

# Carols by Candlelight

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Date: 08 December 2019

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] 1995 Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

We want people to understand what Christmas is really about, above all, why Jesus Christ came into this world. And the claim of the Christian message is nothing less than that Jesus Christ is the answer to the inconsolable longing of every human heart because he is the unique and ultimate revelation of God to the world, whatever your religious background, your cultural background may be.

So let's begin by singing an ancient carol written by a Roman poet living in the north of Spain in the fourth century AD. It tells us how the story of Christmas began before even the dawn of time in the love of the eternal God himself, of the Father's love begotten, ere the world began to be.

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CHOIR SINGS And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

[ 7 : 33 ] And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you?

And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.

He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?

The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate. Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this that you have done?

The woman said, The serpent deceived me and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field.

[ 8 : 42 ] On your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.

Now lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever. Therefore, the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

He drove out the man and at the east of the garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

The wonder of Christmas is that it tells how that terrible estrangement from God signified there by the fierce angels with their flaming swords, guarding the way and barring man from God's presence.

[ 10 : 02 ] It tells us how that estrangement is overcome. Not by us, human beings who have no power to do it, but by God himself coming into our world as savior.

That means that the angels now have a new role, not barring the way, but instead proclaiming the great good news that at last there can be peace and goodwill from God towards men and women on earth.

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold. That means that the angels now have a new role, not barring the way, angels only, by God by on earth.

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[ 15 : 40 ] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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[ 17 : 04 ] hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Words from Isaiah the prophet, speaking hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ, and telling of God's promise not to forget his people, despite all their waywardness, all their rebellion, all their rejection, and telling of that wonderful promise of a coming one, who would be Emmanuel, which means God with us.

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[ 21 : 25 ] CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS  
SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS But you, Bethlehem, Ephrata,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler  
over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she, who is in labor, gives birth and the rest  
of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the  
Lord his God, and they will live securely.

For then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, and he will be their peace. O little town of  
Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the starless silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light, and the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

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[ 25 : 51 ] Thank you. Thank you.

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[ 28 : 25 ] Thank you. And the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

And behold, your relative Elizabeth is in her old age, has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. And the angel departed from her.

The promise was for God himself to be with us. And in the birth of Jesus Christ, he who was truly God became truly man. He really did come to be with us and to be one of us, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

[ 29 : 41 ] And for a purpose, mild, he lays his glory by. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth.

Born to give them second birth. .

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SINGS Our God, heaven, cannot hold him nor earth sustain.

Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign. And yet in the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[ 37 : 53 ] Amen. For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you.

You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

And it came to pass as the angels were gone away from them into heaven. The shepherd said one to another. Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

[ 39 : 38 ] And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had seen and heard, just as it was told unto them.

A God who has not remained hidden and silent, but has come from the realms of glory and drawn near to speak glad tidings of great joy into this sad world.

angels from the realms of glory now proclaim Messiah's birth. Glory to God in the highest. Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Glory to God in ec instruments. God the Lord Glory to Christ. Glory to você.

[ 41 : 03 ] Glory to you. Glory to you. Glory to you. Glory to you. ORTER Thank you.

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[ 44 : 19 ] Thank you. Thank you.

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[ 46 : 47 ] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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[ 49 : 25 ] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[ 51 : 07 ] but perhaps one of the best love carols of all that speaks of that great revelation of the love of God into our world. Son of God, oh how bright. Love is smiling from thy face.

Strikes for us now the hour of grace. Savior, since thou art born. Amen.

SILVER NIGHT Holy and light Shepherds first Sovereign light Earthly sounding clear and long Far and near the angels song Christ the Redeemer is here

Christ the Redeemer is here in the name of the Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 53 : 39 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. ■ I want to speak a little this evening about that last reading.

It comes from Hebrews chapter 1. Because it tells us something very important. It tells us that Jesus Christ is the answer to all our deepest yearnings.

To every inconsolable yearning of the human heart. The true God is not a silent God.

He's a God who has spoken. He's not a God who's hidden. To be searched for. Because God himself has made himself known all through history.

[ 54 : 50 ] But the message of Christmas is that in Jesus Christ, God has spoken his word of ultimate revelation to humankind. I want to think about three ways that God has spoken.

To humankind this evening. And the first is this. God has spoken universally to our human spirits. And the evidence is simply in the universal yearning that there is in the human spirit for fulfillment. Long ago, says the apostle, at many times and in many ways, God spoke. Elsewhere, the apostle Paul says that God's invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world.

In the things that have been made. But he goes on to say, of course, that human beings in their desire for autonomy, for self-determination, they've suppressed this truth.

And tried to ignore God. And yet the fact is, we can't suppress that truth completely. And that simple fact is what explains the reality of our lives.

