

# The Christmas Connection

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, we're looking at Hebrews chapter 1 and the first five verses, and I wonder what your thoughts are on hearing that passage.! It's not long, but it's pretty dense. In that regard, it makes me think of a Christmas pudding. It's small, but heavy.

And you might think that in comparison to what the kids gave us with their wonderful nativity performance, it doesn't feel very Christmassy. And yet, what a passage like this does is answer the question, why was Jesus born?

And so, in that regard, it's very Christmassy indeed. And it gets to the heart of a theme that is very Christmassy, and that theme is connection. Christmas is a time of connection. It's a time when people send cards. It's when we give lots of presents to various friends, like iPads, if needs to be. It's a time when we get all the family around for a Christmas dinner. But because it's a time of connection, it's also a time when isolation and loneliness can hit harder. It's a time of connection, but also of disconnection.

Now, we've all got our favourite Christmas songs. One of mine, and it might surprise those who know me, is Underneath the Tree by Kelly Clarkson. It's a song, like many Christmas songs, that taps into that longing for connection at Christmas.

[ 1 : 27 ] And one of the repeated lines in it is, it just wasn't the same alone on Christmas Day. But that need for connection, although it's perhaps exacerbated during the Christmas season, it's not just a Christmas need, but it's a fundamental human need throughout the whole year.

And we live in an era that prizes connection, and that promises so much connection, particularly through social media, but which also, perhaps counterintuitively, sees so much isolation, loneliness, and disconnection.

In the Christmas edition of The New Statesman, Joanna Thomas-Core, who's the chief literary critic for The Times, she reflects on this phenomenon in her own life. She writes that the more familiar I was to people on social media, and the more I placed myself at the beck and call of those who only knew my digital self, the more disconnected I became from the people around me.

Some of my real-life friends were even checking my Instagram stories as a surrogate for actual conversation. And she concludes her piece by saying she's come off social media and says, Only by reconnecting with myself and all my messy, inconvenient, unformatted thoughts will I be able to reconnect with the world.

Now, I've no doubt that getting off social media is probably a healthy thing, and I imagine when the new year rolls around, some of us might make resolutions to cut down on that dopamine hit of scrolling.

[ 2 : 52 ] But it's that last phrase of hers that I find really interesting. She wants to be able to reconnect with the world. What does that mean? What does it mean to reconnect with the world?

What does it mean to be disconnected from the world? I suspect that though social media and other factors like Christmas, though they can exacerbate a feeling of disconnectedness, they're not necessarily the root problem.

Actually, we all feel a sense of disconnectedness a lot of the time. There's a void or a gap in our lives that we're constantly trying to fill. But so much of what we do can only fill that void temporarily. It's like there's something missing from our lives, and we can't find that missing piece that would make us feel whole. We're disconnected from something, but we don't necessarily know what. And I would argue that this feeling that we need to reconnect with the world is actually a feeling that we need to reconnect with God. He is, in fact, that missing piece.

[ 3 : 56 ] And the reason Christians celebrate Christmas is because Jesus was born for just that purpose. The reason we retell the story of shepherds and wise men, Mary and Joseph, the star and

the angels, the baby in the manger, is because Jesus connects us to God and gives us that peace which we feel is missing.

So I'll look at four things from that passage in Hebrews 1 that explain how the birth of Jesus connects us to God. The first reason is that he was born so God could speak to us.

Connection comes in many ways, but rarely does it come without communication. I'm enjoying the fact that Eden, our nine-month-old, is babbling away to us all the time, but I'd love to know what she's actually saying.

We can communicate, but there's that barrier. What's amazing about the Christmas story is that the baby Jesus, crying in the manger, he did cry, you'll notice which verse we left out of away in the manger, is the way God chose to communicate with the world.

Of course, he didn't stay the baby Jesus. The cries turned into babbles and then into the broken language of a toddler and then the simple language of a preschooler until eventually the baby was a grown man with an awareness that he was no ordinary man but the Son of God.

