

DAY 1 THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

GALATIANS 3:1-6

The great question the Bible is always seeking to answer is how can a man or woman be right with God? It asks the question because it accepts the fact that we are not right with God. Man is a sinner and God is holy. There is therefore a great barrier between them. The Bible also teaches that the wage of sin is death, and this means an eternity in hell. So this gives the question a great urgency. It is of no mere academic interest but our eternal destiny rests upon it.

So what is the answer? Basically there are two answers offered us – law or grace. Law includes just about every system of religion or morals that say you must do this or go there in order to be saved. It teaches that man's salvation is in his own hands. Grace says that man is helpless and can do nothing to save himself. Salvation therefore has to be **all** of God.

The two answers are irreconcilable. They have nothing in common and both cannot be right. So which is correct? It was this which caused the Galatians to be confused. Anything that confuses us as to the way of salvation has to be exposed.

Are you confused by the gospel? If so it is because you are allowing man's theories to distract from the basically simple message of God.

- We are sinners.
- We cannot save ourselves.
- Jesus is the only saviour and we need him alone to save us.

There is nothing confusing about that. So believe it and act upon it.

I was given some watercolour paints for Christmas. I had never painted before but I had a go. I soon discovered that I had no artistic talent whatsoever, but I was enjoying it. My first efforts looked as if they had been done by a 5 year old. But I soon improved and my paintings looked as if a 6 year old had done them. So I went to the library and borrowed a video on Water colouring for Beginners. As I watched the expert at work it all looked so easy – it always does when you watch experts.

But I want to tell you that in the matter of salvation there are no experts. We are all children groping around and all our efforts are pathetic. But this is exactly how it should be. Jesus said, "Unless a man becomes as a little child he will never enter heaven". We need to see that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves but that Jesus has done all that is needed.

DAY 2 WHO IS JESUS?

Hebrews 2: 14-17

The question of who Jesus is, is crucial to the validity of the Christian faith. It was a question important to Jesus himself, so in Matthew 16 we find him asking his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' The answers are interesting and if spoken of any other person would be highly flattering. Common opinion held that Jesus was either John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. People were so impressed with him that they thought he must be one of these great servants of God come back from the dead.

Flattering though the answers were, they were totally inadequate to describe who Jesus is; the Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Jesus.

- 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created' (Colossians 1:15-16).
- 'In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (Colossians 2:9).
- 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus is special

Nothing like this is said of any other person in Scripture. All other men and women are sinners. We are born with a sinful nature and our actions are all tainted by this nature. If Jesus was only the greatest man who ever lived, he would have had a sinful nature and as such he would *need* a saviour and could never have *been* Saviour. Jesus is special. His birth was special and different from all other births. His mother Mary was a virgin, so Jesus' birth came about not as a result of human love or lust, but through a remarkable life-giving operation of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35). This may be difficult for us to understand because in human experience it is totally impossible. But in the birth of our Saviour, God was doing something special that was way beyond human thought or imagination.

Son of Man

The New Testament uses many titles and names for the Lord Jesus but the one he himself used most often was Son of Man. No one else addressed Jesus in this way: there must be something special in the title for Jesus to use it so often. By the use of this title Jesus made it plain that he really was a man. He was a unique man and a sinless man, but nevertheless he was truly man. This was crucial for our salvation. Listen to Hebrews 2:14-17.

• 'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.'

Jesus had to become a man in order to make atonement for man's sins. It was man who had broken God's law and sinned, therefore it had to be man who would pay the penalty for that sin. But there was no man qualified to do this, so God became man in the person of Jesus Christ and did for us what was crucial to our salvation.

DAY 3 THE BIRTH OF JESUS

HEBREWS 2: 1-18

The word used to describe the birth of Jesus is 'incarnation'. It means 'in the flesh', and expresses the amazing truth that when Jesus was born, God became man. In the opening chapter of his Gospel John says, referring to Jesus, 'The Word was God'; then he goes on to declare, **'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.** The birth of Jesus was very special. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah and the New Testament writers Matthew and Luke all tell us that his mother was a virgin. His birth was not the result of human love, or lust, but came about through the remarkable life-giving operation of the Holy Spirit. In today's reading we are told why this was necessary and what it all means. In Hebrews 2:14-18 we have one of the clearest statements in the New Testament regarding the reason for God becoming man in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For this reason

In verse 13 we have a quote from Isaiah 8:18, which is part of a Messianic passage, which means it refers to Christ. This is clear from today's reading, where the Old Testament verses quoted in verses 12 and 13 are all attributed to Jesus: 'He says ...' So 'the children God has given me' refers to the people that God is going to save through Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 17:2 that he would give eternal life to all those that God had given him. These children, those whom God is going to save, are flesh and blood - they are human beings. But God is not flesh and blood; he is not human. So in order to save us he became human. Notice that this truth is repeated again in verses 16 and 17. God does not save angels but human beings: **'For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way.'**

Why was this necessary? Salvation was planned in heaven but it could not be accomplished in heaven. Atonement for sin must be made to God by man's representative. But there was no man qualified to do this, for all men are sinners. So the eternal God became man, 'so that by his

death' (v.14) he might accomplish salvation for his people. God became man so that as the man Jesus he could die for his people and purchase their salvation. Paul puts it like this in Romans 5: 17: 'For if, by the trespass of the one man [Adam], death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.'

