

# *Truth for Today*

## *The Bible Explained*

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**Broadcast :** 23/24 December 2023

**No.:** T1334

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## **The tyranny of Christmas**

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

“It's the most wonderful time of the year  
With the kids jingle belling  
And everyone telling you be of good cheer  
It's the most wonderful time of the year.”

So goes the Andy William's classic hit. Well, it may be if you are in advertising, hospitality, or retail but I rather think that there is a tyranny to Christmas. Now let me be quite clear, upfront. I love Christmas. Maybe not quite as much now that my children have grown up and left home. But I still love the lights, the carols, the food, the time off work, family and chilling out watching movies 'till ridiculously late o'clock at night. However, perhaps like me, you too get to the first week in January and breathe a sigh of relief once the decorations are down and life returns to a calmer, more structured normality. That's it for another year!

For some, of course, Christmas is the worst time of year. Loneliness, poverty, bereavement and a whole host of other reasons make their dark days long and difficult. As Christians, we need to particularly look out for these individuals and include them in our hearts and our activities. So why do I think there is a tyranny to Christmas? Well, because we are increasingly pushed an impossible dream. I have had many splendid Christmas dinners and teas, but they never look quite like the ones the supermarkets put out on their adverts – perfectly golden Turkey, bowls full of steaming veg, all exactly cooked and Christmas puddings perfectly symmetrical – you get the picture. I love giving presents, but how often do I realise that the gift was not quite what the individual was hoping for, and yet again I have missed the mark. I love getting gifts, but there are only so many bulbs a house needs. If only someone had thought to get me....

Even when everything has gone as close to perfect as possible, there is a sense at the end of Christmas day that it is all over. If only it could have lasted, family have to leave, or were never there in the first place. No matter what we do, how hard we try, it always leaves me with a sense of what could have been. Like the infamous teacher's comment on the year-end report: “Could do better.”

So, as we approach another Christmas are we doomed, like some Sisyphus struggle, to always attempt to crack Christmas but never quite manage it, or can we truly know that peace that was proclaimed by the angels:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”  
(Luke 2:14).

I am so thankful for the Bible and for what it teaches me about God. It does not pander to the impossible, like modern advertising, but presents truth as it really is. In the same way that the Samaritan came to where the wounded man was (Luke 10:33) God has come to where we are, and fully immersed Himself in our broken humanity. Nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the Christmas story and we shall consider some aspects of this now.

Part of the Christmas story that hardly ever seems to feature in the traditional Carol service is the reading of the genealogy of the Lord Jesus. You can read it for yourself in Matthew chapter 1:1-16. The reason I say you can read it for yourself is that I would struggle to. I mean what is wrong with names like Sam, Fred, or Jane? However, there is something darker about the genealogy that maybe does not make it suitable for audiences with young children. In verse 3 we read:

“Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar.”

That all sounds innocuous enough. We often think of Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah and envisage His majesty in all this – quite rightly so. Here in Matthew, we get the royal line of inheritance that originated with Judah, an ancestor of Israel’s kings. Jesus was born into the royal family tree. So far as that goes it sounds splendid, doesn’t it?

Except, when we go back to Genesis 38 and look at what lies behind those seemingly innocuous words, we get a sordid tale. Judah had three sons – Er, Onan and Shelah. Er was so wicked that God killed him, so leaving behind his widow Tamar. Now there are not many people in the Bible who were summarily executed by God for their wickedness, so Er really must have been bad. Onan was meant to marry Tamar and have children to carry on Er’s part of the family tree but he did not want to, so he too died. Because Shelah was too young, Judah told Tamar to wait until he grew up and then she would marry him and be provided for. However, months turned into years and the wedding never took place. Tamar disguised herself and sat in an open place. When Judah – her father-in-law – saw her he thought she was a town prostitute and used her as such. Skipping over the rest of the story which reveals how God showed Judah how wrong he had been, the fruit of that sinful union was twin boys – Perez and Zerah, and it is this Perez who takes his place in the family tree that would eventually become the royal house of Judah. Talk about mixed up, dysfunctional families! It all started here with a father and his daughter-in-law. If this was an episode of “Who do you think you are?” I would be mighty embarrassed and hoping for a swift move on, so let’s do that!

In verse 5 we read:

“Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab.”

Assuming that this is the Rahab mentioned in Joshua 2:1, and the lack of explanatory detail otherwise suggests that this is a reasonable assumption, we find out that

“So they went, and came to the house of a harlot named Rahab, and lodged there.”

Hardly the kind of lady you would want to take to meet your elderly granny! So, we will hurriedly move on to nicer pastures. Ah yes! Verse 6:

“David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah.”

Here in one verse two of Israel’s greatest kings are mentioned so surely there is something in the family tree of which to be proud. Of course, Bathsheba had been the wife of Uriah, until David had slept with her and then arranged to have Uriah killed in a bizarre and sordid state execution (2 Samuel 11:12-17).

