

A Saviour from Sin's Domineering Power

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[0 : 00] The good news that we've been rejoicing in in these carols is not just the story of Christmas, but of course the message of Christmas, the good news from God to people of all times at all places.

It's been the church's message from the very beginning. It is still the church's message today. In our last reading, St. Paul, in writing to the church in Rome, sums up what the good news of the gospel has accomplished in these words from chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.

In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. To walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

[1 : 25] Well, in our Christmas carol services this year, I'm wanting to ask the question, why was Jesus Christ born? I'm assuming, of course, that you do know that Jesus Christ was a historical figure.

Apparently 40% of people surveyed in our country recently didn't know that. So I think history teaching is in a bit of a need of an Ofsted inspection. But I'm not going to patronize you tonight with all the historical evidence of Jesus' life and so on.

It would take far too long. And in any case, I'm sure that you all do know that there is hardly a world figure for whom there is more historical testimony than Jesus of Nazareth.

But although I think and I hope we can all agree that Jesus was a real figure of history, we may not, of course, agree about why Jesus was born or why it matters.

For many today, of course, Jesus' birth was not that special. It was just like any other birth, certainly not miraculous. And that's how we feel about it. But for most of the world's population, I think it's fair to say that is not so.

[2 : 33] Billions of Muslims throughout the world believe that Jesus was born a great prophet. Respect him greatly. For many Hindus, Jesus is indeed a god, among many other gods, of course.

Even many Jews consider Jesus to be a rabbi of renown. And many thinkers, even many atheists, thinkers and philosophers, at least consider that Jesus of Nazareth was a great one among their ranks.

But the Bible and the Christian church goes much further than any of that. Because we believe that this birth was not simply about a human birth, although it was indeed fully and truly human.

But it was a divine birth. It was an incarnation, the enfleshment of God himself. In the person of God the Son, who took flesh and became man and did so for a purpose.

As the Nicene Creed says, He is God of God, light of light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father, who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

[4 : 00] Now, did you get that? Because that gives us the answer to the great question of St. Anselm, for example, who wrote a book called *Cur Deus Homo*, Why God Became Man.

The Creed tells us it was for us men and our salvation. Christ was born to save. He was born for our salvation, as these carols have been saying.

And that's why, of course, it could be no merely human birth, because only God can be the Savior of man. Mary knew that. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, she sang in response to the angel's message to her.

And yet, just a few verses later on in Luke's Christmas story, we hear the angels proclaiming to the shepherds, Unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord, the long-awaited Messiah King, who is himself the Lord, the Savior in human flesh.

So the Bible is very clear that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God himself came into our world as Savior. But what does that mean?

[5 : 16] And from what does the human race need salvation? Well, again, you'll find many, many answers to that today. This week, it's all been in the news, hasn't it? That for some, we need saving above all other things from climate change.

Prince Charles himself said that that is humanity's greatest need. Now, whether you're a skeptic on that particular subject or a believer in that issue, I'm afraid the Bible disagrees with the prince. That is not man's biggest problem, according to Scripture. Nor does the Bible agree with Jamie Oliver that it is, in fact, sugar that we all need saving from, although I'm sure we do all need a great deal less sugar.

Although I'm not sure we're perhaps so keen on tax on our milky bars and our dairy milk, but there we are. And by the way, all our mince pies that you'll get afterwards are very healthy indeed. And it's part of the five a day.

And cream has also been rehabilitated recently, which I'm delighted about. So all is well after this service. But that is not our biggest need. Nor even more seriously is terrorism or the forces of ISIL or any other such evil force, dire as it is, our greatest need to be saved from.

[6 : 30] Now, the Bible says there is a far greater horror and terror afflicting this world and every single person in it. It calls it the horror of sin. And what this world and all its inhabitants need above all other things, and compared to which every other need, in fact, pales into eternal insignificance, is the need of salvation from sin, from its causes, from its corruptions, and from its consequences.

Above all, the deadly wage that sin pays in the end to every human being under its deadly power. Death. Why was Jesus born?

Why did God become man in the person of Jesus Christ? The answer is that Christ was born to save. To save human beings from sin.

When we take time to consider just how vast an undertaking that is, we may begin to understand why it took the person and power of God himself to save his people from sin.

Because the mission of Jesus is described in the New Testament by the apostles of Christ as a multidimensional salvation. Not only from the dreadful penalty of sins that humans have incurred, but from the deep poverty that sin has inflicted on this whole cosmos in bondage to decay and under a curse of corruption.