Five reasons

- In Hebrews 2: 14-18 there are five reasons given why God became man:
 1. So that by his death he could conquer the power of the devil (v. 14)
 2. So that he could free his people from the fear of death (v. 15).
 3. So that he could become our High Priest (v.17).
 4. So that he could atone for our sin (v. 17).
 5. So that he could help us in our temptations (v.18).

The accomplishment of all these things meant the suffering and death of the Son of God. Therefore God had to become man. John Owen, the Puritan, said, 'The first and principal end of the Lord Christ's assuming human nature, was not to reign in it, but to suffer and die in it.'

The incarnation was essential for our salvation because salvation is not a whitewash job. It is not a quick cover-up. Salvation is the mighty work of God whereby he makes new men with a new nature. But if we are to be made like him, he must first be made like us (but without sin). If we are to be made partakers of the divine nature, God must first partake of human nature (but not fallen human nature).

Christ Jesus who being in very nature God, ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

DAY 5

GOD'S LAST WORD

HEBREWS 1

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jews who had been converted to Christianity. Thus the writer is concerned to show not merely that Christianity grew out of Judaism, but that it is immensely superior to it. One of the ways in which He does this is by concentrating the attention of his readers upon the Lord Jesus Christ. In this chapter two truths concerning our Lord are set before us, as the author begins his mammoth task.

Who Christ is (vv.I-3)

In the Old Testament we find God's way of revealing Himself to His people. This was normally done through the words and activities of the prophets. But in Christ we have God speaking not through works or words but through a Person - His own Son. We are then led to wonder at the excellence of this Man. Six things are said here of Christ. The splendour and glory of God abide completely in the Son, who is the exact resemblance of His Father; through Him the worlds were created; by His word all things are kept in being; He is the One to whom everything belongs; it is by Him and His sacrifice on the cross that we are washed from our sins; now His work on earth is ended and He has taken His royal seat in heaven. Could anything more perfectly describe the majesty of this Person?

Greater than the angels (vv. 4-14) Angels were prominent in the revelation of the Old Testament (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). The superiority of the New Testament is demonstrated by the way Christ is better and greater than the angels. The contrast between Christ and angels is shown by a series of quotations from the Old Testament. Of the seven passages produced one speaks of the angels as servants, and the others refer to Christ's relationship as Son to the Father, to His kingship, to His work as Creator and to His ultimate triumph. The only verse which speaks of Christ and the angels together requires them to worship Him; so far are they beneath Him. While Christ is the One who has won salvation for His people, verse 14 reminds us that the angels serve the interests of the Saviour and the saved. So that although they are clearly inferior to Christ, they are not hostile or indifferent to Him, and we are greatly indebted to them.

The God who spoke to the fathers, now speaks to us. The God who spoke in old time, now speaks in these last days. The God who spoke by His prophets, now speaks by His Son. John Brown

DAY 6 THE IMAGE OF GOD

COLOSSIANS 1: 9-23

In verses 13-14 Jesus is set before us as the Saviour. God rescues us from sin through his Son, and it is by the Son that we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Paul immediately goes on to tell us of the supremacy of Christ, stated powerfully in verse 15. *Jesus is the image of the invisible God.* An image is nothing unless it is a reflection of an object in one form or another. The gods of the pagans were images, but images of what? Some idea certainly, or some concept, and very often they reflected some fear. Men may even try to make images of the true God, but in so doing they deface the glory of the immortal God (Romans 1:23). Man was created in the image of God, but that image has been shattered by sin. Now in Jesus we have the perfect reflection of God and this is possible because only one who is equal with God could perfectly interpret and reflect God. *The image that Jesus brought us of God was not just a copy, but the real thing (v. 19).* If we were to ask, ‘What is God like?’ the answer the Bible would give is that he is like Jesus — holy, righteous, just, full of compassion and mercy. He loves sinners and stretches his arms out in grace to them, calling upon them to come to him.

The sinner’s only hope of salvation rests on this great truth of who Jesus is, because God can only be known through the Lord Jesus Christ.