[ 5 : 20 ] And the writer of Hebrews says, In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son.

When you open up a Bible, most of it is what we call the Old Testament. And it's written by and tells the story of the prophets who were God's spokespeople.

He used certain individuals at particular times in history to speak to the world. Moses giving God's law in Sinai. King David writing songs of praise and songs of sadness.

Elijah condemning injustice in Israel. Isaiah looking hopefully towards God saving his people from exile. But even with all that, something was missing.

Because the Old Testament is a story without an ending. It ends with the hope that God's going to do something, but all those story threads hang unfinished.

[ 6 : 23 ] God has spoken in the Old Testament, but there was unfinished business. But in Jesus, the story finds its conclusion. Because Jesus speaks the very words of God.

Indeed, he speaks the final words of God. He is the word of God. Do you ever wonder, whether you believe in God or not, what he might say to you if you were to have a one-to-one conversation?

What would God say to you if he could communicate with you like he did to the prophets, one-on-one? Would he be angry with you? Would he be happy with you? Would he be disappointed or frustrated?

The good thing is, we don't have to engage in hypothetical exercises like this. Because we actually know what God would say. Because we have recorded the words of Jesus.

We know what God said through his son. We know what God continues to say in his son. And now, there's an awful lot that Jesus said during his life. He talked about what it looks like to live a moral life.

[ 7 : 27 ] He talked about the coming of an upside-down kingdom, where wrongs are righted and where peace prevails. He told stories and parables. He condemned religious hypocrisy.

He spoke about what would happen at the end of the world. But most important, and most centrally, he spoke about himself. In anyone else, that would seem a little narcissistic.

But if Jesus really did come from God, I think that's fair enough. And what does he say? What does he say to a world of lonely, disconnected, struggling people?

Well, let's just take one example. This is something that Jesus said, and it's a wonderful truth. Jesus said, come to me. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

[ 8 : 32 ] In this hyper-connected world, where there's so many things vying for our attention, so many things that promise to fill the void that we so often feel, so many strategies for reconnecting with the world that never work for long, well, Jesus says to weary and disconnected people, come to me, and I will give you rest.

But how can you promise that? There's plenty of programs out there that promise direction and well-being, but which ultimately fail. There's plenty of life gurus who sound like they've got the solution for making sense of life.

You're Jordan Petersons, you're Sam Harris's. There's a whole world of podcasts for everything you could possibly think of, a deluge of content all out there promising to plug that gap.

But none of it quite fits. None of them are really quite satisfactory. So what makes the voice of Jesus, among all these voices, the one that you can trust?

What makes his promise of rest to weary, disconnected people true? Well, every other voice is merely human. But Jesus is so much more.

[ 9 : 46 ] In the Christmas story, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you're to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

And the same angel said to Joseph, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, 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, God with us. Jesus is Emmanuel. That phrase is picked up lots in our Christmas carols.

It was picked up in our nativity. And it means, as the angel says, God with us. But what does that mean? Well, it means that Jesus is himself God.

[ 10 : 46 ] That baby in the manger is the one who made all things. Jesus was born so that we could know God, because he actually is God. And this is what the writer of Hebrews wants to reiterate for us.

In these last days, he writes, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

The writer of Hebrews looks at Jesus' identity. He's looking at several different angles of it. He says, firstly, that he's God's heir. Just like the Prince of Wales is heir to the British throne, so Jesus is heir to God's heavenly throne.

The difference there, though, is that God the Father will never leave his throne. And so Father and Son rule together as one God and two distinct persons, alongside the Holy Spirit, the third person who makes up what Christians call the Trinity.

And the point being made by the writer to the Hebrews is that this baby in the manger was heir to the entire universe. This was no ordinary baby.

