

## **Jesus Christ: Son & Lord, Conceived & Born**

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John 1:1-18; 13:1-17

Full disclosure: I have made a few changes to the outline, pretty much same content, but a little more catchy! I hope it will all be clear enough!

We'll start off camped out in John 1, so it would be great to have your Bible's open there, let's pray as we continue to reflect on God's Word:

## **Drama: The Eucatastrophe**

Earlier this year, I read through the Lord of the Rings trilogy for the first time. I absolutely loved it. I'm not normally in for fantasy, but I was totally engrossed in Tolkien's epic tale of Frodo and the Ring.

And just recently, I discovered that JRR Tolkien once wrote an essay called "On Fairy Stories", where he explains his own understanding of writing fantasy. And in this essay, he says that the defining feature of the fairy story is the *happy ending*. And he coined a term to describe this hope of resolution. He called it the *Eucatastrophe*.

A catastrophe, of course, is a sudden moment of disaster. The *eucatastrophe*, Tolkien says, is the "sudden joyous turn", that moment in the story when the creeping hand of darkness is turned back and the first glimmer of light is seen. It's the dawning of the new day in Gondor as Sauron's dark army approaches; it's Sam carrying Frodo up the rocky slope of Mordor; as Tolkien says, it is that moment in the story, "however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, [that] can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears."

Now, JRR Tolkien was a Christian. And in the epilogue to his essay, he says that these stories resonate with us, because they reflect THE *True Story* of God and the world. The little stories we tell, reflect the Grand Drama that is revealed to us in the Bible. And in this drama, Tolkien tells his readers, "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history."

The Christmas story is the sudden joyous turn, as God – out of his great love for the World – sends his One and Only Son.

For what we see in the story of Scripture is that God's good creation was thrust down into darkness, death, and disconnection by humanity's rejection of the Good Creator.

Since the Fall, the creeping hand of sin worked out through the world and deep into the human heart. You pick up the Bible and so much of it is totally catastrophic! The Old Testament is a brutally honest account of sorrow and failure, as time and again people and nations set themselves stubbornly against God.

And yet, time and again, human faith/lessness is met with divine *faithfulness*. God does not abandon his creation, or his chosen people, he relentlessly pursues them. Even his just judgement of sin is always accompanied by promises of future salvation.

So he promises to Eve, a child who will come to crush the head of the wicked and deceiving serpent.

He promises to Abraham that his offspring will bring blessing to the whole world.

He promises to David a Son who will rule the world with righteousness and peace.

He promises a Servant who will suffer for the sins of the people.

He promises new hearts, a new covenant, new creation.

And yet, at times it seems like the creeping hand of sin entirely engulfs any glimmer of hope. The Old Testament ends in darkness and silence.

But then, the new Day dawns, a child is born. The gospels of Matthew & Luke recount the story of the birth of Jesus, of course you know how it goes.

Through the announcements of angels, the excited wonder of shepherds, the reverent honour of foreign kings, and the quiet pondering of a young mother, we come to know something of *who* it is who has stepped onto the stage of human history.

The Christmas stories weave together names, and titles, and concepts all drawn from the Old Testament. Christmas is the gospel, literally in embryo, as every promise of God concentrates upon this little boy growing in Mary's womb.<sup>1</sup>

He is the second Adam, the true seed of Abraham, the royal son of David, the consolation of Israel and the hope of all the World. He is the *Eucatastrophe*. The sudden joyous turn, as Jesus Christ, God's Only Son, the Lord of the Universe, is conceived of the holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote and thought is from *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, by Thomas Weinandy.

## **Doctrine: The Incarnation**

This is the drama. And the doctrine at the heart of the Christmas story is what Christians have called *the incarnation*. It is the conviction that the little baby who was born in Bethlehem was Truly God (conceived of the Holy Spirit), and Truly Man (born of the virgin Mary). It is a deep mystery to be sure, but it is the clear testimony of Scripture and the confident confession of the Church.

And if Matthew and Luke's gospel tell us the story of the incarnation, John begins his gospel with a *theology* of the incarnation. He states it simply and profoundly in John 1:14 – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. One writer paraphrases, God took on flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. I love that. God comes close in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus.

And so what does this glorious truth mean? Well, with John 1 as our starting point, let's consider three things:

The incarnation brings

1. Light
2. Life
3. Love

## Light

So first, to those in darkness, Jesus brings *light*. The Bible uses the image of darkness to describe the plight of sinful humanity in several different ways, I think. But the basic point, is that because of our sin we are in the dark about who God is.

It's tempting to think that everyone basically understands the concept of God. He's the big guy in the sky. The ultimate power, the ruling principle of the universe, that kind of thing.

But as we have considered over the last two weeks, God is not an abstract concept – he is a personal being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is not simply an idea to assent to, he is to be related to, known and loved. That is what it means to say I Believe *in* this God.