[ 56 : 06 ] Indeed, only that fact does, I would submit. Human beings have rebelled against God's authority. That's what the Bible means by sins.

As simple as that. Rebellion against God's rightful rule over us as creator. But that doesn't mean that human beings cease to be destined for God.

We have a great desire to suppress that truth. To escape thoughts about God. And yet at the same time, we long for the peace that only God can truly give.

And so we live with an unavoidable conflict. The former atheist, the Oxford Don C.S. Lewis, called this the inconsolable longing.

It's been part of the universal experience of human beings since the very beginning. Human beings long for more. They yearn for fulfillment. And not even the greatest things in this world are really capable of satisfying our hearts.

[ 57 : 07 ] We always feel, don't we, there should be more. More to life. And we live with that sense of restlessness, of homelessness. And yet we have a keen sense of what home really is.

And we yearn for it. Listen to how C.S. Lewis expresses it. There have been times, he says, when I think that we do not desire heaven. But far more often, I find myself wondering whether in our heart of hearts we've ever desired anything else.

Aren't all our lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being who has some inkling of that something which you were born desiring?

And which beneath the flux of other desires and in all the momentary silences between the louder passions, night and day, year by year, from childhood to old age, you've been looking for, watching for, listening for.

You've never had it. All the things that ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it. Tantalizing glimpses. Promises never quite fulfilled.

[ 58 : 13 ] Echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it really should become manifest, if ever there came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself, you would know it.

Beyond all possibility of doubt, you would say, here at last is the thing I was made for. It's the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the things we desired before ever we met our spouse or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds when the mind no longer knows spouse or friend or work.

All your life, he says, an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness.

And C.S. Lewis sensed that deep longing within his own soul, a desire for a far-off country, for the true home that he knew his heart longed for. And that's what set him seeking an answer.

And eventually he found it in Jesus Christ. Actually, his wonderful Narnia stories, I'm sure some of you have read, they express that sense of longing for a better world, probably better than any other stories that I know.

[ 59 : 38 ] But that yearning, it's simply evidence of what the Bible tells us very plainly. God has put eternity into man's heart. And yet, so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

That is, the longing is unavoidably there. But the answer is not within our power to grasp. Listen to Lewis again. He says, I'm trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you.

The secret that hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names, like, oh, nostalgia, romanticism, adolescence. The secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, although we desire to do both.

We can't tell it because it's a desire for something that's never actually appeared in our experience.

We can't hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it.

We want to cheat it, he says. We want to just call it a search for beauty. And we want to think that we can find it. No, no. He goes on and says, the books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located, it'll betray us if we trust to them.

[ 60 : 57 ] It was not in them. It only came through them. And what came through them was longing. These things, the beauty, the memory of our own past, they're good images of what we really desire.

But if they're mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they're not the thing itself. They're only the scent of a flower we haven't found. The echo of a tune we haven't heard. News from a country we've never yet visited. Well, friends, I think that is true.

Don't you? Deep down. That inconsolable longing in our human spirit. Of course, as C.S. Lewis rightly points out, he says, almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent inner voice.

Almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth. Well, it's certainly true, isn't it? That's a crusade that people like Richard Dawkins and others like him are on to silence even the questionings of the human heart.

[ 62 : 14 ] Don't even allow these questions to be asked, they want to say, in schools and so on. Silence them. Suppress them. Not really a very liberal or scientific approach, is it?

C.S. Lewis, though, it does have an answer to the new atheists of our day. How could, he says, how could an idiotic universe, that's the universe of blind chance that these people want us to believe in, how could an idiotic universe have produced creatures whose mere dreams are so much stronger and better and subtler than itself?

If you really are a product of a materialistic universe, how is it that you do not feel at home there? It's an important question, isn't it? He goes on and says, Do what they will then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy.

Well, of course, you might object and you might say, well, there's no reason to suppose that reality does offer any satisfaction to that kind of desire. Does being hungry prove that we do have bread, for example?

[ 63 : 32 ] But Lewis answers and says, this misses the point. A man's physical hunger does not prove that he will get any bread. He might die of starvation in a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes from a race which repairs its body by eating.

And inhabits a world where eatable substances do exist. In the same way, though I do not believe that my desire for paradise proves that I will enjoy it, I think it's a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and some people will.

A man may love a woman and not win her, but it would be very, very odd if the phenomenon called falling in love occurred in a sexless world. You see?

There is a deep, inconsolable yearning in the human heart, and for good reason. And as C.S. Lewis says, this sense that in this universe, we're treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality.

It's part of our inconsolable secret. Yes, at many times, and in many ways, all through human history, God spoke.

[ 64 : 59 ] And the evidence, friends, is in the universal yearning in the human spirit for fulfillment. And so history proves, you find these longings expressed from the stories of the most primitive tribes to the heights of the Greek myths, to the Roman poets, everywhere besides.

