**CHRISTMAS MESSAGE**

**THE SOVEREIGN, SUFFERING, SAVIOUR**

**INTRODUCTION**

What comes to mind when you think about the Christmas story? We have the familiar images of the angels appearing to the shepherds out in the field, telling them that a Saviour had been born. We have the bright evening star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, where they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And of course, we have the baby lying in a manger, tender and mild, sleeping in heavenly peace.

Many people assume that this is all there is to the Christmas message, which sadly has led them to dismiss it. They think of the Christmas story as an old myth that may be fun for kids, but once people grow up they don’t have the time or the imagination to devote to such childish things.

That tends to happen to people as they get older. They lose their child-like wonder and adopt a hardened view of the world. Perhaps you’ve listened to the old Christmas song “Joy to the World” and thought “Joy? What joy? Christmas didn’t bring any joy into my life, and whatever joy I do have in my life didn’t come from God.” Perhaps you’ve thought about the angels declaring peace to all mankind and you’ve thought, “Where is this peace? I don’t see this peace in the world, and I don’t see it in my life. I have seen too much suffering, both in my life, and in the lives of others, to be able to say that there is peace in the world.”

But what if there’s more to the Christmas story than you thought? You may have gotten parts of the Christmas story from your childhood, or from the songs on the radio, but chances are you haven’t heard the whole story. To get the whole story, you need to read the Bible, and if you read the Bible, you would see that there’s much more to the Christmas story than shepherds and stars.

In fact, I believe that the Christmas story, taken in its fullness, has the potential to completely change the way you think about God, about yourself, and even about suffering. Albert Camus, the famous French philosopher in the 20th century and noted atheist, admitted that if the Christmas story was historically true, then it had the potential to bring a “strange form of happiness” out of pain and suffering.

This is what I want to talk to you about today: the strange form of happiness that can come to you from the Christmas story. Christmas has the power to bring you peace and joy, not by making suffering magically disappear from your life, but by radically changing the way you experience it.

The title of this message is **The Sovereign, Suffering, Saviour.** I’d like to spend the next 25 minutes or so looking at each of these three characteristics of God – he is sovereign, he is suffering, and he is a saviour – and to do that, we’re going to look at three different parts of the Christmas story that you may not be as familiar with.

(1) **SOVEREIGN**

Many of us have heard that Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem, but fewer are aware of how he ended up in Bethlehem in the first place. The Bible tells us in Luke 2:1-5:

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

The child here, of course, is Jesus. Mary, who is engaged to Joseph, is pregnant with Jesus and about to give birth. This text shows us why Mary and Joseph, who were from the town of Nazareth, ended up in Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, decided that he wanted to count all the people in the Roman Empire, and he did that by ordering a census to be conducted throughout the entire land. In order to do that, he ordered everyone in the Empire to return to their ancestral homes.

Joseph was from Nazareth, but his ancestral home was Bethlehem, because he was “of the house and lineage of David”. This David was none other than King David, the one who killed Goliath in battle when he was still a boy. David’s known as being a great king, but before he became king, he was a humble little shepherd boy from the little town of Bethlehem. Now Joseph, as a direct descendant of David, was required to return to Bethlehem in order to participate in the census.

Why does any of this matter? It matters because it says something profound about God. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, two prophecies were made about him. The first was made to King David himself in 1 Chronicles 17:11-12, where God promises David that one of his descendants would reign as a king forever. This is what God said to David about a thousand years before Jesus’ birth:

“When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever.”

This was one of the many prophecies that led Israel to hope for the Messiah, God’s Chosen One who would save God’s people and reign on David’s throne over a kingdom that would never end.

But another prophecy from the book of Micah, written about eight hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, said something very significant about the Messiah’s birth. This is what Micah 5:2 said:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

So when you put these two prophecies together, they tell us that the Messiah, or the Christ in Greek, would come from David’s family and would be born in Bethlehem.

