

The Questions of Christmas: Where's the "Peace on Earth?"

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[0 : 00] Well, thanks be to God for his reading, and thank you, Penny, for reading that for us. Good morning, everyone. Good to see you again, and Happy New Year. Wow, it seems like we hardly got into 2014 before it finished, and we're into a brand new year with a lot of opportunities, a lot of exciting opportunities for us as individuals and us as a church here in Plumstead.

So please do keep us as a church in prayer as we begin this new year and as we sort of come out of the holidays and into a new term in a few weeks' time.

Well, a warm welcome to you, especially if you're a visitor. It's great to have you. If you are a visitor, if you're here maybe for the first time and I haven't met you, it would be great to do that. I'd love to meet you.

Please don't rush off after the service, but if you can, come and say hello, and we've got tea and coffee through the hall there for you to just get to know some of the people here. So it would be great if you could stay and we could get to know you a bit.

All right, well, you've just come in the second of a short series we're doing, looking at the questions of Christmas. That's what we're calling it. We're looking at some of the more uncomfortable questions of Christmas that no one really asks.

[1 : 12] And we're looking at these questions really to look back at Christmas, but also to look forward into our new year. So because it's God's word that we're coming to, and that's a very special thing that we're able to do this morning, I'm going to pray that God would help us as we consider his word together.

Let's pray. Yes, Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come to you in prayer. We thank you also that you are a God who has spoken in your word and in your son, Jesus.

We do pray, Lord, that as we consider what you have to say now, that you would help us to focus. I pray for everyone here that you would help them to just put aside distracting thoughts, maybe thoughts of the week or the year to come, and help us all, Lord, even me as I preach.

Help us all to listen to what you have to say. May these words not be my words, but your words. Please help us not just to listen, but also to bear much fruit because of what we hear.

And so we do pray that you'd be with us in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, just over 2,000 years ago in the middle of the night, just outside the little Middle Eastern village of Bethlehem, something incredible happened.

[2 : 30] And if you've been with us for Christmas and the sermons leading up to Christmas, you would have known what that is. Angels, messengers from God, appeared to some speechless shepherds, scared out of their wits, in the middle of the field at night, and announced the arrival of God's king on earth.

And they announced him with these words. I want you to notice what they said. Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and goodwill towards men.

Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and goodwill towards men. And that is incredible. Just the words they said.

More incredible than the fact that these messengers from God had appeared to these shepherds. More incredible than that was what they said. Because on that day, they brought humanity a promise.

A promise of a new world, a new society that this king was going to bring, this king who was being born. A world, a society that was marked by peace on earth.

[3 : 36] That was 2,000 years ago. And here we are, 2,000 years later, and you've got to ask, where's the peace on earth? Where's the peace on earth?

In the past 2,000 years, since those angels arrived with that message, there have been more than 14,000 wars. More than 3 billion people have died violent deaths.

And just last year, in our own country, South Africa, there were recorded 19,000 house robberies, 17,000 murders, which is in fact 800 more than the previous year.

It's not going down, it's going up. And Cape Town has been recorded as the highest murder rate in the country. We've topped even the notorious Joburg.

Where's the peace on earth? Where's the peace on earth? I wonder if you've asked that question before. And where's God in all of this? Where are his promises about bringing peace to us?

[4 : 34] He obviously doesn't exist, some would say. If he did, surely he would stop this. Wouldn't he? If he was a loving God? The argument, you've probably heard it before, it goes like this.

Well, if God was loving, if he really cared about us, he would stop all the suffering that's going on in the world. And if God was powerful, he could stop all the suffering. And therefore, because suffering still exists when we look around in our world, a loving, powerful God cannot exist.

That's how the argument goes. And it sounds logical. I mean, is that true? That a loving, powerful God cannot possibly exist? Well, not really.

Maybe you'd be pleased to know if it was, we may as well just go home now. But you see, people don't consider that there's a third option in that argument. That a loving and powerful God does exist.

