

A Saviour Promised Long

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 December 2013

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] It's never been the story of Christmas alone, enchanting as it is, that makes people want to sing. The multitude of lovely carols that we sing were written by people who understood what that story really means.

And in our final reading, the Apostle Peter tells us that it's a story, indeed it's the story, of salvation. In the story of Christmas lies God's answer to man's greatest need.

Long promised and prophesied, but now fulfilled and revealed to the whole world in the person of Jesus Christ. Peter says this, Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours, searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating, when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves, but you, in the things that have now been announced to you, through those who preach the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

Things into which angels long to look. Therefore, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 34] Well, I thought this Christmas, since we've been studying Peter's letter, we would focus on what Peter might call the true grace of Christmas. In some verses from his letter that help us to focus on what the coming of Jesus into this world really means.

Who better to tell us about the grace and the mercy of Jesus Christ than Peter, the leader of Jesus' band of disciples, but remember the one who failed him so badly and denied him, and yet was restored through the wonderful forgiveness of his grace to become an apostle and the preacher of the good news.

So tonight and next Sunday and on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we're going to look at four snapshots in Peter's letter where the great apostle of Christ tells us why Jesus came into this world. And Peter is very clear. It's the cross of Jesus that explains the cradle of Jesus. The birth of Jesus at Christmas is explained fully only by his death on the cross.

The great painter Rembrandt understood that very well. You may be familiar with his famous painting, The Adoration of the Shepherds. In that painting of the light in the manger scene coming from the Christ child, he makes a shadow in the background from the beams of the stable so that the shape of a cross is clearly there over the infant Jesus.

[3 : 05] And Peter will tell us that Jesus was born to die. To die and to be glorified only through his suffering in a death that brings redemption from the futility of life apart from God and brings restoration to our true humanity and brings at last resurrection so that we will share in the eternal glory of Christ.

We'll come to all of that and I do want to invite you to come back to hear more next week and over Christmas. I say that because this message is more important than anything else you can possibly do in your life.

I know that's a bold claim, but friends, I believe that really to be true. There is no more important thing for any human being to know than this issue of why God became man in the person of Jesus. There come a day for every single person in this room when the answer to that question will be the only thing that matters anymore for the whole of eternity.

This is nothing less than a matter of life and death, heaven and hell. It's about the salvation of your souls. That's Peter's message.

[4 : 27] So first this evening, I want to concentrate on these words that we read a moment ago from 1 Peter chapter 1 where Peter puts the coming of Jesus into the context, the perspective of the whole story of human history.

It tells us that Jesus Christ is the Savior long promised and that he came to bring us revelation. The great good news that all God's promises of salvation are fulfilled at last for us in the person of Jesus.

He highlights these wonderful prophecies and God's wonderful plan and indeed the wonderful privileges that can be ours as a result. So first then, Peter says that the coming of Jesus into the world means that God has fulfilled his extraordinary prophecies of salvation in a fulfillment that answers all the longings of the ages.

Peter speaks of the yearnings, the longings of earth and heaven for this great event, the coming of Christ, the Messiah, into the world of men. concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about this grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating.

The prophets yearned and longed for this coming. And not just them, but the angels in heaven also. The coming of Christ and what he would bring about are things, Peter says, into which angels long to look, that is to look intently upon and to gaze with wonder at.

[6 : 11] Now these prophets, of course, had very specific longings, yearnings for the fulfillment of what had been revealed to them about the future, about the Messiah of Israel who would bring salvation.

Now the God of the Israelites, the God of the Bible, has been a speaking God from the very beginning, revealing his plan, revealing his purpose to his chosen people, Israel, through his Spirit at work in the prophets.

And these prophecies and promises were trusted in and believed in by his people. The whole Old Testament is a witness to that. It's a story of longing, a story of yearning for the great day of the Lord, the day when, as promised, God himself would come, when he would come to this earth and judge this earth with justice and righteousness, to right all wrongs, to put away all evil, to bring salvation to all people who would humble themselves before him.

And so that's why we read earlier in Luke's Gospel about Simeon, that faithful Israelite, who was waiting, waiting with longing and with yearning for the consolation of Israel, that is, for the fulfillment of all these extraordinary prophecies of the coming Messiah of God.

And the whole Old Testament story is one full of longing and yearning for something more, for that ultimate answer to the human condition, for the explanation, for the solution that people knew that they needed.

[7 : 50] As I said, all these prophecies were very specific. They were given by God's special revelation to them. They had that great privilege.

But the longings of these prophets of Israel, they reflect something much deeper, something much wider, something so basic to the hearts of every human culture, every human person, right across the world, even today.

