

The Ultimate Gift

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Date: 15 December 2019

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[0 : 00] Thanks Gates for reading it and thanks to the band for their music earlier. If you'd like to keep that passage open, I'm going to look at that in a moment or two. But beforehand I'd like to just have a quick Christmas quiz because Christmas is all about quizzes isn't it? And especially music quizzes. So here's what we'll do. I'm going to give you a few words of a Christmas song, a line, and then you have to finish it off.

Okay, got that. So I'll say a few words of a famous Christmas song and you've got to finish it off. So we'll start with an easy one. You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.

I nailed it. No problem whatsoever. Okay, so we'll get a little bit harder with each one. So the next one. I'll try and sing this as best I can. Last Christmas I gave you my heart, but the very next day you gave it away. Oh, music in my ears. Okay, a bit harder this time, a bit harder. I'm dreaming of a wise Christmas.

Fantastic. Okay, you do get a bit harder. So next one. Have yourself a Merry little Christmas. Okay, good, good. Right, one more. No, two more. Make my wish come true. Ooh. Try it again.

Make my wish come true. Ooh. All I want for Christmas is you. Mariah Carey. Christmas classic. Can't go anywhere where I can hear that song.

[1 : 42] Okay, this is the last one. Feed the world. Let them know it's Christmas time. Excellent. Great. Okay, that's the end of my singing for now.

That song was by Band Aid, Do They Know It's Christmas? You know, the one that was co-written with Bob Geldof. But apparently, Sir Bob Geldof is fed up with that song. In an interview, he said this. He said, I'm responsible for two of the worst songs in history.

One is, Do They Know It's Christmas? Which you've just sung. And the second is, We Are The World. Remember that one? We Are The World? We Are The World. I won't say it. I'll just say the words. We Are The World. We Are The Children. We Are The Ones Who Make A Brighter Day. So let's start giving. There's a choice we're making. We're saving our own lives. It's true. We'll make a better day. Just you and me. We all know that song, don't we? It's quite a popular song. So they're both songs about changing the world, aren't they?

And I don't know what Sir Bob Geldof's problem with them is, but I suspect it's the fact that we can actually change the world. As much as we would love to change the world, as much as we can try to change the world, we can't actually change the world.

[2 : 59] We can't end disease or poverty or injustice or violence or evil. We can't change the climate, no matter how much we try. We just can't make this world a better place for everybody.

And yet, the brilliant news of Christmas, which we heard about in that last reading from Isaiah, is that God can. God can change this world and make it a better place.

And God can change our lives so that they are what they should be. So that reading from Isaiah, it states this loudly and clearly because it tells us about a promised gift.

A promised gift for our world and to us. And the ultimate gift that is spoken of in Isaiah, this promised gift, is Jesus Christ.

Now these words that were read for us were written about 700 years before Jesus was born. And so they're prophecy, they're pointing to the future about what will happen.

[4 : 00] But they describe to us how Jesus Christ exceeds our expectations for the world we all want. And also Jesus Christ meets the deepest longings of our hearts as human beings.

And it's a message that Isaiah's readers needed to hear at the time. But it's also a message that we need to hear today. Because it's a message for all people in all places at all times.

Because Isaiah's readers lived of its gloom and distress and darkness where everything just seemed hopeless. And if we're honest, it's really no different today, is it? We live in the same kind of world. Things just seem to be getting worse instead of getting better. So just think globally for a moment. This world is a very dark and dismal place.

With wars, with evil, with terrorism, climate change, globally. Then smaller, just think nationally. There's darkness and doom and gloom in our nation.

[5 : 01] With fears over Brexit, as well as all the poverty, the crime, the violence, the inequality and the injustice. So globally, nationally, and just think personally.

There's despair and there's darkness in our own lives, isn't there? In our relationships, with our families, at our workplaces, as well as our own mistakes and our own failures.

We know, don't we, we're not the people that we could be or should be. And so there's this whole load of problems that just need to be sorted out and need to be solved.

And so like Isaiah's day, the biggest problem isn't economic or political, but the biggest problem is spiritual. Spiritual in the sense of it starts within our own hearts.

Because the root of all the problems in our world is human sin. Our hearts are the source of all the selfishness, all the greed, all the arrogance, all the pride that just wreaks havoc in our world and amongst our relationships.