Who wants to stop suffering and who can stop suffering, but he is delaying that for a very good reason. And that's the point of this parable that we're looking at this morning, that Penny read for us, that Jesus gave to us to consider and to mull over, to chew over, which I hope you will do not only this morning, but in the week to come.

[5 : 48] I hope you do that with all the sermons you hear, that you don't just come and hear them for a bit of a boost or entertainment or whatever it is, but you mull over it. Remember, last week we looked at how Jesus said how important it is to take his words and understand them and chew over them and think through them to see how they apply to our lives.

And I hope you'll do that as we look at this next parable that Jesus gives us. And it's in this parable, you see, that Jesus wants people to understand what they can expect in this world as his kingdom breaks into it, and the reason that the world is still like it is even 2,000 years after it's come.

And I hope that you leave this morning knowing just why that is. And he explains it just like he did last week. If you were here last week, if you weren't, then the sermon is available on our website.

And it'd be good for you to listen to that as the completion of the whole series and to come back next week, which I hope you'll do. But just like last week, Jesus tells us a farming story.

Remember, the people back then that he was talking to were agricultural peasants. Farming was something that they knew inside out. And so he used farming a lot as an analogy, as a story to explain spiritual truths.

[6 : 58] And he tells another farming story. Again, there's a farmer who's sowing seeds in a field to grow wheat. But different to last week, this farmer has enemies, right, who want to sabotage his production.

And so they go out in the night when the farmer and his workers are all asleep. They go out and sow weeds in and amongst the wheat that's just been sown.

The original word for weeds actually literally means darnel. And that's a type of weed. I looked it up, so trust me. I know what I'm talking about. Darnel is a type of weed that actually looks the same as wheat until it grows to a certain point and the head appears, or the ear appears much later.

And then people see that it's actually not wheat at all. But it's disguised as wheat. And so it's only later that the workers identify that these weeds have grown in amongst the wheat at near harvest time, and they report it to the master.

And obviously they're angry. They want to just go and rip out all the weeds, and they probably want to find this person who's sown them and go beat them up or whatever. And they want to remove these weeds so they don't do any more damage.

[8 : 08] But then the master does something very unexpected. He says no. He says leave them where they are. You see, this guy, he's a wise farmer. He's been around for a while.

And he knows something that the workers don't know. He knows that if they ripped up the weeds now, they would do more damage than if they left them till harvest time. Now, I wonder if you see what Jesus is trying to tell us in this parable.

Do you see what the farmer is doing there? He's allowing something bad to continue. He's delaying dealing with it. And he's got a very good reason for that. And that's the principle that Jesus wants you and me to understand when it comes to evil and suffering in our world.

Because let me tell you, evil and suffering is something that each and every one of us face. We can't get away from it. And sometimes we come very close and it hurts us. And we feel the results of that.

Jesus tells this parable to teach us why evil and suffering still exist in our world. And there's two main points he makes. And I want us to see what they are this morning.

[9 : 13] The first is that there is a necessary delay. There's a necessary delay in God dealing with evil. Look at the interpretation that Jesus gives of this farming story from verse 37.

The one who sowed the good seed is the son of man. The field is the world. And the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom.

The weeds are the people of the evil one. And the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age.

And the harvesters are angels. All right, so Jesus tells us that the field that he's talking about is the world. The world we live in, this planet. And the enemy who sabotages it is none other than humanity's most ancient and deadly enemy, the devil, Satan.

And the weeds, Jesus says, the weeds are the people who are under the devil's influence. He calls them the sons of the evil one. And so Jesus says, in all seriousness, that it's the devil who sabotaged this world by influencing the hearts of people, of men and women.

[10 : 26] And notice in this parable something very interesting. In the story that he tells, the workers and the farm owner never actually see the enemy. We're never told that they even make eye contact with the enemy at all.

