

# Luke 2:1-20

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[0:00] Please be seated and I wonder if you could just turn back with me to the reading we had so well read for us on page 7. So Luke chapter 2, one of the biographies of Jesus written by a doctor, Dr. Luke.

And actually on Hope Explored, that's the passage, that's the book of the Bible we look at. So have a look at it now. We'd love you to look at it again in January if we come back.

But let me pray as we begin. Heavenly Father, as you send the angels to explain Christmas to the shepherds on that hillside, we pray now you'd send your Holy Spirit just in these few moments to help us unwrap Christmas together.

Amen. It's a dreadful feeling, isn't it, going into an exam or a presentation when you know you just haven't made time to properly prepare.

And so the butterflies mount as the moment of humiliation draws near. And then those terrible words from my school and university days. Do you remember those words in the summer term?

Please turn over your papers.

[1:04] Those exam words in the whole sort of forum. And actually at that moment I often found myself recalling the examinee's verse. Do you know the examinee's verse? Jeremiah 33 verse 3.

The Lord says, call on me and I will answer you and tell you great and hidden things you do not know. Now of course you may not be able to relate to that because you're a sad and boring swat at school. But having got a third at university, I certainly can.

In fact, when I got my third, I remember saying to my tutor, was I close to a 2-2? He said, no, it's a very solid third. So I knew then the ordination to the Church of England was the only queer option available.

So I got ordained and became a vicar. And I thought, well, it's fine. I'm just going to work one day a week. It's going to be fine. And then suddenly in the first month that I got into this new church, I got that awful feeling of butterflies and not being prepared again.

Because I was asked to help a couple get ready for marriage. Everyone was on holiday. This couple had met. And I just got it through. They said, someone's got to do marriage prep. And I didn't know anything about marriage.

[2:05] I mean, literally, there was nothing I knew about it. I could relate to that 7-year-old who said, in marriage, a man and a woman live together forever. And that's known as monotony. And I just didn't know what to say.

So with the butterflies mounting, I walked up to the bell. I'll always remember the flat. Flat 11, number 12, South Wimpole Street. I pressed on the bell. Through the intercom, the guy right at the top said, hello.

I said, hello, it's the Reverend Rico Tice. Come to do marriage preparation. And he said, actually, we're having a bit of a problem here. I said, what is it? He said, my fiance's just gone into labor.

I said, what? Do you mean she's pregnant? He said, she's not just pregnant. She's having the baby now. Get a taxi. I hailed a taxi. We got in the taxi. Went to St. Mary's Hospital. She had the baby three hours later.

That was my first marriage prep. The girl had a baby. I mean, can you believe it? It was not an uneventful birth. It's one I'll never forget. And I'd just like to remind you now of another eventful birth.

[3:02] Can we look at it together in the reading we have? Can we look down just that bottom paragraph on page seven? Here's the eventful birth. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. Now, if you draw to mind any of the sort of religious

Christmas cards you get this year, they'll basically focus on the content of those couple of verses. So there'll be the stable all sort of dressed up and antiseptic. There'll be Mary who looks as though she's just been shopping at Laura, actually. The baby always looks as though he's like a young Winston Churchill.

He's got such chubby cheeks. But here is the issue. Ladies and gentlemen, these two verses are not the focus of Luke. Luke is not so much concerned with the content, but with the meaning of Christmas.

So that's the great question. When it comes to Christmas, do you get the meaning? Well, I didn't know if you knew you were in for an exam tonight, but you are. Can you please turn over your pages?

[ 4 : 11 ] Just turn over a page to page nine. And here's the exam on whether you've understood Christmas. Page nine, everyone. If we can just see as we look down, second paragraph.

There it is, page nine. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

So this is supernatural. You can't be Christian and not believe in the supernatural. God has intervened in his world, and he has sent an angel to explain to the shepherds what happens. And with that explanation, he says, verse 10, don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. And here's the issue. You understand Christmas.

