

The Precious Sacrifice -- who delivers full redemption

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Date: 11 December 2022

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Has that just been the story of Christmas, enchanting as it is, that makes people want to sing? The multitude of lovely carols we've been singing, they were written by people who understood what the story means.

In our final reading, Christ's apostle Peter tells us that it's a story, indeed it is the story of salvation. In the story of Christmas lies God's answer to mankind's greatest need.

Long promised, long prophesied, but now fulfilled and revealed to the whole world in the person of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Peter says.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours, they searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of the Christ and the subsequent glories.

He goes on to say, For you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

[1 : 22] He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but he was made manifest in these last times for the sake of you, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and your hope are in God.

See, Peter is telling us there that the coming of Jesus Christ into the world brings the precious sacrifice that delivers full redemption from all human futility.

And we're going to think about that for a few moments, but first, let's sing once again, perhaps one of the best love carols of all, full as it is of the wonderful grace of Christmas, speaking of the Son of God.

Oh, how bright. And the love, smiling from his face, which strikes for us now, the hour of God's grace. Well, Christ's apostle Peter there explains the true grace that Christmas brings in a letter that he wrote to scattered Christians right across the area that we now call Turkey.

There's a lot to say, and we're going to listen to more of him on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But tonight, I want to focus on those words that we read there, where he says that Jesus came as a ransom, to be a precious sacrifice, to deliver full redemption to his people.

[2 : 58] What does that mean? And why is that ransom? Why is that rescue needed? Let's look again at his words. First of all, Peter says that the message of Christmas is about something pitiful.

It's about the pitiful futility of life without God. Peter says we were ransomed, we were redeemed from the futile ways inherited from our forefathers.

Now, of course, today we think we've advanced a very long way from our forefathers. It was Tony Blair, wasn't it, who told us that we must be liberated, we must consign all those shackles of the past to the dustbin of history, and then things can only get better.

Well, that hasn't aged too well, has it? It's how we think, though, isn't it? We call nations like ours developed. We think we're very sophisticated, liberated people.

We can do as we please that, well, there'll be no judgment on our actions, certainly not from God, and certainly not from a kind of irritating God who might tell us that our ways that we want to live are unacceptable somehow.

[4 : 10] No. For many in our culture today, I think the truth is that if any thought at all is given to God, then it's really to mock Him. You may remember some years ago when Richard Dawkins funded adverts on buses.

Remember what they said? Probably there's no God, so stop worrying and enjoy life. Well, for Richard Dawkins, there's no probably about it. He's convinced of that. But the message there is clear, isn't it?

If God is real, then He's that kind of nasty killjoy. He just wants to ruin our lives. So you have to free yourselves from any thought of Him if you've got a hope of enjoying your life at all.

You need liberation, and liberation is from God. People think that's a very modern, perhaps a sophisticated way of thinking, but in fact, that is not true.

It's quite the reverse. That's been the attitude of human beings right the way back to the Garden of Eden that we read about. That's precisely the attitude that mankind exhibited in wanting to throw off the shackles of God and become rulers of their own destiny.

[5 : 15] That's what the evil one promised them. Liberty, my way. But in fact, of course, they reaped only bondage. Bondage to, well, to futility, to disillusion, to decay and despair, and ultimately, of course, to death.

That's what Peter's readers have inherited from their forefathers, whether they were Jewish by background or whether they were Gentile pagans, because we all share a common humanity, a pitiful futility, because as a human race, we have resisted God and we have rejected God, calling Him a tyrannical whistleblower to ruin the game of life.

We all want freedom, you see. We want autonomy. We want self-determination. But friends, the Bible contends that when you reject the truth about God, when you reject the rule of the only true God there is, you won't get freedom.

You'll find futility. Not liberty, but bondage. Not life as a game of bountiful beauty, but one of bitterness and brokenness.

I wonder if you remember some years ago when the football referees were threatening going on strike. Do you remember that? I'm surprised they're not on strike now. Everybody else seems to be. But they were fed up, weren't they, with all the abuse that was being heaped on them, not just by the fans, but especially by the managers who were always moaning that they blew the whistle too much and they spoiled their team's game and so on.

[6 : 55] Well, just imagine if all the players and the managers got that liberation that they thought they wanted. The thought would be the answer. Let's get rid of referees for good. And let's do that next week for the World Cup semifinals in the final.

Won't matter to England, will it? But we weren't even there in the first place, so we have nothing to gloat about. But what about a game with no nasty whistleblowing referee? Surely that will be the most liberated, beautiful game of all.

Everyone on the field having perfect freedom. No whistles, no fouls, no stoppages, no yellow cards, no red cards. Wouldn't that be just absolutely fantastic?

Well, of course not. There'd be no hope, would there, of a game? No game at all. Probably most of the players would be carried off injured by halftime or long before. It would be a picture of utter futility.

Well, let me ask the question then, what does our human world most resemble? As we live, just like our ancestors have lived. Always liberated from God. Liberated from that unpopular whistleblower that we think ruins the game of life.