But they see the results of his work months later. And that, let me tell you, that is just how the devil works in our world. He's hidden.

He's subtle. We don't see him. Lots of people don't even believe that he exists. And that's exactly what he wants. But we see the results of his work everywhere, don't we?

When we open the newspapers, when we look around, we see the evil desires that he places in the hearts of people that we know shouldn't be there. We see people's desires to rebel against God's law.

We see people's desires to put self first, to lie, to murder, to destroy homes through adultery. We see that all around us, and we can't get away from it.

[11 : 23] It's interesting. A few years back, I did some work at Polesmore Prison, some ministry work. And one of the stats that I came across in the prison was that over 90% of the male inmates had no father figure while they were growing up.

Okay, they grew up in broken homes. And psychologists and analysts said that that was, if not the main contributing factor, one of the main contributing factors to them going into criminal activity and ending up in prison.

But you see, it was mostly, they grew up in broken homes because mostly their parents obeyed the desires of their own hearts rather than God's law about marriage and sex. And God gives those laws for a reason.

You see, and when people disregard God's laws, all sorts of sin just enters in and breaks in and sin leads to more sin leads to more sin. And it's just like a snowball effect.

That's how sin works. And all the devil's got to do to destroy societies and to create poverty and injustice is simply to plant evil desires in the hearts of men and women secretly, silently, without anyone noticing.

[12 : 34] Desires to disregard God's law. And then all Satan does, of course, is he sits back and watches the results. And so that's why our world is like it is, according to Jesus.

Believe it or not, it's because Satan is behind it and he is planting evil desires in the hearts of people. That's why society is like it is. That's why we read what we read in the newspapers of babies being stolen and people being murdered horrifically.

But the question we really want to answer this morning is, why on earth does God let it carry on? I wonder if you've ever asked that. You know, it's so bad. It's come to such a point that you've got to ask, why is God letting it carry on at all?

Why not just, you know, smite all the people that cause the problems? These sons of the evil one that Jesus talks about. Why not just destroy them? God can do that. Surely he can just send lightning from heaven.

Then, you know, people who obey the desires of the devil, why not just remove them from the earth? Then surely it would fix the problems. Well, think about it this way.

[13 : 41] Have you ever had the desire to put yourself first and to put your wants ahead of someone else's? Have you ever had the desire to rebel against God's law, to lie, maybe for your own gain, or to look good in someone else's eyes?

Have you ever wished harm on someone else? Have you ever broken the marriage covenant in your mind, if not in your body? You see, we're so quick to point the finger, aren't we, at the evil in our world and the corrupt dictators and the murderers and the rapists and get cross with God for letting them carry on without realizing that at the core of my heart are exactly the same desires. The only difference, of course, is that the corrupt dictators are given much greater opportunities to satisfy their desires than I am. But whether it's me slandering someone behind their back or whether it's Idi Amin torturing someone he doesn't like, there are different actions, but they're the same desires at heart that drive those actions.

We need to see that this morning. Jesus wants us to see that. You know, there's a great phrase, the problem, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

That's what it comes down to. The problem is not out there. The problem is not when we open our newspapers and look there. The problem is in here. The problem is inside each of us. You see, sin is like a disease.

[15 : 04] That's what we've got to understand sin like, a disease that flows through our veins. The symptoms present differently in different people in this disease. They might present very differently in the person next to me than they do in me.

Maybe I can cover up the symptoms really well. But it's the same disease that flows through our veins. Scripture makes that quite clear. Have a look at some of these verses.

Jeremiah 17, verse 9. Romans 3.23. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3.10. There is no one righteous, not even one. Now, here's the shocker. You see, because we all have sin in our hearts, we are all naturally born sons and daughters of the evil one.

That describes you and me. We don't like to be described that way. It's a harsh phrase, sons and daughters of the evil one. We don't want to admit to that.

