

A Substitute so Perfect

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] I'm going to read very briefly once again from our studies in 1 Peter. If you have a Bible on your seat, you might like to pick it up and turn to page 1014, and then we're going to read just over the page as well.

We've been studying this letter for some weeks on Sundays, and we've been picking out just a few little morsels, a few special verses for this Christmas season in particular.

And in 1 Peter chapter 1 at verse 10, Peter reminds us how old the story of Christmas is.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours, searched and inquired carefully about the person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he indicated 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 : 25] If you turn over to chapter 3 in verse 18, that's where our focus is going to be this Christmas morning. For Christ, says Peter, also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit.

Do pick up the Bibles again, page 1016, and perhaps you just have that one verse in front of you, 1 Peter chapter 3 and verse 18.

I suppose that most of you this year will have seen this year's John Lewis Christmas advert. It seems the big shops nowadays fall over themselves to have the very best advert this year.

And anyway, if you've seen it, it's called The Bear and the Hare. If you haven't seen it, I do recommend it. I thought it was really very good. It's the story of the poor bear who lives in the forest with all the other animals, but misses out every year on the joy of Christmas.

He's never even seen the Christmas tree in the heart of the forest. Why? Well, because with the first snowflake of winter every year, the bear goes into hibernation.

[3 : 03] And so there he is sleeping in his cave, but his trusty friend, the hare, hops in with the most beautifully wrapped up Christmas parcel.

And there he leaves it beside his sleeping friend. And then later on we see it's Christmas Day, and all the animals are in the middle of the forest around the beautiful Christmas tree opening their presents.

Everyone's there except the bear. But then, over the horizon, there comes Ambling, the big bear. Comes in to join the joy along with everybody else. How can that possibly be? Well, the camera cuts into the bear's cave, and we see the wrapping paper ripped off, and the box opened, and inside, a great big alarm clock.

And of course the message is very clear. John Lewis has the perfect Christmas gift. And by the way, if you've missed out on the perfect Christmas gift, they've also got the perfect Christmas sale.

[4 : 13] I turned on my computer this morning, and the first email in the box is from John Lewis, and clearance bargain starts online today. I'm not being paid by them.

Well, the Bible tells us that the real story of Christmas is also about a perfect gift. The perfect gift that comes from God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

A gift that comes to waken us from the deadness, and the darkness, and the winter of sin. The sin that excludes us from the joy and the light of fellowship with God, and the enjoyment of life with God as it was truly meant to be.

Jesus came, says Peter, in this little verse in front of us, verse 18 of 1 Peter chapter 3. Jesus came to bring us to God, and to bring us his peace forever.

We speak a lot about peace at Christmas, this season of peace and goodwill, but we know, don't we? We know that we're all just playing a game. We know that there's only so long that we can keep up the peace and goodwill before the Christmas spirit begins to fade.

[5 : 29] I was reading just the other day about that scene a hundred years ago in the First World War when there was peace that broke out in the trenches in France on Christmas Day.

You remember the story. German and Allied soldiers came out into no man's land, and there was a truce. They even had a game of football together. But it didn't last.

The next day they were back shooting at each other, killing each other once again. Actually, it'll probably be like that this Christmas as well for many of us.

By the end of today, with the in-laws and the outlaws, and sleep-deprived children, and all that family Christmas overload, I think probably war will be breaking out over most of the nation by the end of today.

Or else everyone will be off in their rooms on their iPads on the John Lewis Christmas sale, or selling their presents that they didn't want on eBay. I'm told it's the busiest day of the year for selling things on eBay.

[6 : 30] Oh dear. The world of peace and reconciliation between men on earth doesn't seem to be very real, does it? It's a bit of a fantasy.

It's a bit of a dream. When we read the world news, as we will later on, we'll see that it's still full of tragedy, still full of terror, still full of turmoil.

And when we're real, it's hard not to be cynical, isn't it, about all this talk of peace. But friends, the Bible is not naive about these things.

It doesn't deal in fantasy. It's very plain. And it tells us that Christmas is only part of the story. It's only part part of God's great gift. Only part of his gift to us has already been unwrapped for us.

The best is unequivocally yet to be. It's like Christmas morning. You open up your stockings, don't you? And there's lots of little presents in there and great fun.

[7 : 30] But you know there's something more. You know that the main present is still to be revealed. Some people have to wait till after their Christmas dinner to open their main present.

We tried that, but we didn't get very far, so not for us. But that is the way it is in the Bible with God's gift of Christmas. What we have unwrapped in Jesus Christ and his cradle, even what we have unwrapped in the gift of Jesus Christ on the cross is not yet all that there is.