[8 : 10] Does it resemble? A beautiful game played by a well-drilled team whose synergy and teamwork moves like clockwork towards a common goal of beauty and relentless success.

Is that our world? Or does it more resemble the world and the chaos of every man for himself in a game that has no rules, that has no boundaries, that's become just purposeless and futile, certainly far, far from beautiful to behold?

See, Peter, the apostle of Christ, for one, has a clear verdict. You have inherited the futile ways, he says, of all who have gone before you. Not freedom, futility.

That which is vain and pointless and deceptive and empty. That's what we've inherited, he says, from our forefathers. Not freedom, but bondage, slavery, captivity, from which we need redemption, ransom, rescue.

We think that we're free to do as we please. But the frightening truth, friends, is that, you know, it's possible to be enslaved and not even to realize it.

[9 : 31] It's been an extraordinary thing, hasn't it? Some extreme instances of that in recent years where we've heard about people who've been kept as domestic slaves, even in this country, for years.

And only realized it after they've actually been liberated. Just as many in communist Eastern Europe. They only realized the extent of their subjugation under communism after the Berlin Wall came down.

But we're all held far more captive than we realize by advertisers, by social media, by TV and news media who make us believe lies all the time and make us live subject to those lies and that propaganda which we're often oblivious to, don't realize it.

And you see, Peter's message and Jesus' own message is that all people are slaves when they live without God. When, as they think they're liberated from God, actually, they become inevitably slaves to the dark power of sin.

Jesus said, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. And when he says sin, he's not meaning minor peccadilloes that we think. He's thinking of sin as a mighty power which grips every human being in their life and explains the deep-rooted behaviors that emanate from our hearts.

[11 : 02] We don't like language like that, do we? But we do use euphemisms to explain it. We call it human nature, don't we? We say, oh, it's human nature when we mean no one is perfect and people do wrong things and sometimes people do very, very wrong things.

I remember some time ago when a famous sportsman was in the headlines having had multiple affairs. And I remember hearing an anthropologist expert speaking about it and he said, well, he's acting according to his primeval instinct which is driving him to spread his genes far and wide.

As if that somehow explained everything and made it okay. I very much doubt his wife was impressed with that explanation. But there is a grain of truth in it and the Bible explains it much, much more fully.

We're not animals, of course, just driven by instinct. We're responsible beings. We're made in the image of God. But in seeking to liberate ourselves from God, we are in fact in the grip of another power, a dark power, not primeval instinct as though somehow it was innocent or natural, but the power of sin and evil which is far from natural except in the sense that sewage is natural.

It's a fact of human life but it makes our world stink. And the truth is, you see, we are not free. We're in bondage to the power of sin according to the Bible.

[12 : 40] And that's why human life and that's why human society is marked not by freedom and beauty all the time but so often by futility. If we human beings were truly free to build the societies and the world that we instinctively yearn for, that we long for, then we would be playing the game of life in perfect harmony, wouldn't we?

Like a well-drilled team, our relationships on every level would be filled with fidelity, with honesty, with trust, with peace. Is that the hallmark of our world's relationships?

It's true, isn't it, that at every level between governments and nations, between employers and employees, even in personal relationships, so often the truth is that our relationships are marked by infidelity and by deceit and by suspicion and by war.

Our world is not filled with freedom, it's filled with futility. In his second letter, Peter says that the things so often that we look to for liberation are in fact the very things that enslave us.

He says, for whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. And when people seek liberation from the one true God as our forefathers did, when they seek liberation in other things, worthless idols, they can only enslave us into utter futility.

[14 : 17] Futile, worthless, vain, delusions. These are all the words that the Old Testament prophets used to call the idols of the nations that tempted God's people away from the one true God.

And they still tempt people all over the world today. Often in Eastern nations it is. Physical idols of wood and stone and clay. I've seen that in many countries.

I've seen it in India where I visit. I've seen people giving money and offerings to images of monkeys and dogs. But you know, it's not so different in our Western world. In fact, my very good friend in Delhi in India once said to an American visitor who was telling him how aghast he was to see this worship of dogs, he said to him, don't tell me that.

You're just as bad in the United States. You have dog salons and dog hairdressers and dog funerals. The dollars that Americans spend on their dogs show their idolatry is far worse even than ours.

It's true, isn't it? And we're enslaved also to myriads of other idols that we bow down to.

[15 : 27] Education. Wealth. Getting up the ladder. Having and finding the perfect relationship. Having the perfect body. And on and on and on. Do these things liberate us?

Do these things bring us freedom in our lives? Or being enslaved to the relentless pressure to perform or increasingly in our society to conform.

To come up to scratch. To meet expectations. Not to be rejected. Not to be seen as outcasts in a world that is increasingly full of exacting judges. Try venturing onto Twitter with an opinion and see.

