

2. He came to bring liberation from Sin

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[0 : 01] Do be seated. Now this Christmas we're asking ourselves the question, why did Jesus come? Why did he come in the flesh?

And we're looking at some of the portions of Scripture, some of the parts of the Bible that speak very specifically about what we call the incarnation, the enfleshing of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

There are passages that speak about that and explain the purpose of it all. And this morning in our first study we looked at the words conveyed by Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 21, when Matthew says, He came to save his people from their sins.

That is, Jesus was born to bring forgiveness, to be a savior from sin's penalty, from the guilt of sin against the holiness of God.

And we saw that Jesus' birth is, in fact, explained by his death. A death which once and for all, the Bible says, put away sin.

[1 : 09] Put it away by the sacrifice of himself, bringing forgiveness for all his people. And it's a wonderful, wonderful message. But that alone doesn't exhaust our understanding of what Jesus came in the flesh to do.

And tonight I want to draw our attention to some words in that last reading, Romans 8, verses 1 to 4, where the Apostle Paul describes another side, another dimension to the death, which the birth of Jesus led to.

And it's this. Jesus came not only to bring us forgiveness from sin's penalty, but to bring us liberation as a savior from sin's power and sin's realm.

Just look at these verses on the screen and we'll see three things that Paul highlights here for us. First of all, in verses 1 and 2, he gives us a vivid picture, a picture of the Christmas gospel message.

And it's a picture, isn't it, of liberation from bondage to a dark, oppressive power. You see it there? For the law of the spirit of life, that is, the power and the authority of the life that is in Christ Jesus, the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death, from the power and authority of sin and death.

[2 : 43] The good news of the gospel of Jesus liberates from a dark realm where people live lives subjugated and in bondage under the rule and the authority of something that Paul calls sin and death.

That's the predicament, he says, of all humankind without Christ. Remember how that previous reading began? All, both Jews and Gentiles, all are under sin, under the dark power of sin.

Now that flags up something very important and it's this. Paul is quite clearly talking about sin in a way that's very different to the way most of us think about sin.

I guess to most of us, sin probably means bad behavior. Sex and drugs and rock and roll and that sort of thing. And by the way, no matter how religious or irreligious we are, we've all got views about things that we consider to be sins, things that we disapprove of.

It could be that you're a very upright, moralistic person. Maybe for you, sins are things like dropping litter or swearing or drunkenness or jobs behaving badly in the street at night.

[4 : 10] Maybe you're the sort of person that says, hear, hear and hooray when you read the headlines on the Daily Mail every morning. But of course it may be that you're not like that. In fact, it may be that the Daily Mail is anathema to you.

It may be that you're very liberal and indeed very liberated and you don't like the idea of sins at all. Well, you might not call it that, but I'm willing to bet you that there are plenty of sins that you will look down your nose at as well.

Maybe the things that upset you are abuse of the environment or racism or big business profiteering or passive smoking or gas guzzling cars.

All those sorts of things. Maybe for you it's the Guardian's subtle, clever critiques that have you smiling and cheering. You see, it doesn't matter what our outlook is or what our politics are.

We've all got some sense of morality, whether we admit it or not. We all have things that we look down on and disapprove of. And of course the sins and the sinners are always on the other side.

[5 : 21] And we're always on the saintly side. Isn't that right? Even if we don't call it that. But you see, Paul here is not talking about that. He's talking in very, very different terms.

He's saying that everybody, regardless of whether you read the Guardian or the Daily Mail or the Glasgow Herald or whatever it is, everybody is under the power of sin.

Sin in Paul's language is not peccadilloes that we commit. It's a power that controls us. Actually, when you're reading the Bible, the very first mention of the word sin comes in Genesis chapter 4, the fourth chapter of the Bible.

And it comes in these terms. God talks to Cain about sin crouching at the door, ready to overcome him. A power.

And in the previous couple of chapters of Romans, from Romans chapter 8, that our text here is from, Paul has been talking about this controlling power in very, very vivid language.

[6 : 28] He calls sin a slave master that owns us and abuses us. He calls it a domineering general that uses our bodies as weapons in the cause of wickedness.

He calls sin a brutal employer that pays wages, but the only wage that it pays is death. Indeed, he calls sin a tyrannical monarch who reigns in death.

That's what Paul says is the reality about the power of sin in this world. And that's what he says all alike are in bondage to. Now, you may not feel that.

You may not believe that. But listen, it is possible, isn't it? It is possible to be enslaved and not to know it. If you're born into slavery, for example, you may think that what you know and experience is all that there is to know and experience.

