

A Sacrifice so Precious

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me in your Bibles to page 1014 and to 1 Peter chapter 1. We've been studying Peter's first letter recently, a letter written just a few decades after the first Christmas.

And so we're looking in our Christmas services this year at just a few of the snapshots from that letter where Peter focuses on, I suppose, what we might call the true grace of Christmas. His letters all about the true grace of God, and these verses pinpoint for us what the real message of the Christmas story really is. That is why Jesus Christ came into the world, what he came to do. And we saw last Sunday evening in our Carols by Candlelight service that Peter reminds us that Jesus is the Savior long promised by all the prophets, by the seers of ancient time. And he came to bring revelation at last that all God's promises are fulfilled in Christ and that the Messiah of Israel has brought to a climax the whole plan of God and his salvation.

[1 : 07] But this morning I want us to focus on just a couple of verses in chapter 1, verses 18 and 19, where Peter tells us that in Jesus God has provided us with a sacrifice so precious through whom we can have redemption, that is, liberation.

Liberation from what Peter says is the futility of life without God and therefore without hope. So let's just read these two verses together. 1 Peter 1, verse 18 and 19.

You were ransomed, says Peter, from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Now just keep your Bibles open because I'd like to speak for a little while before we sing our next carol just about Peter's message here. It's really quite a stark message.

But of course Peter is an apostle of Christ and he is the one who has the authority to proclaim to us the genuine Christian message. That means we've got to pay attention to his interpretation of what Christmas is all about.

[2 : 29] If we didn't do that it would be dishonest as well as plain foolish. So let's focus for a little on what Peter is telling us here. First of all, Peter tells us that the message of Christmas is first of all about something pitiful.

The infinitely pitiful futility, he calls it, of human life that is liberated from God. Look at verse 18 again. You were ransomed or redeemed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors. Well I guess today we like to think we've moved a very long way from our forefathers, from our ancestors, don't we? In the West we like to think of ourselves as advanced, very liberated, unshackled by all of those, what was it Tony Blair called it, the forces of conservatism that we've got to put behind us so that things can only get better.

Well I'll leave you to judge whether you think things only got better under Mr. Blair's government. But we think that, don't we? We think we're very developed and we're very advanced. We call nations like our nation a developed nation.

And we think we're very sophisticated and very liberated, free from any inhibitions, and able to live our own lives as we please.

[3 : 51] We're free to do as we please, and to think as we please, and to be free from any consequences of our actions, beyond obviously the mere consequences that we find in this world of humanity.

Because most people in our world today, at least in our society, they don't give God any thought at all. Or if they do, well it's just to mock the idea.

Remember just a few years ago there was those adverts on the London buses, do you remember? Partly funded, I think the biggest funder was Richard Dawkins, and they had that sign saying, there's probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy life.

Dr. Dawkins wanted something like, there's definitely no God, but they had to get around the Advertising Standards Authority, so they had to say, there's probably no God. So stop worrying and enjoy life. Because if there is a God, you can't enjoy life.

So he was saying, there's no God, but if there is a God, well, he's that kind of nasty whistleblower who ruins your enjoyment. So that we must put him aside, we must be free of any thoughts of God if we're going to in any way have a possible chance of enjoying life.

[5 : 02] Liberation from God is what we need. And people like that think that this is a very modern and sophisticated way of thinking.

But in fact, it's quite the reverse. It's as old as time. That's been the attitude of human beings all the way back to the Garden of Eden, as the Bible tells us.

That is precisely the attitude that man exhibited in wanting to throw off the shackles of God and become rulers of their own destiny. That's what the serpent promised to man in the beginning. Liberty from God. That way. But in fact, of course, as the Bible tells us, human beings did not reap liberty but bondage.

bondage to futility and disillusion and decay and despair and, of course, death itself. And that, Peter says, is what you, dear readers, have inherited from your forefathers.

[6 : 08] Whether they were Jewish by background or whether they were Gentile pagans, we all share a common humanity of pitiful futility. And that is because, as a human race, we have rejected God and we have resisted God because we have thought of him as the tyrannical whistleblower that we think always will be there to ruin the game of life.

See, we all want freedom. We all want autonomy. We all want self-determination because we think that we can do it best. But the Bible contends that when you reject the truth about God, when you reject the rule of the only true God, then what you reap is not freedom but futility.

Not liberty but, in fact, bondage. Not a game of bountiful beauty but one of bitter brokenness. I wonder if you remember a few years ago, just about Christmas, actually, there was a strike, wasn't there, of the football referees.