And that shouldn't surprise us. Because God has spoken universally to the human race. And these things are all what C.S. Lewis likes to call good dreams.

They're the dim premonitions. They're the shadows of reality that God has abundantly scattered throughout his world and throughout history and every culture. And even avowed atheists cannot shake off that unsatisfied longing for contentment, that desire for a real meaning in life.

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

Although I don't believe there is. That's Bertrand Russell, perhaps one of the most famous atheists of them all. Even he betrays that inconsolable secret.

[ 66 : 17 ] And listen to Albert Camus, the French existentialist and atheist. He says, For anyone who is alone, without God, and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful.

Dreadful because even atheists can't escape the inconsolable longing. And the more they try to suppress it, the greater the tension in life will be.

Because, friends, that cannot be overcome. We are made, above all, to desire God. One more quote from C.S. Lewis.

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these 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. Human beings feel sexual desire. Well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

[ 67 : 32 ] God has spoken universally to the human spirit from the beginning of creation in many times and in many ways God spoke. And the evidence, friends, is right here in our hearts, yours and mine, in the longings, in the yearnings for more, for fulfillment.

Because God has set eternity in our hearts. And we cannot dislodge this longing for the eternal. Even Bertrand Russell can't help saying there must be something more important, one feels.

So where can that be found? Well, that brings me to the second thing. God has spoken uniquely in the Hebrew scriptures. God spoke to our fathers, he says, by the prophets.

God spoke more than just universally. And the Bible is God's unique revelation, his special revelation of himself. It's needed because human rebelliousness has suppressed the truth of his

universal revelation.

And that's the story of human beings, according to the Apostle Paul. And yet the God of eternity, who created mankind for himself, didn't turn his back on rebellious human beings, even when we turned our back on him.

[ 68 : 50 ] He did not abandon us utterly. The whole Bible is that story of the God who speaks in order to woo back his errant creatures.

The Bible, the Bible, you see, is not a random collection of texts like a lot of other religious books. The Bible is God's story. It's got a beginning. The book of Genesis has got an end in revelation. And in between is the unfolding story of God's whole plan of redemption. So way back near the beginning in Genesis chapter 11, God lays aside for a time the nations of humanity and he calls out one nation, one people to be his messengers to the world, bringing the glad tidings of salvation. And he chose Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and from them the whole of the people of Israel to shine his light to the world. He gave them a unique revelation of himself.

He gave them words of total clarity, revealing his goodness, revealing his ways, his commands, his desires for how human beings and human societies should live.

[ 69 : 57 ] And yet he also revealed to them the terrible horror of what rebellion against God really does mean, what sin really is and what it does. And he showed them the absolute impossibility of human beings ever, ever making themselves right with God again.

That's the whole message at the very heart of all the sacrifices of Old Testament religion. No merely earthly sacrifice could ever possibly accomplish that.

That's why the rituals themselves were endless, year in, year out. It showed them they could never suffice, they could never satisfy because they kept on going. And so they had to trust in God and his promise that one day God himself would intervene to reverse the terrible curse of sin with his own power and might.

And all the prophets they kept lamenting the people of Israel's sin and rebellion. They kept longing for that ultimate answer. The seed of the woman, the one promised from the very beginning to defeat that ancient serpent, the devil, Satan.

Longing for the seed of Abraham through whom God promised to bless all the nations of the earth. Longing for the son of David, for the ruler to be born in Bethlehem, the human child who would inexplicably still be called Emmanuel, God with us, the mighty God, the Prince of Peace.

[ 71 : 32 ] But that was the message that God revealed and spoke uniquely to the world all through the Hebrew Scriptures as we've read tonight. And so it was that for generations, for hundreds of years, men and women of faith were waiting and longing for that day of fulfillment to come.

Men like old Simeon that we read of who were righteous and devout, who were waiting for the consolation of Israel, who were waiting for the fulfillment of what God has spoken to our fathers by the prophets.

Friends, in the birth of Jesus Christ and in his life and in his death and resurrection, the answer at last did come. And that's the final thing that these verses tell us.

God has spoken ultimately in his Holy Son. In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son and he, you see, is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature.

In the coming of Jesus, you see, we've had not just the answer to the longings of the Hebrew prophets, but the answer to all those deepest yearnings of the human heart.

[ 72 : 55 ] He is the answer. He is the answer to poor Bertrand Russell's question, if only he knew it. What's it all for? There must be something more important one feels. Well, there is.

And Jesus Christ is the answer. He is the ultimate word of God's revelation to this earth. He is the answer to all the great questions.

Who is God? What is God really like? What's it all for? What am I made for? Why am I here? He is the answer because he is the God of glory who made us.

