

A D V E N T 2 0 1 7

Born IS
THE
King

Christmas Strength

Well, we are here on Christmas Eve morning and we are so happy to be here today to celebrate our Lord's birth.

Leading up to today we've talked about the stigmas surrounding the birth of Jesus, the economic stigma of being from a poor family, the small town stigma of being born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, the stigma of illegitimacy surrounding his birth. And so the life of Jesus started with stigma but it also ended in stigma. Last week we peeked into Isaiah 53 and talked about the stigmas surrounding the death of Jesus, the stigma of rejection, of condemnation and the stigma of crucifixion. And so in his life there was stigma in his death there was stigma and so rightly did Isaiah say that the Messiah was a man of sorrows.

Now today, we want to shift gears and talk now not about weakness and stigma and death but about power and strength and life. Because ultimately God was able to take all of this stain and

rejection and redeem it into genuine LIFE! And that's what we want to explore this morning.

How did the coming of Messiah bring life-giving power to the human race.

The Concept of Life

And the goal of today is to get way beyond just the surface definitions of life here. We aren't talking about simply whether or not your heart is beating. We all know that there is a massive difference between a person whose hooked up to a machine and is technically alive vs the guy who is thriving as a college athlete in the prime of his life. There is being alive and then there is LIFE.

As I age, I am watching that precious life get stripped away from me. The good news is I think I'm threw the worst of it.

In all seriousness, Every year I live I experience events that highlight the fact I'm getting older. I have some gray hair coming in and some brown hair falling out. My kids are getting stronger and faster than me. Not that this was very hard to do.

Every year that goes by I am made aware of my inevitable mortality. I hear about another one of my friends who died. Or I feel a new ache in my body. Nate and I were laughing this week in the kitchen as we were sharing about our aches and pains, man we sound old.

Every year that goes by I am more cognizant of the long list of things I never accomplished in life and never will be able to accomplish. Just this year I sort of made peace with the fact, I won't get a gold metal in the 100m dash.

Life is being stripped away and I find myself grasping for it but it slips like sand between my fingers. As a parent of five kids I'm constantly comparing my old crusty self to their youthful one. It's just obvious - they have more life.

- When I was a kid I remember driving over the Boise River with my dad during high water and remarking at how high the water was. He looked out said, "Wow! And then very softly he said, I think to himself, 'I've totally stopped noticing things like that. Huh, that's kind of sad.'" And now I see it happening to me. My kids sparkle in a way that I have lost. They wonder at things I yawn at. Something in me died.
- When I was a kid, we'd go to the ocean and I felt like I entered into the promise land. I mean it was so much fun playing in the waves. The exhilaration of it was so fun and then I'd look up and my parents were sitting on blanket. I'd think, "How are they just sitting there?" Now I'm on the blanket. Something in me died.

Is there a way to get that back? Does Christmas have anything to say about that? Does God's promise of eternal life really address these kinds of things? Well, it does. What we want to do today is capture the essence of life promised in Christmas.

If you have a Bible turn to John chapter 1. John 1 is a Christmas text just like Matthew and Luke are - it just has a different focus.

- Matthew and Luke both begin their gospels with a NARRATIVE about the BIRTH of Jesus.
- John begins with a THEOLOGY of the PERSON of Jesus.

If Mt and Lk tell us what happened, John tells us why it happened.

Listen to it.

John 1:1-5, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (ESV)

Now right away, this is talking about life even though it doesn't actually use the word. Every single person in the world asks the same question, "Where in the world did I come from?" How did this whole story of civilization start? How did LIFE get started? We just show up in the middle of this story. How did we get here? It's one of the most interesting questions in the world to think on.

And it becomes all the more interesting when you look at how unique life is in the universe. When you think about what high powered telescopes and satellites have revealed about the universe, it's literally terrifying how much empty space is out there.

I read an article a few weeks ago that talked about the satellite voyager 1. If you are not familiar with this, in September of this year we hit the 40 year mark of it's travel into space, the same year I was born. And the article was remarking on the fact that they had to fire up the rockets on this thing that hadn't been fired up in 37 years to readjust the antenna because the gyro was wearing out or something like that. And it actually worked. So they were pumped.

Now it's lined up for its long journey to the next star Alpha Centari.

