

An Outrageous Promise

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[0 : 00] Great. Good evening. They weren't lying. It really is bright up here. My name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. It's my pleasure this evening to be really just opening the Bible for us over the next 15 minutes or so.

I love Christmas. I love singing carols. Haven't these guys been brilliant this evening? I also love chocolate, and I love the excuse to eat chocolate at this time of year.

A friend and I went to see Wonka in the cinema last week, partly just because I love chocolate. Partly we were just at a loose end. But I thought it was excellent. I highly recommend going to see it.

If you don't know about Wonka, if you know the story of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, the Roald Dahl story, this is sort of a prequel to that. It tells the story of how Willy Wonka came to open his famous chocolate factory.

You should really go and see it. It's great. I don't think that there are going to be any massive spoilers here. I certainly don't want to ruin the film for you, but there is this moment in the film where a young Willy Wonka is learning from his mum.

[1 : 00] They live on a canal boat together. She's teaching him how to make chocolate, and it is the best chocolate, right? There's just something about it, a secret. And he says that one day he is going to share her chocolate with the world.

When you do, she says, I'll be right there with you, and you'll know the secret ingredient. Promise? He asks. Pinky promise, she replies. That's the most solemn vow that there is.

We then get a slightly older Wonka. He's now on his own. His mum is no longer in the picture. And his whole life, this whole film, it seems, is built on that promise. He thinks if he can just share her chocolate with the world, then she'll be there.

We'll come back to Willy Wonka in a bit, but first I want to ask about those two words. I promise. I wonder how those two words make you feel.

There might be a sense of excitement. When Katie and I got engaged, there was a wonderful promise and a great excitement. But maybe you're here this evening and you've made promises that haven't been kept.

[2 : 13] It might be in apparently quite small ways. Again, Katie and I have often promised to do things like the dishes or put the toilet seat down. I don't always keep those promises. But it might be much bigger and much more painful than that.

Marriage vows, promises broken. Parents making promises over and over again that they'll change or protect you or just be there.

Maybe you've had friends promise to meet up or call back or stay in touch. I don't know. Maybe you're here this evening and if you think about it, you've become conditioned to promises being sort of meaningless, maybe empty.

Well, this evening we're going to think about the most outrageous promise that has ever been made. And do you know that God who made that promise does not break his promises?

Kirstie read that passage from Isaiah for us earlier. It's probably a familiar passage at this time of year. I don't know if you've ever taken the time to really sit down and read it. But in that passage that Kirstie read for us, through the prophet Isaiah, God really does make some outrageous promises to his people.

[3 : 29] He promises to establish justice and peace. And he promises to rule with justice and peace forever. And not those promises that we would just love to see come true.

Like, don't we all want to live in a world where justice is done? A world of real peace. And don't we want a God who loves us and who rules the world in that way? As we look around the world, it's full,

isn't it, of conflict and injustice.

Even as we look closer to home, maybe into our own hearts, don't we see the brokenness and the pain of injustice? The promise of Christmas is outrageous.

And here's the promise. It was written 700 years before that first Christmas. This is what he said was coming. First, justice. When God says through Isaiah, he says, You have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

That is a promise to God's people that their enemies would be defeated, that justice would be done for them in that way. And he promises them peace when he says, Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

[4 : 46] That's a promise to God's people that there would be no more war, that peace would prevail. And he promises to keep it that way with a perfect loving rule when he says, and this is probably the most familiar bit, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

This is a promise not just of justice and peace, but of a God come to keep it that way, of a king who would come and sit on David's throne, that this rule would be perfect peace and perfect justice forever.

That's the promise of Isaiah chapter 9. It's the promise of Christmas. And in Luke's gospel, that passage that Delia and Joe read for us just now, we begin to see how Jesus is fulfilling those promises.

But in surprising ways. First, the promise of justice. As the angels come to the shepherds, they say, a saviour has been born to you.

[6 : 17] He is the Messiah, the Lord. The Messiah was like the long-awaited liberator of the people. He was the one who they thought would come and save them from their enemies.

The one who would provide that sort of justice. The angels are saying that Jesus is going to fulfill the justice promise. But what sort of justice is he going to bring?

We'll come back to that. But first, before we do, he's also going to fulfill the promise of peace. The angels come to the shepherds and their message is, do not be afraid.

And they praise God saying, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth. Peace to those on whom his favour rests. Peace, no more war.

But how is that peace going to be established, right? An insignificant baby born in an insignificant town in an insignificant corner of a very war-torn Roman world.

[7 : 17] And the angels say he's going to fulfill the peace promise. What sort of peace will this be? Well, it is a surprising justice and it is a surprising peace.

Because Jesus fulfills what Isaiah has said because he came not just to free God's people from bondage to Rome or any other kind of earthly empire, but instead he brings justice and peace by saving the people from their sin and from death.

That's eternal justice. And what eternal justice does is it casts out all fear and brings real existential peace. It's the great good news that the angels came to proclaim to the shepherds.

And it is great good news for us because all of us, we're caught up in sin. We might think of that as just like all the bad stuff that we do, but the Bible actually describes sin in a way that is much deeper than that.

It's a heart problem. It's our rejection of the God who created us and what he has said is good. Let me offer another Willy Wonka illustration.

[8 : 26] And I've used this before. Some of you may have heard me use it before, but I think it's helpful. So I'm going to use it again. And if you remember Augustus Gloop, Augustus Gloop is one of the kids in the original Charlie and the Chocolate Factory story.

And he wins a golden ticket to go and visit the amazing Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. And at the heart of the story, right at the heart of the factory, is this room.