You may think you enjoy an awful lot of freedom, but in fact, you're not free at all. Many a slave, I suspect, born into the plantations of Confederate America, many of them knew nothing of true freedom at all until liberation came, until a door was opened on a whole new reality for them.

[7 : 51] Many a citizen of the Iron Curtain countries before the Berlin Wall came down had no knowledge of what it truly meant to be a free citizen until liberation came.

The Berlin Wall crumbled. The world changed. And just so many people today in our country, in the West in general, many people think that they are free.

After all, we can do as we please. We've got plenty of money. We've got freedom of speech. We can travel. We're free. But let me ask, is that really true?

If it is really true, why is it that we are ever more dissatisfied as a society? Why is it that there are soaring rates of depression, soaring rates of divorce, of family breakdown?

Why is it that we do not seem to live in the utopia that modern technology and medicine and psychology promises us? Why is it that artists are constantly speaking about searching for something more?

[8 : 58] They're often talking about freedom. Think of all the songs you know about that. Free Bird. I want to break free. Artists.

Think of Tracy Emin. I've been reading a book that she's written recently. Don't know what you think of her art? Dirty underwear and unmade beds and things like that. I'll make no comment.

But she is one of the most successful modern artists around today. She's got fame. She's got money. She's got career. She's got celebrity. Listen to what she says of herself in her book, *Strange Land*.

Quote, I don't think I've achieved very much. I've done all right for Tracy, but I haven't had children. I haven't got a relationship. She's got a relationship. Despite her having slept with many, many, many dozens of men, she says.

In terms of emotional values, I'm a loser. Well, of course, not all of us are Tracy Emin, and you may think that's a good thing.

[10 : 00] But what she's talking about is true for all humanity. We may not think we're in slavery. We may not think we're controlled by powers beyond our control or our understanding.

But friends, the reality is that we are slaves to very many masters in our lives. I mean, just think, for many people, it is slavery to the desperate desire for relationship, just like Tracy Emin, for a partner, for family, for children.

And whether you have it or not, if it is the driving force of your life, if it's all that you live for, it's not surprising, is it? Therefore, it's often a source of huge disappointment to us.

Maybe, if you're a student, you are in fact enslaved to good grades, to academic achievement, later on to career advancement, to business success, or maybe just enslaved to the expectations of your family, what they want for you, or your peers, or yourself.

But friends, whatever it is, if your life is given to seeking satisfaction in what this world can offer, if it's driven by trying to win approval from the people or the institutions or the ideas of this world, then you are in bondage to a power that owns you.

[11 : 33] And which ultimately will never ever be able to liberate you. It will only, in the end, be able to condemn you to failure. Because, however much you might want to say, I'm not enslaved, I'm in control, however much you want to agree with Tracy Emin when she says this, I set up the rules for me, I set up the parameters, I have nobody telling me what to do, however much you want to say that, there is one indisputable fact that forces us to admit defeat.

It forces us to echo Tracy Emin's words, I'm a loser. And it's that last word in those sentences, the word death. And that is the last word, isn't it?

Death is unmistakable. It's unavoidable. Although the whole cosmetics industry and pharmaceutical industry makes billions out of helping us to try and avoid the truth of death, the condemning power of the law of sin and death is plain to see.

It's plain to see all around this city, in the crematorium, in the cemeteries, day after day after day.

You know it, and I know it. We've buried our loved ones there. As one theologian has said, death is the materialized form of guilt.

[13 : 10] It's the evidence. And death is the final wage paid by the brutal power that rules and enslaves this world of ours. We hide from it, of course.

It's said of the Victorians that they talked never about sex, but endlessly about death. And we're quite the opposite, aren't we, in our society? Endless talk about sex, but death is the great taboo.

We hide from it, but we know it's true. And that's what the Christmas message is all about. It's about a liberation from the power and authority of sin and death.

You see, it's possible to be under a tyranny and desperately needing freedom and yet be totally oblivious to that need. There were many, many in the Germany of the 1930s who did not see the sinister and wicked rule of the Nazis for what it was.

By the time they did see it, it was too late. They were powerless. When the evidence was irrefutable, the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the holocaust, they were powerless to throw off the yoke of that dark power.

[14 : 23] And that's exactly what the Bible says our position is vis-a-vis God Himself. Even if we begin to see our estrangement and our rebellion against Him, even if we begin to sense a bondage to a power that is opposed to Him, we discover we're helpless.