DAY 7 CHRISTIANITY IS CHRIST

Philippians 2: 1-11

Is Christianity outdated and finished? How relevant is it in this scientific age? Is it only a matter of time before all churches are closed and turned into bingo palaces? These are questions often asked and it is not difficult to see why. There is a steady decline of Christian influence upon society so the questions are fair and deserve an answer.

The answer is that Christianity is Christ.

This does not refer to the Christ of so much of modern theology but the Christ described here in verses 6-11. The triumph of verses 10-11 is certain because of who Jesus is and what he did.

Jesus is God. He became man for one prime purpose — to die on the cross for his people. Such a sacrifice was beyond what could have been imagined. It means that Christianity is not a religious philosophy invented by man, but a living faith revealed by God. It is a faith centred in what Jesus has achieved for us.

The cross is not a superstitious sign but the symbol of the plan and purpose of almighty God. It was a place of death but also of victory. God accepted what Jesus did, as verse 9 makes very clear. And God will go on accepting this for all eternity (vv. 10-11).

Christianity can no more be finished than Christ can. It can no more be outdated than the love of God can. It can no more be superseded by something else than God can be overthrown. The ultimate outcome is assured and this is what gives us great peace and joy.

We do not like what is happening in the world today but we know the future is in God's hands. The future is Christ.

DAY 8 BORN OF A VIRGIN

ISAIAH 7: 1-17

Ahaz, king of Judah, was in serious trouble (vv. 1-2). He was shaking like a tree battered by the wind, but the enemy he was afraid of was nothing to God, just ‘two smouldering stubs of firewood’ (v.4). God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign that the Lord would give him victory (v.10), but the king refuses (v.12). His false spirituality of verse 12 is answered by Isaiah’s withering denunciation of verse 13.

What Ahaz will not ask for, God gives — and the sign is amazing (v.14). Whatever this sign meant to Ahaz in his day there is no doubt how the New Testament sees it. Read Matthew 1:22-23.

God’s warning to Ahaz in verse 9, ‘**If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all**’, applies equally to us.

Our faith rests on who Jesus is.

What he did had significance only because of who he was. Jesus was born of a virgin. His birth was not the result of human love or lust, but came about through the remarkable life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus was merely a human being like the rest of us, he would be a sinner like we all are, and therefore would have been under the judgement and wrath of God. If that was true, then Jesus could no more save sinners than we could.

The virgin birth meant that Jesus did not inherit a fallen human nature. This was crucial if he was to be the sinless sacrifice for our sin.

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. He is truly man and truly God. This cannot be emphasized enough. This is the rock on which our faith stands.

ISAIAH 9: 1-7

Men and women in sin are in darkness. They are blind to the truth of God and can see nothing of the beauty of Jesus. We are all born in this condition but light comes to us in the gospel (v. 2). That light is the truth about Jesus (v. 6).

On the one hand Jesus is human — a child who is born; on the other hand he is Mighty God. There is no doctrine so baffling to the human mind as that of the two natures in Jesus. *He is not part God and part man, but completely God and completely man.*

Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor. Isaiah tells us in 28:29 that Jesus is ‘wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom’. He gives his people sound advice and direction and when we listen to him we will never go wrong. His recommendations should be our guidelines in everything.

Jesus is Mighty God. Nothing can be a clearer declaration to the deity of Jesus than this. Here we have an amplification of the word Immanuel — God with us in power and might; God invincible working for his people.

Jesus is Everlasting Father. There will be no end to his rule, which is not that of a ruthless dictator but a kind Father. He has a compassion for us that never changes. See Psalm 103:13.

Jesus is Prince of Peace. He rules over the kingdom of peace he has established in the hearts of his people. His peace is not a fleeting notion always affected by circumstances, but a peace with God achieved for us by justification by faith (Romans 5:1).

This is Jesus. Absolutely unique. Totally incomparable. On him we rest our hope of eternal salvation.

MATTHEW 1: 18 -25

Mary was pregnant and Joseph her husband was clearly not the father (vv. 18-19). Christmas was anything but a happy time for this young man. As far as he was concerned the only explanation for the events was that Mary had been unfaithful to him. But there was another explanation that Joseph would never have arrived at on his own (v. 20). The explanation was mind-blowing. It was probably only an angel who could have convinced Joseph it was true. Yet, at the same time, it was not surprising, as Isaiah the prophet had said this would happen (vv. 22-23).

What is impossible to the natural mind is inevitable to the man who takes the Bible seriously. If God says it will happen, then it will!