We've not yet unwrapped the full glory of the crown that Jesus brings. We don't yet see that full glory of God's gift to us in Christ unwrapped.

But the day is coming when we shall not only see that glory, but we will share in that glory. We shall not see him with eyes as we do today, not in that poor, lowly stable, but we shall see him set at God's right hand on high.

And as the carol says, he leads his children on to the place where he is gone. Jesus came, says Peter, to bring us to God.

[8 : 51] And that's the ultimate wonder of the perfect gift of Christmas. In Jesus, God's gift to us is a substitute so perfect that he gives himself to us in his death and in his life.

In the gift of his death, we've already unwrapped it, we've already received the peace of personal reconciliation with God forever. But we're still to receive the gift of his life and that is the promise, the promise of personal resurrection with God forever.

forever. Every Christmas season reminds us that our full salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Because Emmanuel has come. The gift of God come down to man. Pick up your Bible again and let's focus on that one little verse.

Let's think for a moment of the pledge of Christmas past. The gifts that, as it were, we've already unwrapped and received from God in Jesus Christ.

[10 : 07] We've received already the peace of personal reconciliation with God forever. In Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 5, he says that through Jesus Christ, we have now received reconciliation.

And Peter tells us in this verse in front of us that it is because of the perfect substitution of Jesus' death, once for all, for our sins, that we've received it.

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh.

Only through this substitution, only through this great exchange of Jesus' death for ours, can we be brought to God, that is, to peace and to reconciliation with him.

The Bible's very clear, God is holy, God is just, he is holy, right, righteous. And that means that what is unholy and unrighteous, unright, cannot come near him.

[11:21] Psalm 24 says, who shall stand in the holy place, that is, who can come into God's close presence? He gives the answer, only he whose hands are clean and whose heart is pure, who doesn't lift up his soul to what is false, who does not swear deceitfully.

Does that describe you? Does it describe anyone you know, who's never done anything wrong with your hands or your lips or even the thoughts inside your head?

I certainly know it doesn't describe me, that's one thing I know. The Bible certainly has a clear verdict, says this, none is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside, all have sinned and lack the glory of God.

So none therefore can know God's nearer presence, God's perfect peace. But the Bible says that God has done through Jesus Christ what no human being could ever do for themselves.

He has declared righteous, right, those who are unrighteous in his sight. Therefore, those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ are right in God's sight, and therefore they can be brought back into fellowship with him, into peace.

[12:50] peace. We have peace with God who brings us to himself through Jesus in personal reconciliation. That's what Peter says here, and he describes how it happens.

It happens by the perfect substitution of Jesus' death for our sins, the perfect gift. He, the righteous one, takes the punishment of our unrighteousness.

peace. And it's a substitute so perfect and so powerful, as Paul says in Romans 5, that we have now peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through him we have access into the grace in which we now stand. Or as Paul says right into Corinthians, for our sake God made him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That great exchange, that perfect substitution through the death of Jesus in history, once on a wooden cross, which was the whole purpose of his coming in Bethlehem to be laid in that wooden cradle.

[14:06] Through that we have received the peace of personal reconciliation with God forever. He came, says Peter, to bring us to God.

That child in a manger, the Lord of all, he became an outcast and a stranger. He bore all our transgressions, all our demerits, fell on him, so that we might be brought to God.

He was put to death in the flesh to bring us to God. That's the pledge of Christmas past. Okay, pick up the Bibles one last time.

It is important, you have to see that what I'm saying is actually in the Bible. You don't know, I could be pulling the wool over your eyes, I could be talking absolute nonsense. So you need that in front of you to make sure I'm telling the truth.

well, we have already unwrapped the great gift of peace with God. That is the gift that we unwrap the moment that we believed and trusted in Jesus Christ.

[15:19] If we have believed and trusted in him, we were reconciled to God that moment. Spiritually, that's what the Bible teaches. The barriers of sin were broken down.

You know that if you're a Christian believer, don't you? When you came to Christ in faith, you started hearing God's voice in his word as you listened to the Bible being proclaimed as you began to read the word yourself.

God's word came alive. You woke up to it. You came alive to it, rather. That's the truth. And you also started speaking to God in prayer. You came to him.

That relationship was restored. You knew him. You knew the peace of personal reconciliation with God. God. And that is a truly wonderful, wonderful thing.

But friends, there is more, much more to God's Christmas gift just than that. The pledge of Christmas about the future is that in Jesus, we have the promise, not just of personal reconciliation with God, but we have the promise of personal resurrection, to be with God forever.

