

# 1. He came to bring forgiveness

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Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] Our first reading today is from Matthew 1, reading from verse 18 on page 807 of the Visitor's Bibles. Matthew 1, reading from verse 18.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

[ 1 : 35 ] He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Thank you, Scott.

Now, do keep your Bibles open. We're going to be looking at three separate parts of the Bible this morning. And we're asking ourselves a question in these Christmas services this year.

Why did Jesus come? And this morning, we're looking at the first answer to that question. And that is this. He came to bring forgiveness. That is, Jesus came to be a Savior from sin's penalty.

And our first reading this morning flags up one important aspect of that forgiveness. And that is that it is a promised forgiveness. I'm sure you saw that in verse 21 of the reading there.

The angel says to Joseph, he will save his people from their sins in answer to promise. Right back at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel here, we are seeing, I want you to note this, we're seeing God's interpretation of Jesus' birth.

[ 2 : 49 ] That's not my idea of Jesus' birth or your idea or your school teacher's idea of why Jesus came, but God himself. It's very clear.

God sent his angel to say to Joseph why Jesus was coming. He's coming to save his people from their sins. Now, it's very important to see why Matthew says that right at the very beginning of his book, his Gospel.

He tells us, he tells us this because he wants to show us that Jesus was coming in order to answer mankind's greatest need. Now, there's a problem.

And that is that people don't always know what their greatest need is. And in Jesus' day, that was true as well. People were longing for a Messiah. But many people thought that their greatest need was for a Messiah to save them from the Romans, to save them from political oppression, from economic oppression, from exploitation.

In other words, they wanted freedom. They wanted home rule. They wanted to rule themselves.

And there's a lot of people today that think that the Christmas message is all about that.

[ 4 : 07 ] It's all about making this world a better place. It's about peace and goodwill to one another. But no, not according to the angel. That's not the main problem.

That's not it at all. In fact, there's a much, much bigger problem. And it's the problem, says God, that you've got with me. It's your sins, it's your guilt, in my eyes, that is the big problem.

That's my problem, says the Lord God, with you. And that's the problem that you need saving from. Not from the Romans, but from the penalty of your sins.

Now, Israelites, Israelites of all people in the whole world, ought to have known about sin. The Israelites had God's holy law.

They had his law to show men and women what God requires, what he wants. And that same law showed them very, very clearly how far short they were of what God wanted.

[ 5 : 14 ] They ought to understand sin better than anybody else in the whole world. You just need to read the Old Testament. Read the book of Leviticus and you'll see. It's all about endless cycles of sacrifices.

People had to come again and again and again to the temple to bring offerings, just so that they could go on being alive. Just so that God, in his anger at their sin, didn't destroy them there and then.

It was a blessing, of course, to know that God looked at these sacrifices of bulls and goats and sheep and counted it somehow as though these sacrifices took away the sins of the people. It's a great blessing to know the forgiveness that the priest pronounced. But at the same time, it was perfectly obvious to everybody that the blood of bulls and goats can't actually take away sins. And so they were forced to trust God's word, his promise that yes, he would one day ultimately take away sins forever.

[ 6 : 20 ] That what all of these sacrifices spoke about and pointed to really was going to happen and that God could be trusted to be good to his word. And as the ages unfolded down the history of God's people, the promise never went away.

No, it got stronger and stronger and stronger. And the prophet spoke more and more of one who was going to come at last to be that saviour.

Do you remember the prophet Isaiah? Remember he promised that a stump would arise from Jesse's family, that a son of David would come and the Spirit of the Lord would be upon him? That he spoke about a servant of the Lord? And the Spirit of the Lord would be upon him with power and with fullness? And this servant, well, he would be wounded for his people's transgressions. He would be bruised for their iniquities. And by his stripes, they would be healed. He, at last, would bring the true forgiveness that all these sacrifices pointed to.

[ 7 : 33 ] He, at last, would save his people from their sins once and for all in reality. And when the angel spoke to Joseph, as we heard in the reading, God was saying, that's happening now.