So that was cool, but it got me re-thinking on the vastness of space. This satellite has been traveling through space at a rate of 38,610 mph for 40 years. To calibrate yourself on that, when you're on a commercial airliner you're flying close to 600mph. So imagine traveling 70 times faster than that, which is about once around the world every 40 minutes or so and you travel that speed 24 hours per day for 40 years. Just last year that thing finally escaped the outer clutches of our solar system and was officially the first man-made object to reach interstellar space.

So of course everyone asks, when will it get to the nearest star? Well we know very precisely when that will happen. In 34,817 years it will be HALFWAY there. It's funny to think that our sun and this next star Alpha Centari are just two of the several billion stars in this "tightly packed" cluster of stars in the milky way galaxy.

Isn't that frightening to think about how much deathly cold empty space is in the universe. 1/4 of a second in that -450 degree vacuum and you'd be dead.

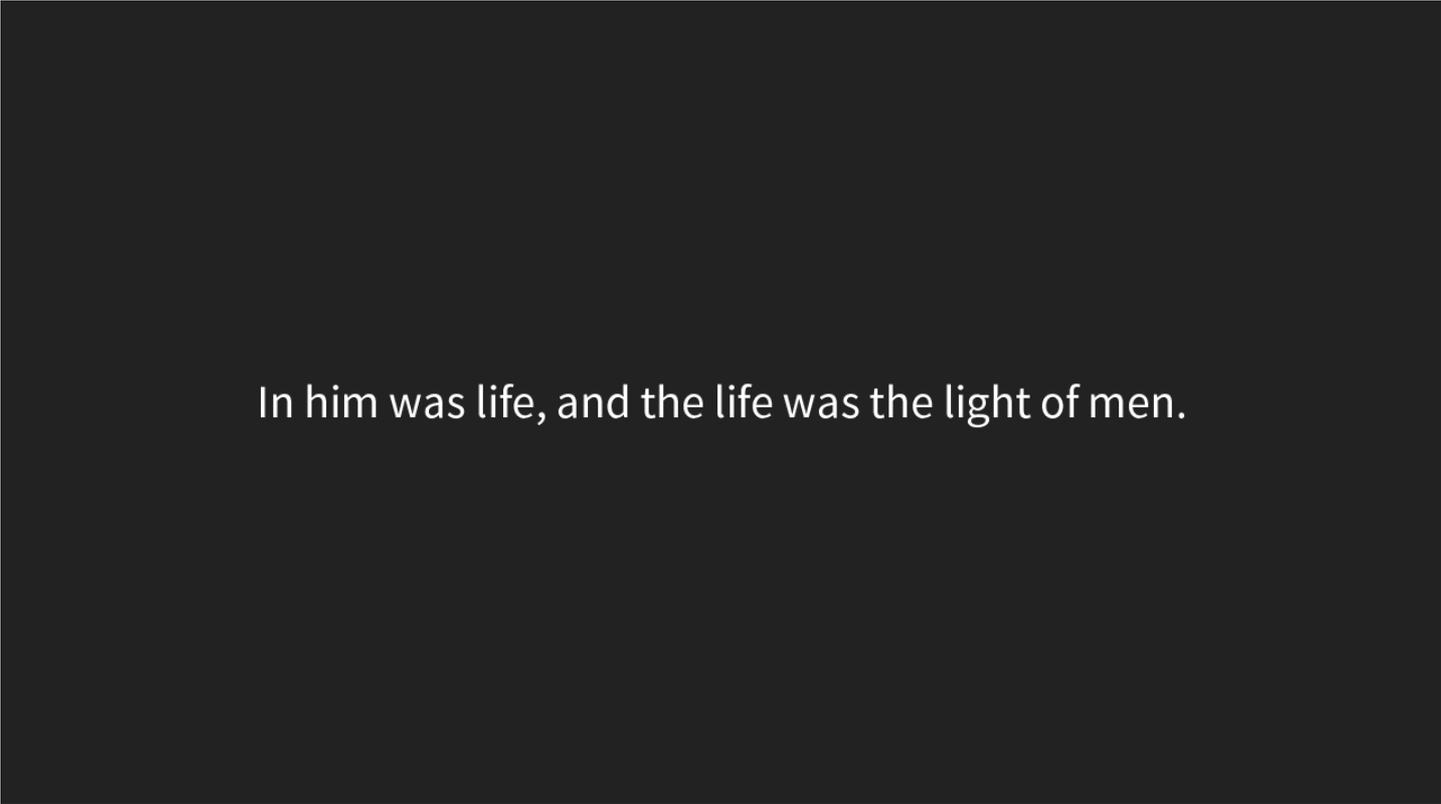
SO, when this text says, in the beginning was the Word. We need to look into space and allow that to be our teacher. What is the absence of God. What was in the beginning? If God doesn't inject his life-giving power what do we have. Nothing. Vacuum. Absolute ZERO. No heat, absence of life, absence of light. No sound. Nothing to smell or taste. There was NOTHING.