[16:30] We've already received that reconciliation with God through his death, but the promise is that we shall receive the full gift of resurrection through his life. Verse 18 says, look, that he might bring us to God, he was made alive in the Spirit, by the Spirit would be a better way to read it.

That he might bring us to God, he was made alive by the Holy Spirit. You see, it's saying to us, the best is yet to be. We're reconciled to God in Christ, yes, but we don't yet see him.

We don't share his glory physically. That's still to come. But Peter says it's certain, it's our living hope, as he calls it, and it will be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ, that is, when Jesus returns in glory to judge this world.

God, and he will bring us to God in the ultimate reconciliation of a bodily resurrection. And we have, in the gift of Jesus' risen life, the promise of our own personal resurrection, like his, to share his glory forever.

That he might bring us to God, he was made alive by the Spirit, says Peter, and we likewise shall be made alive by the same Spirit. That is what the Gospel teaches us.

[18:00] The Apostle Paul says exactly the same thing in Romans chapter 8. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

That is the pledge of Christmas future. The best is yet to be, but Christmas is a pledge, it is a sure and certain hope to us that that will be so.

The past is a reality. He came and he suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous. It's happened. And the present is a reality.

He was put to death in the flesh, but he is alive, made alive by the Spirit of God who raised him. And so the future also is a certainty.

that glory that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus is that he will raise up your mortal body just like his and he will bring you literally, physically, to God and to share God's glory forever.

[19:11] That is the promise of Christmas future. That is the pledge of the Christmas message for every single one who loves the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas day.

He came as a substitute so perfect so that we have now the peace of personal reconciliation with God and so that we have the sure and certain promise of a personal resurrection to be with Christ forever.

Isn't that the perfect gift? To awaken us from the winter of sin and death from human existence that is even for the best of our lives just a shadow life of hibernation because it excludes us from the richness and the fullness of human life as it was meant to be without sin without all that is wrong with us and above all without the curse of physical death.

The gospel of Christmas day is like an alarm clock ringing loudly and sonorously to proclaim to us, wake up! Daybreak has come! Joy has begun!

And you can join that joy in Jesus. Maybe you can't see it. The world still seems a cold place, a dark place, a miserable place.

[20:41] And yes, it is. But that's the nature of daybreak, isn't it? It begins with just the slightest streak of grey across the eastern horizon early, early in the morning.

But you know, it's begun when that first streak of light arises in the sky. It's like the thaw in Narnia, in the story of the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe.

It breaks that never-ending winter and it signals to all who understand that at last, Aslan is on the move. That means that the winter has ended, the day has dawned, that springtime will come and sure, sure as certain, at last, a full bloom of summer will be seen.

Friends, that is the meaning of Christmas. Because Jesus Christ came as the perfect substitute that first Christmas, it means the dawn of a never-ending day can dawn in our lives.

It dawns with the forgiveness of our sins and a reconciliation with God that Jesus brings us. It means the sunrise of a new day can bathe our lives with the peace of personal resurrection, the joy of that future to behold.

[22:06] That's the joy of Christmas. It's what Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, puts so beautifully in that song of his, when he spoke of the perfect gift from man to God.

It came to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Someone's put it this way, there's a sound of many voices in these words, the sob of the widow, the agony of the sufferer on the sick bed, the burden of the guilty soul, the loneliness of the old and the unwanted, the desolation of the orphan, many differing circumstances, but the same

need in each, the way of peace.

Well, friends, in Jesus Christ, the perfect substitute, the perfect gift to us from God, the dawning of that day of peace has begun.

And that means that whoever you are today, this Christmas, whatever you may have done, it means that that peace of personal reconciliation with God can be yours, this Christmas, this day, this morning, now.

And just as silently as the virgin birth came in Bethlehem, and Christ was born into the world that first Christmas, he can be born in your life today.

[23 : 34] The virgin birth of faith in Jesus can take place in your soul this Christmas, because God longs for that to be so for you.

As the carol says, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in to bring that peace of real reconciliation with God in your life now, and to bring you the promise of resurrection. for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above, and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.

The very best part of Christmas hasn't happened yet, but it's nearer this Christmas than it's ever been before, and it's a gift that Jesus Christ came to bring to everyone who will receive it and unwrap it and join the joy of this great grace that comes to us at Christmas.

Well, let's pray together. Heavenly Father, how we thank you that at last our eyes shall see him through his own redeeming love, that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above, and that he leads his children on to the place where he has gone, not in that poor lowly stable with the oxen standing by, but we shall see him, but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high, when like stars his children crowned, all in white shall wait around.

[25 : 25] Turn our eyes, we pray, this Christmas to that great day of the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen.