

The Birth of the Saviour - Dr Marten Walker (Elder Stornoway)

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[0 : 00] Shall we turn for a while to study both of the passages that we read?! So you might want to keep a thumb in each passage.

What we've read today are passages which are being read a lot at the moment So these two accounts that we've read are where basically the birth of Jesus is recorded in the Scriptures.

Now normally this tends to be seen as something for children. And in fact as children many of us had books which inspired us about the coming of Jesus into the world.

So it's often seen as a childhood treasure. But what I want today is look at these not just as children would look at them but as adults would look at them.

To get an understanding of what really is being described here and what the significance of it all is. So there will be three headings.

[1 : 24] The first heading is the angels and the glory of God. So those two together. The angels and the glory of God. The second will be the three gifts.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. And the third heading will be the term the Christ. The Christ.

So three headings. The angels and the glory of the Lord. Then the three gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. And then the term the Christ.

Before we move into these headings though. We need a little bit of background. We need to understand something about the scriptures. We have two testaments.

The Old Testament and the New Testament. Often we're left with the impression that somehow the Old Testament is not important. And things become far more and vitally important when we get to the New Testament.

[2 : 35] And that means we've put an artificial break. A barrier between the two testaments. Now in our church's view that's not the case.

Everything here is the word of God. From beginning to end. Everything from the beginning of Genesis right through to the end of Revelation. And we see that in a way in the...

If we take the word New Testament. The word Testament there comes to us into English through Latin. And in fact if we were translating the Bible now we wouldn't call it the New Testament.

We would call it the New Covenant. The New Covenant. Which is closer to the original in the Greek. And the Old Testament.

We could call the Old Covenant. But you'll know there are several covenants there. So those would be better termed. Former covenants. Plural.

[3 : 43] So we basically have something continuous. From the beginning to the end. Which is to do with covenants. And that's to do with the relationship between God and man.

And remember Jesus himself at the Last Supper inaugurated what he said was the New Covenant. And that's then important to us in the communion service.

So there's something here that runs right through from the beginning of the scriptures right through to the end. And in fact if we were translating it now we wouldn't call... We would maybe give a different name to the New Testament.

Instead of saying New Covenant we might say the Final Covenant. This is the Final Covenant between God and man. Instituted between Jesus and his people at the Last Supper.

But it's to give you that sense that there's a continuity. And so when we read the passages we've read. It's not to see those as somehow appearing brand new out of nowhere.

[4 : 5 6] They have... Those passages have their roots in the earlier bits of the Bible. Which we call the Old Testament. Now the next bit of background is to realise that there are themes that run right through the scriptures.

And the theme which matters to us is that there is a golden thread that runs right through the scriptures. Which we're going to give a very simple name.

We're going to call it God's Rescue Mission. God's Rescue Mission. And that runs right through from Genesis to Revelation. Now God's Rescue Mission is to do with our salvation.

The theologians give it maybe more academic sounding names like the History of Salvation. Or Redemptive History.

But let's say we'll look at it in terms of God's Rescue Mission. So that's for all ages to understand. God is on a rescue mission in the scriptures from beginning to end.

[6 : 0 9] And when we come to these readings, God's Rescue Mission has reached its most critical phase. Jesus is coming into the world.

So let's go back to the three headings then. The angels and the glory of the Lord. The three gifts.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. And the term the Christ. And to realise that the clues to the meaning of all of these things.

The clues are in the Old Testament. So let's look at the angels and the glory of the Lord. We find angels both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

They're heavenly beings. And they're messengers. Messengers from God. And their normal effect on normal people like us is to cause terror and awe.

[7 : 1 3] We are shaken to our boots when we come across an angel. And that's just what happened here in Bethlehem. When the shepherds met, to start with one angel, it says, They were terrified.

And notice the very first words the angel uses is to put them at ease. And he says, fear not. He's got something very important to tell them.

Fear not. And in fact, for the youngsters, this is in Luke's Gospel.

You'll find the word, behold, appears here as well. And it says in verse 10, And the angel said to them, that's the shepherds, fear not. That's to put them at ease.

And then there's, for behold, that means because I've got something very important to tell you. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

[8 : 1 6] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. So angels terrify us.