And left to our own devices, this sort of intimate knowledge is beyond us. John says at the conclusion of the prologue to his gospel: "No one has ever seen God..." We are in the dark, we cannot see God, nor can we know him.

But we are not left to our own devices! In the incarnation, Jesus shines the light of God into the darkness so that we might really see God, and that we might truly *know* him. No one has ever seen God, *but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

To see Jesus clearly, is to see GOD. Jesus says later in John's gospel, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." We are in the dark about God, but Jesus is the light.

## *Life*

And that light, John tells us, is the *life* of all mankind. For not only are we in darkness, blind to true knowledge of God; we are also under death, we are cut off from the very life of God.

According to the Bible, this is *the* human predicament. Whatever other suffering we face in this world, whether pandemic or poverty, disease or disaster, these things remind us that all our lives are lived in the valley of the shadow of death. Death is the all-conquering enemy, cutting down great and small, rich and poor alike.

But as the Word of God and Son of the Father, Jesus shares in the very life of God – eternal and unconquerable life. And he takes on our human flesh, so that he might take on our great enemy, and deliver us from the power of death.

And so what he is by nature, he offers to us by his grace: to all who receive him, he gives the right to become *children of God* – we too can share in the very life of God – eternal and unconquerable life.

And so you see all throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, that he's like this little pocket of paradise, bringing life wherever he goes, healing the sick, casting out demons, even raising the dead.

Jesus says to us, I am the *resurrection and the life*, the one who believes in me will LIVE!

We see in Jesus the life and the light of God. Jesus comes to save and to reveal. In the incarnation we see *the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

## Love

And all of this is an expression of God's great love. For this is the root of the problem. We are in darkness and death because we are *disconnected* from God. We have closed our eyes to his light, and so what else is there but darkness? We have rejected his life, and so where else can we go but death?

And on our own we could never overcome the disconnection with God caused by our sin. We couldn't pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and climb up out of the pit. Our only hope of rescue is for God himself to step down into our pit and to lift us up, and of course this is what he has done. For God so *loved* the world, he gave his One and Only Son.

We see this dramatically acted out in Jesus' service of his disciples in John 13. In John 1, we move from God to flesh; in the upper room we go from head to foot. In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus demonstrated the deep descent of God, *even to the feet of human beings*.

Did you notice: Jesus got up from the table. He took off his robe, wrapped himself in a servant's towel, and stooped to serve his friends. That's the incarnation right there. Jesus, in very nature God, got up from his throne, took off the robe of his glory, put on our frail human flesh, and he stooped down to serve us and save us.

John calls it love. John 13:1, *Having loved his own who were in the world, he **loved** them to the end.*

In the incarnation, Jesus says:

to those in darkness, *do you want my light?*

to those in death, *do you want my life?*

And he says to those in disconnection, *do you want my love?*

## **Discipleship: Beloved, love.**

And so how do we respond to the love of Jesus, the Word become flesh? How does this doctrine shape our lives as disciples of Jesus?

Well, in John 13 we not only see Jesus displaying his love, but also Jesus preparing his disciples for how they should respond to his love.

Jesus says that we must *receive his love, and live his love.*

### *Receive the Love of Jesus*

So first, we must receive the love of Jesus. You see this particularly in the way that Jesus responds to Peter's little outburst as Jesus comes to wash his feet. For Peter at first refuses to let Jesus wash him (you will *never* wash my feet!), and then he overreacts and demands that Jesus do *more* than what he has said is necessary (wash *all of me!*).

In each case, Peter finds himself telling Jesus what to do! But all that is required of him is to stop commanding Jesus and *allow* Jesus to serve him and to love him.

So do you find yourself thinking that you do not need to be served by Jesus? Are you prone to thinking that you need Jesus to teach you, or to guide you, but not *rescue you*?

Well, Jesus says to you, like he said to Peter, "if you will not let me love you, then you cannot have me." If we reject Jesus as the stooping servant saviour, we reject him completely. There's not a person in this world who is beyond the need of Jesus' humble service. Without him we remain in our darkness and death and our disconnection.

But it is also possible that there are some of us who are prone to think that we need *more* than what Jesus offers to us. It is not that you think yourself above his service, but below it. Do you think that your sin is too deep, your past too dark, that Jesus could not possibly stoop so low to serve you?

Well, Jesus promises to Peter, and to you, that all you need is for him to stoop and wash you clean. We need nothing more than what Jesus has promised us. And the promise is wonderfully broad. John says, *to **all** who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

And so the life of the disciple is a constant giving in to the love of Jesus! He has opened up the heavens, come down into the world and he wants to serve you and to save you. And so let us be washed, simply because Jesus *wants* to wash us and not because we think or feel we need or deserve to be washed.