The most staggering thing about today's reading is not that the virgin had a baby, but that the baby was Immanuel, 'God with us'. God had always been with his people, as is clear in the Old Testament, but never like this. God is with us now in that he becomes man and takes a human nature. He did this in order to save us from our sins (v. 21). The two names, Immanuel and Jesus, tell us volumes about this baby.

Immanuel *tells us who he is*; Jesus *tells us what he did*. He is God in the flesh and he is the only one who can save his people from the consequence of their sin. The message of Christmas is that we need a Saviour and that Jesus is the only Saviour. But what a Saviour he is. He has all the glory and power of heaven behind him. He is a Saviour to trust with unreserved enthusiasm.

MATTHEW 2: 1-12

Who were the Magi or Wise Men? Myth runs riot about this — they were three kings named Melchior, Balthazer and Caspar; they were from India and had been baptized by Thomas; their bones were discovered by Saint Helena and are now in the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Cologne.

The fact is, we know nothing other than is told us in today's reading. God had spoken to them through a star in the sky and they came seeking Jesus. *God still speaks to us and all he says is designed to persuade us to seek Jesus.*

Jesus talked about the signs of the times. By that he meant the state of the world and all that happens on the world's scene. Do you ever think about all the unrest in the world and wonder what is happening? Do these events move you to seek Jesus?

Stars may be useful as a general sign, and so too are world events, but we need something more definite if we are to find Jesus. God gives us this in the biblical account of his life. Here we have every incentive to seek the Son of God. But there is no virtue in seeking Jesus if you never find him. It is no use saying, 'I wish I had the faith some Christians have.' That wishing will not save you. God has given us enough truth in the Bible both to seek and find Jesus as our Saviour.

So do what the wise men did and follow the path God sets out before you. The path is to see yourself as a sinner and Jesus as the only one who can deliver you from the power of sin. Seek until you find and do not be put off by any obstacle put in your way.

LUKE 2: 1-20

I wonder if the shepherds had ever read Habakkuk 2:3 and longed for God to send his Messiah. The day in which they lived seemed far from a time when prophecy could be fulfilled. The Romans ruled their land and at the whim and word of the emperor, the whole world had to move around to be counted. But as events were to show, it is at such times that God very often fulfils his promises.

If the shepherds felt disheartened — and who could blame them? — this was soon to change: ‘the glory of the Lord shone around them’ (v.8). They were terrified but they did not doubt that this was of God (v.15) and neither were they satisfied in just hearing about Christ, they had to go and see for themselves. And having seen they had to tell others (v. 17).

Is this how Christmas affects you? You are not likely to see any angels this Christmas but you can experience something of the wonder of the shepherds. But if we allow the world to take over Christmas we will see nothing of the glory of God.

The shepherds could not stop Caesar Augustus having his way and you cannot stop the commercialization of Christmas, but when God speaks, even in the midst of all the world’s activities, you can listen.

Once we grasp the wonder of verse 11, mince pies and decorations will never be the same again.

The message of Christmas:

- We are all sinners and need salvation.
- We cannot save ourselves.
- Christ is the only Saviour.

LUKE 2: 21-40

Every year it is said that Christmas is for the children. Such a statement is totally wrong as today's reading shows us. Here were two older folk, Simeon and Anna, for whom Christmas was the greatest blessing they ever knew.

Christmas is about salvation, and older people are sinners as well as younger people. If a man lives eighty years and dies without Christ he goes to hell. There is no virtue in old age. But Simeon and Anna were godly old people whose minds were taken up with God. Simeon was waiting for the Christ to come (v.26). Anna's whole life was given to prayer (v.37).

So when they saw the baby Jesus they were aware immediately that the Christ had come. They probably did not expect the Christ to come as a baby, but they did not argue with God. They were just delighted that the long-awaited Messiah was there at last.

This Christmas let your mind soak in all that God has done for you through Jesus. Simeon delighted in salvation, light and glory. Anna praised God for redemption. You have seen much more of the revelation of God than they ever did. You have the full story of what the coming of Jesus means. What a cause this is for praise and adoration! *There is nothing more staggering than the incarnation.*

May we all this Christmas be filled with the wonder expressed by Charles Wesley:

**Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine,
The incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.**

MATTHEW 1:18-25

THE NEXT TIME IT WILL BE DIFFERENT

**The first time Jesus came:
He came veiled in the form of a child,
A star marked his arrival.
Wise men brought him gifts.
Only a few attended his arrival. He came as a baby.**

**The next time Jesus comes,
He will be recognized by all.
Heaven will be lit by his glory.
He will bring rewards for his own.
The world won't be able to contain his glory.
Every eye will see him.
He will come as Sovereign King and Lord of all.**

(Taken from 'God with us' by John Mac Arthur)