If you meet an angel, your first reaction will be one of absolute terror. We're going to come back to the angels in a moment, but let's look at the glory of the Lord.

The description of it is when the angel comes to meet the shepherds. And so it's not just the angels the shepherds see, but all around them is the glory of the Lord, which is a golden, glistening cloud.

A golden, glistening cloud. And it wraps right around them. That golden cloud is God's very presence. God's very presence.

And here we need to look back into the Old Testament to work out what is this that's being described here as the glory of the Lord. And if we go back into the Old Testament, where Hebrew is the language, then we come across the word Shekinah.

[9 : 42] It's the Shekinah glory. And that glory appeared twice in the Old Testament. The first was at the dedication of the tabernacle in the time of Moses in Exodus chapter 40.

Exodus 40. Moses, the tabernacle, his dedication. This golden cloud comes and fills it. The next time is in 1 Kings chapter 8 when King Solomon dedicates the temple.

And a golden cloud comes and fills the temple. God's manifest presence. And now for a third time in the scriptures, with the coming of Jesus, the Shekinah glory comes.

And that gives us then a sequence, and this is important. There's a sequence, tabernacle, temple, Jesus. So remember that as we go on.

Tabernacle, temple, Jesus. We'll go back to the angels now. We started with one, and then suddenly, the Greek says, in a flash, a great multitude of the heavenly host appeared.

[11 : 13] In a flash, thousands upon thousands of angels appeared in the night sky. Now, what does that tell us?

Again, we need to go back into the Old Testament and look at God's name. God's name properly is the Lord of hosts, which means the Lord of the armies of heaven.

So here, at the birth of Jesus, God puts his armies on display, and those, that display of his military force points to his name, the Lord of hosts.

If we were to count right through the Old Testament how many times the term the Lord of hosts appears, it's 235 times.

And all of that now comes together in declaring this Jesus is the Christ. This Jesus is the Savior.

[12 : 28] this Jesus is the Lord. He's divine. Now, let's look at angels in the New Testament.

We've looked back and we've seen that they point to God's name in the Old Testament. Let's look in the New Testament.

They appear when Jesus is born and they proclaim his birth and also at his resurrection. Remember the women at the tomb.

They are the ones to proclaim the resurrection. So both birth and resurrection of Jesus are proclaimed by divine messengers.

angels. And angels also acted as a support to Jesus during his earthly ministry. After his battle with Satan in the wilderness, it's an angel who comes to strengthen him.

[13 : 35] In Gethsemane, when he is facing the awful horror of what is to happen on the cross, but he says to his father, your will be done.

It's an angel who comes to support him and strengthen him. But there were times when angels did not appear. An angel did not appear when he was betrayed.

An angel did not appear when he was on trial before the chief priests or before Pilate. or before Herod. And an angel did not appear when he was crucified.

He faced all of these things alone. And that's because he had to. Our salvation depended on Jesus himself facing all of these challenges and then dying.

He had to face all of that himself. In no way could it be permitted that it be said that Jesus had any help in rescuing us.

[14 : 59] Jesus had to face all of that alone. There is an intriguing thought though. What if an angel had appeared? what if an angel had come to help him?

And there is a reference in Matthew 26. At Gethsemane, when Judas comes with his rabble and the temple guard to arrest Jesus, and Peter draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus actually says, stop, no.

And he says, do you not realize that I could appeal to my father and he would at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?

that tells us the armies of heaven, the very ones that appeared at his birth, were on permanent standby for Jesus. And he could appeal to them, to his father, and they would be sent.

And the phrase he uses is at once, which is very similar to what we read here in Luke, in a flash. But Jesus declined to appeal to his father because he knew that our salvation depended entirely on him facing death on the cross alone.

[16 : 38] Now that's the end of our study of angels and the glory of God. And just hold that thought in your head that there is something here in the angels and also the glory of God about God's mighty power and also about God's presence.

So Jesus' birth involves something of God's mighty power and his presence. Let's move on rapidly onto the gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

often things that we've been mystified since childhood about. What I want to do here is say, let's look at the three gifts together, all three gifts together, not individually, and then ask, where in the Old Testament do we find gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

And there are two places. One is in Song of Solomon, chapter 3, verse 6, and I'll leave it to you as homework to take away, homework this afternoon.