The promised forgiveness from all down the ages is about to happen. It's going to be fulfilled. He, the son that you are going to have, will save his people from their sins.

He will be Emmanuel, that is, God with us, to save. The birth of Jesus Christ is a promised forgiveness coming to pass.

Because God is good to his word. Well, think about that as we have a pause and we take up our offering now. And as we do so, Ruth's little singing group are going to sing a couple of lovely songs to us.

They were singing to the old folk at their party on Monday night. And I've managed to persuade them to come and share with us this morning. Two songs which speak about the coming forgiveness being announced and the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 8 : 50 ] And as we do that, your offerings will be received. Our second reading is from Hebrews 9, reading from verse 22, on page 1006 of the Visitor's Bible.

Hebrews 9, reading from verse 22, Under the law, almost everything is purified with blood. And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus, it was necessary for the copies of the hidden things to be purified with these rites.

But the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. First, Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself. Now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own.

[ 10 : 03 ] For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly for the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment. So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with the sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Do keep your Bibles open there at Hebrews chapter 9, because I want to look at these verses now with you. Because the Christmas message is not just one of a promised forgiveness, but it's a promise that was fulfilled.

And therefore it is a message of a perfect forgiveness. In Hebrews, we're looking back now at the Christmas events as explained by the Apostle who is writing after the Lord Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and has ascended to heaven.

And again, what we have here is God's authoritative interpretation of these events through his Apostle. And the message is very simple.

[ 11 : 24 ] The promised forgiveness of the prophets and the Old Testament Scripture because of the birth and the life and the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ has achieved a perfect forgiveness and a perfected forgiveness forever.

The message of the book of Hebrews is from beginning to end that in Jesus Christ we have God's finished work. That it's been finished, completed, accomplished forever.

That it has been made perfect. And that there's nothing else needed for the forgiveness of men and women. There's nothing else for God to do for our forgiveness.

There's nothing else for us to do but to receive what Christ has done. And it's wonderfully crystallized in these verses that Jonathan read for us that speak of three appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I wonder if you noticed that in the reading. Three appearances. And you see, Christ's work achieved for us a perfect forgiveness because, first of all, it has secured the past.

[ 12 : 31 ] Look at verses 25 to 28. It says to us that Jesus is not like the priests of the Old Testament who had to go to the temple year after year after year with blood for sacrifices.

No, verse 26. He appeared once and for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Verse 28. Christ has been offered once for the sins of many. It's a finished work. It has achieved real forgiveness.

That's why, if you turn over to Hebrews 10, verse 14, it says, By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Where there is forgiveness of sins for these, there is no longer any offering for sin. It is finished. It's complete. It's perfect. You see, all the sacrifices that the Old Testament pointed forward to, the reality that every sacrifice spoke of, that was fulfilled once and for all in Jesus' sacrifice of himself.

[ 13 : 46 ] The result is, as chapter 10, verse 17 says, God says, I will remember their sins no longer. Their lawless deeds I will no longer remember.

It's a perfect forgiveness. The past is absolutely secured. Nothing needs to be added for our forgiveness. Nothing can be added because to add, or to try to add, is to take away from the perfection of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done.

To think that somehow we could add something to what God has done for our own forgiveness, that's an insult to God. The Hebrews writer says, that's to trample the Lord Jesus Christ under your feet.

It's to treat as profane the blood that was poured out for us. It's to insult the Spirit of grace. Puts it that strongly. Because nothing can be added to what Jesus Christ has done.

Do you know, friends, we find that so hard. We find it so hard to grasp that God's forgiveness is actually perfect.

[ 15 : 01 ] That it comes to us as a perfect gift. I was speaking at, on Wednesday lunchtime, after our lunchtime service, to a lady who came to speak to me.

Been here for the first time. She's a Roman Catholic. And she said to me, I'm crushed constantly by my burden of guilt. And I go to church, and I do penance, and I go to confession.

And I keep going, and I keep going, but I can't get rid of this guilt. But you see, to think that somehow we can add to what Christ has done by confessing, or doing penance, or doing what a priest tells us, or any of these things.

