

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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A Christmas message

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction and Reading

I'm going to begin by reading a short Bible passage which is the main focus of today's talk, and which I'll speak about later. Today's talk is a Christmas message, but this will not sound like a very Christmassy Bible passage. Apart from the mention of Bethlehem at the very end of it, you are very likely to wonder what on earth it has to do with Christmas. Hopefully all will become clear before the end of the talk.

The verses we're going to read are in the book of Genesis chapter 35. Jacob, whom God had renamed Israel, and who was therefore what we might call the founder of the nation of Israel, had lived a rather nomadic existence since the days when he had worked for his father-in-law Laban. Now he was on the road again, with his large household, on a journey which would eventually take him to Mamre, also known as Hebron. This was where his father Isaac was living, and where his grandfather Abraham had lived before him. But these verses tell the sad story of how Jacob's wife Rachel died, giving birth to his twelfth son, as the family journeyed. We'll read verses 16 to 19 of Genesis chapter 35.

“Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labour, and she had hard labour. And when her labour was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for you have another son.’ And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”

Why is Christmas so special?

Before we get to talking about the passage we've just read, I'd like us to think about something which always seems to me to be a remarkable fact. It is the fact that, in general, Christmas seems to get to people. And it seems often to make a difference to how they behave.

Not only in Britain, but in much of the western world, I think few people would question that the influence of Christianity on society has been in a steady decline for at least 100 years. I've not heard this recently, but, going back a decade or two, I can recall it being quite common to hear people describe the present day as the “post Christian” era. Now one thing that is fairly obviously is Christian, and yet is still part of popular culture, is the annual celebration of Christmas. We might well ask, of course, how much of Christmas is actually Christian?

When a piece of music is being played at full volume, its basic content, its rhythm, melody and repeating themes, are things which few can escape from, but when the volume is reduced, and it becomes drowned out by background noises, then it becomes indistinct and unrecognisable except to the enthusiasts.

So it is with the Christian message today. Not only are there far fewer who today profess allegiance to Christ than was the case, say, 100 years ago, but also the very essence of what the Christian message really is has become blurred and indistinct in the minds of most of our fellow citizens. Distressing as it is to say this, I fear that the vast majority of those who reject the Christian message today, have never really heard it. They are rejecting a caricature of Christianity, and not the thing itself.

I don't spend much time watching television, but if you were to find me doing so, it's as likely as not that I'd be watching a quiz programme. When a Bible question comes up, I'm often shocked at how few people there are in Britain today who know anything at all about the book which we on the Truth for Today team set out to explain.

Now if we were to take our lead from one of those TV quiz programmes, the one known as Pointless, and we were to stop 100 people in the street and give each of them 100 seconds to tell us the things that came into their minds at the mention of Christmas, what answers would we get, I wonder? I have little doubt that Santa Claus, reindeer, Christmas trees, holly, mistletoe, presents, turkey and Christmas pudding would all come out with high scores. Some would probably mention Christmas carols and special church services. How many, I wonder, would think to mention the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the stable at Bethlehem, angels, shepherds and wise men from the east?

Despite all of that, I think most people, if asked point blank "What is the origin of Christmas?" or "What is Christmas about?", would still understand that it is at least supposed to be a celebration of the birth of Jesus. And despite all of the "clutter", the commercialisation and often trivialisation which it has undergone over the years, some trace of the underlying biblical message still filters through into the popular consciousness.

I said before that Christmas seems to make a difference to how people behave, how they treat one another. People still say "It's Christmas" as a reason for some extra touch of kindness or some out of the ordinary act of generosity or leniency. Christmas is often called "the season of goodwill." This is actually a reference to the last part of the message brought by the angels to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, and written down by the evangelist Luke in his gospel. In the King James Version of the Bible, which in the past was the Bible everyone was familiar with, parts of which they could probably quote from memory, this reads:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."¹

Something of the real message of Christmas still seems to penetrate all the noise and glitter of Christmas as we know it in the modern world, and stimulates this desire to do something to show good will, because "it's Christmas."

Perhaps the most outstanding example of this extraordinary power of the season of Christmas to influence the way people behave is the series of accounts which have come down to us from the dark days of the First World War, of the so called "Christmas truces" which took place on the Western Front on more than one of the Christmases that the opposing German and Allied troops faced each other across the "no man's land" between the trenches.

Without any truce being agreed, men on both sides began singing Christmas songs, famously the favourite German carol *Stille Nacht*, which becomes *Silent Night* in the English version. Later, by all accounts, they emerged from the trenches to exchange Christmas presents, and it is often reported that, at least in 1914, British and German troops played football together in the middle of "no man's land."