Since time immemorial, human beings have been searchers, seeking answers, posing questions, feeling after meaning and purpose in life, longing, yearning for more than just what this material universe seems to afford.

That's what defines us as being human beings. We ask these great existential questions. And we yearn for answers that are more solid, that are more satisfying than just the mere answers that maths and science can give us.

Although, of course, most honest mathematicians and scientists will tell you that their discoveries actually raise far more questions for them than the answers give. Many of the greatest scientists in our world today know just how little that they know.

[9 : 10] But we human beings ask, we ask, and we ask, and we ask, and we yearn for more because we sense so very deeply within that there is more and that we need more.

C.S. Lewis, the writer who died 50 years ago this year on the same day in which John F. Kennedy was shot, he put it very memorably when he called this searching the unappeasable want, the inconsolable secret that's so basic to every human being, something beyond the grasp of our consciousness that yearns for fulfillment.

it's what's expressed with such urgency so often in the world of the arts. In the tragic pathos of the romantic composers like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and others searching in their music.

Or the aching and longing of a poet like Keats or Wordsworth searching in their poetry. Or even in the Bistar distortions of the surrealist artists like a Van Gogh.

All of these and myriads beside, they're expressing the yearnings, the gropings in the dark for a door that must be there somewhere. But if only we can open it, it'll shed light and bring meaning and understanding to our human existence.

[10 : 33] That might even offer us an understanding of the present, but far better, a hope for the future. These things lie deep within the human heart.

And when we're honest about it, we'll admit that. Of course, that kind of consciousness is deeply unsettling to us. It's disturbing and very often, for that reason, we suppress these thoughts.

And of course, our modern materialistic world all around us has a vested interest in silencing any such questioning. Witness, for example, the National Secular Society recently, and people like Richard Dawkins and others who are on a zealous crusade to silence the very questioning of our human hearts like that.

Don't even allow these questions to be asked in schools, they say, if you need to suppress them. If you can't do that, well, mock those who ask them. Deride them.

Make them feel foolish for daring to ask such things that would dare to challenge the atheistic humanism that so rules in our society. We cannot have that heresy, they say.

[11 : 40] It's interesting, isn't it, what a fundamentalist and zealous religion that kind of scientific reductionism has become in our society. But, despite the loud protests of our materialistic world, the truth is our yearnings, yearnings for more than just this mortal coil, our yearnings cannot be expunged.

Can we really accept Macbeth's verdict on life? Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.

It's a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Is that right? Is that all there is?

I find it interesting that even about atheists can't shake off this unsatisfied longing for contentment and for a real sense of meaning in life.

Listen to this. It's odd, isn't it? I care passionately for this world and many things and people in it and yet, what's it all for? There must be something more important one feels even though I don't believe there is.

[13 : 00] the words of Bertrand Russell, perhaps one of the most famous atheists of the last century and even he betrays his inconsolable secret, a yearning for answers, a yearning for destiny, for fulfillment, for a life that doesn't just signify nothing, that isn't just a tale told by an idiot, an unappeasable desire.

There must be something more, he says. C.S. Lewis, I think, has an answer for Bertrand Russell. Creatures, says Lewis, are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.

A baby feels hunger, well, there's such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim, well, there's such a thing as water. Men feel the sexual desire, well, there's such a thing as sex.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, then the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

Well, the Bible tells us that God has put eternity into man's heart, yet, so as he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning, it says.

[14 : 26] So the longing for more is unavoidably there, unarguably there, but the answer is not within man's power to grasp, at least not by ourselves, not without revelation that comes to us from eternity into our finite world from outside to bring the light of truth that alone can illuminate our tortured yearnings.

things. But this is what God has done is the message of the Bible. From the beginning God has spoken from eternity into time and human history through his spirit speaking in the prophets.

And then in the coming of Jesus into this world that revelation reached its zenith of brightness. it was all concerning this salvation that the prophets spoke and for which they longed the coming of the Messiah, Christ Jesus, the Son of God.

This is he whom seers in old time chanted off with one accord. And the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight in the coming of Jesus into this world at the first Christmas.

God has fulfilled his extraordinary prophecies of salvation and in doing so he has given us the answer to the longings of every human heart for every person in the world if they will but listen to him and for every person here in this room tonight.

[16:08] But secondly, Peter says, in the coming of Jesus Christ God has completed his extraordinary plan of salvation. A plan that brings grace instead of judgment to rebellious creatures through the suffering and the glory of God's Son.

