Coming to Terms with Christmas: Faith Memory Verse: Hebrews 11:1

Dec. 29th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:32 - 39

**SLIDE 1**

Christmas day has come and gone but we continue to celebrate because the coming of our King Jesus, is not an event relegated to history. King Jesus came to us in a lowly manger, but his kingdom persists and you and I are invited to be citizens at this moment and on into eternity.

It’s a new reality that we can experience every day of our lives. It’s a reality that results in all those lofty Christmassy words that we have been discussing. Words like hope, peace, joy, and love. Because of what happened that first Christmas morning, these words no longer remain lofty and out of our reach. They have become grounded and real. Because of Christmas we can live in and share hope, and peace, and joy and love. But how do we take on these attributes? How can we incorporate these words into our reality. If we were to go shopping in the store and we were to see these terms there on the shelf, we would have to pass them by. We might stop and look at them longingly. We could imagine hope sitting with us in the hard times, we would like to have peace and joy on hand in our homes. And woudn’t it be great to love and be loved. But we would eventually have to leave these items on the shelf and just keep walking, since there is no way we would ever be able to afford them. We are stuck. We must return to despair and darkness. What else can we do?

Well, there is something that can be done…there is a solution to our lack of funds. And that solution is our last term that we will be looking at in this series: Faith.

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In the New Testament the word is *pistis* and the book of Hebrews describes it this way: “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.” So faith is already directly tied to hope. We hope for a reality that has not yet occurred. And this hope proves out that reality. So at this point already we have departed from the normal pattern of thinking.

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We live in an information age. We prize knowledge and strive to understand how this world works. We want to research and discover and experiment and test things until we can prove out theories that explain our surroundings. A scientific mindset is looking for results and demonstrable proof. This is the opposite viewpoint of Christianity. For us, faith in what is unseen IS the proof. In other words, we do not need the tangible proof laid out before our eyes because we have faith.

*Pistis* is described as belief or trust.

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The Hebrew term is *emuna*  is similar. But this word is based on the root word *aman.* Hopefully that sounds very familiar. Our “Amen” is directly taken from the Hebrew *aman* which means “to confirm”. So when someone finishes up their prayer we all say together, “Amen”. We say this as a confirmation or affirmation of the spoken prayer. We are in agreement with what was prayed. We even use this term in normal conversation. If someone declares something that strikes a chord within us, we might confirm their statement by saying “Amen”. So our “amen” is derived from the Hebrew word for faith, trust. And it is only through faith that we are able to acquire all these other great things: hope, peace, joy, love.

And like these other items, faith has an object.

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Faith has to have an object and every human being has faith in something. When I get in my car to drive somewhere, I have faith that my vehicle will operate correctly and that I will control my vehicle well enough to get where I am going. I have faith that others on the road will stay in their lane and properly follow the traffic laws. When a scientist goes in to perform an experiment or collect data, he has faith that his eyes will perceive correctly what he is studying. When you sit down at a restaurant to eat a meal, you have faith that the chef washed his hands and the ingredients are safe for consumption. You do not have proof of any of these things, but you just sort of trust that things will work out and function according to our normal experience. But the very fact that we have normal experiences paves the way for abnormal ones. Strange things are only strange because we have a “normal” with which to compare it.

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 So, we come to claims about a child born of a virgin, a man who is the Son of God, that same man dying on a cross and being raised again three days later. These are abnormal claims…way beyond the norm. It seems that we cannot properly verify these claims. It seems that there is some doubt concerning their reliability. But faith is asking us to trust anyway; to trust the abnormal – the supernatural- the unseen. Again, Hebrews says in the verse following our memory verse,

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“By faith we understand that the universe had been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.”

 See, we have it all backwards. As scientifically minded people we set out to prove the unseen by way of what is seen. We seek ways to observe the invisible. Microscopes are a good example. **SLIDE 8** They reveal to our eyes a normally unseen reality. But it’s backwards. Again, the material world, our world, is only secondary. It is not the end-all-be-all. Creation, the universe, this material world, has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible. Hebrews declares that we understand this by faith, We want to start with what we can see with our eyes, then through scientific endeavors we advance into microscopes and x-rays and medical tests and we begin to see the unseen. But again, it’s backwards. The visible came into existence from the invisible. **SLIDE 9** The invisible is primary. The invisible is the priority. But the invisible is also hard to believe.