We could pick out other individuals from this genealogical record, but it would rather be labouring the point. There was nothing in the family tree of the Lord Jesus to bring pride and glory. Now why is this so? Why did God not arrange for a perfect family tree, virtuous individuals passing on heroic deeds from one generation to the next climaxing in the birth of His Son? Of course, in theory, it would not be too hard for Him in theory. Except, perfect families just do not exist – because perfect individuals do not exist. I was once asked to give some teaching on parenting. I thought I would

select some examples of parents in the Bible who did good things and so raised good children, so that we could learn from their example. I really struggled to find these examples – there are not many at all. Jesus knew then what it was to be a part of a mixed-up family with plenty of issues. He knew in adult life what it was to be misunderstood by his family. If we think that we have problems with families this Christmas, then we can take comfort in the fact that He knows and He understands, for He has had experience in this field. Don't worry that it won't be the perfect family Christmas but just be thankful for those who are there, for those who do love you and for those that you can love.

If the family side of things was not perfect that first Christmas, neither were the circumstances. We have endured the Covid restrictions that spoil Christmas for so many. We have also lived through the cost-of-living crisis that curtailed much of what we may have wanted to do. Perhaps, like me, you wonder what is next. Well, the circumstances into which Jesus was born were just about as bad as they could get. Israel at the time was a land under occupation. Think about the complete loss of power and freedom that would have meant for the ordinary Israelite of that time. Corrupt or sadistic Roman soldiers could say or do almost whatever they liked and you would have had no option but to obey them or suffer. The expansion of the Roman Empire might have brought civilisation and a pax Romana, but it was very much on their terms. It was against this backdrop that the first Christmas took place. We read in Luke 2:1-5,

“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.”

It must have seemed like the whole world was on the move that particular year. We need to remember that even up to the Middle Ages in this country the majority of people would be born, grow up, grow old and die all within about 10 miles of their birthplace. Yet here, Joseph and Mary were compelled to make a journey of about 90 miles, almost due south, so that they could be registered in Bethlehem, as part of the royal house of Judah.

Now on foot, assuming a walking pace of about 2.5 miles per hour for 8 hours a day that journey would have taken 4-5 days. The Bible does not tell us how that journey was made, just that the couple did make it. No mention of riding on a donkey or any other animal. To say that both of them, but particularly Mary, must have been exhausted on arrival is probably an understatement. Every muscle in their bodies must have been aching. We do not know for how long they were in Bethlehem, although Luke 2:6 suggests that the birth was not immediately after their arrival. However, we do know from Luke 2:7 that,

“She brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

This might suggest that Jesus was born in a stable. It certainly infers that He was born in the lowliest of circumstances as there was not even room in an inn for Mary and Joseph to stay when in Bethlehem. Like many first-time mothers, Mary must have longed for her own mother to be there as she went into labour. Someone to hold her hand and tell her that all would be well. Where was she? For that matter where was God when she needed Him most? Had she not endured the judgemental looks and the suspicions of nosy neighbours? Had she not endured the journey south and the lack of dignity as she brought forth her Son? So where was God now. He was right there in the manger!

Christmas can be the loneliest time of year. Loved ones who have died and therefore cannot be there. Children who have left home and now have their own families. Everyone else seems to have a place and be wanted. The message of Christmas is that at the very heart of such circumstances God is there. The Prophet had written:

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, “God with us”” (Matthew 1:23).

What a joy to know this kind of God. Not a far off, angry deity that needs to be appeased but One who has made His home amongst us and is with us. Therefore in Hebrews 13:5-6 we read:

“For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we may boldly say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?””

This was the message that the angels brought to the shepherds that first Christmas time:

“Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people” (Luke2:10).

How many fears might have assailed Mary’s mind – would the labour be smooth? was her Son warm enough? clean enough? fed enough? The message that the angels brought, first to the shepherds, and through them to all of us is, “Fear not.” This is not just a wishful burst of unwarranted optimism but is foursquare based upon the fact that Jesus is Immanuel, God is with us. He was there in the middle of the most difficult of circumstances. His Spirit is still with us, guiding and protecting us each and every minute for He has given us that promise never to leave us.

A reason for hope and a cause for optimism are that the message of Christmas is that He is always near at hand for those who need Him, want Him. He may not change our circumstances. He certainly does not promise us an easy life, all full of cherubs and warm Christmas light shining on a perfect situation. That was not what He experienced either. But He does promise that we will not face whatever life may throw at us alone. We can take hope in the fact that He has experienced the hardest of circumstances and will be with us every step of the way.

Life did not get much better for the Lord Jesus. Threatened by the genocide, unleashed by Herod, he was taken as a young child into Egypt for maybe about 2 years until the despot was dead. Life for refugees is seldom easy. Jesus knew what it was to grow up in a foreign environment, surrounded by strangers and far from family. Undoubtedly He would have suffered the cruel taunts of the local children as One who was different. How little they understood just how different He really was! Despite the difficulties, Jesus grew up knowing that He must be about His Father’s business and completed it in such a way that at the beginning of His public ministry, God tore open the heavens and declared:

“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

We cannot always control our circumstances and may well feel that we are hostage to the actions and decisions of others. We can control how we react to these events and we should make the Lord Jesus our example in this. In perfect obedience, let us live lives that are well pleasing to the Father.