[16 : 08] But we all, and none of us can deny this, we all to a greater or lesser degree obey the desires that the devil has planted in our hearts. And we rebel against the laws of God.

Even though those laws are good for us, we rebel against them. We want to live our own way. And so, back to our question. Why is God delaying the rooting out of evil in his world?

Well, because that would mean rooting out all of us as well. And the only, you know, the only way, the only way for God to make this world what we want him to make it, to remove all suffering, as we cry out for him to do, the only way for him to do that is to remove all of us as well.

But just as well for us that he's a wise farmer. And even though he could, and he should root us out of his world, what does he do instead? What does the farmer do in the story?

He waits. He waits to give his wheat a chance to grow. And Jesus tells us that that wheat, that wheat is the sons of the kingdom.

[17 : 18] That is, people who have heard and understood the message of the kingdom, who've turned and followed Jesus, and who have found, in Jesus, have found forgiveness for their sins through what Jesus did on the cross.

When he hung there and in the sight of God and under the wrath of God, he took the punishment for all the sins of the people who have come to him and trusted in him. He took their punishment in their place.

And God is delaying judgment. And God is delaying judgment. He's delaying the rooting out of evil to give the wheat a chance to grow. For people to hear the gospel and come into his kingdom and be saved from their sins.

That is the only reason we are still here in this world. That we are still in a world of suffering because God is delaying for that purpose and that purpose alone.

For people to hear the gospel and be saved before it's too late. So that at the harvest, when God brings the hammer of justice down on the whole world, the people in the kingdom who've put their trust in Jesus can be spared, can be saved because their sins are covered.

[18 : 21] And that's why we're still here. That's why he's allowing this broken world to continue. Not because he doesn't love us, but because he does. You see, people say, well, God, if he's leaving the world like this, then he's obviously not a loving God.

But people need to realize, you and I need to realize, no, it's the opposite. God is leaving the world like it is because he is a loving God and he wants to give us a chance to be saved before it's too late. Because he loves us that much.

And he's so incredibly patient with us. You know, I don't know when it is that God is going to say, okay, enough is enough. Now is the time for judgment. I don't know when that is. But I am eternally thankful that he has delayed it long enough for me to hear the gospel and put my trust in Jesus.

And so you see, we're called to be patient. We're called to be patient. Just like the farmer calls his servants to be patient. We live in a broken world. We feel the effects of that brokenness. And sometimes we just want to cry out, how long, oh Lord?

How long is this going to carry on? But Jesus says to us here, be patient. Be patient. Bear with it. God is allowing this to continue because he loves people enough to give them a chance to repent and come to him before it's too late.

[19 : 33] And so be patient and get on with the work of telling people the gospel. Because if that is the only reason that God is delaying his judgment, then that is the main and primary thing we should be focusing our lives on is getting involved in what God is doing in his church to spread the gospel into the world.

I don't know what takes your focus up in the week. What kind of distractions, what kind of things, what kind of projects you have on the go. But the main and foremost thing in your mind should be how I can contribute to the work of the gospel going out in this world.

Because that is why we exist here as a church. It means getting involved in the church. It means not coming on Sunday and just sitting in a pew and listening to a sermon and going home. It means seeing what gifts God has given you and seeing how they can apply into what the church is doing. And there are hosts of service opportunities in this church. And that is what we are called to do as people who have come to Jesus is not sit on our backsides.

It's to work until Jesus calls us home to work for his kingdom. And if you don't know what you can be doing, if you want to work towards his kingdom but you just don't know how, then come speak to me.

[20 : 51] Come talk to me and see what kind of opportunities there are in the church for you to get involved. But everyone here, to a certain degree, should be involved somehow in this mission that we're on as a church.

Because, you know, we don't have a lot of time. Jesus could come back tomorrow. And we don't want to be found when he comes back and he asks us, you know, what have you been doing with your time?