Song of Solomon, chapter 3, verses 6 to 11. And that's where the woman in the Song of Solomon, is describing her lover, her fiancé, her husband-to-be coming up out of the desert.

[18 : 11] And it's a description of King Solomon, but it's often taken looking forward to Jesus.

And the title given to that section in Song of Solomon is The Coming of the King. My challenge to you is read that passage later today and find gold, frankincense, and myrrh there.

Next, the other place where gold, frankincense, and myrrh appears in the Old Testament is in Exodus chapter 30. And that's when the tabernacle is being constructed, God's special tent in the wilderness.

house. Now, remember that tent. So there's gold, frankincense, and myrrh being used there. And that's the place which is God's dwelling place.

But more than that, it's not just God's dwelling place, it's God's dwelling place obviously amongst his people. So they could look at his tent and say that's where the living God dwells, our God.

[19 : 23] and then more than that. The tabernacle was the place where human sin was atoned for by sacrifice.

And then to allow access to the presence of the living God one day a year on the day of atonement. Now remember by the time of Jesus the temple had taken over all of the functions of the tabernacle.

So all of the functions. And by the time of Jesus it was still in use. The temple was still being used and inside the temple was gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Again, read Exodus 30 later. You've got to read it right through and find gold, frankincense and myrrh. now I just want you to imagine something.

Cast your minds back to Jesus being born. Imagine you lived in Bethlehem and you've heard remarkable things. You've heard about the Shekinah glory coming which had not been seen in almost a thousand years.

[20 : 42] you've heard of angels. You've heard of the gifts. You've heard of the Christ coming and you've heard of the Saviour.

And you're bewildered. You're one of God's people. You climb up a hill near Bethlehem and you look north and you see Jerusalem which is only five miles away.

if you think driving from here to Stornoway is 11 miles. Imagine just stopping halfway and then look towards Stornoway.

But here you're looking towards Jerusalem and you can see something that stands 15 stories high which is the temple. With the renovation of the temple by Herod it was 15 stories high and all of the outside was covered in gold and it glinted in the sunshine.

And the Jewish Talmud says that it was the most beautiful building in the whole world. Now what I want you to do, and here you can use the analogy of the War Memorial above Stornoway, five miles from it, just look at it.

[22 : 00] Imagine though you're here in Bethlehem. You're on a hill, you're looking towards the temple in Jerusalem. Now you know that gold, frankincense and myrrh are being used there every day.

And then you say that's, in that temple is where the living God dwells. And then you look down at Bethlehem and say there's a young child here who's been given gold, frankincense and myrrh by mysterious strangers.

could it be that the living God dwells in him? Moving on, you think again, you look at the temple and you say there's gold, frankincense and myrrh being used there every day and that's where the living God dwells obviously.

We see his home here on earth. And then you look down and you think this young child's been given gold, frankincense and myrrh. could it be that this young child is actually the living God dwelling obviously amongst us?

And you've actually just quoted a verse in John chapter 1. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. And then the final thing about gold, frankincense and myrrh.

[23 : 19] You look to the temple and you say that is where human sin is atoned for by sacrifice to allow access to the presence of God but only one day a year on the day of atonement.

And then you look down to Bethlehem and you say there's a young child here who's been given gold, frankincense and myrrh. Could it be that in him human sin will be atoned for by sacrifice to allow access to the presence of the living God?

Now if you lived in other thirty years and you stood outside Jerusalem, you would see three crosses, three crosses thirty years later.

And on the middle cross, that young child having grown to full manhood. And yes, on the cross, that young child who was given gold, frankincense and myrrh, truly did in his sacrifice atone for human sin, but not just one day a year of access to the living God.

That atoning sacrifice allowed access to the presence of the living God every moment of every day. And that's what we know when we come to be saved.

[24 : 46] That's what we know when salvation is conferred upon us by Jesus. Now that's the end of the study of the gifts. And I'm sorry if the time is moving on.

These are the sorts of things that really excite me, so I hope you can bear with my excitement. The next is the term the Christ. The Christ is not a name.