Christmas gifts are always a hard one to get right. We want to give something that will really be appreciated by the recipient. However, it can so easily go wrong. Clothes are the wrong size.

Novelties are just that. Food or chocolates are the wrong flavour. Then there is the question of who to give gifts to. More recently, there has been a recognition that there is a tyranny in this too. If I give to you, you feel indebted and that you need to return a gift. That may well skew your spending plans and although we say it is the thought that counts, sometimes the value matters, either making us feel uncomfortable or making us feel cheated. In Matthew 2:11 we read:

“And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

These gifts have often been thought to have special meaning, rather than them being a random collection of things the Wise Men had picked up at the duty free, on their way. The gold speaks of the majesty of the Lord Jesus. He was no ordinary Child. Here, in the house in Bethlehem was the One who will be King of kings and Lord of lords. Though to all outward appearance here was a child of humble birth and poor means, yet God would ensure that Jesus was recognised as the true King. We do live in a world that is still so appearance focused. It would be good this Christmas if we could lose a lot of this and instead, learn to look at what truly mattered, and what had lasting value.

Frankincense was an aromatic resin used in soap and perfume production. It was a part of the grain offering, the directions about which we read in Leviticus chapter 2:1,

“When anyone offers a grain offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it.”

In his book ‘A Home within the wilderness’ (Emmaus Bible School UK publication) Stephen Olford writes,

“The frankincense refers to His graciousness, for everything He did or said went up to God as ‘a sacrifice....for a sweet-smelling savour’” (Ephesians 5:2).

The common people said:

‘He hath done all things well’ (Mark 7:37, KJV).

Those who heard Him ‘wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth’ (Luke 4:22, KJV).

In life, as in death, there was a sweet-smelling aroma to God the Father in all that the Lord Jesus did and said.

Myrrh was typically used in embalming the bodies of the dead. In giving the infant Jesus myrrh the Wise Men were foreshadowing the death of the Lord Jesus. This was His whole purpose in coming into the world. He came to die. Now this is very different from any of us. We will inevitably die, though most do all they possibly can to avoid this inevitability. However, none of us would view death as our reason for being on planet Earth. When a child is young, we may wonder what they will be when they grow up. As I hold my grandchildren, I often pray that they will grow up to be men and women of God, on fire for Him. More generally, people wonder if they will be a nurse, or a soldier, or a teacher, or some other such thing. Jesus was different. He came with the explicit purpose of dying as a substitute for us in a complete act of penal atonement. His death was what was required for our sins to be dealt with once and for all. So myrrh was an entirely appropriate gift for this Holy Child. However, I cannot help but think it was a bit strange!



Some time ago, my wife and I were out shopping for a present for our latest grandchild. Racks and racks of clothes and children's toys were searched and I began to lose interest. Not for one moment, however, did I think to suggest that perhaps we could get a pre-paid funeral plan for him. After all that would come in useful one day I suppose. It is just not the done thing. The fact that Jesus was presented with myrrh just highlights how vital, how essential His death was. Without it we would be eternally lost. It established God's righteousness and allowed His mercy to flow out to mankind.

It is as we accept Jesus as our Saviour that we can know peace with God. In amongst the business and the tyranny of the Christmas season, there is sweet joy in knowing that no matter what else may happen, for good or bad, we stand in right relationship with God. This is not something that will last just for a day. This is not something that will change with the coming of a new year. This has lasting value that will continue for all eternity.

In closing, I just want to tackle one other tyranny of the season. Our lives are so ruled by the clock. There is so much to do. Everything needs to be in the oven at just the right time. Presents need to be ordered with enough time to be wrapped and handed over. The days and weeks beforehand can blur into one long round of carol services, school Christmas plays, parties, etc. Please, it is okay not to do everything. We need to rediscover the fact that time is for our benefit not our master. We should make time just for those things which really matter. Things don't have to be perfect.

God was the Master of time. He was not rushed into that first Christmas. The chaos of it all did not take Him by surprise. Instead we read:

“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Galatians 4:4 – 7).

What a wonderful blessing has come out of that first Christmas. To so many eyes it might have seemed a mess, not at all what was planned. But with God in control, it was perfect and that is what counts.

May each one of us, this Christmas, escape the tyranny of the season and know the real peace of God in our hearts. As with that first Christmas, things will be messy and contain their mix of ups and downs. That is alright. For as we allow God to work in our lives, He is able to:

“[Work all things together for good to those who love God]” (Romans 8:28).

Let us enjoy this time of year, however it may pass, safe in the knowledge that He is in control. Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today Christmas message, talk number T1334.

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