We don't want to be so, well, I've been saving up for my retirement or I've been trying to get a nice house. No. We want to be able to say to him, I've been working hard for people to hear the kingdom.

I've been contributing to the church and doing what you have given me to do and waiting for you to come. That's what we should be doing. We should be patient. We should be waiting for Jesus and we should be working for him as we do.

And instead of demanding that God fix everything in our world, we should first look to our own hearts and ask ourselves whether we are really ready for him to come back. Are you ready for him to come back?

[21 : 49] Ask yourself honestly, are your sins covered? Do you know they are? Because you've got to ask those questions before this age of God's patience comes to an end.

Because his patience, while he is long-suffering and patient, that won't last forever. And we see that in the next point of this parable, which I want us to look at now. That there will be an inevitable division one day.

There will be an inevitable division. That's the next thing we see. I remember at school years ago. Now, you might be able to think that far back as well.

That period at school, that lesson just before break time. Remember that? When all the kids are restless and you just want to get out to break. It's a nice sunny day outside. But then the teacher, you know, they really mean that last period.

And they know the kids want to get out. But the teacher says, okay, I'm going to step out for a few minutes here. I need you to, you must do this work. And you can only go to break when you've completed it after the bell is gone. You know, that kind of situation.

[22 : 53] I remember that distinctly. The teacher would set us this work. And, of course, not wanting to risk getting in trouble just before break. We got out our books and we diligently did our work. The teacher said, you know, she's going to step out for two or three minutes and come back.

We carry on doing our work. Until, of course, one or two smart alecks look up at the clock and realize, wait a minute. The teacher's been gone for much more than two or three minutes, like she said. And then the realization hits the class.

The teacher's not coming back before break time. At that moment, the books get closed. They become cricket bats. The balls come out of the bags. And the classroom is transformed into an action cricket pitch.

But then, of course, what happens? A minute before the bell, the teacher steps in. Silence ensues. A ball flies past her head. And game over.

And break time is over. There is no break time. And we're sat the whole break time. We have to sit in detention. I wonder if you've been in a situation like that at school. I certainly have. But why did we allow ourselves to get into that situation?

[23 : 53] Well, here's why. Because we made the fatal error of assuming that because the teacher delayed her return, she wasn't going to return. And we got up to mischief. Well, you know what? That's what this world is doing.

God is delaying his return to judge the world. And we've seen why he's delaying. For a very good reason. But because of that delay, you see what's happened?

Because of that delay, people have made the fatal error of assuming it's not going to happen. And so they live as they want. And they are going to be shocked when Jesus comes back.

It's going to be totally unexpected. And we see that, don't we, in people's attitudes day to day. Their attitudes towards death, towards the Bible, towards Jesus. People just aren't interested.

Because they don't really believe they've got anything to worry about. Well, Jesus begs to differ. Look at what he says in verse 40. These are shocking words.

[24 : 50] As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels. And they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin.

And all who do evil, they will throw them into the blazing furnace. Where they will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine. Like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear. Now Jesus is saying, listen, listen, this is truth. You don't want to hear it. But you must hear it.

And he uses shocking language here. You see the language he uses of weeping and gnashing of teeth and a blazing furnace. He's the most loving man who's ever lived.

And yet he uses the scariest language to warn us of what's going to happen when he comes back to bring God's judgment. And if these are the pictures that he uses, then how terrible is the reality going to be of that day?

[25 : 51] But you see, Jesus is not trying to manipulate people here. He's trying to help us. He's trying to help us to wake up and see what happens when God's perfect justice comes to bear on the unrestrained rebellion of the world.

You know, that judgment that he's been holding back and holding back. When it finally falls, it will be terrible. And we've got to know that. We've got to live in light of that.

We've got to warn people before it's too late. Because it will be terrible. And Jesus wants to make sure that we know that. He came to earth to warn us. But not just to warn us.

He came to earth to give us a way out of that. But he is coming a second time to bring God's judgment to all who have refused that way. They will face God alone with all their sin and no excuse.