This is what happens in Luke 2. Joseph, a descendant of David, travels to Bethlehem where his wife Mary gives birth to Jesus. Both prophecies were fulfilled. But here’s the question: what did God use to fulfill these prophecies? He used the decision of Caesar Augustus to conduct his census.

If the census had never happened, Joseph would never have returned to Bethlehem. And if the census hadn’t been ordered precisely when it was, and if Joseph hadn’t heard of it precisely when he did, then Joseph and Mary wouldn’t have made it back to Bethlehem in time for Jesus to be born there, and the prophecy wouldn’t have been fulfilled.

This shows us that God is totally in control of all the events in history. The theological word for this is *sovereignty*. God being sovereign means that he is completely in control of everything that happens in the world.Everything happens according to his will to accomplish his plans. It doesn’t matter that it took a census ordered by the Emperor of Rome to bring Joseph back to Bethlehem, because even the decisions of kings are governed by the King of Kings. As Proverbs 21:1 says,

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”

(2) **SUFFERING**

So if God is sovereign over all the events of history, then you would figure that he would send his beloved son into a situation where he could grow up in safety and comfort, right? God certainly could have done that, but he didn’t. Instead, God chose to send the Christ into a life of suffering.

We see this right at the beginning of Jesus’ life. Many of you know the story of the wise men, how they followed the great star to Bethlehem where they found Jesus and offered their gifts to him in worship. Less known is what the wise men did before they arrived in Bethlehem. They went to Jerusalem first, where they spoke to a king named Herod. King Herod ruled over the Roman province of Judea, which is where Jerusalem and Bethlehem were located. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Herod was a power-hungry leader who wanted to do everything he could to cement his own legacy.

So when the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they approached Herod and asked,

“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:2)

The Bible tells us that Herod was deeply troubled by this news. He didn’t want the Messiah to become king. He wanted to be the king. So Herod immediately started making plans to find Jesus and murder him.

This is the context in which Jesus was born. He was born to poor parents in a little town in a political climate that immediately put a target on his back. He had no fortress to protect him, and no armies to fight for him. He was left completely vulnerable to suffer at the hands of evil men.

The Gospel writer Matthew tells us that this had a significant impact on Jesus’ early life. He writes in 2:13-14,

“Now when [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.”

Do you see what this tells us about Jesus’ childhood? It shows us that Jesus grew up in a context of deep, personal suffering. From the very beginning of his life, he was a political refugee in a foreign country because the most powerful person in his home country wanted to murder him.

This is the life that God chose to send his Son into. He chose to send him into a life of suffering.

Many people say they can’t believe in the God of the Bible because there’s too much suffering in the world. If he truly is a sovereign God, then why would he allow so much pain? Christmas may not give us all the answers to this question, but it does tell us that the God who allows pain in our lives did not exempt himself from it.

This is one of the most powerful truths of Christmas: that Jesus Christ came into the world as a man to suffer *with us*. And since Jesus is God himself, his experience of human pain and suffering means that God himself has experienced our pain and suffering.

In his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Tim Keller puts it this way:

“If God is no exception—if even he has suffered—then we cannot say he doesn’t understand, or that his sovereignty over suffering is being exercised in a cruel and unfeeling way, or that he is a cold king who lets things happen without caring about what we are going through…Since even he has not kept himself immune from our pain, we can trust him.” (p. 153)

Jesus would suffer so much throughout his life that the prophet Isaiah wrote that the Christ would be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). Whatever suffering you have experienced, you can be sure that Jesus has felt it before.