And then comes life.

All things we are told were made by him, and without him was not

anything made that was made. We think of the opposite of life as death. But that's not the best way to think of it. The opposite of life is non-living. It's a similar concept to saying the opposite of hot is not cold. Cold is just the absence of heat. Well death is just the absence of life.

Everything is dead unless there is a mind and a power that injects life into it. We all derive our life from some power outside of us. From a scientific point-of-view all life on earth gets its energy from the sun. Take away the sun, the earth dies... While the sun may be the source of energy for life on earth it does not represent the origin of life, the source of life. It doesn't tell us what gave us life. We find that in verse 4.



In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

In him was life. And certainly we have in this the Christian's answer as to where biological life came from. The ultimate source of life was from God. In Him was life? What is the "Him" referencing? The Word. Who is the word? If we drop down to verse 14 we see that this Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. So the word is

Jesus.

So in these first four verses, John has given us a summary of the Genesis narrative of creation and let us know that Jesus himself was involved in the creation of the world. But he's moving beyond that. Sure, God gave us biological life. But his coming to earth at Christmas is to give us a different kind of life.

He uses a metaphor to describe it. And the life he wants to give us was the light of men. Okay, now we are getting somewhere interesting. What does that mean? I think what this is pointing to is exactly what we talked about earlier. There is a difference between being alive and having LIFE, rich life. We can certainly understand the concept of differing qualities of life. We might even say there are different orders of life. And in the coming of Jesus somehow we are given this illumination that allows us to experience this true, highest order LIFE.

One of the best ways to understand this concept of higher and lower forms of life is to look at the various levels of life we are familiar with. What is the difference between the life, say, of a plant, the life of an animal and the life of a human?

A plant meets all the criteria for life according to science but clearly, it doesn't have the same kind of life as we do. We are a higher form of life. What makes us more alive, so to speak? Moving up the chain, what makes us more alive than a cricket or a hamster or a turtle? I think if you were really forced to distill this down to a single concept, you'd have to say that higher forms of life have a higher awareness of reality. The more awareness of reality we have, the more illumination, the more light we have, the more alive we truly are.

You can stand in front of a plant and wave your hand at it and it doesn't know you are there. It's not aware. You are real, but the plant can't perceive you as real. Your entire frame is towering over it 6 inches away and all it knows is that the sun went away.

Moving up the ladder, you can stand in front of a mouse and it knows you are there. It knows you exist and while he can perceive more reality about you than a plant he still can't really perceive who you are. So it is more alive than a plant. You might even say it's more alive than a human connected to life support? Why? Because that little mouse has more awareness of reality.

The less connected we are to reality, the more "animal" we become. And if we descend far enough we call people vegetables.

So when this passage says, "The LIFE was the LIGHT of men." What it means is that Jesus' very essence, his presence functioned like a flashlight to create a greater awareness of reality, which is to say, he infused life.