The people that you know that have disregarded Jesus, who have lived for themselves, they will face God all alone. And again, the only reason that God delays is so that those people don't have to be in that position.

[27 : 00] It's that bad. God is delaying. He's letting wars and suffering and crime continue so that people don't have to face his wrath. Because you think this world is bad. Wait until the day Jesus returns.

Now you may ask, well, if it's that bad and if God is that loving, then why doesn't he just not judge then at all? Why doesn't he just forgive everyone? Have you thought that?

Why doesn't, you know, God, we say he's forgiving. Why doesn't he just say to everyone, okay, forgiven, your sins are covered, come into my kingdom. Well, you know, if he loves us, surely he'll do that.

Well, no, because that's a profound misunderstanding of what love actually is. What is love? You see, love wants the best for the beloved, doesn't it? And God loves his world and his people and he wants the best for them.

So much so that he will passionately destroy everything that threatens them. Everything that stains his world, all the brokenness, all the sinful desires, all the refusals to obey his rule, he will uproot and destroy once and for all.

[28 : 04] For the sake of the world he loves, just as passionately as you would want to destroy a cancer that's eating away at a loved one. You know, love doesn't say, well, I'll just let the cancer live.

No. And God doesn't say, well, I'll just let sin carry on in my world. He will destroy it once and for all. Even the causes of sin.

Notice again in verse 41 in your Bibles. Jesus says, even the causes of sin will be rooted out. Everything that might cause people to sin. He will remove the temptations that might cause us to go astray and ignore God.

He will remove, which really is the best news ever, isn't it? Because it makes the end result a truly perfect world where not only will there be no evil and sin and suffering, there will be no desire to sin or to cause suffering for anyone else.

It's a world beyond what we can imagine. You see, we're only used to this world that we find it difficult to think of the world to come that God has planned. But you see, that's what God has always intended for this world.

[29 : 11] God did not intend for his world to be like this. He intended for this world to be perfect, for us to be able to enjoy it in a society without sickness, suffering, pain or death forever.

In perfect relationship with him. That is the world that God has planned. To be who he made us to be without being marred by sin and brokenness and selfish desires. Imagine yourself like that.

Imagine yourself in that world. Just think of you and your family and your relationships without any sin, without any selfish desires, without any short tempers. Imagine a society like that.

The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. Are you going to be there? That's the one question I want to ask you this morning.

Are you going to be in that world? You see, God doesn't want you to live in this broken world with suffering and sickness and death. But the only reason he still allows it, because even more, he doesn't want you to face his judgment for your sins against him.

[30 : 20] And so he's giving you a chance to change sides before it's too late. To become a person of the kingdom. To have your sins washed away so that you can have a relationship with him now.

And that you can shine like the sun in the kingdom of your father one day for eternity. Will you be there? Will you change sides if you haven't yet?

Because you know what? You can do that right now. You can do that today. You don't have to do anything special. Jesus has already done it all for you when he died on the cross. All you've got to do is come to God.

Trusting what Jesus has done for you. Praying a simple prayer. And I want to give you a chance to do that right now. Don't delay. You know, the evil and pain and suffering in this world makes life not a certain thing.

We don't know that we'll wake up tomorrow. And so, if you feel that God is calling you to change sides. If you feel maybe for a while he has been calling you. And maybe you've been coming to church for a while but you just haven't taken that step.

[31 : 18] Well, now is your time. Now is your opportunity. I want you to pray silently after me. If that is you. I'm going to pray a prayer. And I want you to pray in your heart after me. Let's pray.
Heavenly Father.

Heavenly Father. Every day I live is because of your mercy. Even though I have sinned against you in so many ways. I know that Jesus came to take my sins.

So I put my trust in him now. Forgive me for all my wrongs. Help me to follow Jesus. And grant me eternal life in your kingdom.

Amen.