[7 : 59] And from the dark personality behind all sin, behind the devil himself. But first of all, tonight, I want to focus on these few verses from Romans 8 that we read a moment ago, where Paul focuses on another dimension, as it were, of what salvation from sin means according to the Bible.

Because he tells us that Jesus came into this world to be a savior from the deadly power of sin. He came to bring redemption, liberation, as a savior from sin's domineering power and reign over our human lives.

Just look with me at these verses on the screen. And I want to highlight three things that Paul highlights for us. Look at the first couple of verses there on the screen. And you'll see the first thing. Because they give us vividly a picture of the message that Christmas brings.

And it's a picture of liberation from bondage to an oppressive and domineering and indeed a deadly power. Do you see? Paul says there that the law of the spirit of life, that is the power and the authority of life that is in Christ Jesus, has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death, that is from the power and the authority of sin and death.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus liberates us from a dark realm where people live subjugated in bondage under the rule and authority of a power that Paul calls sin and death.

[9 : 44] Now we're all familiar, aren't we, with this ghastly realm of the Islamic State today where foolish young people seem to be attracted to it and go and travel to be there.

And only too late they discover the dark oppression and the bondage from which there is no escape except for death. And Paul says that humanity, all of us, are actually in a bondage far, far worse even than that without the Savior Jesus Christ.

Do you remember from that previous reading, just a few chapters before this from Romans chapter 3, we read these words, All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.

And notice that because, you see, Paul is talking about sin there in a very different way than most of us tend to think about sin. Most of us think about sin as bad behavior, sex and drugs and things like that.

And by the way, no matter how religious or irreligious we are, all of us do have a view of sin or sins and the things that we disapprove of.

[10:52] In fact, if you show me your daily newspaper, I'll probably be able to tell you exactly what the things you think are the worst sins. If you're a Daily Mail reader, well, it probably is things like dropping litter and swearing and drunkenness and jobs behaving badly and anything that Jeremy Corbyn says, things like that.

If you read The Guardian, it won't be that, will it? You'll feel probably you're so liberal you don't even believe in sin. But I bet that I can tell you there's plenty of things that you do look down your nose at. Racism, homophobia, business making too many profits, gas guzzlers, people who don't do their recycling properly. Anybody who reads the Daily Mail probably as well, I should think.

Well, you see, we all have a sense of morality. We do. Whether we admit it or not. And we all look down on sinners from our side of the fence. Of course, our side is where all the saints are. The sinners are over there.

But you see, Paul is not speaking in those terms at all, is he here? He says that everyone, regardless of their views of right or wrong, everyone is in the same bondage under the power of sin.

[12:00] Sin, in his language, isn't peccadilloes that we or others commit. Sin is a power that controls every one of us. In fact, actually, the very first mention of sin in the Bible is way back in Genesis chapter 4.

And it's in exactly those terms. God says to Cain, Sin is crouching at the door, desiring to rule over you. And of course, Cain couldn't escape that power, could he?

He became its servant and he murdered his brother. And that is exactly how Paul speaks of sin in these chapters in writing to the Romans. Just before our readings here, he uses vivid images of sin as a slave master who owns us and abuses us.

Of sin as a domineering general, in fact, who uses our bodies as weapons for wickedness. Isn't that a chilling thought in this age of suicide belts and so on? And sin, he says, is a brutal employer who pays the great wage only of death.

In fact, sin, he says, is like a tyrannical monarch who reigns in death. And that is the power that enslaves all human beings in this world, according to the Bible, according to Jesus Christ.

[13:21] Now, you might not feel that at all. You might not believe that. But listen, it is possible, isn't it, to be enslaved and not to know it.

If you're born into slavery, for example, it might be all you know. You may think you've got a lot of freedom, but actually, you don't have freedom at all. There were many slaves, I suspect, born into the plantations of the southern states of America who didn't know the meaning of true freedom until emancipation showed them that there was a whole new life beyond their conception.

There were many citizens of Eastern Europe during the time of communism, that I suspect thought they were relatively free, had relatively normal lives, until that Berlin Wall came down and they realized how different life could really be.

And in our country today, I suspect there are many, many people. Well, most of us who think we're free, we can do as we please, we can have a vote, we've got money, we've got freedom to go where we want, we can travel and so on, we're free, we're not slaves.

Is that really true? If that is true, why is it that we're so dissatisfied? Why do we have soaring rates of stress and depression?

[14:44] And widespread family breakdown? And relationship breakups? And loneliness more than ever before? Why don't we have a utopia that modern medicine and modern science and technology and psychology promises us?

