

A Saviour from Sin's Dark Personality

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[0 : 0 0] Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die.

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Of the world as it's meant to be, the world as God created it to be, and the world, of course, as we would love it to be. Perfect peace and harmony of male and female, of human beings, of nature, of human beings, and God himself.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. But God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, you will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. And she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he 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.

[2 : 5 2] 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. To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing.

In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. And to Adam he said, because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground. For out of it you are taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

A curse upon human relationships, a curse upon nature, a curse upon our very lives. To dust you shall return.

And that is more like the world we actually know, isn't it? And it's because our rebellion against God has put us in bondage to the power of sin and death and the devil himself. But God's promise, even as that very curse was pronounced, was that evil would not have the last word. That God himself would intervene in history through the offspring of the woman and would destroy the work of the devil and liberate, redeem his people. And down through history, that promise shone despite long ages of darkness until at last, at the first Christmas, that offspring at last came. Came to save us all from Satan's power when we had gone astray.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, have been created. And the things that have been made.

[5 : 43] So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

For they were not. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore, God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Well, those words of the Apostle Paul make pretty grim reading, don't they? People tend to dismiss the book of Genesis as just ancient history or myth, but of course it isn't.

It's just presenting exactly the same picture that St. Paul presents there. And they're both simply describing the reality of the contemporary world that we know all too well.

[7 : 36] How great is the world's need for saving? Saving from the darkness of our own humanity, our own hearts.

But because of the message of Christmas, out of darkness we have light. And that's why on Christmas night all Christians sing. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, Leviathan, the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

[9 : 01] The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy.

And sorrow and sighing shall flee away. At last the Christ whom the prophets foretold is born.

[10 : 02] The seed of the woman. The shoot of Jesse. The son of David. And at last he comes, as we're told there, to destroy the serpent.

To reverse the curse of sin. And instead to make his blessings flow as far as that curse was found.

And that is why Christmas is the message of joy to the world. The curse banished. And a world restored to be as God created it to be.

And that is what the story of Christmas really is all about. A great victory that means that this world will one day truly be put right forever.

Listen now to some words from the New Testament letter to the Hebrews that we're going to think about for a little this evening. It says, We do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

[11 : 33] But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus. We see him crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

For it was fitting that he for whom and by whom all things exist in bringing many sons to glory should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he's not ashamed to call them brothers. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things.

That through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

You see, that reading tells us that Jesus took flesh in order to deliver his people from death by destroying the one who holds the power of death.

[12 : 55] But to do so he must win that victory, it says, through his own death. And so even from his birth, or that babe, still infant crying, shadows of the cross were lying.

Well, in all of our Christmas services this year, we're asking the simple question, why was Jesus born? Why did God come in the flesh to earth as the Bible tells us he did in the incarnation?

The taking of human flesh of God the Son himself. And the answer, of course, can be summed up in the words of many carols, one that we sung, Christ was born to save.

But we need to understand, of course, what that really means, because the Bible shows us how multidimensional that salvation really is. Last Sunday morning, we thought about salvation as Jesus come to bring forgiveness, to save us from sin's dreadful penalty.

The child will save his people from their sins. That was the angel's message. But, of course, there's more to sin than just sins. The Bible calls sin, in fact, a domineering power which controls humanity.

[14 : 15] And it tells us that Jesus came to bring redemption, to bring liberation, to set us free from the power of sin and death, so that human beings might once again find their true destiny as servants of light and of life, not of darkness and death.

But tonight, this Christmas Eve, I want to look at another dimension of what Jesus' incarnation was all about. And that last reading from the letter to the Hebrews makes it very, very clear.

Jesus came into this world to save us not only from sin's dreadful penalty, not only from its terrible power, but also he came to save us from sin's dark personality.

The tidings of comfort and joy that Christians tell are tidings of salvation from Satan's power when we had gone astray.

And Jesus, the Bible teaches, is a Savior who came to bring victory over our greatest enemy of all, over the devil himself. That's what Hebrews chapter 2 verse 14 says.

[15 : 22] Explicitly look at it again on the screens. He came to share our humanity that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.

And so deliver those who, through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery. Christ was born to bring victory over the evil one.

Not for himself, but for all who live under the shadow of death because they live under his power. Now that needs a bit of explaining.

So let's just go back to the beginning of this chapter that we read for a few moments because I think that helps to make sense of us. Let me try and walk us through it under four headings. First, we have a picture of the world that God created for man.

That's what verses 7 to 8 describe. It's the world as God created it to be, with man as the chief glory in the world. You see verse 7, humankind crowned with glory and honor by God.