This is the beginning of discipleship. This is what John's gospel hammers home again and again. What is the right response to Jesus? Believe! Not strongly believe, not firmly believe, not believe and then show that you really really mean it – simply *believe*: Receive the stooping servant love of Jesus.

### *Live the Love of Jesus*

And then, having received this love, Jesus tells his disciples to do as he has done.

Jesus tells us that his stooping servant love is the way that we can become his disciples, and it is the *example* of how we are to live as his disciples. *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.*

This week, I saw a discussion on Facebook about when it is appropriate to start playing Christmas carols. Now I'm not going to name any names, but it turns out people can feel pretty strongly about that! But whatever you think about Christmas carols, the shape of the Christmas story, of the God who comes *down* to serve us, is something that should shape all our lives, all year round.

Listen to the way the late J.I. Packer draws this out. I was reminded of this passage last week and it's worth quoting at length. Packer says:

*We talk glibly of the 'Christmas spirit', rarely meaning more by this than sentimental jollity on a family basis. But what we have said makes it clear that the phrase should in fact carry a tremendous weight of meaning. It ought to mean the reproducing in human lives of the temper of him who for our sakes became poor at the first Christmas. And the Christmas spirit itself ought to be the mark of every Christian all the year round.*

*It is our shame and disgrace today that so many Christians - I will be more specific: so many of the soundest and most orthodox Christians - go through this world in the spirit of the priest and the Levite in our Lord's parable, seeing human needs all around them, but (after a pious wish, and perhaps a prayer, that God might meet those needs) averting their eyes, and passing by on the other side. That is not the Christmas spirit.*

*Nor is it the spirit of those Christians - alas, they are many - whose ambition in life seems limited to building a nice middle-class Christian home, and making nice middle-class Christian friends, and bringing up their children in nice middle-class Christian ways, and who leave the sub-middle-class sections of the community, Christian and non-Christian to get on by themselves.*

*The Christmas spirit does not shine out in the Christian snob. For the Christmas spirit is the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor - spending, and being spent - to enrich their fellow humans, giving time, trouble, care and concern, to do good to others - and not just their own friends - in whatever way there seems need.*

The world tells us that true blessing is found in securing our own position. But Jesus tells us that true blessing is found in leaving our position behind and stooping down as a servant. The world demands that we acknowledge our privilege. Jesus invites us to go further, to follow him down in using every good gift that God has given us to love the lowest and the least and the lost.

Last week Rusdyan reminded us of the dignity that every human being shares as a person created in the image of God. And yet, throughout the history of the church, care for the those on the margins, love for the unlovely, and help for the hard-pressed has been most deeply motivated not by creation, but by Christmas.

By taking on our frail human flesh – becoming an embryo in a young woman's womb, living in poverty, dying as a criminal – Jesus showed that there was no human existence so poor or wretched or inconvenient to be outside of God's concern. And so we love, just as the Lord Jesus has loved us.

We have the same mindset as our Lord Jesus Christ,

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)*

## Doxology: My Soul Glorifies, My Spirit Rejoices

It would be fair to say that 2020 has been a year where darkness and death have felt very real. Sickness and suffering have been front and centre. And yet, the light **has dawned** in the coming of Christ into the world. There has been a sudden joyous turn in human history. Jesus is *still* the light of the world. He is *still* the resurrection and the life. And what our world *still* needs above all things is not a vaccine, or lifted restrictions, or better politicians. What our world really needs is the serving and saving Love of our Lord Jesus, the Word become flesh.

And so in the darkness, our lives now ought to be little pockets of light, revealing something of who God is, and what he has done for us.

In the face of death, our lives ought to testify to a life that is stronger than death – life eternal and unconquerable.

So we stoop, and we serve, and we love. And perhaps the most counter-cultural thing that we can do in a world full of despair and complaint as is to live with *hope* and *joy*.

Listen once more to what Tolkien says about the Eucatastrophe:

*it is a sudden and miraculous grace (he says): never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of **dyscatastrophe**, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is GOOD NEWS, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.*

This is what we read about at the beginning of John's gospel: the light has shines in the darkness, *and the darkness has not overcome it*. In the incarnation we discover that not only is there a joy beyond the walls of this world, but that Joy has come INTO this World. So there is real hope in the face of every trial, there is light and life and love, eternal and unconquerable, offered freely to all who simply *believe* in Jesus.

So is it any wonder then that more than anything else, the Christmas story is saturated in song. Everyone sings! Now it might be best to leave the Christmas carols to November (or October if you're super keen!), and for the present moment we will seek to love our neighbours by refraining from actually singing.

But the coming of Christ into the world means that Christians have a deep doxological impulse, an instinct of praise, for we know, we believe, we confess that Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord, was conceived of the holy Sprit and born of the virgin Mary.

And so we sing with Mary,

*My soul glorifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*