[ 12 : 02 ] This was no ordinary man. And I imagine, unless I suppose you're a particularly ardent nationalist, that if the Prince of Wales arrived at the door, you'd direct your attention towards him and listen to him, the arrival of the heir would be a big deal.

How much more so the arrival of the heir of all things. But not only is he the heir to the universe, but he made the universe.

Jesus is the voice that spoke creation into being. If the one who made all things arrived at the door, well, you'd probably listen to what they had to say.

But not only that, he is the radiance of God's glory. This is perhaps even more surprising because it's quite clear from the gospel accounts of Jesus' life that he was biologically an ordinary human. And there was nothing outwardly impressive about him. But he was, at the same time as being human, also God. There's a story in the gospels where Jesus takes three of his disciples up a mountain.

[ 13 : 09 ] And for a brief moment, he shows them who he truly is. And he's transformed before them. And he shines with a heavenly, holy light. He shows them that he is the glorious God who burns with flaming holiness.

And a voice comes from heaven and says, this is my son whom I love. Listen to him. And perhaps even more surprising again, he is the exact representation of God's being.

One of Jesus' disciples, Philip, once asked Jesus if he could show the disciples God the Father. And Jesus said, don't you know me, Philip? Even after I've been among you for such a long time, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, show me the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me? So if you want to know God, reconnect with that missing piece in your life, Jesus is the way.

The voice that called creation into being and which sustains all things is the same voice that spoke all those years ago in first century Palestine.

[ 14 : 26 ] That same voice that cried in a manger. That same voice that speaks to us now through God's word. But here's another question. Why are we disconnected from God in the first place?

Why do we have that feeling of restlessness or emptiness or disconnectedness that we can't quite shift? Well, it's all because of a problem that the Bible calls sin.

And the Son of God becoming human was essential to dealing with that problem. Christmas is, of course, a time for snuggling up and watching Christmas movies.

My favourite, and objectively the best one, is The Muppet's Christmas Carol. It's based, of course, on Charles Dickens' tale of the redemption of a bad man named Ebenezer Scrooge as he is visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

It's a wonderful story. And it's one which captures a wonderful truth that anyone can be redeemed. No one is out of reach of redemption. But there's two problems with it.

[ 15 : 32 ] First, it assumes that we can actually be good enough to redeem ourselves. All Scrooge needs to do to atone for his life of cruelty is to start being nice.

Put that way, the story starts to seem potentially a little problematic. Surely there ought to be some kind of restitution for the people who suffered because of his heartlessness. The second problem is that it actually lets all the rest of us off the hook.

What I mean is, it's a really easy story to enjoy because it makes out that all the problems in the world are actually down to a few very bad Scrooge-like figures.

But all the rest of us are really quite nice and alright, really. But we all know deep down, I think, that the darkness in the world isn't limited to a few Ebenezer Scrooge-type figures.

The Bible, no matter what else you might say about it, is really quite honest about human nature. We might not like the word sin and its connotations, but it is a really accurate description of the human condition.

[ 16 : 39 ] The problem is, we are just not the good people that we wish we were. We often like to think we are. We often lie to ourselves that we're quite good. But deep down, we all know that we are not what we should be.

We don't even live up to our own standards of goodness, never mind God's. I mean, the world is a mess, isn't it? And it's not because of a few particularly bad people, though particularly bad people don't exactly help.

But the world's a mess because we're all a mess. We all contribute to the mess of this world. It's a bit like a muddy footprint in the first snowfall.

We all dream of a white Christmas, and it rarely ever comes. But let's just imagine, for example, that it does this year. And you wake up to a world of white snow, and it's pristine, and it's clear, a perfect snowy landscape outside your front door.

And you decide, after opening the presents under the tree, you're going to go out and you're going to enjoy it. You have a snowball fight, build a snowman, make a snow angel. But the moment your foot makes contact with the snow, that perfect snowfall is forever muddied.

[ 17 : 53 ] And then you take another step, and another, and another. By the end of the day, that perfect white that you started with is now just muddy slush.