Why do artists and singers and poets still constantly search for more, search for freedom? When I was young, it was Freddie Mercury singing, I want to break free and live the liberated life of the rock star.

Well, where did that get him and many like him? Are we really as free as we think we are? Dear friends, consider this. I wonder if people live as slaves to many, many masters in their lives without

perhaps liking to think so.

For some, it's a slavery to a desperate desire for a relationship, for a partner perhaps, for a family, for children. And whether you have it or not, it's a driving force of what you live for.

That's why so often it can be such a great disappointment. Or it might be you're a student. Maybe it is enslavement to grades, to academic achievement. Or perhaps it's business success.

[16:04] Or career achievement, or whatever it is. Maybe it's the expectations of your family, your peers, even yourself. Maybe you're a driven person and you need to succeed.

How very bitter it is when that success eludes you. Is that not so? But you see, whatever it is, if you live your life seeking satisfaction in what this world can offer, and if you're driven in trying to win the approval of the institutions and the ideas or the people of this world, then the truth is you are in bondage to those powers that rule over you.

And those things, friends, will never ever liberate you. But they will condemn you again and again and again. Because however much you might say, oh, I'm not enslaved, I'm in control.

There is one indisputable fact that will force you at last to admit defeat. And it's that word, death.

That last word in that last line there will be the last word in the end for every one of us.

Death is unmistakable. Death is unavoidable. Although, of course, the pharmaceutical industries and the cosmetic indices make billions of pounds, helping people to try and hide from that truth, which we all do.

[17:34] But no blockbuster drug saves lives, does it? That's the language used. Even if I read this week, apparently there's a new discovery of a diabetic drug, which may be an anti-aging drug that can help us all to live to 120.

They've tried it in rats and it works. I'm not sure if I want to live like a rat until I'm 120. But no drug saves life.

And no drug prevents death. It only postpones death. And the condemning power of sin and death is plain to see, isn't it?

In countless cemeteries and crematoria, week after week after week. And we hide from that, but we know it. And death, as one theologian has put it, is the materialized form of guilt.

It is the final wage paid by the brutal power that rules and enslaves this whole world of ours. And we hide from it in our culture.

[18:43] It's said the Victorians never ever spoke of sex, but talked endlessly of death. I suppose we are the exact opposite, aren't we? Sex is everywhere, all the time, but not death. Death is sanitized in our culture.

It's hidden in single hospital rooms, in private ambulances that actually are hearses, in funeral homes, things like that.

We hide from death and its dark reality. But we know it's real. And we know it's fearful. That's why we hide. But the message of Christmas is all about a liberation from the deadly, domineering power of sin and death in our world.

And it's a message that we need to wake up to because it's possible to be under such tyranny and desperately need liberation and be totally oblivious to it. Many living in Germany in the 1930s did not see the sinister and wicked force of the Nazi party for what it truly was.

And by the time they woke up, it was too late. They were powerless to do anything about it when the evidence became indisputable of these dreadful concentration camps, brutal holocaust and so on.

[19:56] They were powerless then to throw off that yoke of tyranny. And that is exactly how the Bible describes the human condition.

Even when we begin, perhaps, to sense our bondage to a dark power. To realize that we too are driven by it to be opposed to God, to be enemies of God.

When we begin to realize it, we realize we're helpless. We cannot rescue ourselves to become what we were made to be.

We need liberation. And that's what the next verse there speaks of. The power of the message that Christmas brings.

And it is the power of a great liberator, God himself. God has done what we ourselves could not do. Knowing what we need to be is no good.

[20:56] That's why God's law on its own is powerless to help us. Not because it isn't perfect, but because we are not. Because as it says, our flesh is weak. Well, we know that, don't we?

We're captive to our human nature. We don't want to submit to God's rule. We can't submit to God's rule. We won't submit to God. I will live my way.

That is the song of common humanity. And that is why God had to come to earth to save man. What he could never do, God himself has done, says Paul, by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin.

Notice, in the likeness of sinful flesh. Not in the likeness of flesh, as though he wasn't real. He was real flesh and blood. Nor did he come as sinful flesh.

He himself was without sin. But he came into our real world of men and women. Into the realm of darkness. Into the place where sin ruled.

[22 : 04] In order to deal with sin. He came for sin. To destroy that power forever. And the power of Jesus' birth lies in the power of his death.

He came for sin. In Jesus' flesh. In his death on the cross. Do you see? God condemned sin. He executed judgment on sin itself.

On that evil despotic power. In the person of Jesus. Not just the guilt of sins. Yes, that too. But on its power and authority.