We cannot rescue ourselves. But you see, verse 3 gives us the answer. And that's the power of the Christmas Gospel message.

It's the power of a great liberator, of God Himself. God has done what we ourselves could not do. God's law alone was powerless to help us.

Yes, yes, it's perfect. Yes, God's law shows us what people are meant to be, what God requires of us, but that's not the problem, is it? Our flesh is weak.

The law is weakened by our flesh. We are captive to our natures which don't want to submit to God's rule, which can't submit to Him, which will not submit to Him. I set up the rules.

[15 : 32] I decide the parameters. And that's why Christmas had to happen. What we could never do, God Himself, has done.

And He did it, Paul says, by sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. In other words, to deal with sin forever. Not in the likeness of flesh, as though He wasn't real.

He was real. Real flesh and blood, human being. Not as sinful flesh. No, He was without sin Himself. But He came down into the real world and into the realm of darkness, into the realm where sin and death ruled, in order to deal with sin and to destroy its power forever.

And that's why the power of Jesus' birth lies in the power of Jesus' death. He came for sin. In Jesus' flesh, in His death on the cross, God condemned sin in the flesh.

He executed judgment on sin itself. Not just on the guilt of sins, but on the power and the authority and the hold of sin over men and women.

[16 : 49] So that, He says, for all who are in Christ Jesus, there is no longer any condemnation. None. There can be no more condemnation from sin's power because those in Jesus Christ have been liberated.

They've been removed from the realm where the binding authority of sin rules, into a realm where the power and authority over everything is the spirit of the risen Jesus, the spirit of life.

He is the ruler. It's like a dissident being rescued from behind the iron curtain in the days of the Cold War. Somebody rescued from being under the condemnation of death for spying.

And the secret agents of the CIA fly them out. Well, I know CIA flights are not exactly in vogue at the moment, but in that case, it was the power that brought liberation.

They could no longer be condemned or under condemnation because they were removed from the realm where that power was in operation. Into the liberty of the land of the free.

[18 : 02] And the power to rule over and to brutalize and to subjugate and to destroy is gone in a great liberation. A liberation effected by the powerful arm of the liberating rule.

And for a whole new life to begin. And that's Paul's third point there in verse 4. This is the purpose of the Christmas gospel message.

The gospel of the good news of Jesus doesn't just liberate us into no man's land, into limbo, into something nothing, a minus, a negative, something that's just been removed from us.

No. Not at all. God in Christ has liberated us for life, for life as it was meant to be. We're liberated from enslavement to sin and death in order that, says Paul, the righteous requirement or the righteous decree of the law might be fulfilled in us.

What God's law could not do, what the law could point to and could promise, but could not deliver because of the weakness of our flesh, God did do. Through Christ's work on the cross to condemn sin and through His Spirit's work in our hearts to make His life ours, God has brought us life, the perfect life of Jesus in us who walk no longer according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, to His Spirit.

[19 : 43] What was ours, the sin and the death, became His on the cross. And what was His, the life and the holiness becomes ours because of His Spirit in us.

In this great exchange, as Paul says to the Colossian church, He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son.

and all this becomes ours when He sends the Spirit of His Son so that we also walk no longer according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

We walk as truly perfected humanity was always meant to be. All this, says Paul, is fulfilled in us when we believe in Jesus Christ.

Christ. So it's not just history we're talking about tonight. It's not just academic. It's deeply, deeply personal. It's a promise of life.

[20 : 51] Life as God created it to be. Life eternal. Life as God wants it to be for you and for me. As we read earlier, for all who believe through faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ. Listen to what Paul goes on to say a few verses later from our reading here. If the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

That's the message of Christmas. It's the message of life. It's the message of the death of death. death. It's freedom from the bondage, from the slavery to sin and death.

Freedom forever. It's the end of bitter tears and weeping at the graveside. Forever. For all who trust in God.

It's the end of the bondage and the fear of death, the misery and the mortality that robs us of all our dreams. times. That's why the Christian message is good news to all people.

[22 : 09] That's why we sing light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Friends, I want to say to you tonight, in the words of another favorite carol that we sang, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

That's why he came to free men and women like you and me from the bondage of sin and death.

So don't miss the message of Christmas this year. don't resist the message of liberation from the power of sin and death into the light and the life that he offers to all who will believe through faith in Jesus Christ.

Don't miss it and don't resist it. It's a personal message from heaven to earth, from God to you and to me.

[23 : 26] It's a message for you if you also will trust Jesus Christ. Well, let's pray. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell, who come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.