Willy Wonka takes all the kids into this room and in it is a sort of garden. There's a chocolate river that flows through the middle of it. And there's trees and there are flowers.

And Willy Wonka says, everything you can see is edible. Even the bark on the trees is chocolate. The flowers are made out of candy. Just go and eat whatever you like.

But what does he say? Do not drink from the chocolate river. And what does Augustus Gloop do? He just runs straight to the river and eats, doesn't he?

[9 : 23] And in a way, that's what sin does. You might have thought that story is quite similar, actually, to the story of Adam and Eve, where God gives humanity this wonderful garden with lots of good things in it, with one instruction, do not eat from that tree.

I wonder if Roald Dahl had that story in mind when he wrote Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, because that is the story that we're given to understand, really the root of the human problem. And it's this, always questioning what God has said is good.

Hearts and desires pulling us away from him. And that ends up consuming us, and we fall into it, right? That's what happens to Augustus in that story.

He falls into the chocolate river. He's consumed by his own temptation and carried away by his rebellion. We're about to hear another reading from Philippians chapter 2, and that kind of tells the story of Christmas too, in a way, of God become man, and yet born in a stable, a king born in a stable, who stepped down in that way.

But in Philippians chapter 2, the story doesn't stop there, because he keeps on stepping down, even to death on a cross. Why? Because that is how justice was done, and that is how peace was established.

[10 : 49] You know, I think at first glance, the cross of Jesus looks to completely deny this. It just looks totally unjust, the death of a perfectly innocent man.

And yet nowhere is God's justice more apparent than it in Jesus at the cross. That's where he took the punishment for our sin. That's justice.

So that we could be forgiven by God. And that's peace. It's a surprising fulfillment. You know, in that new Wonka film, Wonka's mum is faithful to her promise.

There is a sense in which she is with him when he shares her chocolate with the world, and the secret to that joy is revealed. It's a really touching moment, but it is a surprising fulfillment of that promise.

I won't tell you what it is. You'll have to go and watch the film to see what I mean. But it's wonderful.

And in some ways, the promises of Isaiah are fulfilled in surprising ways too.

[11 : 50] Surprising, but wonderful. As Jesus comes and he brings justice, paying the price for all our sin. And as he brings peace, but a peace with the God who created us.

If you're listening in tonight and you're not a Christian, this is really, really good news. It's an outrageous promise. It's a wonderful promise. And it's the promise of Christmas today, justice and peace.

And yet, God, through Isaiah, promised more than that, didn't he? He didn't just promise that justice and peace would be established, but that he'd rule with perfect peace and perfect justice forever.

And let's be honest, that doesn't feel true today, does it? Like we've already said, as you look around you, as you look inside you, we know that there isn't perfect peace or justice in this world.

But there is even more good news here. Because he came, again, we're going to hear this in Philippians chapter two shortly. He came and he died, but he didn't stay dead.

[13 : 04] And he promises that if we trust in him, then we don't have to either. He's done it before, that's Christmas. And he'll do it again.

He's brought justice for our sin. He's brought us peace with the God who created us. And he promises that if we trust in him, we will live forever with him in a place of perfect peace and perfect justice.

And that makes all the difference in the world, doesn't it? I've been to a handful of funerals here at Brunfield over the last couple of years, and some of them have been for people that I never even met.

Actually, just earlier this week at Sylvia's funeral, I'd never met Sylvia before. And as we heard about Sylvia's life, and especially about the impact that she's had on this church that I now call my family, I was overcome, if I'm honest, really with sadness at never having had the pleasure of knowing her.

But then we were reminded on Monday at her funeral of this wonderful promise that Sylvia, trusting in Jesus, doesn't stay dead, but that she lives forever.

[14 : 16] And that one day, I will too. And I'll get to meet her. And if you trust Jesus, that can be true for you today too. Because he promises that if we trust in him, we will live forever in a place where he rules with perfect peace and with perfect justice.

That's the outrageous promise of Christmas. And so as we finish, especially again, if you're here this evening and you're not a Christian, I just want to leave you with two questions that I want you to keep on asking.

First, keep asking, is this true? Is any of this true? Let me implore you to go and explore the evidence. We've got these little copies of Luke's gospel in the foyer.

Please help yourself to these. That's really the best place to start. We've also got a couple of good Christmas books. These would be helpful too, but keep digging. It has been my experience as I keep asking those questions.

The more I push at whether Christianity is true or not, the more the claims of this faith really do hold up to my investigations of it. What have you got to lose by doing that?

[15 : 32] And as you do that, as you explore the claims of Christianity, don't just ask whether it's true, but ask whether it might have the potential to make a positive difference in your life. Ask, what would it mean for this to be true?

What could it mean to follow this king? It's great to come along to a carol service like this to feel a bit festive, to grab a mince pie at the end, but there is so much more to Jesus than that.

And we would love to help you out and point you in the right direction. Please don't just head home and put Jesus back in his box until next year. We'd love to see you here again. You're welcome, honestly, anytime.

Keep pushing at that question. What difference might this make for me? Because he doesn't break his promises. And the promise of eternal peace and justice is a properly outrageous promise.

It's well worth exploring. In a moment's time, Tophel's going to come up and read Philippians chapter 2 for us, where we really, like I said, hear the story of Christmas and what Jesus has done for us beyond that too.

[16 : 41] And as he comes up, let's just still our hearts as I pray, why don't we? Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Christmas. We thank you that you are a God who does not break his promises.

We thank you for those wonderful promises of justice and of peace, of all the ways that you have fulfilled them for us as we trust in you. And Lord, we look forward to a time where we will live with you forever in a place of perfect peace and perfect justice.

In Jesus' name. Amen.