At least for that brief period, the guns fell silent and the killing was put on hold. What is it about Christmas which has this dramatic effect?

Might I venture to suggest that it is not just sentiment? Nor is it just the fact that, because we celebrate Christmas in late December, after what are, in the northern hemisphere, the dark and depressing days towards the end of the year, the festival gives rise to a warm glow of hope, that spring is around the corner. I think there's more to it than that. We need to go back not just to the end of the message brought by the angels, but to its beginning. The angel began his announcement with these words:

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”²

Did you get that? This is about good news of great joy, and it is for everyone! You remember I said earlier that those who reject the Christian message today are very often rejecting a caricature of it? I don't think the first thing that most people in the world today think of when they hear about Christianity, is that it is good news of great joy. But it really is. It is very, very, very good news. And perhaps it is just some hint, some distant collective memory of that, some dim awareness of that sense of great joy which has now been lost, which still spurs people today to seek in some way to reawaken that spirit of Christmas.

The Christian message, which we might say begins with the message of Christmas, is very good news because it is about Someone who has come. It is about a Person, and that Person is of course the Lord Jesus Christ. And part of the caricature is a fundamental misunderstanding of the reason for which He came. People suppose that He came to be our guide, to show us how to live, and that He came to give us a perfect example so that we might follow, and learn how to live better lives.

Like all caricatures, these ideas contain an element of truth. The life lived on earth by the Lord Jesus is certainly the perfect example, if only we had the humility and the selflessness to follow it. But let's go back again to that message brought by the angel. He goes on to say:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”³

And that is the point! If only we are prepared to accept God's diagnosis of us, that we are lost sinners who have forsaken God and chosen to go our own way rather than His, then we will appreciate that an example cannot help us. It is a Saviour that we need.

For those who have welcomed Him into their lives as Saviour and accepted His control, He is indeed described in the Bible as an example for us to follow, but this is only possible because He is by our side to help us, and His Spirit is within us to give us the power to walk in His steps.⁴

To come back to the original question, as to why Christmas seems to tug at the heartstrings as it does, I believe that it is this half-forgotten memory, the thrill of the idea that the great Rescuer has come, that the true King has landed and that the end of the War against evil is in sight, which creates a sense of awe and wonder and motivates us to respond in some way.

Mary's journey

Now let's look a little closer at the details of the Christmas story. We've referred a number of times to the message which was brought to the shepherds by an angel, joined after his initial announcement by a very large number of other angels who made that great proclamation beginning “Glory to God in the highest.” This all happened just after the Lord Jesus had been born.

But the gospel writer Luke, who gives us this information, has previously recounted some of the events leading up to His birth. I'm now going to read about these events, in verses 1 to 5 of Luke chapter 2.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

This is all the detail the Bible gives us about the journey which Joseph and Mary had to take to get to Bethlehem. The popular image is of Mary sitting on a donkey, being led by Joseph along the roads and tracks that threaded their way through the Galilean and Judaeen hills between Nazareth and Bethlehem. We can't actually say how they travelled, because the Bible doesn't tell us. We don't know whether or not they had a donkey, and whether they travelled alone or in the company of others. All we do know is that they made that journey.

In Britain we have a Census every 10 years. Imagine if, when the time for the Census came round, everyone had to journey to wherever their ancestors had originated from in order to complete the necessary forms. What an outcry that would cause! In a modern democracy, the authorities would surely never get away with that. But this was not a modern democracy. It was life under the unbending power of the mightiest empire the world had ever seen, imperial Rome. The Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had decreed it, and the citizens had to obey.

There is an old hymn by William Cowper (1731 – 1800) which contains the lines:

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform”

Caesar Augustus no doubt believed that he was the one in charge when he issued that decree and the entire Roman world had to obey. But God was working behind the scenes, and that journey, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, was necessary so that the scriptures would be fulfilled.

Caesar may have decreed that all the world should be registered, but God had decreed that the promised Messiah, the Christ, the great Deliverer, would be born, not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem. Centuries earlier, the prophet Micah, in chapter 5 verse 2 of his prophecy, had written:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was around 90 miles, and Mary was heavily pregnant. Incidentally, the idea that the Lord Jesus was born on the very night that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem comes from popular tradition, and is not the impression we get from a careful reading of the biblical account. The scripture says that it was “while they were there”, that is, while they were in Bethlehem, that the time came for her to give birth⁵. This suggests that at least some days had passed since their arrival. It may have been more than a few, but nevertheless I think we can still take it that Mary must have been in the final stages of her pregnancy when she undertook that journey.