He is the radiance of the glory of God. And he is the Lord who made us in order to love us. And for us to find rest and peace and belonging and significance in relationship with him.

He is the exact imprint of his nature. Friends, what that means is simply this. There is nothing un-God-like in Jesus Christ.

[ 73 : 58 ] And there is nothing but nothing that is un-Jesus-like in God. And that's so important. Because it means there is nothing dark or hidden or mysterious or chilling about the true God who made heaven and earth.

There is no need to be fearful that the true God could turn out to be the God of fanatics, the God of terrorists, the God of suicide bombs, the God of machine guns. No. He is the God whose glory is radiated exactly in the person of Jesus Christ.

If you hear his words, if you see his works, you have seen and heard your true maker. And nor is he a God who will ever disappoint.

A God who, when you find him, will turn out to be far less than you'd hoped he might be. No, no, no. Old Simeon knew that, didn't he? He saw, even in that little baby, the answer to all his lifelong earnings.

Now, he says, now you're letting your servant depart in peace because my eyes have seen your salvation. Nor is he a God who will reject you.

[ 75 : 15 ] However dark, however wicked your life has been, yes, he is the Holy One. He's the one who can't look upon sin. He's the one, yes, who will judge the earth with justice.

There is no refuge from his justice. But friends, the ultimate word that God has spoken to this world in Jesus Christ, his son, is a revelation of his salvation.

You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. And in doing so, and only in doing so, he'll satisfy that inconsolable longing, that unappeasable want that is deep in every human heart and will be deep in every human heart until that heart finds its true home in him and in the sinless glory that we were truly made for.

One last word from C.S. Lewis. Our lifelong nostalgia, he says, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door that we've always seen from the outside.

It's no mere neurotic fantasy. That's the truest index of our real situation. At present, he says, we're on the outside of the world.

[ 76 : 41 ] We're on the wrong side of the door. But, all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so.

Someday, God willing, we shall get in. And to be at last summoned inside, he says, would be both glory and honor beyond all our merits and also the healing of that age-long ache.

Friends, that is the message of Christmas. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God's ultimate word of revelation.

And it is a word of summons. It's a word to come inside, to find in Jesus Christ the answer to the deepest yearnings of every human heart. So I want to urge you, whatever you do this Christmas, don't fail to respond to Jesus Christ, to God's ultimate word to humankind.

because it is he and it is he alone who will answer that inconsolable longing of your heart. Let's pray.

[ 78 : 04 ] O come, all ye faithful, come joyful and triumphant, come to Bethlehem, come and behold him, born the King of angels.

come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Our gracious God, we ask that you would grant this to be a true response of all of our hearts this Christmas.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, come, and behold him, Christ the Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. **CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS**

[ 80 : 06 ] **CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS CHOIR SINGS**

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And so may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all now and always.

Amen. Do please have a seat and we'd love for you to stay behind. There will be mince pies circulated in a few minutes. There will be drinks downstairs and on my right hand side over here in the transept when that area is cleared.

So in a few moments that will all be happening. We'd love you to stay. Don't go out into the cold and wet before you have to. It's been lovely to have you here this evening, especially if you're a guest.

And we have lots more of Christmas events to come.

[ 83 : 36 ] Next Sunday evening, for example, at 5, we're back here with a different kind of thing, a festival of Christmas, an evening of poetry, of choir, of carol singing to and of testimony.

And more explanation of the word of scripture with services on Sundays as normal and on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. And we'd love to see you at one of these. But can I just say, if you're new to the Christian faith, if you've never really explored or engaged with these things properly, let me encourage you.

The next step for you is just to do that yourself. Read the Bible for yourself and come to your own conclusion. A great place to start is in one of the Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark or Luke or John.

John's Gospel is one that we use a lot here. There's copies at the back if anybody would like to have one. If you came with a friend, I'm sure they would love to read through John's Gospel with you.

We have a special edition, actually, that's made for precisely that. It's called Word One-to-One. It does what it says on the tin. One-to-one. You just read through together the Gospel of John.

[ 84 : 40 ] We'd love for you to do that. And if you came with somebody, just ask them. And I'm sure they'll be glad to do that with you. If they won't do it, come and find me. And I'll be delighted to do it with you anytime you like.

But think about it. Read for yourself. Make up your own mind. And understand what it is that makes us Christians tick. Let me issue that little challenge for you this Christmas.

Thank you for being with us this evening. Enjoy the drinks and the mince pies. And enjoy sharing time together. Thank you. Thank you. For more information with Jesus, basketball, basketball, and basketball.

Thank you. For more information, even though you may be a recipient of our website, as we have a■■■ ■■■■■ for you tenim. I'm a total of American when bisogna trees and their client Sicht■.

Thank you.

Thank you.