And upon its hold. Over men and women. So, as verse 1 says. There is no longer any condemnation. For those who are in Christ Jesus.

There can be no condemnation under sin's power. Because, in Jesus Christ. We've been liberated. If we're his. We've been removed from the realm. Where the authority of sin rules.

[23 : 09] Into a realm. Where the power and the authority overall. Is the spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The spirit of life. It's just as if someone has been rescued.

Out of that. IS controlled territory. And brought into another country. Where that oppressive government. Government has no say at all.

And they've been given a new passport. And a new visa. Here in this country. And that evil regime. Has no power. Any longer. To condemn them. Because a new power.

A new realm. Rules. You've been liberated. Liberated. And that means now. There is a whole new life. To begin. What you've been liberated for.

And that's Paul's third point. Here in verse four. Of this little section. It's the purpose. Of the message. That Christmas brings. See the good news of Jesus. Doesn't just liberate us.

[24 : 07] Out. Of the domineering powers. Realm and grasp. It doesn't just. It doesn't just mean escape. Into a feeble boat. Floating on the sea. Like these poor refugees. In no man's land.

No. God's. God's liberation. Isn't just a minus. It's not just a negative threat. Taken away. Not at all. God in Christ. Came to liberate us.

Into. Life. To save us for a life. As. Life was always. Meant to be. For human beings. Do you see. In order that the righteous. Requirement.

The righteous decree. Of the law. Might be fulfilled. In us. What the law. Alone. Could never deliver. Because of our weak. And sinful.

Rebellious flesh. God himself. Did deliver. Through the work. Of Jesus Christ. On the cross. To condemn sin. And through the work. Of the spirit of Christ.

[25 : 02] In our hearts. To fill our hearts. With his. Perfect. Human life. So that we can. Walk.

Not according to the flesh. But according to the spirit. His holy spirit. The perfect human wholeness. Of Jesus Christ. You see.

What was. Our sin and death. Became his. On the cross. And what was his. Holiness and life. Becomes ours.

Through his. Spirit. In our hearts. And in this. In this great exchange. As Paul wrote. To another church. He has delivered us.

From the domain. Of darkness. And transferred us. Into the kingdom. Of his. Beloved son. And all of that.

[25 : 59] You see. Becomes yours. And mine. When. When he sends. The spirit of his son. Into your heart. When you believe. And trust. In Jesus Christ.

As savior. So that you will walk. No longer. According to the flesh. But according to the spirit. All this is fulfilled. For those who are.

In. Christ. Jesus. Says Paul. You see. It's not just history. This is not just. Academic. This is something. Deeply personal. That the Christmas message.

Brings. It's nothing less. Than a personal. Liberation. A liberation. Into life. As God. Meant it. To be. Life. That is eternal. For all.

Who believe. For all. Who are in. Jesus Christ. Who have faith. In him. This is not. Paul goes on. Just a few verses. Later.

[26 : 52] From these ones. We've been looking at. He says this. 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. Already. And that's.

Why Jesus Christ. Was born. He was born. To save. To bring about. At last. An end. Forever. To the bitter. Tears. Of death. To end.

The weeping. At the graveside. Forever. For all. For all. Who are in Christ. Because one day. Those graves. Will see resurrection. Bodily. They will see joy.

Inexpressible. They will see the end. Of bondage. To fear and death. The end. Of the misery. Of our mortality. The mortality. That robs us. Of everything in life.

[27 : 45] Our dreams. Our achievements. And most of all. Our loved ones. And our dearest ones. Jesus came. To be a savior. From sins.

Domineering. And deadly power. And friends. That's why the message. Of Christmas. Is good news. Of great joy. 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 us. Second birth.

It is good news. Of great joy. Said the angels. To all. The people. But the only question is.

Will that message. Be received. Or rejected. Why would you. Reject. Such a message.

[28 : 44] Of true liberation. And life. One of those carols. We sang earlier. Proclaims. That where meek souls. Will receive him. Still. The dear Christ.

Enters in. Enters into the human heart. To bring light. And life. That is eternal. Now you need not. Fear the grave. For Jesus Christ.

Was born. To save. Friends. That is the message. From God. In heaven above. To you. Today.

This Christmas. To every one of us. In this place. So let me urge you. Don't let it pass you by. Don't let it pass you by.

Come and adore him. Who was born. For our salvation. Let's pray. O come.

[29 : 45] O come. O you faithful. Joyful and triumphant. O come ye. 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 that. This indeed. Will be the response. Of all of our hearts.

This Christmas. For Christ's sake. Amen.