

Jesus Christ Came into the world to bring LIBERTY: Christmas is about Rescue from Sin

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[0 : 00] Do take up your Bibles again, and if you turn this time to Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter 1. That's page 991 in the Church Bibles, and Rachel de Bleek is going to come and read to us this little section from verses 12 to 17 of 1 Timothy.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly, in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. As we sit, let's join our hearts in prayer. Let's pray.

[1 : 28] O Lord, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us. And with great might succour us, that whereas through our sins and wickedness we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us.

Through the satisfaction of thy Son, our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Spirit be honour and glory, world without end.

Amen. Do turn with me, if you would, to that passage we read there a moment ago with Rachel, 1st Timothy, chapter 1.

And that's page 991, if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles. We've been studying 1st Timothy together on Sunday mornings this last term.

And so at Christmas in these services we're taking the chance to go back and to revisit some of the great statements that the Apostle Paul makes in these pastoral letters about the Lord Jesus Christ and about why he came into our world.

[2 : 41] And this morning we're going to look at one of the very greatest of them all. Chapter 1 and verse 15. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am foremost.

That's what Paul's testimony is, the Apostle of Jesus Christ. In fact, this little section from verses 12 to 17 is an extraordinary testimony from the man who surely became the Christian gospel's greatest evangelist and greatest theologian.

And I want to look at it this morning because, well, I think it tells us so very clearly at least four things of what it means that Jesus Christ came into our world at the first Christmas.

It tells us why he came and what he did and what's important for us. Because these verses tell us so very clearly these four things about the reality of sin, about the rescue of our Savior, about the result of our salvation.

And, of course, crucially, they tell us also about the road to that salvation for all who want to find it. So in between the carols this morning, I want us to think about each of these things in turn.

[3 : 54] And first of all, let's think about what Paul shows us here, what he reveals about something that often people are very confused about, and that is the reality of sin.

Verse 13 gives us, doesn't it, a very grim picture of sin. And it shows us sin as the perverse resistance to God revealed in Christ Jesus.

Paul says, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent. I acted ignorantly in unbelief. Well, if Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, then we need to ask, don't we, who and what is a sinner?

That's a very important question because when Saul of Tarsus, that's what Paul was known as previously, when Saul of Tarsus was leading his violent opposition and persecution to Christ's church, no one in the religious establishment would ever have called Saul of Tarsus a sinner.

He was one of the most celebrated religious figures of the day, sort of like the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope all rolled into one. How could somebody like that call themselves a sinner?

[5 : 07] Of course, we face the issue today, don't we, that many people around us today just don't even entertain the idea of such a thing as sin.

There's no such thing as sin at all. Until, of course, you know, somebody nicks into that parking place you've been queuing patiently to wait for when you're about to go and do your last-minute Christmas shopping.

And suddenly they're a sinner, aren't they? Or when somebody's walking their dog past your door and decides to use your little bit of pavement to leave its mess on. Well, you're pretty quick, aren't you, to spot a sinner in those circumstances and many others.

And we might deny it and we might like to talk about something like sin as though it doesn't exist, but we all have our own sense of what's sinful and what's right. We all do.

You tell me the newspaper you read and I'll tell you your list of the top sins. For some, it'll be drug-taking, it'll be dropping litter, it'll be prison sentences that are far too short, it'll be wind turbines, it'll be militant vegans, Jeremy Corbyn, people like that.

[6 : 13] Well, I can see you lie, I know which newspaper you read. Or for others, it'll be cruelty to animals, it'll be gas guzzlers, it'll be deniers of climate change, it'll be not being a vegan, it'll certainly be being Donald Trump and others.

But whatever your sin list is, normally it's other people who are top of that sin list, isn't it? You'll probably not be on it. It's like those irregular verbs that Sir Humphrey Appleby used to like to conjugate in, yes, Prime Minister.