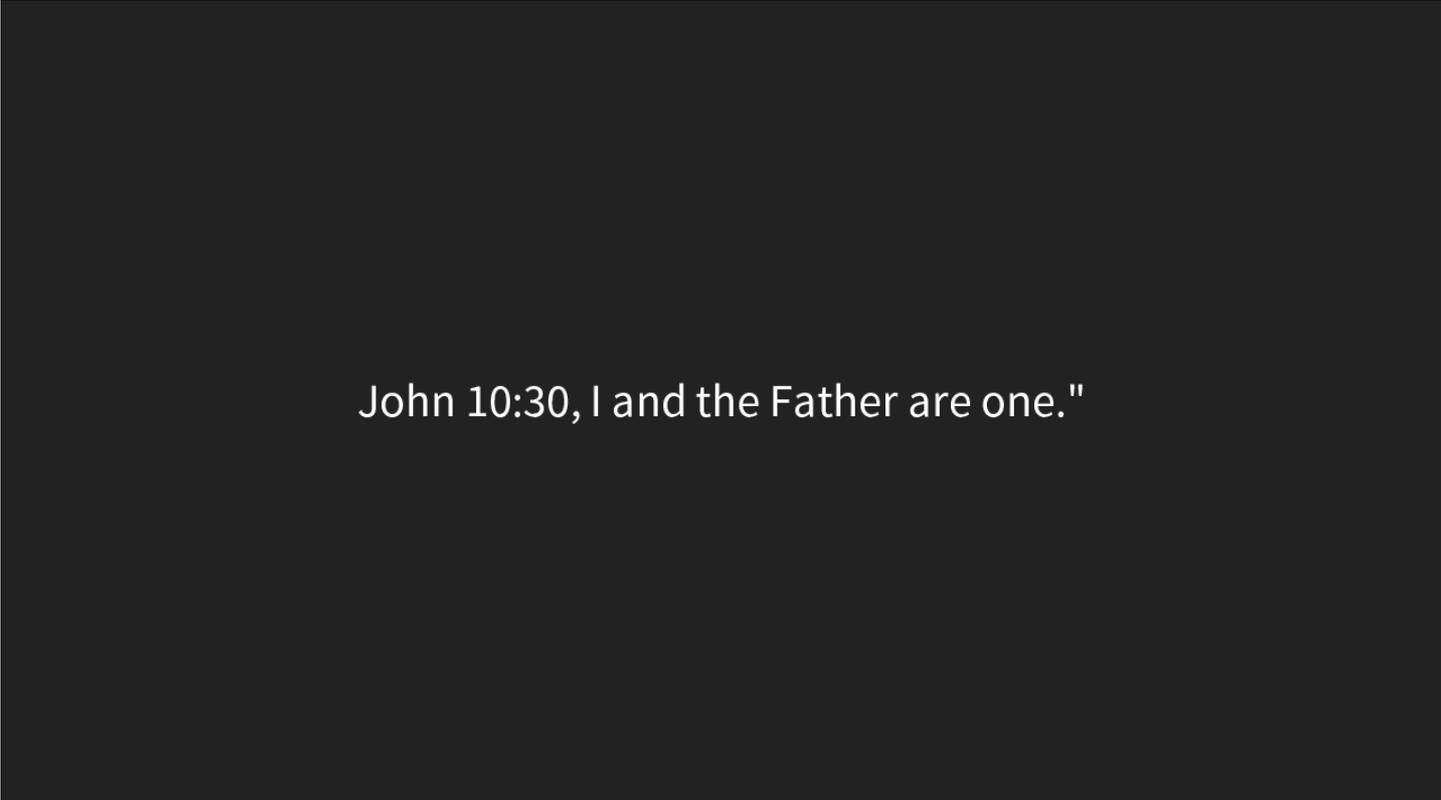
Let me try to summarize these first five verses into a sequence of thoughts:

1. Greater life is greater awareness of reality.
2. The Greatest Reality is God himself
3. Therefore, to experience the highest order of life, we need to be aware of the greatest possible realities.
4. Christmas is about giving us light to make us aware of the greatest reality of all, GOD HIMSELF.

What was the mission of Jesus? You might say Jesus came to save sinners. And that is true. But that is actually secondary to an even greater mission. Jesus came to reveal the Father, the greatest reality

of all.

This is a point the gospels make over and over again. That Jesus came to reveal the father. It's this giant point made from John 10-14, four chapters of the Bible whose overarching purpose is to try and make this point. In John 10 Jesus is wrangling with the religious leaders over his miracle working power and he summarizes their conversation by saying, you want see the father?



John 10:30, I and the Father are one."

Jesus came to reveal the father, the ultimate life-giving reality.

Two chapters later he heals Lazarus and again they are confronted with the miracle working power. We'd gladly ignore this guy but he can do miracles. Jesus explains why he can do miracles.

John 12:45-46, And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

Jesus came to reveal the father, the ultimate life-giving, light-revealing reality.