[6 : 10] And yet it's into this darkness that Isaiah's words offer such great and tremendous hope. A hope that's so certain and so sure that Isaiah's words speak about the future as if it's already happened.

And so if you look down in verse 2, he speaks about darkness turning to light. So the people were experiencing the darkness of God's judgment.

And yet the day would come when God would break into that darkness with his light. Then in verse 3, he speaks of fear turning to joy. So the day would come when God would cause people to celebrate and be glad by giving true and lasting joy.

And then he speaks in verse 4 of oppression turning to freedom. So the people were oppressed. But the day would come when God would bring true and lasting deliverance by setting people free.

And then in verse 5, he speaks of war turning to peace. There was no peace in that day. There is no peace in our day. And yet he's speaking of a day that would come when God would bring true and lasting peace.

[7 : 17] So it even says that all the army kit is going to be burned because there will be no more wars. And so we've got light. We've got joy. We've got freedom.

We've got peace. It's all promised here. And yet we might be thinking, how could such a world ever be? Because whether you live in North Korea or North Kelvinside, the way I'd rather live actually, whether you live in either of these places, these words here just sound too good to be true.

And so in this past week we've heard all about political parties and their manifestos for what they will do in this country. But what we've got here in Isaiah chapter 9 is God's manifesto for what he's going to do with the universe.

And that includes us. And so the thing about Christianity, if you're new to it, and if you're here today and you would call yourself a Christian, we're glad you're here, but Christianity doesn't offer sentimental and sloppy solutions to this world's problems.

It doesn't say we are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day. Because I guess as humans, we naively think and we believe that political systems or ideologies are even just a bit more love and we'll be able to solve our own problems and the problems in this world.

[8 : 41] But we know we just can't. And so Christianity doesn't let us delude ourselves into this kind of wishful thinking. The Bible, you see, is brutally honest.

It's brutally honest about our biggest problem in life, which is sin. The sin that is within our own hearts. And it's honest about our complete inability to do anything about it.

And it tells us that we desperately need help. That's why we've got Christmas. That's why God entered into this world. God with us. Emmanuel. And that promise was great, not just for the people back then, but it's great for people today like you and like me.

Because it anticipates in Isaiah that a divine ruler is coming who is also a divine rescuer. So he will reign and rule with perfect justice, but he will also save and rescue people from their predicament.

And he'll bring joy. And he'll bring freedom. And he'll bring peace. Isaiah says, verse 6, For to us a child is born. To us a son is given.

[9 : 52] So he's speaking about Jesus, God's ultimate gift for our world and for our lives. And what Jesus came to do is spelled out in the four names that are given to him there.

They're like titles. Wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. So Jesus is the wonderful counsellor. And everybody, if we're honest, needs counsel today. And we're not short of counsellors from television, journalists, politicians, even celebrities who offer their wise counsel, telling us how to live, how to speak, even what to think. And yet Jesus is the source of true wisdom, teaching us the truth about God, teaching us the truth about ourselves, answering life's big questions.

And so only his wise counsel can answer those deepest questions. And so he is the voice that's worth listening to. Even if his counsel is just too radical for the snowflakes of our polite society.

[10 : 56] People say, what we need is, we need more knowledge. Tick. We need better education. Tick. We need greater understanding. Well, Jesus, the wonderful counsellor, is all this.

Next, Jesus is mighty God. So when Jesus was on earth, the mighty power of God was on display in his life. And the things he said, and he did. So he's teaching, his healing, his control over nature, his control over death.

He is mighty God. That's why he alone can sort out our world and sort out our lives. And we need a God who is both loving, who can forgive us when we fail, but also just who will punish evil.

And Jesus is that mighty God. But today people say we need better societies. We need less evil. We need greater justice.

It would be amazing if you get this. But Jesus, the mighty God, is the only one who can give it.

Jesus is everlasting father. So all that God is, Jesus is.

[12 : 03] He came to bring us into God's everlasting family. As his adopted children. And so, we are the everlasting father. He gives us unconditional love.

Who is tender. Who is caring. Who comforts us. Who forgives us. And who will always be there for us. Jesus is everlasting father. Today people say we need genuine relationships.

We need more love. We need real commitment. We need people to stick to their promises. The everlasting father gives us all of that.