I'm not a bad person, you're a little bit flawed, he's a sinner. That's how we think, isn't it? And we tend to be full of generosity when we judge our own little foibles, our own little faults.

And we like to collude with one another, don't we, in hiding those things in euphemisms, so that we can excuse ourselves and excuse others who are like us.

Not those others out there who are real sinners, but others like us. We have our little flaws, our little foibles, but we have language for that, don't we? Well, we're only human. It's just human nature, isn't it?

[7 : 21] We shrug off our failings as though they weren't really all that important, as though they were minor aberrations. Except they're not, are they? Human nature isn't just a minor blot on the canvas of life.

That's why our human society is marked much more by infidelity than by fidelity in relationships. That's why divorce lawyers make a jolly good living. That's why our society is marked so often by suspicion and not trust in the whole world of commerce.

That's why commercial lawyers make a good business. Our society is marked so often by deceit and by lies and not by truth. Which is why court lawyers and barristers always have plenty of work.

And our society and our world is more often than not marked by war and not peace, which of course is why international lawyers have a good business. And diplomats. And soldiers too.

They'll never be out of a job, will they? It's not just quite so easy to airbrush this idea of human sinfulness out of our vision.

[8 : 31] And the Bible certainly doesn't do that. The Bible doesn't talk about human nature, does it? It does talk about sinful nature. Jesus himself was terribly blunt about these things.

He would have been deplatformed in minutes. People would be rushing for the safe spaces. It's when Jesus started speaking the sort of things he spoke about in Mark chapter 7, where he said, All the rot is inside your human heart.

For from within, he said, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these things come from within. And defile a person. We can't have somebody saying that sort of thing. I'm feeling offended. I'm feeling upset.

I'm feeling hurt. Silence. Silence that man. And silence anybody who speaks for his church. That's what many people say today, isn't it? Funny thing is, it's absolutely not new at all.

[9 : 38] It's precisely what Saul of Tarsus was doing 2,000 years ago in the first century with the very first Christians. Precisely what the whole religious establishment was trying to do to the early church.

It's amazing, actually, how little has changed. You may have read, as I did in the news last week, that Derby Cathedral recently had a screening of one of the most notorious sex films of the 1970s, signed Donald Sutherland, Don't Look Now.

Whilst at the same time banning Derby University Christian Union from having an evangelical preacher at their carol service. A friend of mine, Melvin Tinker, wasn't allowed to preach. Nobody else from his church was allowed to preach in cathedral because the cathedral said they didn't want themselves associated in any way with that kind of teaching.

Just biblical, evangelical truth. So you can have public graphic displays of sex. That can be celebrated and promoted in the cathedral. Don't mind being associated with that.

But gospel proclamation of Christ? No, that's condemned. That's prevented. See, that's the kind of religiosity that Paul speaks about in 2 Timothy 3, where he says it has the appearance of godliness, but it denies totally its power.

[10 : 57] And that kind of thing helps us to see here what Paul is telling us about what sin really is, about what the human heart produces that he calls sin.

At its root, it is ignorant unbelief, says Paul. It's opposition to the real truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

And you might be a pillar of the establishment like Saul of Tarsus was. You might be a cathedral dean, but Paul says we're actually blasphemers. We're showing casual arrogance towards God in our attitude to Jesus Christ.

And that's why we showed such contemptuous anger to Christ's church. I was persecuting them, he says, as an insolent opponent. He was utterly prejudiced against Jesus Christ and therefore against his church.

So he was an act of persecutor of the message of the church, the gospel of the church, and the people of the church. So he thought, of course, that he was very righteous, very spiritual, very upright.

[12 : 02] But he was totally wrong about everything that mattered to God. And it turned out he was an ignorant unbeliever. That word in verse 13, ignorant, is our word agnostic.

And we tend to think that that means somebody who's reasonable and open-minded. But in fact, Paul says he was culpably ignorant. Ignorance was not an excuse for him.

