God sent prophets to them to speak to them. That they should turn from their sinful ways, that they should, instead, that they should turn their hearts to the God who is there. They would not listen; instead, they stoned the prophet, they killed the prophet, in order to continue fulfilling their own ways. And finally God says, "Okay, you don't want to listen to me, I'm going to punish you." And that's how He sent the foreign armies in order to take them into captivity. It was because of their sin and the wrath of God for their sin.

Now, let me quickly put it this way, suffering in itself is not bad. Suffering often is this symptom pointing to a serious disease somewhere. In that sense, it's a very big favor to us. You see for the children of Israel, in the state of distress and darkness and fearful gloom, they should be asking themselves the question, Why are we in this state? And instead of being angry with their national leaders and with their God, they should look

inside and see, we have sinned, we have broken God's law and consequently we are being punished. The answer is very simple. Let me repent of my sins, let me go back to God and consequently He will heal me. That's what suffering is. It's God knocking at our doors saying, "There's something wrong that needs to be fixed."

At the beginning of this week, I rushed to see my dentist and it was because I was in pain. I couldn't read, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't do anything, and finally the dentist opened me up and shook her head and said, "it's very bad news, very bad news," and started speaking in technical terms, root canals and so on and other problems and she started fixing me up. Now I could easily have simply dealt with the pain, by living on a lot of painkillers. But from what she explained to me, I would just become worse with time because whatever was happening inside was getting worse. Thankfully or hopefully I rushed to her early enough for her to deal with my real, real problem.

Well in the same way, we need to appreciate that and in bringing the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians and the Romans upon the Israelites, it was because God was pointing them that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and then in due season He brought them the answer. Let me ask, what is your state today?

Are you in any form of distress? Is there something that has begun to happen in your life, where it seems to be evident that God is not King? You've tried to resolve the issues one way or the other, but no doubt about it, pain and distress and darkness and, indeed, lack of hope for the future is now filling your life. Is that the situation you are in now?

I don't know the details of your life. But I'm asking you, is there present suffering? Here's my question: Could it be that God is knocking at the door of your life, and saying, There has been stubborn sin here. I have spoken to you, I have preached to you through my servants. You have not listened and consequently I have now pushed you into the corner where life has, as it were, run away from you. And you being angry with other people and angry with me, as God, is not solving any problem. Because ultimately it is your sin that is finding you out. That is the reason why you are in such a state of distress and gloom."

Are you willing to accept that it is your life of sin, stubbornness in sin that is ultimately bringing you to the point where you are in a complete lack of rest within, a constant state of sorrow, a need for you to find an answer? But I want to say to you that each year when Christmas comes around, it's a time when God is saying, "Yes, in that state where you are I want to bring you good news." Nevertheless, there will be no more

gloom for those who were in distress, and the reason is because Christmas is good news concerning the birth of a savior. It's good news concerning the birth of a savior.

The Angel said, "Today, in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord." He is Christ the Lord. Why should this be good news? You know, when you are in a state where you know you cannot save yourself, the news of a Savior is extremely good news.

I think most of us will remember the news about that Chilean miners, the miners in Chile. You don't remember? I mean you must've been out of touch with the whole world. Maybe you were under anesthesia during that whole period. But here were individuals who were trapped, many, many, many meters in the bowels of the earth. There was absolutely nothing they could do to get themselves out. Absolutely nothing. If you've never gone underground, you don't appreciate it.

That was my job. When that thing goes, and goes, and goes, you start praying that one day it will go, and go, and go, and bring you out. Because when rocks finally crash over you and block your way out, you can't dig your way out of the bowels of the earth, you can't. Imagine those individuals stuck there. The most they could do was to pray, that's all they could do.

That the people out there, who are still on top of the earth, may not think that they are dead. So that they may somehow discover that they are alive. And you know what they were doing apart from praying? They were simply taking another stone and were hitting on the rock. That's all they could do, just hitting on the rock. Because they knew that if the people who are up there on the surface find a way of putting some kind of stethoscope to the earth and they hear a knock happening there, they won't think that these are our ancestral spirits talking to us.

They will know that these are human beings. They will know that the people down there were still alive. In other words, the most they could do was say, "We are here please hurry, before we perish." Until one day, there was a little hole that was made, which gave them regular supplies, even some favorite music just to keep up their spirits. And then one day a bigger hole was made and the capsule went down and all they could do was to get into that capsule and be pulled up. That's all. That's what it means to be told, here is a savior, here is a rescuer, finally.