Jesus is prince of peace. Who in this world doesn't want peace? We all want peace. And Jesus brings peace between God and us as human beings. Because by nature we're enemies with God. There's a problem. That Jesus through his death on the cross. Reconciles us to God. And puts us right with him. Through dying. We also are not at peace with others.

[13 : 06] Jesus brings that peace with other people in our relationships. Jesus also gives that inner peace. That even if life is a struggle. We've got that peace.

That enables us to keep going. But that's not all. One day Jesus Christ will bring lasting peace. And so people say today we need world peace. We need inner peace.

We need peace between people. Only Jesus the prince of peace can give this. That's why Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift for our world and for our lives.

And it all sounds great, doesn't it? And you might be asking, well, why is there still darkness in our world? Why is my life still such a struggle?

Why if all these things are promised by God, do we not see them? Well, it's because we're still waiting for God's kingdom to come in all its fullness in the future.

[14 : 02] But the promise here is that it is coming. It will definitely arrive one day. And that's why Isaiah speaks about the future with absolute certainty. So just look down at the very last verse, verse 7, and see what he says.

He says, And it all sounds too good to be true, doesn't it?

But these words point to a reality that is as real as the air that we breathe right now. Because the baby we celebrate at Christmas time is king.

And he reigns and rules forever. That's what these words are saying. And so if he's the king, and if he reigns and rules, it means he's king over us, whether we like it or not.

Whether we realise it or not. And that's why the coming of Jesus on that very first Christmas is the only hope for our world. For you and for me.

[15 : 13] Let me try to illustrate. We used to live in a place in the east called Edinburgh. Sounds good as glass doors, obviously. But it was far better. And when we lived in Edinburgh, our house

had two levels.

And so I had a study upstairs in the house. And I would often be working upstairs. And the children, the two boys, would be playing downstairs. And hear them downstairs playing.

And they would play nicely most of the time. But sometimes they wouldn't play so nicely. And so I would call down some wise words from above. Like, don't fight.

Leave your brother alone. Share. Don't hit. No, radical. Radical words coming down from upstairs to downstairs. And if only those words were listened to, there would be no problem.

Everything would be fine. And of course, it didn't always work. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. And so if they couldn't resolve our differences between one another, then I would have to get off my seat.

[16:14] And come downstairs, from upstairs, to downstairs, to start the night. I mean, to start at night. Start out the situation. My words became flesh, as it were.

I became incarnate downstairs from upstairs. I appeared bodily downstairs from upstairs. And then everything was sorted out.

The problems were solved. And now, as parents, sometimes we do need to step in, don't we, and sort out our children's problems. Because they just can't do themselves. And isn't that Isaiah's message here?

And it's also the message of Christmas. In fact, it's the message of Christianity that God came down to earth as a man to sort our world and to save our lives.

And that is the amazing hope of Christmas. The creator of the universe, the eternal God, shrunk himself down to an embryo in a human womb.

[17:16] Why did he do this? Because only human flesh can die. And so Jesus' death on the cross is the only way our sins can be forgiven and we can be saved.

Our sin needs to be dealt with so our broken relationship with God can be restored. And so our broken world can be renewed. And because Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sin through his death, He's the one who has won the victory over sin and evil and decay and disorder and everything that spoils this broken world.

And so Christmas is the fantastic news about Jesus, who was born, who died, who rose again, who reigns right now and who will one day return and judge this world and put everything right.

And so Christmas tells us that we are so lost in darkness and so unable to save ourselves that nothing less than the Son of God coming from heaven to earth can save us.

And that's why Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift. Yes, to our world, but also to us. Did you hear those words for, to us, a child is born.

[18:39] To us, a son is given. He's the ultimate gift to you and to me personally. It's as if, around his ankle, you had one of those Christmas tags that said, From God to you.

And so as I close, the question is, What have you done with this gift that God has given? What have you done? A gift can only be ours if we receive it, can't it?

And so this child born to us, this son given to us, must be received by us. Because Jesus is the ultimate gift for our world and for our lives.

And so, I hope you have a great Christmas. I hope you have a fantastic time with your family, your friends. I hope you get loads of presents and eat lots of chocolate. And aren't you sick or overweight.

Well, let me do this Christmas. Please don't reject God's ultimate gift to you and to me. The gift of his son, Jesus Christ.

[19:43] Like,■■ around thee. Please don't re-