



To Bless the World

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Note: The following content is a raw transcript and has not been edited for grammar, punctuation, and word usage.

0:00:01.2 Speaker 1: So good morning everybody and Merry Christmas. Thanks for joining us from wherever you're joining us from. No doubt you have already seen, or you will soon begin to see the signs and the bumper stickers and the clings that say, Jesus is the reason for the season. You may have already seen one of these. In fact, you may have one of these on your car or somewhere on a Christmas decoration in your house. And I certainly appreciate the sentiment behind this that Jesus versus the commercialization of Christmas, let's keep Christ in Christmas. Jesus is the reason that we celebrate Christmas. But if Jesus was correct, and of course I think Jesus was certainly correct, and if the authors of the New Testament were correct, and I certainly think they were correct as well, it may be more accurate to say that you are the reason for the season and you are the reason for the season and I'm the reason for the season because without us there would be no Christmas, or more to the point, if we weren't such a mess, right?

0:01:02.1 Speaker 1: If we weren't such a mess, no Christmas. For God so loved this rebel race, we talk about this all the time, for God so loved this rebel race that he actually moved in our direction, sent us a savior. So maybe, and this is probably a terrible idea, some new clings or some new bumper stickers or maybe some new Christmas tree ornaments are in order. Maybe one that says, I'm the reason for the season, that'll get you in trouble. Or if you don't love where you currently work, maybe a cling that says my boss is the reason for the season. Or perhaps if you don't wanna be invited to Christmas dinner, my mother-in-law is the reason for the season. And I just wanna be clear, Jackie, if you're watching, I'm not talking about you, I've just heard stories about other mothers-in-law.

0:01:42.9 S1: Anyway, the point is simply this, that the birth of Jesus was for our benefit, that Christmas was for our benefit and it benefited us in so many ways. So what we're gonna do for these next three times together during this Christmas season, we're gonna talk specifically about or focus specifically on three reasons that Jesus came and how Jesus benefited us and how that very first Christmas and the Christmases thereafter really were for us because, well, for God so loved the world. And the first reason we're gonna talk about actually comes to us, and this is gonna be a little bit different angle, it comes to us by way of what I'm referring to as the story of Christmas. Now, we're all familiar with the Christmas story, but some of us aren't as familiar with the story of Christmas or specifically the backstory to the Christmas story. And the story of Christmas does not begin with a pregnant teenager who's wondering, exactly how in the world did I become pregnant?

0:02:39.0 S1: It actually begins with a couple who could not get pregnant. It begins with a couple, this is the amazing thing about the story of Christmas, it begins with a couple who lived 2000 years before the first Christmas who wanted to have a child and they were not able to have a child. It begins with, it's a remarkable story that begins with a less, as we discover, a less than remarkable man named Abram. We know him as Abraham. So here's how the author of Genesis begins the story of Christmas, the backstory to the Christmas story. It says this, it says, the Lord God said to Abram who will eventually become Abraham, I want you to go from your country and your people and your father's household to the land that I will show you. Now, we're not told why God chose Abram just as we're not told why God specifically chose Joseph and Mary, but what we do know, we don't know why God chose them, but here's what we do know. In ancient times, somewhat like modern times, but even more so, in ancient times, a person's country, a person's



people and a person's household represented security and protection.

0:03:47.6 S1: And God says to this man that he seemingly just chose because he just needed somebody to get this thing kicked off, he says to Abraham, I want you to leave essentially everything that you know and everything that provides you with security and in exchange here's what I'm gonna do for you. And this is where the story begins. God says to Abram, if you'll do what I've asked you to do, I'm gonna make you a great nation. Now, interesting and maybe you know this, Abraham is about 75 years old when God says to him, hey, I want you to leave everything you know, I'm gonna make you a great nation. And perhaps because he and Sarah were not able to have children, he was thinking, I don't know about great nation, I'd be happy just being a great-great-grandfather, right? Or just a great-grandfather. I don't know about the nation thing, but God wasn't finished. The promise goes on like this. He says, and I'm gonna bless you and I will make your name great. The reason that all of us have heard of Abraham before today is because this promise certainly came true. His name became great, but there was even more.

0:04:50.9 S1: And what God says to Abraham next really is what sets the stage for the Christmas story. And again, 2000 years before the first Christmas, here's what God says to Abraham, and you will be a blessing, which means, Abraham, somebody, somebody in the world is going to be better off because of you. And of course the question he would ask is who? And this really is the amazing, unbelievable part of the promise. Because what God promises next was absolutely impossible, unthinkable, unimaginable. Here's who God says would be better off because of this man, Abraham and his faith and his decision to follow, here's what he says. And all peoples on earth will be blessed or all peoples on earth will be better off because of you.

