

The Sign of Christmas

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[0 : 00] So I don't know about you, but I reckon the winter is probably the hardest season. The nights are long, the days are short, it's cold, it's dark, it's frequently wet, although perhaps that's just a Glasgow thing, but it's cold and wet, so it's pretty miserable.

And apparently now it's when COVID variants like to strike. So all in all, winter's not great. I think it's for this reason that I very much resonate with the horror that befalls the land of Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The White Witch has placed the land of Narnia under a dark spell that means it's always winter and never Christmas. I start here because that novel understands something. We do need Christmas. We don't just need Christmas as something to look forward to when the dark of winter encroaches, though that probably is true. I think that trivializes Christmas. And Christmas isn't to be trivialized because despite what all the films suggest, Christmas is so much more than just a mawkish celebration of general goodwill.

When we come to the Bible and look at the story of Christ's birth and what it's telling us, we see that Christmas is more than just a sugar-coated pill that's going to get us through the winter of the year. Rather, Christmas is all about giving us hope in the winter of the world.

Let me explain. Without Christmas, this world is in a perpetual winter. Dark, cold, without hope or direction. A world on a knife edge. A world where life is fleeting and pain is common. A world where death is real and suffering is normal. A world where climate change, disease, or war could destabilize our fragile comforts at any moment. These are the sorts of things that we kind of want to ignore, especially when we come around the turkey on Christmas Day. For most of us, Christmas is probably when we want to cover up the miserable realities of the world. Our solution to the winter of the world is to cover it in wrapping paper, if you like. But not in the Bible. In the Bible, Christmas is the solution to the dark and sober realities of the world that we live in. The message of Christmas is that there is hope in this winter of the world. The message of Christmas is a promise. A promise that through the coming of

Christ, we will have spring again. And the coming of Christ as a child born in a manger in a backwater town in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago is truly the hope that the world needs for all its problems. It's a big claim, I admit. But what I want to try and get across the next 20 minutes or so is that Christmas is more than a sentimental celebration where we forget the problems we face. Rather, Christmas is concerned with the gritty realities of life and it is a sign and a celebration of the fact that Jesus was born to solve humanity's deepest problems and bring hope to a world in darkness. Spring to a world trapped in the bleak midwinter.

[3 : 36] Now, our last reading that we had, it was from a book written by a man in ancient Palestine called Isaiah. He was a prophet, a man who God spoke through. And he came to the king of Judah, a man named Ahaz, a man who was facing his own personal winter. His political enemies in the surrounding kingdoms were readying for war and he was without hope. In his desperation, he planned to ask the biggest player on the world stage for help, the Assyrian Empire. So far, this doesn't sound particularly Christmassy.

But what I want to get across is that Ahaz and his situation illustrates the need for Christmas and the need for Christ. Because Ahaz is a pretty accurate representation of the world we live in and its attitudes to God. Ahaz was facing problems of catastrophic proportions. He was facing the prospect of war, the destruction of his kingdom, and probably his own death. And here I think we can see similarities to our own lives. Now, we're not kings for sure, but we're continuing to live through a pandemic. Climate change promises to bring destruction across the world in the coming decades. And across the nations, the former political status quo seems to be changing and unraveling. Refugees flee war and tyranny with little hope. And brutal regimes rule with cruelty and without fear of reprisal. We live in an age of global anxiety and uncertainty. And that's to say nothing of our own

personal winters. There's going to be those who are amongst us who are grieving, those who are ill, those who are depressed, those who are lonely, and those who are struggling and barely able to keep hanging on. And if that's not you, it either has been in the past or will be in the future. Winter always comes. And the gravest winter of all, the one that we will all have to face one day. That coldest winter that no one escapes is our own death.

Where do we find solutions for all these problems? I would suggest that most of the solutions that our world, our culture offers are barely more than a sticking plaster. For example, it doesn't look like COP26 has provided much significant hope for our climate crisis. Politicians can't agree how to respond to the refugee crisis. And in all our personal crises. Often the best we can do is delay things until the next crisis appears. And the sleep of death is, of course, that great inescapable. All of which ultimately suggest that the world can't actually offer any capable solutions to our deepest problems, which lie at the root of our world and our lives. Ahaz, he thought his solution to his problems lay in the king of Assyria. But as Isaiah would tell him, the Assyrians would stab Judah in the back, and Ahaz would find that his allies were now his enemies. He was looking for solutions in all the wrong places, just as I think we do. So where's the right place? Well, it's in God. The problem is, it's not a very popular notion. Even at Christmas, a lot of us probably prefer our Christmases without the God stuff. Keep the carols, but throw the baby out with the manger, as it were.

[7 : 23] But that's always, it's always been unpopular. Isaiah comes to Ahaz, and through Isaiah, God speaks to this anxious king. And God had told Ahaz not to make an alliance with Assyria. But Ahaz, he doesn't think this is a particularly politically astute course of action. So God tells him to ask for a miraculous sign, to prove that God will be there, a sign in the deepest depths or the highest heights.

Now Ahaz, he responds rather sanctimoniously. I will not ask. I will not put the Lord to the test, he says. Word of advice. If God ever offers you a personal sign, you take him at his word and ask for the sign. But Ahaz didn't want a sign because he didn't want to be pressured into acknowledging that God was right, or that God was able to do what he said he would do. Ahaz didn't believe, and quite frankly, he didn't want to. Because an actual sign from God would make things more difficult. Ignorance, after all, is bliss, is it not? Except that it's not. We can be a bit like the Macalester parents in Home Alone. They're so distracted by everything else that they don't realize that they've left Kevin at home over Christmas. Or we can be so distracted and think we're so busy that considering God, it's just not on our radar. But like the Macalesters discovering that they've forgotten their son in their busyness, well, we might find that we've made a mistake by forgetting the Son of God in ours. Ahaz's refusal of the sign, well, it would bring desolation and hopelessness to his country. And that, at the very least, should make us think. Now, although Ahaz refused the offered sign, God gave one anyway. And this is where we get more traditionally Christmassy. Isaiah said, here now, you house of David, is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel. Now, Ahaz, he would never see this sign come to pass. He got his wish. In fact, the promised sign didn't come until 700 years later. The Assyrians had come and gone, as had the Babylonians and the Persians and the Greeks, all of them different empires who had subjugated God's people. When the sign finally did come, God's people were under the oppression of the Romans. The fulfillment was, of course, Jesus.