And Rachel's journey

Now let's reconnect with the verses from Genesis chapter 35 which I read at the beginning. I read

those verses because there is a remarkably close parallel between Mary's journey, and the journey made many centuries earlier by her forbears in the very earliest days of what was to become the nation of Israel. Mary was in fact retracing almost exactly the steps of that much earlier mother-to-be. Although Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph's journey began, was about 4 times further from Bethlehem than was the ancient city of Bethel, from which Rachel had set out, both were heading south towards Bethlehem, and in all probability Mary and Joseph would have passed the very place of Rachel's burial as they drew near to their destination.

Travelling along the unpaved roads of the ancient world, whether on foot or by some other mode of transport, seems hardly advisable for a woman in the final weeks of a pregnancy. It has often seemed to me that, according to normal human reasoning, Mary should never have made it all the way to Bethlehem, and she, like Rachel before her, would have given birth by the side of that road. But then the scriptures would not have been fulfilled.

And nothing in the Bible is there by accident. It is filled with beautiful foreshadowings of future events, and I believe the link between these two journeys is perfectly intentional. The essential point I'm coming to in those verses from Genesis is the matter of the naming of Jacob's youngest son, because it is deeply significant. His mother, with perhaps her final breath, gave him the name Ben-oni, which means "son of my sorrow." But his father overruled and changed it to Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand."

For a brief period, Rachel's son bore a name which spoke of sorrow, but for the rest of his days, he bore a name which spoke of glory and exaltation. On the other hand, Mary's son, whilst He was never actually known by either of these names, exactly lived out the fulfilment of this prophetic illustration. Whilst here on earth, for a brief span, He was the true Ben-oni. He fulfilled the prophetic words which had been spoken of Him centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah, who had described Him as "a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"⁶.

But now, having completed His great work of redemption by dying on the cross, He has been raised from the dead by the glory of the Father⁷, and is now the true Benjamin, having sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high⁸.

Son of my sorrow

It is easy to understand why Rachel, having endured a very difficult birth, and now probably all too aware that her life was at its end, should choose to reflect this in the naming of her son. We might perhaps say that she bequeathed her sorrow to her son; she laid it upon him by giving him this name.

And this is exactly what each of us has, in effect, done to the Lord Jesus. We are the reason why He died. Our sins are the cause of all His sufferings. As Charles Wesley's (1707 - 1788) famous hymn puts it:

"Died He for me, who caused His pain;
For me, who Him to death pursued?"

Quoting again from Isaiah, chapter 53 verse 4:

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows."

Harking back again to the message of the angels, that good news of great joy for all the people, proclaiming the birth of the Saviour, we have to humbly acknowledge that His death, in our place, upon the cross, was what the name "Saviour" actually implied.

If we are amongst those who have welcomed that good news by receiving Him as our personal Saviour, then we are eternally indebted to Him as the true “son of my sorrow.”

Son of my right hand

Now, as far as I can see from the scriptures, the convention in Old Testament times was that it was the sole privilege and responsibility of a mother to decide what to call her new born child. Fathers don't appear to have been consulted. But this was an exception. The scripture simply says “But his father called him Benjamin.”

Whilst those who happen to be left-handed may wish it were otherwise, there is a general recognition, particularly in some non-western cultures, that to be placed at someone's right hand is an honour. We may sometimes hear a key employee or assistant in some organisation being referred as someone's “right hand man (or woman).”

In the scriptures, without question, to be invited to sit at the right hand of a king or great noble is considered a great honour. In the New Testament, subsequent to His death and rising again, it is said several times of the Lord Jesus that He has sat down at the right hand of God⁹.

The scriptures speak in several places¹⁰ of how the Lord Jesus stooped to the very depths of suffering and sorrow, in order to be our Saviour, but has now been raised to the supreme place of glory and splendour.

One of the most outstanding of these is in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, chapter 2 verses 7 to 11, where he writes that the Lord Jesus:

“Made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Let us give thanks to God this Christmas, not only for Him who came as the babe in the manger, but for Him who came as the true Ben-oni, who came to take upon Himself all of our sorrows, and for Him who, that mighty work of redemption completed, returned, the true Benjamin, to the highest pinnacle of glory, at the right hand of God.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Christmas message - talk number T1282.

¹ Luke 2:14(KJV) ² Luke 2:10 ³ Luke 2:11 ⁴ 1 Peter 2:21 ⁵ Luke 2:6 ⁶ Isaiah 53:3 ⁷ Romans 6:4 ⁸ Hebrews 1:3 ⁹ Mark 16:19, Acts 2:33, Ephesians 1:20, Hebrews 10:12 ¹⁰ Luke 24:25-26, 1 Peter 1:11

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