0:05:50.1 S1: Now, this was unimaginable just on the surface, but within that cultural context, you need to know that in ancient times, people did not bless one another. They conquered, they enslaved and they plundered one another, but no, they did not bless one another. But in spite of this, Abraham, we're told, believed God's promise is outlandish as it was, obeyed God and left all of his security, everything he knew, followed God. And even though he was obedient to God, Abraham did not live long enough to see this promise fulfilled. He and Sarah, as you probably know, eventually do have a son, Isaac, and then begins the story of one of the most dysfunctional families you can imagine. Regardless of how dysfunctional your family is, you just look at the family or trace the family and the lineage of Abraham. And I mean, it really is unimaginable. If you've ever wondered, have I gone so far that God could never use me, just study the story of Abraham.

0:06:48.4 S1: In fact, just a couple of interesting tidbits. Abraham, in fact, the dysfunction really begins with him. Abraham, at one point along the way, meets a king, and Sarah is so beautiful, he's absolutely convinced the king is gonna kill him and steal his wife and put Sarah in his harem. And so Abraham lies, imagine this, ladies, Abraham lies and says, no, no, she's not my wife, she's my sister. And sort of technically she was his sister. And then Isaac, their son, their only son together, actually does the same thing with his wife, lies about his wife and says, no, because she was so beautiful, no, no, no, she's my sister. And then it just goes from there. Isaac has a couple of sons. They hate each other. They literally, their families go to war with one another. One of Isaac's sons, as you know, if you know the story, actually had 12 sons and 10 of the sons actually sold one of their brothers into slavery, and it just goes on and on and on.

0:07:43.2 S1: So early on, nobody in Abraham's family was being blessed and nobody was being blessed because of Abraham's family. Eventually the whole family ends up in Egypt as slaves. And as a slave nation, as a slave state, they certainly aren't in a position to bless anybody. Then, if you know the story, God sent Moses, this is hundreds of years later, God sent Moses. And by the time Moses led the nation of Israel out of slavery, Egypt was not feeling very blessed. Not very long after that, the Canaanites were not feeling very blessed either. So this goes on and on and on. And perhaps people had forgotten about God's promise to Abraham, perhaps they had toned it down a bit. But if you would pause the story at that point in the story and say, wait a minute, Abraham, the descendants of Abraham, God told



your forefather that the whole world was gonna be blessed through him. And we don't see any of that happening. In fact, we don't even see the potential for that happening.

0:08:45.1 S1: Hundreds of years go by, a thousand years after, think about it, a thousand years after God made Abraham this promise. His descendants are so large, they have become an official kingdom. We know it as the kingdom of Israel. But as a kingdom, even then, they don't bless the nations around them. Their first two kings go to war with all the nations around them. And then their third king makes a terrible decision. The third king, Solomon, decides to marry the daughters of the surrounding nations, worship the gods of the surrounding nations. And before long, instead of blessing the nations, the nation of Israel has become just like the nations they were supposed to bless. And then if you know the story, God judges the nation, divides the nation. He actually sends the surrounding nations into the nation of Israel to punish them. At some point, literally, God puts the best and the brightest of them in time-out because they'd been so disobedient and so unfaithful to God. At one point in the story, Nebuchadnezzar's stormtroopers, as you may know, come into Jerusalem and destroy Solomon's temple.

0:09:53.6 S1: And if again, if you pause the story at that point, you would say the opportunity is lost. Perhaps as a kingdom, especially during the reign of Solomon, the golden rule, the golden age of Israel, there was an opportunity there to do something for the nations to be a blessing to the world. And you squander that opportunity, you lost that opportunity. That opportunity has come and it's gone. But in spite of the fact that Israel wasn't even in a position to bless herself, God is the promise keeper. God is the promise keeping God. And in the midst of all the chaos, in the midst of all the turmoil, in all the death and the disruption, God from time to time would send a prophet to speak to the nation. And prophet after prophet would remind the nation that God has a plan for you. And God's not given up on the promise. And even though it seems out of reach and unattainable, God is at work and God is gonna keep his promise to Abraham. Isaiah was one of those prophets. Imagine how these words must have sounded and must have felt at a time of economic turmoil, at a time again, when they couldn't even care for themselves, much less think about being a blessing to anybody else.