Because God has made his truth known to humanity about himself in the light of the whole created order, which show forth his beauty, his love, his creativity. And in all that he'd revealed in his words through the prophets all down the ages.

And above all, in these last days, in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate. And so Paul says here, the truth is, I and all who live like I used to live, we're just showing arrogance towards Christ.

We're showing contempt for his church. And we're ignorant. We're prejudiced. We're perverse in our resistance to the truth of God revealed in Christ.

[13 : 17] And for all our sense of worthiness, for all our religious observances, indeed any other kind of observances, any other kind of credo or cause that we believe might give us merit in this world, and with the gods if there are any.

Regardless of all of that, my opposition to Jesus Christ is what really made me a sinner. I was lost.

I was helpless. I was corrupt. And therefore, I was condemned in the eyes of God. And even the most religious of people, Paul is saying, can be a foremost sinner, as far as God's concerned.

Even the most morally upright person, and Paul most certainly was. But he was the foremost sinner of his day. Because, Paul is telling us, the heart of what sin really is, is perverse resistance to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sin is unbelief. And however ignorant it might be, it's culpable, Paul says. Because God judges ignorant unbelief.

[14 : 34] That's the reality of sin, according to the New Testament, according to the Apostle Paul. It makes us think, doesn't it? Do take up your Bibles again, and turn back to 1 Timothy chapter 1, page 991, I think, in the church Bibles.

We're just saying that earth will not see him rejected again, because triumphant in glory, the Lord Jesus Christ will come again as King and as Judge of all the world.

So can there possibly be a solution to that culpable, perverse resistance to God in rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ that is so rife in our world?

It's hard to believe there can be. After all, if you show your contempt for someone by spitting in their face, that's a terrible insult, isn't it? You'll be arrested and charged, rightly.

If you spit in the face of the judge in whose court you are sitting awaiting sentencing, you'll be held in the greatest of contempt. And I suppose if you dared, dared to do that in the face of the sovereign of our Queen, well, I suppose you'd be guilty of treason, wouldn't you?

[15 : 48] But do it to God, the sovereign of the whole world, the judge of all the earth, and quite literally, there must be hell to pay. And that makes Paul's words here in verses 13 and 14 all the more astonishing.

But I received mercy. And the grace of God overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The reality of sin, he says, is met with the rescue of a Savior. The gracious provision of a Savior and the powerful rescuer from God, Christ Jesus our Lord.

The only possible solution is the grace, the sheer grace and mercy of God, the love that comes down from heaven. And Paul says, it overflowed towards me.

Do you get that imagery? It's a picture, isn't it, of something filthy, something awful, something shameful. But being drowned in the overflowing grace and mercy of God so that it's covered over and not seen, so that it's hidden away forever and ever.

[17 : 04] Paul's saying Christ Jesus didn't come into this world to give instructions about salvation. He's saying he came himself to be the instrument of our salvation. Instructions aren't any use, are they?

Instructions are only useful if you've got the ability to follow them. But man's predicament that Paul has laid out here in God's eyes gives absolutely no power to save himself.

Even if we knew we needed saving. But Paul says he didn't even know that. He was ignorant. He was like a little child asleep in a building that's on fire, blissfully unaware of the danger.

Or like a man who's swimming along and just doesn't see a huge shark just coming up behind him. Or maybe like a little headstrong youngster who thinks he can swim across that big river and has no idea that that current is absolutely going to sweep him away.

Now only a powerful rescue can save you in those circumstances. Only a powerful rescue from God can save sinners. And that's why verse 15 is so clear.

[18 : 11] Christ Jesus came into this world to save. To save sinners. The Christ, the Messiah, was a human king that all Israelites had longed for all through the ages.

God had promised that he would come to be their liberator. But even Israel, with all the Bible's witness, they just hadn't grasped just how great was the power needed to save them from their sins.