It seems that the gods that we have chosen to be our masters have very great power indeed but not power to liberate us. Rather power to condemn us into bondage.

Into futility. And even if you don't feel that is the case friends there is one master that none of us none of us can deny does have an iron grip on our lives.

[16 : 32] And that's death itself. Here's what I read one artist writing. The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death.

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

And that is the infinitely pitiful futility of the life that we've all inherited from our forefathers. A life liberated from God and therefore without the one true and living God and the life the true life that only comes from him.

But Peter says Jesus Christ came to liberate us redeem us from that futility. And because that is so you see he tells us that the message of Christmas is also about something precious.

The infinitely precious freedom of human life that is liberated by God. Peter points us in verse 19 to two things of infinitely precious value.

[17 : 47] One explicitly and the other implicitly that follows on. First he's explicit about the infinite value of the Redeemer our Lord Jesus Christ. You were redeemed you were ransomed not with perishable things such as silver or gold.

Well that's what marks precious metals isn't it? That they don't perish like paper money or like consumable things but he says even silver and gold are not ultimately imperishable because they belong to this world don't they?

To what's time bound to what is finite. But not all the gold in this galaxy is worth one drop of what Peter calls the precious blood of Christ our Redeemer.

Like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. That language of course is from the Old Testament language about sacrifice for sin on the great day of atonement.

The blood of the sacrifice is so precious because it represents life given in death for another. For it is the blood that makes atonement by the life says the scripture there.

[19 : 02] Jesus' blood represents his life the infinitely precious life of the Son of God himself the only begotten of the Father but given in death to bring redemption to bring true liberation from the power of sin.

Just as the unblemished spotless Passover lamb brought redemption of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt when that blood was shed and it brought protection to them from the angel of death and liberation into a new life.

And so Christ the infinitely precious lamb of God is a sacrifice so precious that wins an infinitely precious liberation for God's own people.

And so what Peter says there you see about the infinite value that God places on the life of his son it also speaks implicitly doesn't it of the infinite value that he places on the lives of his adopted children who are redeemed by that precious blood.

It's a great irony that mankind thought it would cost him nothing to liberate himself from God and seek freedom and yet it cost him everything. And he gained only frustration only futility but God did know what it would cost him to liberate man and to bring him true freedom from futility from his rebellion.

[20 : 35] God knew the price of that and yet he gave everything that we might find that infinitely precious freedom of a life liberated by God and for God forever.

So precious are human beings to God that he came to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God as the apostle Paul puts it.

which will one day liberate this whole created order from its futility from its bondage to decay. And he did it friends at the cost of the blood of his own.

The infinite preciousness of the life of the redeemer speaks so eloquently of the infinite preciousness of the life of his redeemed ones. So the message of Christmas is about something infinitely precious.

But there's a final thing that Peter wants us to be so clear about here and that is that the message of Christmas is also something that is very personal. It's about the infinitely personal future through the hope that is offered by God through Jesus Christ.

[21 : 53] Look at verse 20 there. the message of Christ is an infinite message. It's eternal. It transcends time. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world.

And yet that message has come into time, into the world, into our world, and it has become deeply personal. He was made manifest in these last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him and gave him glory.

He came to give us hope. So that your faith and your hope are in God. The wonder of the Christmas message, says Peter, is that this eternal message, the living and the abiding word of God, as he calls it, has become, do you see, the good news, he says, that is preached to you.

This is the good news. All who receive the apostles' gospel find this good news personally. God's infinite word of the glory of Christ has become a personal word of the good news of Christ, to you and to me, an infinitely personal word.

It was that for Peter's readers, it is still today for every one of us, everyone hearing this message, everyone here tonight, everyone watching online. That's why the Bible itself says repeatedly today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart, don't harden it.

[23 : 23] Don't let the Christmas message pass you by. It's a personal message from God to you. At the first Christmas, there was no room, was there, in the inn for the Savior.

Too much upheaval, too much rearrangement to accommodate his birth. But the same was true all through Christ's ministry. People had no room, there was too much change, too much to let go of to follow Jesus.

too much change to your life. And just the same issues face all of us today, don't they? When the message of Jesus comes right up close to us, comes personal to us.

But remember the alternative. Liberation from God can never bring real liberty, not freedom, only futility.

futility in life now, and ultimately infinite futility. A never ending experience of pointless and vain and deceptive emptiness and darkness.

[24 : 36] That's what Jesus himself called the horror of hell. but he came to redeem, to rescue us from that terrible reality by his own precious, precious sacrifice.

And he who sent his son into the world at that first Christmas for our salvation, he sends his spirit still into human hearts today so that we all can experience that very salvation personally.

Personally. we sang where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in to cast out our sin and to bring us personal hope forever and ever.

Friends, that's the joy of Christmas. That's why we who have come to know the Redeemer Jesus Christ love to sing at Christmas, to join the heavenly choirs of angels, singing, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

That's the joy, the personal message from God in Jesus Christ that we rejoice to share with you this evening.