0:11:00.9 S1: Isaiah writes these famous words, he says, I will also, this is God speaking to the nation, I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, I'm gonna make you a light, a bright shining example to all the surrounding nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. To which they must have thought, a light to the Gentiles? It's dark in our nation. How are we gonna be a light to anybody? Besides that, the Gentiles, they're not impressed with us. They're not impressed with Yahweh. Israel couldn't even save herself. How in the world is she gonna bring salvation to the ends of the earth? This was insulting. Their economy at this time was in shambles. Nobody's feeling blessed. Nobody's in a position to bless anybody. There is no possible way what God promised Abraham all those years ago was gonna take place.

0:11:57.4 S1: Then around 436 BC, 1600 years, it's very difficult for us to get our minds around this time period, 1600 years, 1600 years after God makes the promise to Abraham, 1600 years later, God sends another prophet, the prophet Malachi. And again. If we were living in that day and age, if we were living within Judea or even what would be Galilee, we would hear these words and we think, this is impossible. This is insulting. Malachi comes along and he says this, don't give up hope. Don't surrender hope. Don't quit believing. And to which the people are like, what? Malachi says, my name, again, God's speaking to the prophet, my name will be great among the nations. The people of Israel are like, if they'd had an opportunity to respond, they would say, no, it won't. You don't understand. Your name is being mocked among the nations. Your nation, no offense, God, is pathetic. Look at us. We can't feed ourselves. We can't protect ourselves. So stop with all the hype. I mean, Zeus, the name of Zeus will be great among the nations. Eventually the name of Jupiter will be great among the nations. And buckle up, because Alexander is about to leave his mark on the nations. And his name will be great, right? It becomes his nickname, Alexander the Great. But not Yahweh and not Israel and not our kingdom.



0:13:26.8 S1: Malachi wasn't even finished. Listen to this. He says, no, God's not finished. From where the sun rises to where it sets, that is everywhere in the world, in every place, he doubles down, in every place, incense and pure offerings will be brought to me because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord almighty. And nobody took him seriously. And we would not have either because it was impossible. It was out of reach. They, the nation had already been overrun by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, and it went on and on and on. Then, to add insult to injury, 63 BC, Pompey comes to Judea, takes the city of Jerusalem by force, murders about half the priesthood, and annexes that entire region into the Roman empire, the Republic of Rome. And so begins the famous Roman occupation of Judea and Galilee.

0:14:33.5 S1: So clearly, if we'd shown up in that part of the story, if we'd hit pause and reflected on what God told Abraham, three things were absolutely clear. All the nations, all the nations would not be blessed through Abraham. Israel would not be a light to the Gentiles. And clearly, clearly, their God would not be worshiped throughout the world because nobody was interested in a God who was too weak to take care of his own people. And then, then when things were as hopeless as they could have possibly been, then when God's promise to Abraham was completely and hopelessly out of reach, God moved. In fact, the apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee, who then becomes a Jesus follower, he's looking back on this entire story arc because as a Pharisee, he knew the Old Testament backwards and forward.

0:15:33.7 S1: He knew the history of his own people. He was able to put all of this in context, and just a few years after the resurrection of Jesus as he contemplates this story and how God fulfilled his promise to Abraham through Jesus. Here's how he sets it up. I actually, I love this phrase. Here's how Paul writes it. He says, when the set time, when the set time had fully come, I love this, when the set time had fully come, in other words, when God had everything just the way he wanted it, an expanding empire, an expanding empire that was exporting a common culture and a common language, a highway system, a seaport system that connected all the major world population centers, a means by which to export this message that was for the world and to the world, when the set time had fully come, when things were just the way God wanted them to be, God finally, the nation would eventually understand, those who became Jesus followers, God finally sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

0:16:52.1 S1: And the virgin's name was Mary. So you see, if you stop and it's so difficult for us to get our mind around this many years and this kind of a story arc, but in some ways, in fact, in many ways, the story of Christmas or the backstory to the Christmas story, the story of Christmas with all of its crazy twists and turns, all the off-ramps and the interruptions and the dead ends and the ends and the it's never gonna happen, the story of Christmas actually makes the Christmas story much easier to believe. A narrative, think about it, that played out over 2000 years... When Jesus was finally born, Babylon was uninhabitable. When Jesus was born, the entire Persian empire had been greatly diminished. When Jesus was born, Alexander's kingdom had been carved up. Rome was considered eternal, but eventually even Rome would capitulate to the baby king. And perhaps, and this is just my opinion, perhaps, maybe, perhaps the reason God waited so long was a political reason. Perhaps God was making somewhat of a political point, namely that the kingdoms, the kingdoms of this world, the kingdoms of this world do not have the capacity to bless the world, only rule the world.