Because sin is so, so much greater than any human being can ever calculate, ever truly grasp. And that's why it must be God himself breaking into our world to be the savior, to be the rescuer.

Only God can possibly do that. The Messiah, the Christ, must come into our world from outside, is what Paul's saying.

He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all. And with the poor and the mean and the lowly, he lived on earth as our savior, holy.

[19 : 21] Our God contracted to a span. And incomprehensibly made man to be our savior for us and for our salvation, says the creed.

God our savior and Christ our hope. That's what Paul loves to call him in these letters. And he came into our world of hopeless sin in order to save helpless sinners.

And he saved them, says Paul, with overflowing mercy and grace. I received mercy. And that overflowing grace, that mercy, it amazes him still as he's writing.

Just as it amazed a man like John Newton to his dying day, who was a violent opponent, a slave trader, a horrible man. And yet he wrote those words we know so well.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. That's what Paul is saying in these verses. Because there's only one thing that's more terrifying, isn't there, than being ignorant as an unbeliever, being unaware of the disaster of judgment that's coming.

[20 : 33] And that is to have that ignorance lifted so that, in fact, you see the truth. That's like the little child waking up and the building around them is burning. Or the man turning around and seeing the shark upon him.

Or the swimmer being swept away and realizing the terrible danger they're in. And the sheer terror strikes. The weight of that sin and that blasphemy and that rejection of the living God.

A dawning reflection that every single thing you've believed about life and the universe and everything and God is utterly wrong. Utterly wrong.

That's what happened to Saul of Tarsus, wasn't it, on the Damascus Road, when he saw the risen Lord Jesus Christ and he fell on his face in abject terror. Because he knew.

But then he discovered God in Christ as a Savior, rich in mercy. Not only able as the powerful God, but willing to save a dying sinner like him.

[21 : 40] Not a dying sinner because Paul wrote to this same church, the church in Ephesus, a little before, didn't he? In Ephesians chapter 2. And says that those who refuse God, those who resist God, are already dead in transgressions and sins.

They're already children of wrath under eternal judgment. But he says, But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, he made us alive together with Christ.

By grace, by grace you've been saved. The reality of sin, but met with the great rescue of a Savior.

Even the foremost sinner of his day, says Paul, a perverse refuser of God in Jesus Christ, is met with a gracious rescuer who overflows with grace and mercy.

Notice how clear Paul is. There's absolutely no merit of his own involved at all. There's nothing in my hands I bring, only to your cross I cling.

[22 : 50] That's what Paul's singing in this verse. It's all about mercy. Verse 14. I received mercy. Grace overflowed for me. Again, verse 16.

I received mercy. That's the rescue of the Savior, friends. That's what the herald angels were singing about in the skies over Bethlehem.

Peace on earth and mercy. Mild God and sinners reconciled by the overflowing grace and mercy poured out in the coming into our world of Christ Jesus to save sinners.

That's the Christmas message. First Timothy chapter 1. Once again, page 991. Paul has shown us the reality of sin.

And he's shown it met by the rescue of a Savior full of tender mercy. But don't miss that he also tells us in these words very clearly the result of our salvation.

[23 : 52] The glorious purpose of our salvation, which is permanent restoration to God through Jesus Christ for the great and the everlasting glory of God.

Look at verse 16 at the end there and verse 17. They tell us what salvation is all for. Paul says he's an example. He's a pattern. He's a prototype for all who believe in Christ for eternal life.

And he goes on in verse 17 to say that that is all therefore for the eternal glory of the one true God who is our Savior. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

The result of salvation is eternal life, says Paul. It's not just that Jesus came to save us from perverse resistance to God, but for permanent restoration to God.

He came to restore the whole purpose of our creation in the first place, which is that God above should image his great glory in us and in all the world.

[25 : 04] To fill the whole earth with his gracious and merciful glory. And that's what the Savior Jesus Christ came to save his people for.