Any religious works. To think that means that we have no idea how big a thing sin really is. Do you see? Sometimes we say, oh, because it's because I feel so guilty.

I feel I have to do something to make up. But actually, friends, if that's what you think, it's because you don't feel nearly guilty enough. You've got no idea how deadly, deadly serious sin against God really is.

[ 16 : 13 ] You have no idea of the weight, the real weight, of the guilt of your sins before God. If you really understood the weight of that guilt, well, you'd know that there's absolutely nothing that you can do about it.

Absolutely nothing that can add any value at all. The weight, the true weight of sin is absolutely crushing. It is killing. It is damning.

It is destroying. But, the Christmas message is that Jesus appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin.

And he has put it away. Just read what the Bible says about what that means. The sins are as far away as the east is from the west.

They've disappeared like the morning mist, says the Lord. I have remembered them no more. They're behind my back.

[ 17 : 18 ] It's a perfect forgiveness. Our past is absolutely secured because of the birth and the life and the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you see what that means? It means that you can have peace. It means that you can have relief. It means that nothing in your past can ever haunt you again if you're in Christ and trusted in Him. Nothing, however awful it may be, in your past can bring back the guilt because Jesus Christ has appeared and taken it away. No failure on your part.

No lack of devotion. Nothing in your life. Nothing can bring back what Jesus Christ has appeared once for all and taken away. You really are forgiven.

You really are free. You can do nothing at all yourself to make up for your sins but you need to do nothing because Jesus Christ and His forgiveness has dealt with the past.

[ 18 : 29 ] But that's not all. Look at verse 28. Jesus' forgiveness secures the future. He will appear, says verse 28, a second time. Not this time to deal with sin.

That's been done. But rather to save those who eagerly wait for Him. You see, nothing more needs to be done or can be done to secure the future for those who trust Jesus Christ.

Jesus' once and for all past work has also secured the future. And so the Christian message is a great message that secures our future forever.

He will come in the fullness of time. He'll come to make full what His work has already accomplished, the salvation, the eternal life in His new creation that He has promised.

And friends, that means that whatever you may fear, you need not fear.

[ 19 : 30 ] You need not fear for the future of your life, for food and clothes and jobs and pensions and where you'll live and all these things. And you need not fear your death or the judgment that surely follows death.

Because death itself has lost its thing. Jesus Christ has appeared once and He has secured the future. And when He appears again, it will be to bring in salvation for those who have loved Him. On Christmas Eve, we're going to look at Hebrews 2 verse 15 that tells us this. He has set free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

The world lives in fear of death, doesn't it? We desperately try to beat it with medicine, with cosmetics. We try to stave off the reality, but we cannot.

And death is the ultimate stalker that stalks everyone. And the fear of death cripples so many lives. And death is a real enemy.

[ 20 : 38 ] The Bible tells us that. And it is the last great enemy. But Jesus' death has secured the future. There's no guilt in life, as the hymn says, and there's no fear in death either.

We have a high priest who's gone through the heavens and who will come again to bring salvation, to lead the way. He comes again to lead us where He's gone.

And that river of death held no fear for those who are in Christ. I once remember being out on a walk in the country with my parents when I was a little boy and we had to cross a burn which was in spate.

And I didn't think I could manage a cross. I was scared to go across. So my father got into the river, took his shoes and socks off, rolled up his trousers and walked across to show me and said, come on.

I said, no, I still don't want to come. So he walked back across the river, put me on his back and carried me over. And that's what the Lord Jesus Christ has done.

[ 21 : 50 ] He's gone across the river of death. He's broken the power of death. He's taken away the guilt of sin that keeps us under the power of death. And he promises to come again to carry us over into the future that he's won.

Do you fear the future? Do you fear death? Christmas is a hard time, isn't it, sometimes, when it forces us to face up to mortality. Many of us have lost loved ones in this past year.