The joy they had in the knowledge that rescue had finally come. You know sometimes we human beings can be terribly wicked and sinful. Because as I watched these miners

coming to the surface and the way in which we're now being turned into heroes. Heroes for what? The real heroes are the individuals who made that hole down. That first person who got into the capsule and went into the bowels of the earth, that's the guy we need to know. Friends, it is because it is impossible for you to extricate yourself from your sin and from the wrath of God.

Believe it. As long as you think that by going to church a little more frequently, by reading my Bible a little more frequently, by praying a little more frequently, perhaps God will finally change His mind about me and receive me into Heaven. As long as that is your view that you can do something, you will

not think Christmas is good news, you won't. You won't think that information about a savior being born is good news, you won't.

We had again, not too long ago, some young people who were lost in the middle of the Atlantic. And they would have perished, surviving on eating seaweeds and so on until a ship found them. And I can fully well assure you that's good news. The site of a ship when you are lost in the middle of the Atlantic, that's good news. As you appreciate it, that you cannot change. You cannot change. You don't have the ability. You don't have the capacity to change your spiritual state. It is impossible. You need a rescuer. You need a savior.

You need somebody to come from the, as it was, the surface of the earth into the bowels of your misery and gloom and distress and bondage to sin in order to save you from there. I'm asking, do you realize this? In my evangelistic work, which I often do at the personal level, I'm amazed at how many individuals, when I first ask the question, "Do you know that you are a sinner?" How the first answer is, "Well, everybody is a sinner." No but I mean, you. "What sin have I committed which nobody's committed?"

Now if that's your attitude and I'm sorry if you are not ready for good news. Somehow you try to justify yourself. It's like me and the dentist. Some say, "Well, who hasn't got teeth problems, who hasn't? We all have teeth problems." Well then I won't change my agenda and go to the dentist. That's my answer. But if I'm getting to a stage where I say whether other people have got teeth problems or not, I am definitely in trouble. I need a dentist; I must go and then there is going to be hope. Worse still if it's individuals whom when you say to them you are a sinner, "What sin have I committed? Have you seen me commit adultery? Why are you calling me a sinner?" They even get upset.

If that's your attitude, I want to repeat: There is no hope for you because you don't see the need for a rescuer, a deliverer to come into your desperate situation. You don't see your need for a savior. So even when the angel is saying, "Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you." And you are sitting there as a shepherd watching your flock. You're going, "Anything else you want to tell us, Angel?" God is listening to you, because you don't recognize your desperate situation, your need for a savior.

But if you are sitting there and you are saying, "Yes, my sin is fast finding me out, I'm already beginning to pay the price for my sin here on earth. I know what I've done. I know in fact I know I deserve worse than this, I deserve death. I deserve eternity in hell already. And there is nothing I can do to change this because in myself I am weak. Too weak to extricate myself from sin. In fact, I am not just weak. I am dead, dead in trespasses and sin. I need a savior, a life-giving savior."

If that's your question, if that's your answer, if that's your attitude, I'm saying to you, God has got good news for you and it is this, He has provided a savior in baby Jesus. I mean, let's go back to the Chilean miners. It means a lot to me I'm sure you can understand. They are still in there. A little hole is made and in it is a note and when they read it, it's basically saying, "We are beginning the rescue operation here. We will soon pull you out." You know, they were still underground, but I'm sure they hugged each other, they jumped, they danced a bit of a jig and they are still there. In fact, I think it took another two months before they got them out, but that was enough they received good news down there.

But here is where the challenge is, in case you thought that acknowledging yourself to be a sinner is the greatest challenge. The greatest challenge is that to be saved from sin and the wrath of God by this Jesus, you need faith. You need faith. You need to believe. The reason is because He is a very unusual savior. He's a very unusual savior. You can well imagine that this was demanded of the shepherds when they were told this would be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.

Now, this is not the way in which saviors come. Let's assume those miners underground there, were now to be rescued. And upon the capsule going down, it was a baby that came out. You know that's not, the first thing they will be thinking is, what are these guys up to? What's going on? But what is worse here is that this little baby was not just speaking about being in the weak state physically, but also in terms of economic strength. I mean a baby in a manger. A manger was what cows ate in. It was a feeding trough. You don't find your rescuer there.

I mean, if they were told to go to Herod's palace and in the midst of the marble walls and pillars, with gold plated beds and tables and so on, they went to find a baby there, a child of aristocracy, a child who is going to be the next Herod. Perhaps that would be normal. They would say, "The Romans are in trouble here. The Romans are really in trouble." But you're going into a little insignificant town called Bethlehem. And in that little insignificant town you are going into a cow shed. And in that cow shed, you are going into what a cow feeds in, and they are in the midst of grass and swaddling clothes, which simply means the kind of cloth which you might sort of carry babies in, they tie themselves like this. Now that kind of cloth, that's what had been put there and that's what's covering this baby. And that's your rescuer from the power of Rome.