To bring us eternal lives that will bring honor and glory to God forever and ever. You can read later in Ephesians chapter 3, Paul says that was God's plan.

That was the mystery hidden all through the ages. But now revealed that through Christ's church, through the people who are saved by God's mercy.

He said the manifest wisdom of God might be made known even to the heavenly authorities, the powers and rulers in the heavenly places. This was God's eternal purpose, he says.

And it's now revealed through Christ our Savior. He has saved us for the glorious purpose of bringing glory to God forever and ever.

[26 : 02] He saved us for man's chief end, which is how the catechism puts it. Which is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That's so important to grasp, isn't it?

Because true joy for human beings will only ever be found in our true purpose. We know that, don't we? Even in our earthly life.

We find the greatest satisfaction in our lives when we're doing the thing that we are made to do. If you're made to be a musician and to make music, you'll be at your most joyful when you're making music.

Isn't that right? If you're made to be an artist to create beautiful things, you'll be most fulfilled and joyful when you're making beautiful things.

If you're made to be a doctor or a nurse, you'll be at your most fulfilled when you're caring for people, helping people, healing people. I suppose if you're a young child, you'll be most happy when you're making a mess and making a noise.

[27 : 03] Because that's what they seem to be made to do, isn't it? Until they grow up. But you get my point. Human beings are made with a purpose. And ultimately, our purpose is to glorify God by living out his image.

And Jesus Christ came into the world to save us for that. I hope you see what that means. It means, you see, that everything that is most precious, most beautiful, most good and wholesome about your life will never be destroyed.

It'll never be lost. It's been saved by Jesus forever and ever to glorify God forever and ever. And of course, it also means that everything that's wrong in your life, everything that's ugly and shameful, the things that make you ashamed or ought to make you ashamed, everything that doesn't glorify God, that is going to be transformed so that you will glorify God forever and ever.

In beauty and in wholesomeness and in truth and in glory. And the wonderful reality is that Paul says that the moment you believe and trust in Christ the Savior, that transformation begins.

It says that elsewhere, writing to the Corinthians. If anyone is in Christ, if anyone has trusted and believed in Christ as their Savior, if anyone is in Christ, he says there is new creation.

[28 : 35] It's begun. Eternal life has begun even now. It's not yet complete, but it's begun. And that was so for Paul even here.

Even his terrible past, his violence, his murderous, persecuting past. Even that had already become a bright ray of hope for every other vile offender who would believe in Christ for eternal life.

Paul is saying, if Christ can save me, the foremost sinner of my day, he can save anyone. And he will save anyone, he says.

Anyone who believes in him for eternal life. For ever to transform into the glorious image of God in Christ.

Do you see? The result of our Savior's great mercy is our permanent restoration to life that is truly life. To life as it was meant to be for human beings.

[29 : 33] To life that is transformed. To glorify God forever and ever. And to therefore give us a deeper, fuller satisfaction as human beings than we could ever, ever have even imagined was possible.

Forever. Never to be cut short by the shadow of death again. Because our lives will be abundantly satisfied when they find their true purpose, what they were created for.

Which is to bring glory to God forever. And that is what salvation means in Jesus Christ, says Paul. That's why Christmas is a message of joy to the world.

Because no more will sins and sorrows grow. No more will thorns infest the ground of our human lives. Because he has come to make his blessings flow. He has come far as the curse is found.

To restore forever. To permanent beauty. Everyone who believes in him for eternal life. One last time.

[30 : 41] 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verses 12 to 17. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Of whom I am the foremost, says the Apostle Paul. Well, we've seen Paul show us the true reality of what sin really is. And the great rescue of the Savior.

And indeed, the wonderful result. The everlasting result of that salvation. There's one more thing. Absolutely vital. We can't possibly finish until we've talked about that this morning.

And it's what makes Paul's message so vital, so real, so relevant for every one of us right here today. Because in this passage, he is abundantly clear, isn't he, about the road to that salvation.