We often think of it as a surname. We say Jesus Christ. But when we say that, we're thinking in a very modern way. Thinking in a very modern way.

The term the Christ is actually a title. It's not a name. If we say it in Greek, it's Christos. If we say it in Hebrew, it's Messiah.

And all of that means the anointed one. And that means set apart for holy purposes. But this title then, it's equivalent to saying, if you met the king, or you were speaking about the king, you would say the title would be the king.

[26 : 05] If you were talking about a minister, you would talk about the reverend. If you know any lords of the realm in the House of Parliament, you would say the Lord, like the Lord Mackay of Clash Fern.

So it's a title. So it's better, instead of saying Jesus Christ, we should say Jesus the Christ, or we should reverse it and say Christ Jesus.

Now this title is really important as we go back into the Old Testament. Remember, the Old Testament holds the clues for meaning, especially when we come to the coming of Jesus into this world.

If we go back to the Old Testament, we find there were three offices where someone was anointed. Three offices set apart for holy service.

The first we come across are the priests, next the kings, and finally the prophets. So in an Old Testament order, it's priest, king, prophet.

[27 : 17] But what in the New Testament we do with that is we change the order to prophet, priest, and king, and all three of those come together in Jesus. So Jesus is, yes, a king, he's, yes, a prophet, and a priest.

He is all three. Now that's the end of our study of the term the Christ, and again, it's the Old Testament that has given us the clues for the meaning of what we've read in these remarkable passages.

We're coming to a conclusion now. We're almost done. We need to go right back to the beginning of the sermon and one of the background issues. We said the most important theme of all scripture is God's rescue mission.

God's rescue mission, that he's taken on himself to rescue the likes of us. Human sin was the problem.

The same thing I said in the children's address about the Bible, if it broke that I couldn't fix. We can't fix our sins. We can't make ourselves right with God.

[28 : 30] So God steps in. He steps into human history, and he restores the relationship. So the clues to the purpose of Jesus coming, even at his birth, are in the Old Testament.

In a way that the world might understand, Christmas points to Easter. Christmas points to Easter. Remember the Shekinah?

the Shekinah and the gifts both told us the same thing. There's a sequence, tabernacle, temple, Jesus. The purpose of all three is the same.

And remember our meditation on that hillside above Bethlehem. And if you still have to come to a saving faith in Jesus, I would say just go through that meditation in your head.

So remember the sequence, tabernacle, temple, Jesus. They all have the same purpose. You're on that hillside now.

[29 : 52] You're looking towards the temple in Jerusalem. You're looking down to Bethlehem to see Jesus. and then here it is. Here in Jesus is where the living God dwells.

Here in Jesus is where the living God dwells among his people. Obviously, they can see him. And here in Jesus is where human sin is atoned for by sacrifice till I accessed the presence of the living God, not just one day a year, but every moment of every day for his people.

Amen. We've now come to the end of the service. At the end of the sermon, shall we now bow for a short prayer? O Lord our God, inspire us with your very self.

Please go with us when we part. And please speak into our lives. Take something of what has been studied of your word to inspire us through these coming days.

And that if by Wednesday or Thursday we are still thinking on something from this sermon, that you are at work in the lives of people, and especially Lord, please bring people to a saving faith in Christ Jesus.

[31 : 28] Thank you again for this opportunity to study your word, to be in this place. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, our final singing is on page 314 and it's Psalm 72, the traditional version.

And I chose this one because this one also, this section of scripture is also regarded as the coming of the King.

The coming of the King. I'll read it through before we sing. So, Psalm 72 from verse 17 to the end. His name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall.

Men shall be blessed in him and blessed. All nations shall him call. now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, for he alone doth wondrous works in glory that excel.

[32 : 48] And blessed be his glorious name to all eternity, the whole earth let his glory fill. Amen. So let it be.

Shall we sing these wonderful words of praise to our God? Amen. His name forever shall endure, last like a son it shall.

Men shall be blessed in him a blessed all nations shall him call.

Now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, God for he just wondrous wondrous words in glory that excel And blessed be his glory his name to all eternity The whole earth let his glory fail

Amen So let it be Shall we now receive the blessing from the Lord in the benediction May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of us Amen as