Two chapter later Philip actually asks Jesus, "Show us the father."

John 14:9, Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? **Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.**

Jesus came to reveal the father, the ultimate life-giving reality.

But probably the best one of all is right here in John 1. We are told in verse 1, In the beginning was the word.

John 1:14, And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So while it is true that Jesus came in weakness. And while it is true that he came to die. The really amazing and truly great thing, the thing that motivated all those other things, is that Jesus came to show us the father which produces life.

Jesus gives life by revealing the father. When Jesus tells Nicodemus in John chapter 3, "Listen, you need to be born again." What is he saying? Nicodemus' heart is pumping. He's living just fine.

He's saying you need a new level of life. There's another whole plane of living you are missing out on. You're like a flower and God is right in front of you. This massive complex reality and you are living in complete unawareness of it.

When we look at Jesus in that goat feeding dish we are seeing the very essence of life, the path to life. We are beholding a plane of existence a life-giving reality greater than anything hitherto we could have seen or known.

- The OT gave us a picture of God.
- Jesus gave us God. Jesus revealed God.
- Moses said, show me your glory.
- Vs 14 says, when that baby came in the manger, we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth.

Our entire worldview is flooded with light as we begin to understand who God is. When we look at the ministry of Jesus we see God the father, extending grace and delivering truth. We see that this father loves his sinful creatures enough to send his Son. We see that the father would send his Son in weakness and stigma and surrender his power and rights. And seeing this reality of earth-shattering love it transforms.

John 1:18, No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he [Jesus] has made him known.

The greatest life-giving reality of all is the reality of God himself. If the definition of TRUE life is abundant awareness of God then Jesus is the way to that life because he is the way to God. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth (awareness) and the life, nobody comes to the Father except through me.

So Jesus is the LIGHT. Now there are implications here. That light coming into the world reveals. Look at verse 5.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Christmas Meditations

Now it's time for some Christmas meditation. What are the implications of really beholding God? When we look at Jesus we are beholding, God, this ultimate, life-giving reality. We breathe in life. What are the implications of knowing and loving and being aware of this reality, of having access to this greater understanding of reality?

The text here says that the light, this true life shines into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. If lower life is

darkness, lack of awareness of reality, lack of awareness of God, then what does this darkness-penetrating life do? Or maybe the simplest way to say it: how does awareness of the Father through Jesus change us?

What happens when our affections are pointed to the all-satisfying person of Jesus Christ? The text says that this light will penetrate through the darkness in such a way that the darkness is just simply overpowered. This is one of my absolutely favorite concepts of Christianity. The world is so full of evil. It's so pervasive. And we are effected by evil and infect others with it. We are like fish just swimming in it and couldn't even consider an alternate arrangement. Evil is everywhere. But just like cold is the absence of heat, just like death is the absence of life, so evil is simply the absence of this life-giving reality which is pictured as penetrating light.

This power of life moves in and begins to just overcome the darkness. Let's spend some time trying to contemplate what this really means. How does this child in manger overcome darkness? Somehow by knowing the Father, by knowing this ultimate reality, we expel darkness.