Actually, you understand Christianity. Ladies and gentlemen, if and only if it's the best news you've ever heard in your life. So if Christ's coming at Christmas is not the best news you've ever heard in your life, you can be sure, you can be certain you've misunderstood it.

[ 5 : 20 ] One of my favorite places in London is the ice cream bar at Harrods, which explains why I'm such a fat old boy. Anyway, I was there recently, and actually, it was a pastoral visit.

I was there with Paul Levy to discuss Welsh rugby, but it was a pastoral visit. And there we were, and I picked up this brochure. And here's the brochure, and I don't know if you can relate to it, but this is what it says about Christmas at Harrods.

Rejoice! Christmas is coming to Harrods, joyful and triumphant in a blaze of celestial splendour.

This year, Harrods is brimming full of comfort and joy, overflowing with grandeur and gifts.

Let the glory of Christmas ring out. So here's the question, ladies and gentlemen, as we come this evening. Is Christ coming at Christmas? The best news you've ever heard in your life.

Are you with Luke? Or are you with Harrods? Well, it's just really a mixture of turkey tradition, trees and tinsel. Which one is it?

[ 6 : 19 ] If it's not the best news you've ever heard, you've not understood. So the next question, of course, is why? Why is it such great news to be Christian at Christmas? What's the reason?

Can we see as we look down? Let's have a look at the next verse. Here's why it's such great news to be Christian at Christmas. Do we see verse 11? Today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. Why the joy? Well, ladies and gentlemen, as you see the trees and the tinsel, as you think of the turkey, as you think of Christmas, here's my question.

Do you primarily think, ah, it's all about being rescued? If you don't see that Christmas is the start of the launch of a great rescue operation, you've not understood it.

It's an amazing thing. It's a rescue. And the joy comes because there's rescue. There's a deliverer who's Christ the Lord. Now, at this point, I should say, I guess there are a number of people here who'd say, look, Rico, do you know, with all modesty, I have to tell you, Rico, I don't really need rescuing.

[ 7 : 26 ] In fact, if you come to my family or my office, I spend most of my time, in all humility, rescuing other people. I'm actually the glue person.

I'm the cornerstone. But, ladies and gentlemen, it is easy to be deceived. When I got my third at university, I spent most of my time in rugby circles, mucking around and doing things like this. Actually, that slightly concussed me there. Have you come across these? These are crushable cans. So, I've got the most beaten up car in central London. It's a Ford Fiesta 1.1. And I drive through the middle of London.

I stop at the lights. Someone comes up alongside in a Porsche with someone very glamorous next to them. They look across at me, looking disparaging at my car. I look back at them, crush this on my head.

And as we drive off, I've won. So, this saves me about 200,000 quid, this does. Can I tell you, it's easy to be deceived. And, ladies and gentlemen, as we think about being rescued at Christmas, we can be deceived and not understand the great lie.

[ 8 : 31 ] This is the great lie. This is the great lie that we've got all over the culture. That I can live well and push God to the fringe of my life. And take his gifts.

And we love his gifts. Fun, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness. We love the gifts, but we ignore the giver. Now, often, I don't know where you are on this, but it starts with going, do you know, when I look at my own life, there's a gap.

And you never really become a Christian unless you see the gap. There's a gap between the real and the ideal. I'm not what I should be. No one becomes a Christian unless they start going, do you know, it's not what it should be.

I mean, this occurred to me, first of all, when I was 16. And I kept this book. Here's a diary I kept. I wonder if you can see it there. And I kept this book because I thought I was such a great bloke. I owed it to the world to record my life.

So, night after night, I kept this diary. And really, it was for future generations. I did it for all of you. And it was an amazing experience because I found out I was a total burke. It's incredible doing it.

[ 9 : 39 ] So, I'd write in my diary, wouldn't it be wonderful if there was world peace? But I'd never lay aside the weapons of malice and sarcasm in my own self-defense. I'd write in my diary, wouldn't it be great if the starving were fed?