Verse 16, look, gives us, doesn't it, very plainly, the global path to salvation. And it's a personal response to God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

[31 : 42] For all who will believe, no matter what your provenance, wherever you come from, no matter what your past life. Look, I receive mercy for this reason. That in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display his perfect patience as an example.

As a pattern. To all those who are to believe in him for eternal life. You see, Paul is a pattern of the worst possible sinner imaginable.

Actually killing Christians. To satiate his fierce anger against Jesus Christ, their Lord. And if even he can receive mercy, then there is such a depth of mercy.

That means that the road to salvation truly is open to all, all who will believe. That word all is a great word through these pastoral epistles we've seen so many times.

I'd be surprised if there was anybody here this morning who had opposed Christ and his people quite so violently. As the Apostle Paul had actually killing Christians.

[32 : 51] But there are people around the world today who are doing just that. Or who have killed out of hatred for Christ. But there are plenty, aren't there, all around us in our city and in our nation today.

Plenty who are living in great hostility to Christ. And therefore great opposition to his church and to his gospel. But friends, Paul is saying the road is open even for such as these.

Because it's nothing to do, is it, with merit. It's nothing to do even with making amends for your past behavior. As though you could possibly do that. You can't possibly compensate for that.

It's impossible. Even if you wanted to. It's nothing to do with merit. Nothing to do with making amends. But everything to do with mercy. I received mercy.

And that means you can too, says Paul. Whoever you are. Because it's nothing to do with merit. And everything to do with God's overflowing mercy.

[33 : 56] But neither notice, neither notice is it by magic. It's not automatic, is it? And nor can it ever be on terms of your own making.

Paul says it twice. Verse 13, again verse 16. I received mercy. You can't demand mercy, can you? You certainly can't earn mercy.

You can't work up mercy towards yourself. You can only receive mercy. In your own empty hands. Hands that are held out to God.

Through Jesus Christ. Because you know that they are empty. And your life is empty of everything that you need from him. Empty of all hope. Except for that mercy made known through God our Savior.

And Christ our hope. Who came into this world to save sinners. And you receive that mercy as you come in humble trust.

[34 : 59] And as you reach out your hands to the one who himself is already reaching out his hands in love. Even, even to the chief of sinners, says Paul. That's what it means to believe in him for eternal life.

To come with empty hands. And seek his ready overflowing mercy. It's a response, isn't it? Of humble, penitent faith. That's what makes, that's what makes the reception, receiving God's mercy possible.

That's what makes his mercy personal to us. Another carol puts it so beautifully, doesn't it? It's where meek souls will receive him.

But still, the dear Christ enters in. But where they do, he does enter in. And he will enter in.

And his grace and his mercy and his love will overflow. Just as it did for Paul. Even bringing the foremost sinner, persecutor, blasphemer.

[36 : 07] Into eternal life. To glorify him forever. Friends, the message of Christmas is that there is a road to salvation. But, there's only one road.

And it's the road Paul speaks of here. A personal response to God our Savior through Christ our hope. You must come to him humbly. A proud recipient of mercy.

That's an oxymoron, isn't it? But, you must come to him humbly. But, you can. You can come to him confidently.

Because, Paul says, that is why he came into this world. To save sinners. You see, he's saying that Jesus Christ is the unique, he's the universal rescuer from sin.

For all humanity. For every single person. Every single nation. And, he's saying that he came to save every last one who will believe and trust in him.

[37 : 14] And, to save them forever and ever. And, so he says, to the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen. Well, let's pray. How we thank you, O God, our Father, that you are rich in mercy. And, that you sent your only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, into this world.

That whosoever believes in him should not perish. But, have everlasting life. Even the chief of sinners.

Everyone who believes. And, so may this message of your gracious mercy flood our lives and our hearts this Christmas, we pray. To the glory of the immortal, invisible God.

To whom be glory and honor forever. Amen. Amen.