1. Jesus' Life Overcomes Evil

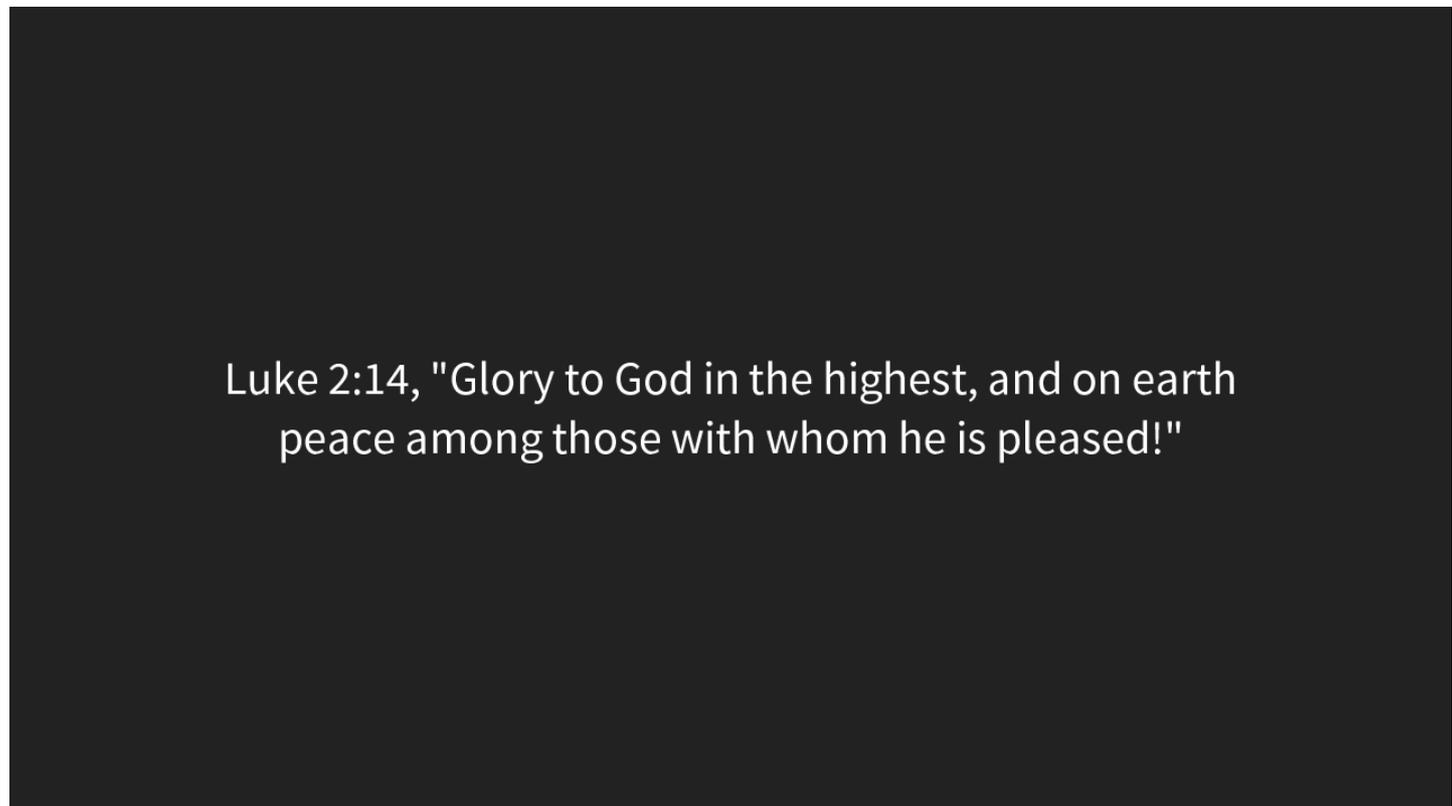
The evil and sin in the world is oppressive and Jesus has a solution. It's stunning. Now to understand the solution you have to understand what sin really is. You don't sin in a vacuum. All sin is in relationship to God. That's why an unbeliever can never really be moral. Sin is a religious concept. It's not just breaking a law of God, it's breaking a covenant you have with a person. It's putting a fracture in the relationship.

You see, there is a way the world is supposed to be. Do you believe that? If there is no God then of course there can't be a way things "ought to be" and therefore there can be no "violation of that intended order." But for the Christian, there is a way things ought to be. The Bible calls that peace. In the OT it's called shalom.

Sin breaks that peace. Sin destroys peace. And God hates sin for THAT reason. God isn't arbitrarily offended. God is pro-peace and therefore anti-sin. Sin could be defined as the spoiling of peace, the poisoning of it.

That's why Jesus came in a manger on Christmas. His mission was to restore shalom. Restore the world back to the way it was supposed to be. When the world is the way it is supposed to be, we experience peace.

Do you remember what the angels said to the shepherds?



Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

This peace is delivered in two parts. The atoning for sin in his first

coming and the deliverance from sin in his second. So we are still waiting for the full experience of it but we can get tastes. What does true peace on earth look like. What is this full life, this higher order of life really look like?

Imagine the Way it's Supposed to Be

Let's just imagine it. Imagine a world in which people, nature and God all act in perfect harmony. Imagine where your relationship with the father is fully restored. That is the way things are supposed to be at the most fundamental level. That is interacting with the greatest reality and therefore represents the greatest possible life.

Once that relationship is restored guess what happens.

There is peace with people. There is peace with nature and peace with God.