Think of it this way: If we had a complete volume of scientific data that proved unequivocally every facet of the gospel story, then there would be no need for faith.

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 If the resurrection could be demonstrated in some sort of experiment and proven as a scientific law, then there is no place for faith. If the virgin birth could be explained through the discovery of some new properties of physical matter, faith then becomes obsolete. If the gospel story could be verified scientifically, we would not have to trust in the story itself, we would just trust our senses. We would trust in our ability to acquire and compile information. We would trust in our ability to understand information. This would simply be another way of bolstering faith in ourselves. And when we walk down the aisle full of faith in ourselves, we will find that we are still ultimately destitute, still unable to purchase this lofty hope, and peace and joy and love.

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We have faith, that is trust, in Jesus Christ alone. We proclaim his supremacy as King his sufficiency as Savior. Not because we can prove it in a physics lab, but because we have faith, we believe it. I want to take a look at two verses that further explain this saving faith. The first comes from Romans 12:3 which reads,

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 “For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not ot think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one.” So faith originates in God. It begins with him and he gives it to us. It is a result of grace. We don’t achieve faith or earn some sort of status as a faithful person…it is distributed by God. Our second passage, also from the apostle Paul:

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 Ephesians 2:8, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift – not from works, so that no one can boast.” But every gift must be opened. Faith must be accepted. The initial gift of God requires an intentional response on our part. One theologian Bruce Demarest defines faith as “the divinely enabled human response of belief and trust in God or Christ.” So, like Jesus himself, faith is an incarnational phenomenon.

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 It is completely God’s doing, while at the same time completely our consent. We must consent because this faith directs our life and shaped our decisions. We must consent because we live our lives by faith!

 The prophet Habakkuk does not get a lot of attention in our normal discussions, but he famously penned this simple verse,

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 “The righteous shall live by faith.” Paul takes this same verse and quotes it twice: In Romans 1:17 and in Galatians 3:11. The author of Hebrews also borrows this line in chapter 10 verse 38. The righteous shall live by faith…faith in God and the story he has written, faith that directs our lives. Faith that gives us access to the greater gifts of God: hope, peace, joy and love.

 The beloved hymn declares, “Joy to the World, the Savoir reigns…repeat the sounding joy! No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found.” Christmas is the watershed moment of history. John’s gospel explains it this way:

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 John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us” (HCSB). Other translations say, “made his home among us” (CEB), “dwelt among us” (KJV), “lived among us” (GW). The Greek literally says that he tabernacled among us. God became human. What an unheard of story! What an insane notion! God took on flesh and lived as one of us. He wore our face, he felt our pain, he grew up in a family and had a personal background. But as one of us, he had a distinct and unique purpose. Isaiah 53 sheds light on this purpose. “He grew up like a young plant before us…He possessed no splendid form for us to see…He knew sickness well…He was despised and we didn’t think about him.” This is Jesus, the Son of God we are talking about here. The cute little baby Jesus born in a manger…Isaiah goes on: “It was certainly our sickness that he carried and our sufferings that he bore…He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed.” This baby Jesus was born to die, and to die for me and for you and for all of humanity. He died for our sins. By his wounds we are healed. This is the amazing story of the gospel. It is in this story that we place our faith. When I drive somewhere I believe that I will arrive at my destination safely…I usually do every time. But when eternity is the destination, I know I cannot trust myself to get there. A need a new vehicle; a new driver. I trust in Christ and his gospel to get me there.

 We mentioned before, Christmas and Easter exist as one story. We really cannot celebrate one without the other. That is part of why I appreciate the new song we have been singing this season.

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 In verse 1 we sing, “Behold the king has come….creator of the world breathing our air.” Verse 2, “Behold the empty tomb, He’s not here for he has risen. Every heart prepare him room, Jesus Christ the King of heaven!” Verse one always leads to verse two…birth leads to death leads to resurrection!

 This is the gospel. This is the only story that matters. This is why he came, it is why we are here, it is why the church even exists. Pastor and author Thabiti Anyabwile puts it frankly when he says, “The greatest need in the church today is the gospel…Apart from the gospel the church has nothing to say.” Christians are people formed by this gospel, this story of good news. We have faith in the truth of this story, faith in it’s impact upon this world and it’s impact upon us personally. We trust that it is true. And through this faith we are empowered to take down from the shelf enduring hope, perfect peace, undying joy and unconditional, self-sacrificial, faithful love. And to that all God’s people said: Amen!