They were all fed up. Do you remember? Fed up with all the abuse that gets heaped upon them by the terraces, but, above all, fed up with the abuse that was being heaped upon them by football club managers like Alec Ferguson. They're always blowing their whistle far too much and ruining my team's game.

Well, just imagine if the fans on the terraces and the players and the managers, just imagine they got the liberation that they all thought that they wanted.

[7 : 44] They just got rid of those referees for good. A game without that nasty, whistleblowing referee. Surely that would be the most beautiful game of all.

Surely the beautiful game would emerge in all its magic. Everyone on the field would have perfect freedom, wouldn't they? No whistles, no fouls, no yellow cards, no red cards.

Wouldn't that be just fantastic to watch? You don't think so? Well, of course not. There would be no hope, would there, of a great game of football?

In fact, there would be no hope of any game at all. Probably most of the players would be carried off within about the first 20 minutes. It would be a picture of utter futility.

Well, let's ask the question, what does our human world most resemble? As we live, like our ancestors did, and as we've always done since, seeking to be liberated from God, liberated from that unpopular whistleblower that ruins human life.

[8 : 55] What does our human world look like? Does it resemble a beautiful game played by a well-drilled team whose synergy and whose teamwork conspires like clockwise towards a common goal with a relentless success and beauty and harmony?

Is that what our world looks like? Is that what our world looks like? Or does it more resemble the chaos of every man for himself in a game with no rules and no boundaries, just purposelessness and futility, something very far from beautiful to behold?

Well, the apostle Peter, for one, offers his clear verdict. He says, you have inherited the futile ways of all who have gone before you. Not freedom, but futility, which means vain and pointless and deceptive and empty.

That's what you've inherited from your forefathers, says Peter. Not freedom, but in fact bondage, slavery, needing redemption, needing ransoming, is what he says.

It's like those captives that we hear about today in various parts of the world being taken captive. And requiring a ransom to free them. Now you might object to what I'm saying and say, well look, that's ridiculous.

[10 : 24] I'm not in bondage like that. I am free to do as I please. I live like I want to. But you see, it's a frightening truth, I think, when we realize that it's actually possible to be a virtual slave for a very, very long time and never even seem to realize it.

And never want to do anything about it. Weren't you staggered when you read in the newspaper a few weeks ago about these slaves who had been liberated from these houses in suburban England and had been slaving in those households for 30 years and yet never tried to escape and only seemed to understand the full enormity of what their life had been when they were actually liberated?

Wasn't that staggering? 25 years ago, it wasn't so different, was it, in Eastern Europe? It was only after the Berlin Wall came down and the light of liberation began to penetrate into Eastern Europe from the West.

It was only then that many of those people had realized the tyranny and the slavery that they had been living with for decades, some of them all their lives, 70 years.

And friends, you see, the message of Peter and the message of Jesus himself is that people are slaves when they are liberated from God. They're slaves, the Bible says, to sin.

[11 : 56] Everyone who sins, says Jesus, is a slave to sin. And when he says sin there, he doesn't mean sin as minor peccadillos, things that we do wrong in our life, but he means sin as a mighty power, a power that grips every human being like a vice, a power that explains the deep-rooted behaviors deep down from inside of us that so often we're ashamed of.

We don't like using language like that, slavery to sin. But we do recognize it. We use euphemisms instead. We talk about human nature. Oh, it's human nature, we say.

When we mean that nobody's perfect, when we mean people do things that are wrong, when we mean that people do things often that are very bad indeed, well, it's human nature. I remember some time ago, a few years ago, when a particular sportsman was in the headlines for having had multiple affairs.

And, of course, it was in all the news and the chattering classes were talking about it. One television program had on this anthropology expert. And he said, well, you see, what this chap is doing, he's a powerful male and he is following his primeval instincts to spread his genes as widely as possible. And he said it all with a very straight face and it was as if to say, well, of course, that makes it all okay, doesn't it? Just doing what a powerful instinct is teaching him to do.

[13 : 33] I remember thinking at the time, I don't expect his wife will be terribly impressed with that particular explanation. But, you see, there is a grain of truth in it, a grain of truth. The Bible explains it much more fully and honestly.

Of course, we're not animals. We're not driven just by instinct. We're responsible beings. We're made in God's image. But in seeking to liberate ourselves from God, we are, in fact, in the grip of another power.