[16 : 26] And verse 8, with everything in subjection to man, everything under his feet, everything under his control. Now the writer there is quoting from one of the Psalms, Psalm 8, but again, that in turn quotes those words from Genesis that we read earlier on at the very beginning of creation's story.

Man made in God's image and as God's image to rule the world for God as God's vice regent, to reflect God's good and generous rule on this earth.

And that is why God created man and what we were created for. And of course, we do see that in our world, don't we? We do see the mastery of man and we see glory and honor reflecting a wonderful creator.

Just think of all the history of human achievement in this world, from the wonders of ancient civilization to all the things in the present day. Think of the beauty of so many ancient cities, for example, world heritage sites.

Think of the glories of classical literature and music and poetry and so on. Think of the creative genius of the musical composers and think of the magnificence of all the music that fills our world.

[17 : 44] Think of the extraordinary mastery of nature by man so that we can live from the North Pole to the South Pole virtually, in the baking heat of the desert and in the cold of the Arctic.

Because we've got clothes, because we've got heating, because we've got air conditioning, because we've got umbrellas, which allow us to live in the west coast of Scotland. We can fly, can't we, to the opposite side of the earth in just a matter of hours these days.

Go and spend Christmas on the beach in Australia. I bet many of us are wishing that we had done that. We can even have people living in space. Did you watch the blast off the other day in the International Space Station?

Who knows, one day, man might be able to live even on Mars. Nothing, it seems, is really outside the control of human beings.

Well, think of the extraordinary complexities of world trade and world travel so that you can have mangoes and passion fruit in Scotland in the middle of December, maybe for your Christmas dinner tomorrow.

[18 : 47] So you can have shoes made in Portugal with leather that comes from Brazil and you can buy them in Buchanan Street. Or you can have ties woven in Italy from silk that comes all the way from China.

We could go on and on, couldn't we? There is abundant evidence of the mastery of human beings in this cosmos that is truly astounding. And that is the world that God made for man.

But of course, that's not the whole story, is it? Because verse 8 goes on to make something else really very clear. And it's the world that man has created for himself.

At present, it says, we do not see everything in subjection to man. And that's true also, isn't it? For all the mastery of man in the universe, there is another side.

For all the wonder of human achievement, there is a darker side, isn't there? There is a seedy side. There is a shameful side. So the biggest culture business in our globe today is the pornography industry.

[19 : 59] And all the abuse and exploitation that goes with that. All the damage it wreaks increasingly on younger and younger children, even in our society. And one of the biggest trade businesses in the world today is people trafficking.

Exploiting economic migrants, bringing them on deadly journeys supposedly to a better life, or exploiting people in the sex trade, which is vast, vast across this world, including in our own country.

And for all the beauty of landscaping and architecture and building and all of these things, so much of the world is blighted by the sheer ugliness, the soullessness of slums, of concrete jungles that only compound the sense of despair of those who have it in them.

For all the mastery of nature and all man's ingenuity and space travel and everything, there is also the vast destruction of nature by man. Isn't there? By his greed, by his avarice, by his thoughtlessness, the deforestation, the overcrowding, the pollution, the creeping deserts that is the bane of so many governments in the world today.

For all the wonders of trade and travel, for all the eclectic enjoyments that they have shared across the globe all these centuries. At the same time, they've left a legacy, haven't they?

[21 : 24] Of exploitation, of theft, of abuse, of peoples and nations, even whole continents. The story of the strong and the powerful exploiting the weak and the vulnerable.

And so many, so many of the conflicts that are causing trouble in the world today, they date back to misdeeds that have gone on centuries and centuries ago. Isn't that true?

And for all the beauty, for all the love that gives expression in the poetry, the songs, and all these beautiful things of the world, there is also, isn't there, the hatred, the brutality, the aggression, the vengeance.

Read the history books of our civilization, friends, and those things are all there writ large, are they not? And still, the headlines of our newspapers today and tomorrow and the next day will be full of all of these things.

Isn't that the truth? Not to mention the constant battle, which is a losing battle, despite all modern medicine and pharmaceuticals and so on, the constant losing battle against disease and aging and, of course, death itself.

[22 : 43] I think if we're honest observers of our world, we must agree with the Bible here that despite all man's ability and all man's achievement, at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

At least not in all the things that we'd like to see. And certainly not the way that the Bible is speaking of here, of man truly reigning gloriously over everything in this world, including life itself.

And the reason, the Bible says, is simple. It's because this is the world that human beings have chosen to make for themselves. The world as we know it to be is the result of the rebellion of humanity against God and against God's ways.