There is no vandalism on the way God designed things to be. Things just exist in their designed state and function as they ought in this perfect ecosystem.

Imagine there's no attack on the design of God.

- There's no sexism or racism because people are valued according to their design. There's no mental cramping that requires everyone to be like me or elevates me above others or the place God put me.
- Personal preferences are not divisive because they are seen in their proper place as part of God's creation of healthy diversity. Can you imagine joyfully surrendering your preference because you have a greater love for the diversity God created in others?
- Imagine a world in which we do not resist objective moral truth but instead love it because we believe it produces peace.

- Imagine a world in which you never suppressed truth. You longed for it. The Bible says we are sinful because we suppress the truth but we also suppress the truth because we are sinful. What if that cycle was broken. You welcomed the truth. There was no pride that resisted it.
- Dream of a world where there was no idolatry. No elevating of anything including yourself beyond it's proper place. Sports was enjoyed as a gift like lemonade but never worshiped. Nature was a pointer to the maker not worshiped as a mother.

But let's go deeper still. What if we were free of sin both individually and corporately.

Let's start by imagining this individual freedom. We probably have some loose familiarity with the traditional seven deadly sins. Nate taught on these in youth group over the summer. Pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust.

We can all agree these are bad but how much control do you really have over them? These are really symptoms of something pretty deep. Let's take envy as an example. Nobody wants to be envious. It's kind of an embarrassing sin. You don't choose to be that way. There was no moment where you were vacillating, should I or should I not be envious. And yet, there it is.

So what do you do about it? It's unhelpful to say, "Don't be envious" because the work required to be free of envy would take lifetimes. It's kind of like barking to the 500 pound overweight guy, "Weigh 100 pounds." You can't just do that. There are all these issues that play into it: physiological, psychological, social, identity. There's a history. And even if you could fix all that in an instant, the physical reality is that the fastest possible route would be years.

The reason I bring this up is I want to illustrate how broken the system really is which helps you to appreciate just how amazing the work of Christ really is. We are deeply flawed. We experience envy because our souls are horribly sick clear down to very, very core. Our souls are 500 pounds overweight and need repair and healing.

Sin is deep personal, but it's even more complicated still. Sin is also deep corporate and social.

Consider a white boy who is raised in a family of racists in the deep south in the 1850s. Every aspect of this boy's life is training him to absorb the "sins of his fathers.*"

- The modeling he gets from his adult role models,
- the education he receives in his schools
- the jokes that are accepted, laughed at, not corrected
- the way they interact, the structures of society.

The things he sees and experiences growing up will combine to corrupt his conscience and enable him to adopt without resistance the attitudes of his parents.

Now we would say without question, that racism is sinful, but who is at fault? Do you see the depth of sin.

Forget the deep south of the 1800s - what about now?

- Who decided what our cultural values would be? They are deeply engrained. And they are not God's values.
- Who decided to lace sexual imagery into our society at every level?
- Who decided what our cultural traditions would be? They are deeply a part of who we are but they aren't God's traditions.
- Who set up the list of expectations of how you are supposed to be in

middle school or high school? How you are supposed to conform? What you are supposed to care about? Who knows? But it certainly isn't what God would choose!

Someone, somewhere knew what they were doing was wrong. They broke the peace. And that sin, began a landslide, this complex matrix of interconnected threads represent this chain of influences that can be traced clear back to Adam and Eve.

Do you see the depth of it? I was thinking about the problem of child trafficking this week. It's such a horrible thing. And you can get so angry at the people that do that. But then you think, "How were they raised?" They were probably neglected and sinned against, and abused. They themselves may have been trafficked. Their behavior was totally a product of their upbringing. And you see how vicious the cycle is. I think about this all the time. I wonder how many of my great, great, great grandchildren generations from now that I will never know will reap the the consequences of my "innocent" sins. How much derived sin have we acquired from the sins of our great, great grandfathers we never knew?

But can you imagine a world that is free of that. Where the entire matrix, the grid from top to bottom is filled with the freedom of living under God and for God and to his glory.

Imagine a social situation in which we are concerned with building up the soul. Not just fixing the situation or the circumstances, but creating an environment for the spirit of a person to flourish. And an environment where we had time and emotional energy to do it.