Perhaps you suffer the pain of rejection or alienation from your family. Jesus suffered that pain when his own brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5)

Perhaps you’ve tasted the grief of losing a loved one. Jesus felt that grief and wept at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35)

Maybe you’ve been betrayed by someone who was once very close to you. Jesus was betrayed by Judas, one of his closest friends, when he led the Roman authorities to arrest Jesus in exchange for thirty silver coins (Matthew 26:15)

Or maybe you’ve just been let down again and again by your loved ones. Jesus was often disappointed by the selfishness and doubts of his friends, and all of them abandoned him after he was arrested for crimes he never committed (Luke 9:41; Matthew 26:56)

Whatever pain you have experienced in this life, Jesus has suffered it with you. It’s not that it was forced upon him. Nothing could ever be forced upon the Sovereign God. All the suffering he experienced with us, he experienced voluntarily, as an expression of his deep love and compassion for us.

(3) **SAVIOUR**

Christmas shows us that Jesus is sovereign, and that Jesus is a sufferer, but he’s also one more thing: he is a saviour. Jesus offers us an understanding shoulder to cry on when he suffers with us, but then he goes on and suffers for us by taking the burdens of our sin and placing them upon himself.

Shortly after the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to the Temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer sacrifices according to Jewish law. While they were there, a prophet named Simeon approached them. The Bible tells us that he took Jesus into his arms and declared that here, in this child, was God’s salvation.

But in the midst of this joyous announcement, Simeon turns to Mary and says these sad words to her:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:34-35)

What’s this sword that would pierce through Mary’s soul? It was none other than the cross, where Jesus, Mary’s beloved child, would suffer unimaginable pain before he died as a condemned criminal. This was the ultimate purpose of Jesus’ life. He lived to die. Even at the cradle, the shadow of the cross touched this divine child.

But why did Jesus have to die like this? Why did the cross loom so large over this sovereign king? It’s because this was the only way that *we* could be saved. Jesus didn’t just come to suffer *with* us. He came to suffer *for* us. The death he died, he died on our behalf. His punishment on the cross was the punishment that we deserved for our sins.

God isn’t only sovereign, and he isn’t only loving. God is also holy and just. Our sins demand a penalty, and because they are committed against a holy God, they demand an infinite penalty that none of us could ever pay. But Jesus could pay it. Jesus could pay our infinite penalty by dying in our place as our substitute on the cross. He didn’t have to do this, but he chose to, so that on the cross, both the love of God and the justice of God could be satisfied.

Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, telling them that, in his death, death itself had been defeated, and that one day he would return to restore a new heavens and a new earth, a timeless age in history where there would be no more sin, sickness, or sorrow. But until he returns, he has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell within all who trust and follow him. The Spirit comforts us, strengthens us, and empowers us to live for God with joy even as we continue living in a broken world, waiting eagerly for the return of Christ to make all things right again.

This is what the Bible calls the gospel, which literally means “good news”. If you believe the gospel and put your trust in Christ, then God comes to you, and he does a miracle in your heart. He makes you a new person, a person who loves him more than anything, and a person who increasingly knows the infinite depths of his love for you. All your sins are forgiven, and you are adopted into God’s family as his own sons and daughters to enjoy and intimate, personal relationship with him. But if you do not believe the gospel and trust in Christ, then you are still in your sins, and one day, you will have to pay the penalty of your sins yourself in an eternity apart from God and his goodness.

You don’t have to be a good enough person to deserve this salvation. You don’t need to do enough good things to earn it. All you need to do is to look to Jesus and say, “I believe that you died for my sins. I trust you to save me and to take me home to be with you forever. Come into my life and change me into the person you want me to be.”

**CONCLUSION**

These are the truths that make the pain and suffering of this world bearable. Knowing that Christ suffered *with* us, and that he suffered *for* us, is what brings a “strange form of happiness” out of our grief. The joy and peace of Christmas don’t come in the absence of suffering, but in the midst of it.

Christmas tells us that, whatever trials you may be going through right now, there is always joy in Christ, there is always peace in Christ, and there is always hope in Christ. My prayer for all of you this Christmas is that you would put your trust in Christ, so that you, like the people here at Sovereign Grace, and like Christians all around the world, may possess the unyielding, indestructible joy that comes from knowing Christ. Merry Christmas everyone.