The shadow of a picture of perfect landscapes there, but it's a shadow. You can't recreate it anymore. Once the foot goes down, it can't be undone.

And really, that's sin. We might not necessarily be the worst offenders, but every footprint we leave on earth is a footprint that muddies the world just a little bit more.

because we can't help it. It's not to say that we can't impact the world for good, but it's to say that we can't stop tainting it. We can't stop messing up through our selfishness or our anger or our greed or our lies or whatever it might be.

We leave muddy, sinful footprints everywhere we go. This is why the writer of the Hebrews mentions what Jesus did when he was on earth. This is the reason he was born.

[ 19 : 00 ] He writes, after he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. This is what Jesus has done. He has provided purification for our sins.

That's why he came. He had a mission and that was it. Once the holy infant was grown, he knew where his life was headed. The child who was nursed in a manger was destined to die on our Roman cross.

Why? To do this, to provide purification for all of our sins. There is a cost to every wrong that we've ever done and Jesus paid for it all.

As God said through the prophet Isaiah, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. And that brings down the barrier that exists between you and God.

Sin at its cost. That's what stops us from feeling whole and keeps us feeling disconnected. But in Jesus, we become reconnected to the one who made us.

[ 20 : 09 ] It's because God wants us to reconnect with him and know him. That's why Jesus came. That's what it means for him to sit down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

Jesus isn't, he's not literally sitting down in heaven. What that means is that if you know Jesus, he's in heaven connecting you to God the Father. Having succeeded in his work of purifying our sin and breaking that barrier.

And so we can be connected then forever. Not just for Christmas, not even just for this life, but for eternity. This is what God offers in Jesus.

Because Jesus is unique. There is no one like him. This is the last thought which I want to end with. We can try all sorts of things to fill the gaps in our lives.

We can try all sorts of things to fix that disconnectedness which we often feel. We can take up hiking or CrossFit. We can do meditation or mindfulness. We can read about atomic habits or 12 rules for life or the tipping point.

[ 21 : 16 ] We can practice the seven habits of highly effective people. We can journal. We can find a new job. We can try cutting everything or even everyone out of our life that we feel is holding us back.

But in the long run, none of it's actually really going to work. These things, they're not necessarily bad, but they're not actually going to answer that aching longing that we have.

That feeling of disconnectedness from something bigger than ourselves. That's why the writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, You are my son, today I have become your father. I don't know how much thought you tend to give angels on a day-to-day basis, maybe a little bit more at Christmas time, especially if you've got one at the top of your tree.

But the first readers of this letter really did. They weren't convinced that Jesus was necessarily the answer to connecting to God. They were really interested in angels. But the writer says angels pale in comparison to Jesus.

[ 22 : 30 ] And God literally says that Jesus is his son and he is his father. Now it's unlikely to be angels for us, but as we've said, we all try to solve our feelings of cosmic disconnection in a hundred different unsatisfying ways.

What the writer of Hebrews is saying to us is, if all this is true, if Jesus really is the son of God, you'd be mad not to listen to what he has to say.

And you'd be mad to listen to anyone else. Which is why the writer later says today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

We sang the carol in the bleak midwinter. And in it, there's a line, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone. Sometimes that can describe our hearts when we hear all of this.

We can come to the Christmas story and to Jesus with a bit of a hard-edged cynicism and a skepticism. We can see it as a nice story for a children's nativity, but really nothing more than that.

[ 23 : 37 ] certainly not something that might have real significance for our lives. And so as I close, this Christmas, instead of cynicism, if you hear his voice as we have done, don't harden your heart.

Listen to him. Come to him. Know him. As the carol says, what can I give him? Give my heart. And I promise you that you will receive from him so much more.

The wonders of his love and the peace that comes from a real and true connection to God. He is God with us and he will give us all the rest that we desperately seek.

Let me pray and then we'll sing our final carol. Thank you.