This will be a hard, hard time. It comes upon us in that way. And sometimes the fear grips us. But the gospel says when that fear touches your heart and grips you, don't look to yourself. Don't look inside and say, how will I manage the future? How will I cope? How will I face up to death? No, the Christmas message says look to Jesus. Look back to that great appearance once and for all.

And then look forward to the promised day of his appearance when he comes to bring salvation. Friends, it is a perfect forgiveness.

[ 23 : 00 ] Jesus' work secures our future. But there's even more still than that. Look at verse 24. Jesus' forgiveness secures our present.

The Christmas message isn't just a remote forensic work in the past. Nor is it just a distant promise of the future, gritting your teeth and waiting for heaven.

No, verse 24 says he appears now for us in God's presence. Jesus' forgiveness is at work now, today, every single day, every hour.

He is today the merciful high priest just like us in every way except without sin. And he is able to intercede for us in our weakness.

forgiveness. You feel weak and needy today? You feel weak and struggling in your life many days of the week?

[ 23 : 59 ] Well, says the Hebrew writer, he is able to save to the uttermost all who draw near to God through him because he always lives to make intercession for them. Jesus' forgiveness secures your present today.

Not that Jesus has to do anything more in praying in heaven for our salvation. No, his once for all sacrifice at Calvary speaks. His finished work speaks day after day after day.

Speaks up for us. And it speaks repeatedly as often as you and I ever need it of a perfect forgiveness.

Nothing can undo what he did. Nothing can ever undo it. And therefore nothing can stop us today drawing near to God in perfect peace with a cleansed conscience with no need for any priests or mediators or confessions or anything else at all.

We can have peace with God today no matter what. No matter what sins seem to stand against us because Jesus' forgiveness forgiveness is a perfect forgiveness.

[ 25 : 13 ] Yesterday, today, and forever secures our past, our future, and it secures our present. Isn't that a wonderful thought?

Friends, that no sin of yours or of mine, no failure, nothing can separate us from our Heavenly Father today or tomorrow or any other day if you're in Christ and have trusted Him for salvation because He appears now on your behalf proclaiming that perfect forgiveness.

So as we sing in that great hymn, when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, I look to heaven and see Him there who made an end of all my sin.

All because Jesus came to bring forgiveness, to be a Savior from sin's penalty, born as the promised Savior and risen and interceding today with a perfect salvation.

Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow, Christ the babe was born for you. That's why we sing these words with joy. So let's sing again.

[ 26 : 35 ] Let's sing a wonderful carol that speaks of tracing the forgiveness of God. Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall.

1 Timothy chapter 1, reading from verse 13 on page 991 of the Visitor's Bible. 1 Timothy chapter 1 Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I receive mercy for this reason, that in me as the foremost sinner, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life.

[ 27 : 51 ] to the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen. Thank you, Andrew.

Do just open your Bibles again, if you would, to that passage that Andrew read for us, 1 Timothy chapter 1. Because that final reading picks up the theme, I suppose, of that carol that we sang just before this last one, Christ the babe is born for you.

Because you see, the message of Christmas is not just a promised forgiveness, it's not just a perfect forgiveness. All of that really would still be meaningless to you and to me, unless we grasp the implications of what it means.

And the implication is this, that it all comes home to us when we realise that it is also a personal forgiveness.

Let me read that verse, 1 Timothy 1, verse 15. This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

[ 29 : 15 ] Jesus didn't come in the past in some sort of abstract way to deal with some sort of abstract sin as though sins kind of floated about on their own and had to be cleared up a bit like an oil slick or something like that.

No, he came to save sinners, to save human beings from the personal guilt of their personal sin before a personal God.

God. He came to bring personal forgiveness and that once for all work in the past that did deal with sins forever and that did secure forever the future and eternal life for his people, that is something that he imparts to real people, to real flesh and blood, to you and me, to people in the real world today.

Jesus Christ is a present Savior today. In his person, yes, he stands in the glory at the throne of heaven to intercede for all of his own.