[9 : 57] Matthew, writing his account of Jesus' birth in the New Testament, records that an angel came to Joseph, who was engaged to Mary. Mary was pregnant, and the angel told Joseph that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Then the angel cites this part of Isaiah. She will give birth to a son, the angel tells him, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. Now, the first thing to notice about this sign is that it is miraculous. A virgin pregnancy is not normal. It is impossible in the normal run of things, obviously. So, this is a pretty significant claim, and the claim tells us a number of things. First, this child was not a normal child. This is not how conception usually works. So, the child is worth paying attention to. Secondly, and more specifically, the child is divine. We often use the term divine to mean something wonderful, but to be truly divine actually means to be of God. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is the Son of God, and that's what that name

Emmanuel means. When the angel tells Joseph that Jesus will be called Emmanuel, Matthew tells us that this means God with us. Jesus is the Son of God, but he is also God himself. God chose to come down to earth to be born of a virgin and live for 33 years as a man amongst his people.

He was born into poverty, and he was born into a people who had lost hope, a people who had seen oppression generation after generation, and that's what Isaiah's words speak of in the later part of the prophecy that we had read. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. For before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. That there is a picture of both poverty and desolation, the poverty and desolation that God himself came to be born into. Isn't that striking? I don't know what you imagine the God Christians believe in to be like. If you imagine a distant and uninvolved king who cares little for the affairs of his creation, then you'd be very wrong. The God Christians believe in is certainly a king, but he's the king who came to suffer and to serve in meekness and humility.

[12:48] God knows your pain. He knows your fears. He knows your loneliness. He knows your anxieties. He knows your struggles. He knows because he has felt these things as a man.

And that man, Jesus, came not just to experience them, but more importantly, to provide deliverance from them. Jesus was born to bring deliverance from our pain, our tears, the evil and the darkness in the world, and the evil and darkness that exist within ourselves.

That's why the angel said to Joseph, he will save his people from their sins. And Jesus even brings deliverance from that worst and most grievous of enemies, death.

Jesus, God as man, Emmanuel, he is the solution to our deepest problems, to the winter of the world. Now, time doesn't permit as much space to explore in depth how Jesus, God with us, is the solution to these problems.

But if you'd like to explore more, chat to myself or Jonathan, chat to the person you came with, maybe even try reading the Bible with them. They'd really love to if you asked them. But what I'd like to leave us all with is an observation about how we respond to the Christmas sign of Emmanuel.

[14:15] Because there are basically two options. Option one is rejection and refusal. Ahaz, as we've already said, he didn't want to sign from God.

But when Isaiah came calling, he didn't want to hear any God chat. He would rather not have had God intrude upon his life. He didn't want to have to consider God.

He'd much rather just head toward disaster on his own terms. And when Jesus was born, we see a whole host of reactions to him. Outright hatred by some like the mad King Herod.

Disdain by many. Apathy by others. But all of them fall into this same category. Rejection and refusal. This is the, I'd just rather not really hear about Jesus category.

This Christmas, I'd really love it if we were all able to take the second option. Option two is reception and acceptance. An open ear and an open heart.

[15:19] A willingness to glimpse into the reality that Christ really came for you. And for me. When the angel came to Mary.

And told her she was going to be pregnant with the Son of God. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Her response is just amazing. Mary said, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

I'm sure that Mary was pretty intelligent. But this must have confused the life out of her. And yet she says this. I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

And this willing response is exemplified in others. By Joseph who trusted the words of the angel. By the shepherds who visited the child in the manger. By the Magi who followed a star all the way to Bethlehem.

And none of them had all the answers. None of them had the whole picture. None of them could see the whole story. Or quite how it was going to unfold. Nevertheless.

[16:20] They listened. And had the boldness and the courage. To take God at his word. This Christmas. Why not try taking God at his word?

Why not read some more of the Christmas story. And consider whether. Jesus might just be. The hope that you need. Because option one. That option of rejection.

Refusal and apathy. It's a bridge to nowhere. Option two. The option of reception. And acceptance. Of the sign. Will lead you like a torch in the night.

To hope in the darkness. Emmanuel is our hope. In the winter of the world. We began our time by singing.

O come, O come, Emmanuel. It's a song of hope. Hope that Jesus Christ is. The help that this world needs. God with us.

[17:17] To deliver us from all of our pain. And all of our fear. From darkness and death. From the icy heart. Of this world's bleak midwinter. Which affects us all.

And holds us all. In its cold and icy grip. But with Christ. Christmas came. And winter is waning. The icy grip of hopelessness is melting.

And it's giving way to spring. But only if you choose. To listen further. To Christ our Emmanuel. And feel the warm rays of his spring.

The hope of his deliverance. The beauty of his love. And if you do. Well then this last carol that we're about to sing.

Is yours. The song of Jesus victory over the winter of the world. His song of spring. Joy to the world. The Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.

[18:17] And it is my deepest and sincerest hope and prayer this Christmas. That all of us here. Will receive the heavenly king.

That we all can have the hope. Of his eternal spring. And that we can know and follow. Jesus. Our Emmanuel. Our Emmanuel.