Jesus came to bring salvation from the consequences of our rebellion against God our Creator. That's what Peter means when he speaks of Jesus suffering and then being glorified. He means that he came as promised by the prophets to suffer for his people, to offer himself as a substitute for them. To offer his life as a sacrifice for sins so that he would be their sin bearer to take away their guilt to take away the just punishment of God in himself.

We'll hear more about what exactly that means in the coming services. But he suffered says Peter and then he was glorified. God raised him from the dead and gave him glory.

And that means says Peter that Jesus has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels and authorities and powers all having been subjected to him.

[17:26] And what that means is that God has exalted Jesus to be the Lord and the judge of every creature in earth and heaven. That's why the creed says from thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.

And so Peter says himself a little further on in his letter everyone will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. Jesus who suffered for sins is now glorified and exalted as the judge of all mankind and every heavenly creature also.

And so he is ready now to judge the world. And that means according to Peter that God's plan for this universe is accomplished.

It's complete. It only awaits his consummation when Jesus comes again. That was the message that Jesus himself commanded his apostles to proclaim to the world.

Peter himself says that back in Acts chapter 10 where he's speaking to the centurion Cornelius. He said, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

[18:41] That was the gospel that Jesus sent his church out into the world to proclaim. Judgment day is coming and Jesus Christ is the judge because Jesus who suffered is now glorified and is exalted at God's right hand.

judgment. Well, you may wonder if that's the gospel Jesus gave his apostles. Why on earth do we call it good news about judgment? Well, because as Peter immediately went on to say to Cornelius, to him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The prophets foretold the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories as a means of forgiveness of sins for all who would trust in him, to all who would repent towards God, to all who would receive his forgiving grace.

Now, God's wonderful plan of salvation is complete in the coming of Jesus and through his death on the cross and his resurrection to God's right hand.

The whole message of the Bible is about this. And now it's accomplished, says Peter, Christ's apostle. Those were Jesus' last words, weren't they, on the cross?

[20:05] It's finished now. It's accomplished. And after he rose, Luke tells us in his gospel what he said to his disciples. He told them, he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures and he said to them, this is what's written, that the Christ must suffer and on the third day be raised from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations.

God's plan is accomplished. And so, says Peter, those who trust in Christ's salvation need not fear that judgment to come because for them, now, it will be a day of wonderful grace and glory because of the forgiveness of their sins.

That means that we can set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought to us at the revelation of the Lord Jesus. That brings me to the final thing because in the coming of Jesus into the world, God has fulfilled his extraordinary prophecies of salvation He's completed His extraordinary plan of salvation and therefore, Peter says, it means that we can receive the extraordinary privileges of salvation.

The answer to all mankind's deepest need is now offered to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He says, the prophets were not serving themselves but you in the things that have now been revealed to you through those who preach the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. You see all that repetition of you to you. It's to you that this immense privilege has been fully and finally revealed, says Peter.

[22 : 02] He's referring, of course, to his first readers scattered as they were or in the margins of their ancient Roman Empire feeling as they were very weak, very vulnerable, aliens, strangers in the world.

But no, says Peter, to you, to all people, indeed to all nations now, this immense privilege has been revealed.

What the prophets of old and the angels of heaven longed to see fulfilled has now come to them and to us and to all who live on this side of that first Christmas.

Jesus himself said the same. Blessed are your eyes for you see and your ears for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous ones longed to see what you see, but they did not. the saints of old, the great hearers of the faith that we read about in Hebrews chapter 11, they only looked for what we have and they saw it afar and greeted it from afar but died without having received the things promised because, he says, God had revealed something better for us that we should have this message of all God's prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ of his whole salvation plan complete in Jesus Christ.

[23 : 33] The prophets prophesied a grace that was to be ours in the things that have been now announced to us. Friends, that is the true grace of Christmas that the Savior long promised has come and he has come to bring revelation the ultimate good news of all God's promises fulfilled at last and so that we can find the answer for every longing, every deep yearning of our human hearts and that we might have hope, everlasting hope that transcends death itself in the grace that will be brought to all who believe the revelation of Jesus Christ.

What's it all for? said Bertrand Russell. There must be something more important. Yes, there is and it is this salvation, the things now announced to you in the good news of Jesus Christ, the Savior long promised and now come and sure to come again in the clouds of the glory of heaven.

So may God give all of us eyes to see and ears to hear this great message this Christmas. Amen.

Let's pray. O come, all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant.

O come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold him, born the King of angels. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Gracious God, grant this to be the true response of all of our hearts this Christmas, that we may be those who set our hope fully on the grace that will be at the revelation of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.