Not primeval instinct as though it was somehow natural, somehow innocent, but rather the power of sin, which is ubiquitous.

But it's far from natural, except in the sense that sewage is natural. It's a fact of human life, but it makes our world stink to high heaven.

The truth is, according to the Bible, according to Jesus, according to Peter, we are not free as human beings. We're in bondage to the power of sin. And that is why human life and human society is marked out not by freedom, but by futility.

[14 : 49] If we humans really were free to be all that we wanted to be, to build the societies, to build the world that we yearn for, that we hanker after, then we would be playing the game of life in harmony, wouldn't we?

Our relationships on every level would be marked by fidelity, by honesty, by trust, by peace. But are the hallmarks of this world's relationship not very different to that?

On every level, between governments and nations, between employers and employees, in our personal relationships, is it not more true that relationships are marked by infidelity and deceit and suspicion and war?

Our world is not a world of freedom. It is a world of futility. And Peter, in his second letter, says that the things that we look to so often for liberation are the very things that actually enslave us because whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved, says Peter.

You see, when people seek liberation from the one true God, as our forefathers did, when they seek liberators in other things, then these worthless idols can only enslave us in utter futility.

[16:26] Futile, worthless, vain, delusions, that's the language that the Old Testament prophets constantly used of all the idols of the nations that so often tempted God's people Israel away from the one true God.

And it's still the same the world over today. In some parts of the world, perhaps particularly in the East, it is still often idols of wood and of stone and clay.

I've seen that myself with my own eyes in India and elsewhere. People offering money and offering goods and food to images of monkeys and dogs. But it's no different, friends, in the Western world today.

In fact, I recall when I was in Delhi a few years ago, Isaac Shaw telling me a story about an American who was visiting them at the Delhi Bible Institute and he was so shocked and aghast at the worship of dogs that was going on everywhere.

There's dogs everywhere on the streets in Delhi and the council feed them. They don't feed the humans who are living in the streets. And he said, this is shocking. But Isaac turned to him and said, well, hang on a minute, it is shocking.

[17:30] But you come from America and it's just as bad there. You've got dog salons and dog hairdressers and dog funerals and dog goodness knows what. The dollars spent on dogs tell you about the idolatry in your country that's just as bad as mine.

Perhaps even worse. And that's true, isn't it? We are enslaved to a whole myriad of idols in our western world today. To education, to wealth, to getting up the greasy pole, to having or finding the perfect relationship, to having the perfect body, to having the perfect home, to having the perfect family.

You name it. We are worshipping at the shrine of idols of futility. Do these things bring us liberation? Do these things bring us freedom? Or do they bring us the relentless pressure to perform and to conform and to come up to scratch and to meet expectations so that we're not rejected, so that we're not left as outcasts in a world that is full of exacting judges of our religious observations? It seems the gods that we've chosen to be masters have great power indeed over us. Yes, they do. But not power to liberate. Instead, great power to condemn, great power to bring us into bondage, into futility.

[19:07] And if you don't believe any of that, friends, in the end, none of us, none of us surely can deny that one power has an iron grip on our life and that is death itself.

Here's what one artist said. The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death.

It's absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless. Futility.

That is the infinitely pitiful futility of the life that we have all inherited from our forefathers. A life liberated from God and therefore without the one true and living and life-giving God.

That's why Peter says the message of Christmas is first of all about something pitiful. But Jesus Christ came to ransom us, to liberate us from that futility.

[20:25] Do open your Bibles again at our verse in 1 Peter 18 and 19 because Peter goes on to say that it's because Jesus came to rescue us from futility that the message of Christmas is about something precious.

It's about the infinitely precious freedom of human life liberated by God. Peter points us in verse 19 to two things of infinitely precious value.

One explicitly and one implicitly. First of all, he's explicit. about the infinite value of the Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ.

You are ransomed not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the imperishable. We say, don't we, that that is what marks out precious metals today.

It's that they don't perish. They don't perish like paper money or other things. but Peter says that even silver and gold are not ultimately imperishable because they belong to this world.

[21 : 34] They belong to what is time-bound, to what is finite. But he is saying to us that not all the gold in the galaxy is worth one drop of what he calls the precious blood of Christ, our Redeemer, like a lamb without blemish or spot.

Language, of course, is the Old Testament language of sacrifice for sins. Just after Leviticus chapter 16, chapter all about the sacrifice of the great day of atonement, there's a verse in the next chapter that sums up why the blood of the sacrifice is so precious, because it represents life given in death for another.