But I would ask my parents for a larger allowance. And as you can see, I would eat it. There's a gap, ladies and gentlemen. This first struck me, actually, with this book. Do you know, this is my favorite autobiography.

Do you know this book? Lance Armstrong, the cyclist. It's not about the bike. And we now know, well, that was true, wasn't it, Lance? It wasn't about the bike, was it? After the drug scandal broke, I mean, it was mayhem.

I loved most the Australian lending library that moved this book after the scandal from biography to fiction. There's a gap. And, you know, years later, I read in the Bible, the Apostle Paul, he writes about his own life when he writes to the Romans.

He says, I don't do the good I want to do. The evil I don't want to do, this I keep on doing. And the issue with this gap is that it doesn't just, and over Christmas, by the way, if we're not aware of it, it makes us difficult to live with.

[ 10 : 47 ] But the issue is not just that actually it's how we've lived. It's how we've treated God. And there'll come a day when God will say, as he looks at my life, he says, Rico, did you know me?

And what about all the wrongdoing here? Did you get forgiven? And unashamedly, ladies and gentlemen, I want to say that you'll never understand Christmas unless you understand, categorically, that there is a judgment day.

Oh, do you know, Paul will say this, Reuben will echo it, and Andrew. Do you know, the worst thing in pastoral ministry is when people lie to you. So they tell you a story, and they leave something out. And then you talk to the other person, and they say, what about that? And it's something, brutally, you go back to them, and they say, yeah, sorry, I missed that out. You say, well, it matters. And do you know what happens in churches all over this country?

They miss out judgment at Christmas. But categorically, can I say, we don't get Christmas unless we understand that there'll be a day when God will say, look, I made you. I gave you all those gifts.

[ 11 : 54 ] Did you know me? And also, did you get forgiven? And the Bible says, everything will be uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of whom to whom we must give an account.

Everything. It's a brutal thing. And furthermore, the Bible says, oh, do you know, our hearts break as we say this. The Bible says, ladies and gentlemen, and again, you don't understand the rescue at Christmas unless I say this, so we're just trying to be honest.

The Bible says, ladies and gentlemen, there is a place called hell. It says there's a place where actually God will punish those who have so offended him.

But actually, judgment's a really good thing. Do you know, I got the times today just to read out one or two of the headlines and just to say to you, isn't it great there's a judgment in God's world?

Do you know, the headlines are so bad, I'm not going to read them out. Now, it's so bad, I thought, I'm not actually going to say this in a church service. But what I want to say, and this is what's really good about judgment, is how you treat me and how I treat you and how God treats his world

matters to God.

[13:03] I was preaching in Waterloo, by Waterloo station this morning, and there was a woman from Ukraine who did the prayers. And she was really weeping during the prayers as she did the church prayers.

And she said, Lord God, we pray for justice. And it's a great thing there is justice, isn't it, with what's going on. I won't read the headline out of terms of what's been happening.

But justice is great. But the question is, as we come to Christmas, who's going to pay for what I've done wrong? So it's all in here. And the question is, who will pay?

And then Lefty's reading. He said in the reading, the angel comes to Joseph and says, she'll give birth to a son. You're to give him the name Jesus. Because he will save his people from their sins. So here is all the stuff I've done wrong. And the Lord Jesus, as he's born, is called Jesus. Because the name means rescuer.

[14:06] So the moment he's born, he says, Rico, I'm going to go to the cross one day. And I'm going to die on the cross so that you can be forgiven. So you can either pay for this yourself or you can allow me to pay.

And as Jesus goes up to the cross and he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? From the moment he was born, he was going to head to that rescue. And he's going to say, actually, there's only one way to hell.

The only way you can get to hell is to trample over the cross of Jesus. Jesus says, I'm blocking the way to hell. I'm paying in death and blood so that you can be rescued.

And that's the gift of Christmas. It's a staggering thing. It's as though, here I am and here's my wrongdoing. And all the times I've slapped God in the face.