That's what Genesis 3 described in its own inimitable way. Man says, look, we can make the world a better world than God has made. So we'll do it ourselves our way.

Frank Sinatra couldn't have put it better. I did it my way. That's what they sang at Adam's funeral. And so God said, okay, you do it your way.

[23 : 53] But be sure it will bring you nothing but disaster. It will bring a curse on all your relationships. Men and women will be at odds seeking the mastery over one another.

Man and the environment will be at odds battling for control against thorn and thistle and decay. Man and life itself will be at odds because death will rule over you.

From dust you came to dust you will return. That's the world as we know it. Yes, it's full of echoes of what might have been in man's triumphs, man's glories.

That's still there. But also it is full of the harsh realities of a dark side that we cannot escape. So you see, there's no sentimentality in the Bible.

The Bible is not a fairy tale. The Bible tells the truth starkly. It tells it as it is. The good? Yes. The good and the beautiful. But it also tells the bad and the very ugly.

[25 : 04] We see enough in our world to see what the world should be but we also see what it is not and what it cannot be because man is man. Because human nature is what we know it to be.

But friends, this is what the Christmas message is all about. Because third, you see, in the good news about Jesus Christ, we see the world as God has recreated it to be for a new humanity in Jesus Christ.

Because of what Jesus did, we do see him. We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor. Now, we see in the risen, victorious Jesus Christ, we see one triumphant human being.

We see man as he was made to be. We see man as he was destined to be. Truly. Here at last is man as God made him.

Here is a perfect reflection of the glory and honor of God in human flesh. Now, I put it to you that whatever you think, whoever you are, that the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that he requires some explanation.

[26 : 23] You can't simply ignore. You can't simply remain willfully ignorant of this man who changed the course of human history, who changed the course of nations, of empires, of continents, of this world.

Surely, only the most arrogant person or ignorant person could just sweep Jesus Christ aside as being utterly irrelevant. surely, surely, an honest person must have some explanation for his life, for his teaching, for his actions, for his legacy in the world.

You must take him seriously on his own terms. I mean, just imagine, just imagine a world full of people like Jesus of Nazareth.

friends, that is precisely God's ultimate purpose for this world. And this text that we're looking at is the Bible's explanation of who he is and what he has done for human beings.

He has been crowned with glory and honor because he did not rebel. Do you see? He did not do it his own way. But he was obedient to his Father in all things.

[27 : 38] Look, even in complete submission, to death on a cross. Notice, very carefully, not, not death like some ghastly suicide bomber sacrificing himself to do evil, to destroy others, to wreak wickedness and destruction.

Not that. Now look at verse 9 there. So that, by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone.

He tasted death for all so that he might be the founder of salvation for others. So that he might bring many sons to glory, to the glory of his new creation.

So as to create a new humanity for them just like him and to fill a whole new world, a new creation with many brothers that share his glory and honor as true human beings, as human beings were meant to be.

That's the Christian message. The Christian message really is that big. It's not just at all about souls being saved as if that meant some sort of disembodied spirits floating around in a netherworld after death.

[28 : 56] It's not not at all as though there was some sort of consolation prize after real life here on planet Earth. No! The Christmas message is about the recreation of mankind and the recreation of this whole universe.

Putting everything right as it should be. But of course that brings us back to the question how?

How can something that massive, that incomprehensible possibly ever come about? Well the last point and really the main point of this whole passage is there in verses 14 and 15.

This can come about only because Jesus came to save us from sin's dark personality. He came to bring a cosmic victory over the one who holds the power of death.

That is the personal reality of the embodiment of evil in this world. That is the devil himself. Jesus came into this world to destroy that great enemy.

[30 : 06] The one who holds this world in bondage and has done ever since man's first rebellion. And he came to deliver us from the bondage of slavery to sin and to death.

And that liberation from the power of sin and death comes through his victory over the devil who holds that power over us. The devil is not God's enemy.

Don't make that mistake. He has no power over God. The devil is a creature of God but he is our enemy because we have made him our master instead of God. Therefore he holds power over our lives.

But as the hymn said Jesus came to smite in man for man that foe. And thanks be to God says the apostle Paul who gives us that great victory.

See our world does live in bondage through fear of death. Death is what robs us of all our greatest desires, of all our greatest achievements.

[31 : 18] The writer Woody Allen once said I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying. But he can't do that can he? Death is what robs us of our greatest loves and our loved ones.

Death is the shadow that stalks us ever more with every passing year as we start to see and feel our bodies aging and heading towards decay.

but Christians Christians are those who are found in Christ the source of eternal salvation. Christians are those for whom Christ has tasted death so as to deliver them from that fear and hold of death.