Listen, for the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

And Jesus' blood represents his life, the infinitely precious life of the Son of God, the only begotten Son of the Father, but given in death to bring redemption, to bring true liberation from the power of sin, just as the spotless lamb without blemish, the lamb of the Passover brought redemption to God's ancient people Israel from the bondage of Egypt, when that blood was shed, when it brought protection for his people from the angel of death and the judgment of God.

And so Peter says Christ, the infinitely precious lamb of God, is the sacrifice, so precious that it wins an infinitely precious liberation for his people.

[23 : 32] And so what Peter says about the infinite value that God places on the life of his Son speaks also implicitly of the infinite value that he places on the lives of his adopted children, on those who are redeemed by that precious blood.

It's the greatest irony, isn't it, that man thought it would cost him nothing to liberate himself from God and gain freedom that way, and yet it cost him everything.

All he gained was futility and bondage. But God did know what it would cost him to liberate man and to bring him true freedom from futility, from his rebellion.

And yet he gave everything that we might find that infinitely precious freedom of a life liberated truly by God and for God and to be his forever.

So precious are we, his redeemed to God, that he came to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God, as Paul calls it in Romans, which will one day liberate the whole created order from its bondage to futility and decay.

[24 : 51] And he did it at the cost of his own precious blood. The infinite preciousness of the life of the redeemer speaks eloquently of the infinite preciousness of the lives of his redeemed ones to God.

Do open your Bibles for one last time. We're going to look particularly now at verses 20 and 21 because there is one final thing that Peter wants us to be absolutely clear upon here, and that is that the message of Christmas is also about something very personal.

It is about the infinitely personal future that is offered to us in the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. Look at verse 20. The message of Christ, Peter makes clear, is an infinite message.

It is eternal. It transcends time. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, and yet it has come into time, into the world, and into our world to become deeply personal.

Do you see? He was made manifest in these last times for your sake. Verse 21, who through him are believers in God, who raised him and gave him glory.

[26 : 21] It's become personal to give us hope so that your faith and hope are in God. The wonder of this Christmas message, Peter says, is that the eternal message of the living and the abiding word of God, as he calls it in verse 23, that it has become, look at verse 25, do you see?

The good news that has been preached to us, that is to all who receive the apostles' gospel.

God's infinite word about the glory of Christ has become a personal word of the good news of Christ to you and to me. It is an infinitely personal word.

Was that to Peter's first readers? But it's still that today to each one of us, to everyone hearing this message, here in this room, downstairs, whoever's watching, later on on the recording on the internet.

it is a gospel that has come as personal good news to you. That's why the Bible says, today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart.

[27 : 38] Don't let this Christmas message pass you by, because it's a personal message addressed to you, to every one of us. At that first Christmas, as we heard in the reading, as we sang in the chorus, there was no room in the inn for the Savior.

No doubt it would have meant far too much upheaval, change, rearrangement, to accommodate that family and a birth. But the same was true not just in Jesus' birth, but all through his earthly ministry, right to the end.

Many, many people had no room for Christ and his message. Too much change, too much to let go of, to follow Jesus, too much to be changed in your life.

Just those same issues face every one of us still today, don't they? When the message of Jesus comes up close and personal and challenges your heart and mine.

But remember the alternative, friends. Liberation from God in Christ can never bring real liberty, can never bring real freedom.

[28 : 54] It can only bring futility. Futility in life now and ultimately infinite futility. A never ending experience of pointlessness and vanity and deception and emptiness and darkness and frustration and futility.

That's what Jesus called the horror of hell. Friends, Jesus Christ came to redeem us, to rescue us, to liberate us from that terrible tragedy by his sacrifice so, so precious.

he who sent his son into the world for our salvation at that first Christmas, he will send the spirit of his son into our hearts today if we will heed that good use so that we also might experience the joy of his salvation personally in our own lives now and for all eternity infinitely.

And that's the joy of Christmas. That's why everybody who has come to know the Redeemer, who has come to follow Christ, who has come to receive his great salvation, that is why we love to sing these songs at Christmas.

That's why we love to sing all the time, all year round, because of his sacrifice so precious that tells us that we are so precious in his sight.

[30 : 37] because in him the curse to blessing turns, my barren spirit flowers, as o'er the shattered power of sin, the cross of Jesus towers.

Oh, what a Savior, what a Lord, oh, master, brother, friend, what miracle has joined me to this life that never is.