0:18:16.6 S1: So we shouldn't be surprised that years later when the baby of Bethlehem becomes the prophet and becomes the rabbi Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised that when Satan, as Matthew records for us, that when Satan took Jesus, remember this narrative from his life, when Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain and he showed him, what did he show him? All the kingdoms of this world and their splendor. And he says to Jesus, he says, Jesus, I will give you all of this. I will surrender all of these kingdoms to you if you will simply surrender to me for a moment, if you will simply bow down and recognize me as your superior for just a moment. If you'll just bow down and worship me. And you remember what Jesus said, these are my words, not his. No, thank you. No, thank you. That's not why I've come. I've not come to assume command. I've not come to assume command of a network of failed kingdoms filled with



peacekeepers, but not peacemakers. I've not come to conquer the world. I've come to bless the world by giving my life for the world, to demonstrate the way forward for the world.

0:19:33.3 S1: The Virgin's name was Mary. And the angel went to her and said, again, unimaginable, but the whole story is unimaginable, the backstory, the story, it's all unimaginable. You will conceive, the angel says, and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus and he will be great. And again, how great will he be? Well, finally the name of Abraham is great and Jesus, your son will be even greater. He will be great. And he is gonna be called unlike Abraham, unlike anyone who's ever lived before or will ever live, he will be called the son of the most high. And so God kept his promise. Israel would in fact be a light to the world. The God of Israel would in fact, and is in fact being worshiped throughout the world. And the world would in fact be blessed through Abraham. The world would be better off because of Abraham.

0:20:37.3 S1: And so, so ends the backstory to the Christmas story. A 2000 year saga, fascinating, amazing, inspiring. But it's also, if you stop and think about it, it's also a bit convicting. And here's why I say that. And as I thought about this story and every time I think about it, it is so unimaginable, but it's so real. And it so happened. As I think about it, I think about the implications for me. And I think honestly, I think about the implications for us, I think about the implications for the church at large and for men and women who call themselves Christians and for the pockets of people who consider themselves Jesus followers. The implications are this. If the arrival of Jesus was a blessing to the world, shouldn't Jesus followers be a blessing to the world as well? Using the word that God said to Abraham that then said the angel said to Mary, if the arrival of Jesus was intended to be a blessing and has in turn turned out to be a blessing to the world, should not Jesus followers be a blessing to the world as well? Are we? Am I? Are you?

0:21:48.5 S1: If, think about it this way, if the world is better off because of Jesus, shouldn't our world and our communities be better off because of Jesus' followers? Is it? And if Jesus is the light of the world, shouldn't our collective presence in the world make the world brighter? Does it? And does it matter? And the answer is of course it matters. It matters a great deal. And these are good questions for us to ask. These are good questions for us to ask individually as Jesus followers. And these are good questions to ask as a group of churches. And these are especially good questions to ask at this time of the year. Good questions to wrestle with. And from where I sit, if I had to answer those questions specifically for us, and if you're not normally a part of our online stream, and if you're not part of one of our local churches around the city, the state, and really around the world, this may sound a little bit strange, but I'll say it anyway. From where I sit, you are a blessing to your community. And you are a light in our world. And people in your communities and in our neighborhoods and in the areas surrounding our churches, people really are better off because of you.

0:23:14.0 S1: And the reason is not because you're extraordinary or remarkable any more than Abraham was remarkable or extraordinary, the reason is because you have chosen not to be content with simply believing things about Jesus, but you have decided to follow Jesus and to live out the values of Jesus and to embrace the way of Jesus. And whenever a community of people come together and do that, the world becomes a better place. So, at Christmas, God blessed the world with a different kind of king. We talk about that all the time, who came to establish a different kind of kingdom, an upside down kingdom, an others first kingdom. And wherever and whenever his followers come together to live that out and to embrace and live out that simple kingdom, others first ethic, the world is a better and blessed place. But as it turns out, to bless the world was just one of three reasons God gave us Christmas. And we're gonna talk about the second one next time in part two of Reasons for the Season.

0:24:28.5 S1: I'd love to pray for us. Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you for this season, thank you for what it represents and means to so many of us. And we really do, as your followers and followers of your son, we really do wanna get it right, we wanna get our part right because we have been so blessed and we see that as an opportunity. In fact, we see it as a stewardship to ensure that the people around us and the communities around us are blessed as well.



So teach us how, show us how to be a light to our communities as you have been a light in our lives. And we pray all of that in the matchless name of Jesus, our King, amen.