Here's the catalogue. Everything will be uncovered. And here is Jesus dying on the cross. And the Bible says, all we like sheep have gone astray. Each has gone his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the wrongdoing of us all.

[15:11] It's all on Christ. When I went into central London today, I went close to St. Paul's Cathedral. And there, you know St. Paul's Cathedral and the old Bailey.

They're there. And there are two statues on top. First of all, there is Pomeroy's statue, Justice Year, on the old Bailey, the home of British justice. And she's blindfold.

And there's a sword in one hand. And there are scales in the other. And the message is clear. If you're found guilty, then the sword of justice must fall. But just across the skyline is the golden cross of St. Paul's Cathedral.

And the message is this. The sword of God's justice did fall. It fell into Jesus who says, Rico, don't pay for this yourself. I'm going to die at Christmas.

I'm going to die at Easter and be born at Christmas to rescue you from this. Now, can I say in terms of great joy, if you can see your wrongdoing and you understand how much he loves you, it's just overwhelming.

[16:13] It is great joy. Years ago on my day off, I was at home at my parents' house. And I was teaching my nephews to scrummage to play rugby. They're little, but you've got to start them young.

So I was with the four-year-old on the carpet teaching him to scrummage. And as I was doing that, the two-year-old picked up a large plant pot. And he got so excited, he started to empty it all over the floor to make a pitch.

And when I next looked up, I'm not kidding, he had trashed the floor. There was mud everywhere. And at that moment, my mother, his grandmother, walked in the room. And honestly, her lounge was just covered in dirt.

And she walked over to her little two-year-old grandson. And she picked up the plant pot. And she put it on one side. And she picked him up and she kissed him. And she said, let's go and have lunch.

And as she carried him out of the room, over the mud, he looked over her shoulder at his older brother and I on the ground, scrummaging. And he went like that. You see, his grandmother knows what he's done.

[17:17] She's going to clear up the mess. And she loves him anyway. And that's Christmas. God knows what we've done. And he sends his son to clear up the mess.

Because he loves you so much. He says, yeah, it's going to be uncovered. But I've sent Jesus to rescue you. And that's the great joy.

Now, again, we'd love to talk more of that now. We can't. I'm finishing. But there are three applications of this. The first one, ladies and gentlemen, is this. Is this is very serious. What we've done wrong. We wouldn't be doing all this if there wasn't a certainty of the judgment to come. It is serious. There is a place called hell.

Please be warned. Please. So that's serious. But secondly, you must be loved. I've got two sons. I wouldn't let them die for anyone.

[18:16] I love them so much. But God says, Rico, I love you so much. I'll send my son to die for you. It's quite overwhelming. So it's serious, our sin.

You must be loved. But lastly, ladies and gentlemen, it's a gift. It's a gift. I can't pay for it. God sends his son Jesus to die to pay for our wrongdoing.

But Paul and Reuben, Andrew will echo this. Do you know where the agony of Christmas is?

People don't unwrap the gift. Imagine being given a gift at Christmas and it's under the tree and you just leave it there.

26th, 27th, 3rd of January, 12th of April, July. Just leave it. And we're saying, please don't do that. Be like hundreds of thousands in this country at the moment.

I mean, it's staggering to see who are saying, do you know, I've got to unwrap the gift. And to do that, obviously, please come back here. Come back next week. But actually, the time to unwrap it and really, you know, really just ask any question you like.

[19:22] Here's the Hope Explored course. We're putting it on for you. We'd love you to come along. But don't put this away with the decorations for the year. Don't just say, right, it's in the box for the decorations. Say, do you know, I'm going to unwrap it this year.

New Year's resolution. I'm really going to look into this. And again, can I say, that's the job you've got to do if this isn't the best news you've heard in your life.

That's the diagnostic tool. If it's not the best news you've ever heard, you need to come back and unwrap it. Let's pray together. Let's pray.