Imagine a world in which wholeness was cared about. Imagine your neighbor caring about what truly animates you and gives you life

and imagine you caring about what animates and gives your neighbor life.

Imagine being able to care deeply about things that take a long time to nourish because you are drawing deeply from a renewable source of vitality.

Imagine longing for the beauty of God, longing for Christlikeness, for maturity.

Imagine a world where you keep all your promises. Where you listen with earnestness, where you weep with those who weep and perhaps even more impressively rejoice with those who rejoice.

Imagine a world in which trust in God removes insecurities that inevitably result from trying to parade around your accomplishments.

Imagine a world in which others take risks for you and you take risks for others. How is this possible, because they are so connected to the source of life, that if they risk themselves for you and lose it all, they 100 percent believe that God will give it back. That a cup of cold water given in his name will not go unnoticed.

Imagine a world in which discipline is exercised not because you have to or because you should but because it is through discipline of appetite that true appetite is created. We all know that self-indulgence suppresses gratitude. What if we were disciplined in all the right ways, all the non self-righteous ways so that we don't spoil our appetite for God.

What if we took interest in boring people, pondered the life of the marginalized, encouraged the neglected.

I want you to look into that manger and see the intent of God. To give life, to restore peace. God came in flesh to show you how things are supposed to be. God came to show you how you are supposed to be. God came to reveal himself, to reveal his love, to reveal the greatest reality, to give you life, the real life, this abounding life so that you could be this way. This is what eternal life means in the Bible.

Eternal life means you now understand what you previously had no awareness of. Imagine turning your dog into a human. You can almost imagine it. The dog would say, "Unbelievable! I had no concept of joy and sorrow. I mean I thought I understood what it meant to be happy but now I really see. I never understood this whole idea of purpose and meaning in life. I really had zero concept of beauty. I had no idea I was a brute."

So a person who becomes a Christian, and finally sees the love of God through Jesus is like a dog becoming human. A person who gets eternal life says, "I was as uncomprehending of

- holiness,
- of self-sacrifice,
- of sin and evil,
- of the righteousness God gives,
- of adoption into his family,
- of the gift of salvation,
- of heaven and hell.

I was totally unaware of all those things as an animal is uncomprehending of beauty and ugliness, of justice and tragedy. Do you see how God restores things to the way things are supposed to be and establishes shalom?

Gospel Priorities

Now I mentioned this restoration of peace comes in two phases. Christ in his first coming took away the penalty of sin. There is coming a day when he will remake us so that we can experience completely the way things are supposed to be.

So we are living in that life between. But that doesn't mean we can't experience much that is coming right now. What is the method? How do we experience this? By knowing the father now. If Jesus is how we know the father, and it is knowledge of the father that expels darkness and gives us light then the path to experiencing heaven on earth is knowing the father.

Well how do you do that? These are all the most basic disciplines you already know. It's reading your Bible, it's prayer, it's fellowship with other believers.

And it's in that vein that I want to introduce our theme for 2018. We are calling it Gospel Priorities. In our culture, I think the greatest obstacle to the kind of life we have been talking about is busyness.

Who has any time? Ask 20 Americans how they are doing and 19 will respond, busy! The industrialization of entertainment, the proliferation of electronic stimulant, the multiplication of opportunity has virtually pushed boredom to extinction. But there's another thing on the verge of extinction: God Himself.

Decades ago James Dobson said, "What is the biggest obstacle facing the family right now? It is over-commitment; time pressure. There is nothing that will destroy family life more insidiously than hectic schedules and busy lives, where spouses are too exhausted

to communicate, too worn out to have sex, too fatigued to talk to the kids. That frantic lifestyle is just as destructive as one involving outbroken sin. If Satan can't make you sin, he'll make you busy, and that's just about the same thing."

What better way to destroy fellowship with God than to make Christians endlessly busy? What better way to destroy the very foundations of Christian growth than to cast a spell of confusion on our minds so that we no longer believe we have time for the things that once brought us true fulfillment and peace.

We want to make 2018 not a year of adding but subtracting. We want to make God priority number one so that we can experience true life. The thing we are going to encourage you to do this year is stop doing so you can start being.

We'll have an entire message on this the third Sunday in January. But let's get thinking. What would God have me do so that I can really get to know him this year. If it's true that life is found through knowing God, then how can I get to know him?