Christians have received in Christ the victory over that great enemy who has the power of death and so it no longer has a hold over them. That's why Christian people do not fear death.

Christian people are truly free and we're free to live now because we know that although we don't yet see the world as it should be, although we don't yet see ourselves as we should be crowned with glory and honor and all of that, lords of life eternal, we don't see that, but we do see and have seen it in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 49] We see him crowned with glory and honor and risen victorious over death and over hell. And so we know that what we see for him now in glorious life beyond the grave will be for everyone who trusts in Christ.

One day at his coming he will share that victory with all who are his. He will not be ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. his true fellow human beings in the image of God.

He came to be the savior from sin's dark personality and to share his victory, to share his inheritance with all who are his. That's why friends if you ever go to a Christian funeral you'll find it is a very different experience from a non-Christian funeral.

Yes of course Christian people grieve. Death is a blot, it's a horror that mars this good creation of God. It's an alien intruder, it is a great enemy.

That's why Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. But as Christians we do not grieve as those who have no hope. No, we have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ who has destroyed him, who has the power of death and has freed us therefore from bondage and fear all through our lives because his resurrection has paved the way for ours.

[34 : 23] And his resurrection is the promise, it's the deposit, it's the down payment of the recreation of this whole world forever. That is the meaning of all these Christmas carols.

That's why we sing, O come Emmanuel, from depths of hell thy people save and give them victory over the grave. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Do you see? Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth.

That's what Christmas is all about, nothing less. And Paul declares to the church in Corinth who were grieving because some of their loved ones had died and they were unsure of what that meant.

And he says, no, thanks be to God who gives us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ. At last, what the prophets promised has now come to pass, death is swallowed up in victory, he says.

[35 : 33] the victory Jesus has won over the power of sin and death and the dark personality behind it all who has been our enemy from the very, very start.

I don't know, I'm sure many of you have read C.S. Lewis's story, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, or perhaps you've seen the film of it that came out some years ago. And if it's on over Christmas and you haven't seen it, let me encourage you to watch it if you can because you won't find anywhere, I don't think, a better or more vivid depiction of what this victory really means for our world.

You know the story, it's a wonderful story because it reflects the great story of this world, of a world destroyed and a world rescued and recreated through the victory of a great savior.

Narnia is a land in fear and bondage, it's enslaved by the power of the white witch, it's a land where everything is frozen, where it's always winter but never Christmas. And then at last, Aslan appears, the great lion, the son of the emperor across the sea.

And at first it seems like Aslan is defeated because he must die, he must die in the place of the man-child Edmund whose folly has led him to be a slave of the witch.

[36 : 57] And so it's decreed, she says, from deep magic, from the dawn of time. It all seems dark, it all seems terrible. And yet, there is a deeper magic from before the dawn of time that promises that when the lion gives his life in place of the man-child's wrongdoing, that he will rise again and conquer death.

And then, there will be a great, great assault on all the powers and the kingdom of the white witch. And what you see is Aslan, the lord of life, the great lion, breathing life into the nostrils of those who have been turned into lifeless stone statues by the power of the wicked witch.

And they roar back to life and join in the great battle against all the dark powers. and the whole realm of Narnia begins to thaw.

And at first, it's Christmas at last. And then the flowers of spring begin to creep up, telling of a summer that is coming and of a whole world that has been remade and made new.

Friends, that is a fantasy. fantasy. But it is speaking of something that is real. Not about a fantasy world, but about a real world, this world, rescued and renewed forever through the great Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

[38 : 30] If Christmas is not about that, then it is about nothing. it's a fraud, it's a sham, and we Christians are to be pitied more than anybody else in the world because we are utterly foolish and pathetic.

But if it is about that, if it is about God himself, our creator, taking human flesh and blood so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death over us, so that he might give us that victory over death and darkness and despair.

If this is true, then this is truly the message that this whole wide world needs more than any other.

Because it is the message of death's dark shadows put to flight forever and of life and immortality brought to light through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christmas speaks the end of the winter of death with all its fear. It spells the birth of spring in our lives now and it gives us the promise, the promise of summer to come, of life, of hope, of peace, of joy that is everlasting, that will never disappoint, that will never spoil, that will never fade or rot or decay.

[40 : 06] Jesus came to save. He came to save us from sin's dreadful penalty and from its domineering power over our lives and from the dark personality of the devil himself.

He came to bring us victory. thanks be to God, says the apostle Paul, for his indescribable gift, the gift of Christmas, the gift of Jesus Christ who came to save.

Amen. Let's pray. Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may thus hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may indeed embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you've given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.