But by his Holy Spirit, by his living powerful spirit at work in the world today, he is calling men and women, real people, boys and girls like you and me out of the bondage and the darkness of their sins and calling them into the forgiveness and the reconciliation and the fellowship with him that the freedom from sins guilt means.

[ 30 : 54 ] He's calling people to receive the promised gift of forgiveness, the perfect and perfected gift of forgiveness. He's calling people today to receive that gift themselves in a personal way.

And that's why Christmas is good news. That's why we're here this morning. We're not here for a history lesson. It's not even like something like Remembrance Sunday, when we solemnly remember the wars of the past and those who have fallen and we look back at something and we bring it to mind, but it's something that stays in the past.

No. Jesus Christ is a Savior for sinners today. He's alive today. And that's why Christmas is a personal message of personal good news, of personal forgiveness for everyone who has received Jesus.

And it's an offer for all those who have never yet received the gift of that forgiveness. And what Paul says here in this passage that we read is that it's good news even for the chief of sinners, for the foremost sinners, for the worst sinners, for those that you couldn't even imagine forgiveness could be possible for.

Listen to how Paul describes himself. Did you hear? Verse 13, a blasphemer. He was a persecutor of Jesus Christ and of his church. He says of himself, I was an insolent opponent.

[ 32 : 25 ] I was ignorant. I was unbelieving. Friends, maybe many of us this morning have loved ones, have friends who seem to fit that description.

Although it would be pretty hard to better Paul in his zealous anti-God fanaticism. But maybe you've got a friend or a loved one and you think that because they are like that, therefore they're beyond hope.

Maybe there's even somebody here this morning who is in that category themselves. Although perhaps you wouldn't quite be as explicit in describing yourself like that as Paul has. But listen, see what happened to this violent man, this determined opponent of Christ, this hater of Jesus, this murderous persecutor of the church.

Listen to what happened to him. Verse 13, I received mercy. Verse 14, the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

For me, the chief, the foremost of sinners. Isn't that extraordinary? By any account, such a change in a person is extraordinary.

[ 33 : 46 ] But when you understand the gospel, a gospel of personal forgiveness, yes, it is still staggering that God would extend mercy to somebody like Saul of Tarsus.

But it is understandable, as it is wonderful. Because this is why Jesus came. That's what Christmas is all about.

He came into the world to save sinners, to save murderous, blaspheming persecutors, to save those who are willful in their unbelief against God. That's why Jesus came into the world. To make forgiveness and peace and reconciliation with God. To make it supremely personal and real for real people.

You see verse 16? Let me read it in the New International Version. I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

[ 34 : 54 ] Do you see that? Do you see what he's saying? He's saying if the depth of the grace and the mercy of God can bring forgiveness to this man, to me, this blaspheming, violent, ferocious murderer, this utter opposer of Jesus and his people, if God can bring forgiveness to him, then there is no one, no one on this earth, no one in history for whom the forgiveness of God in Christ cannot be personal and real and wonderful.

Not your scornful and disinterested husband or wife or son or daughter or mother or father. Not your friends who want nothing to do with the Lord Jesus at the moment other than to blaspheme his name and use it as a swear word. Nor anybody here who thinks for any reason they're well far too far gone or too late in life to change or just too far down to ever really have forgiveness from God.

No, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Even the chiefest, as Paul describes himself. The message of Christmas is that Jesus came to bring forgiveness. He came to be a savior from sin's penalty. He came to fulfill the promise that God had from the beginning of time and to fulfill it.

[ 36 : 39 ] And he comes today and every day and every Christmas to make it real and personal. Jesus Christ was born to save.

Come at his most gracious call to find salvation one and all. Christ was born to save. To save from the guilt of sins. To bring forgiveness full and free.

Long promised. Made perfect forever in Jesus Christ. And made personal today in the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Which is for even the chief of sinners. And that's a message to rejoice in. That's the message of Christmas. That's why it's good news.

So let's end this morning by singing the last hymn in our sheet that does indeed join rejoicing with heart and soul and voice. Because Jesus Christ was born to save.

[ 37 : 40 ] Good Christian men rejoice. Thank you. Thank you.