That demands faith. In case you think that that's bad enough, think about the cloth because the whole of Jesus's life was a challenge to faith. He never made His way into the palaces of Pilate and Herod. He never made His way to Caesar's palace, He didn't mingle with the aristocracy of His own days, He walked the streets of Galilee, of Nazareth, He mingled with the poor people of His day, and finally, under false accusations, He is nailed to a cross to die the death of a criminal. That's your savior. "Oh Israel, this is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Savior, that's the one they thought was going to redeem Israel, was going to save Israel but now, He is at the hands of the Romans, He's been crucified, He is dead, " said the disciples to Him, a few days later, not knowing that He has been raised from the dead. But friends, that's God's way. That's God's way. It's a way that must first humble us.

God serves us by first wanting to bring us to the end of ourselves. You see, all along, we were the clever ones. We knew what we wanted in life, we didn't want to listen to Him. We want our own way, stubbornly. And we've had our fingers burnt. And now He is saying, "Alright stop trying, now trust me." Are you expecting me to put all my hope on this little baby in a small town of Bethlehem, David's city, in this cow shed, in this little feeding trough, this little baby who is so weak, totally dependent on its mother care? You expect me to trust in him? Yes!

You expect me to trust in this adult 33 years later, who is hung in shame on a cross in complete weakness at the mercy of the Roman empire. You want me to trust him for my future, for my hope for heaven and for everything?

"Yes, previously you refused to listen to me and that's why you are where you are. But now trust me, trust me. I'm sending you a very unusual savior. Believe in Him. Call upon Him. And He will save you from your sin." Let me ask, are you willing to do that? Are you willing to believe in the infinite wisdom of God, are you? And fully trust Him.

A story is often told, and it's been put in cartoon form or in comic strips of a gentleman falling off a cliff and about halfway down, there's a little outcrop from the side of the cliff that he just manages to hang onto. And he begins to call for help, it's in the middle of darkness now. He is getting weak. That little outcrop is beginning to give way because of his weight. And the voice in that darkness says, "I hear you. Let go of that outcrop, and I will save you." The joke there, although it's very serious, is the little strip ends with him calling out again, and this call is, "Is there anyone else up there?" In other words, this kind of savior, who is expecting me to let go, when I have no assurance on what's going to happen next, I'm not willing to trust. I first of all want to see a helicopter. I want to see a rope coming down from the helicopter. I want to see, I want to see, I want to see. Is there anyone else up there?

I wonder whether that's what you're doing today. Go ahead. This is the yes, this little baby born in bed. Trust me. Let go of everything you are hanging on. Let go and this little baby who finally find that he found himself on a cruel cross, dead, buried and raised again from the dead. He is the savior. Christ Jesus the Lord. Trust Him. He will wash away your sins. He will change your heart. It will make you new, trust Him. In your heart of hearts are you saying, "Is there anyone else up there? I want another savior." If that's you, you will perish in sin. You will go to hell with your own so-called intelligence. Sin will finally destroy you.

And that's why for me, the craziest thing about every Christmas is that I meet a lot of people who are very excited about it, but who are still in bondage to sin. They sing, they dance, they eat, drink, they put on new clothes. But they are still on their way to hell. They know it and I know it, we all know it. But they put up the biggest Christmas parties, drink themselves into a frenzy. All because they have not yet trusted in this unusual savior that has been brought to them. Are you in that category? Are you an individual who has just had a wonderful Christmas weekend wonderful in many ways? And yet you cannot speak about the fact that, that gloom, that distress, that agony, that darkness, has been finally removed. Having recovered from the alcohol drinking you are still where you were, in the darkest gloom. Is that your condition? Oh, that you may not have another Christmas like that.

That indeed this same weekend, that you would call upon this savior that has been born in David's city. That you would cry out to Him and ask Him to save you. That you might trust in Him, that you may believe the good news. That yes, He is not the usual kind of savior. But He is the savior that God has sent and consequently you want to believe in Him. You want to rest in Him. You want to leave all your calls to Him and

experience His power to change you from the inside out. Experience His power to put a new joy in your heart, as we were learning earlier on.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom, but there will be joy because of the kind of child that has been sent. Let me end by reading to you the words that Billy read to us about this child, it explains why he should be the meaningful savior. Verse six of Isaiah 9, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

This is the savior that has been sent to you from heaven itself. This is what Christmas is all about. This savior wants to save you from that power of sin that takes you the wrong way and is destroying your personal life, your family life, your working life, everything about you, it's draining life out of you. This savior wants to change you.

But you need to have faith. You need to call upon Him in desperation and experience His salvation. Amen.