

Bigger than you Imagine

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- [0 : 0 0] John 1, 1-18 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was light of all mankind.
- The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.
- He himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
- He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to do that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.
- [1 : 0 8] Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God.
- The Word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, This is the one I spoke about when I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me.
- Out of his fullness we have all received grace, in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
- No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
- [2 : 2 1] Well, good evening everyone. It would be super helpful if you could keep that passage open in front of you. It's very familiar, and we're going to spend the next few minutes just exploring some of the significance of that.
- Before we do, let me ask for God's help and pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the words of the Bible and what they say to us about your gift of your Son to our world.
- Please, as we explore these words together, give us understanding and help us to respond in the right way to what we learn. We ask this in Jesus' name.
- Amen. I wonder if you have come across the Christmas Price Index. It is absolutely a must for anyone who wants to make their true love feel truly loved at this time of year.
- It's published every year by a financial services company in the U.S., and it calculates the cost of all the items in the 12 Days of Christmas song.
- [3 : 2 5] They've been doing it for nearly 40 years. They're very good at it now, and it makes fascinating reading for those thinking about their Christmas shopping list. I wonder if you can guess what the most expensive items are.

Well, despite the fact that food and fertilizer prices have significantly increased the cost of the smaller living presence on the list, the biggest percentage climber this year, perhaps unsurprising given the rise in commodity prices, is gold rings up a massive 40%, but they're not the most expensive item.

The most expensive item is lords are leaping. Those lords have leapt ahead of the previous leaders, the swimming swans, and can now command a price of nearly \$14,000 a shot, would you believe?

This is in sharp contrast to the unskilled labor on the list. For those hard up, the bargain basement item of the year is yet again, sadly, maids are milking.

You can get eight of those for an amazing \$58. Put them all together. Day 12 of the song will cost you over \$45,000.

[4 : 44] And if you really want to make your true love feel truly loved and give them all 364 gifts, and a year's worth of stuff to sell on eBay, it'll cost you a cool \$197,000.

C.S. Lewis, the author of the Narnia stories, has two complaints about Christmas shopping. Number one, it gives more pain than pleasure.

Long before the 25th, everyone is worn out, physically, by weeks spent daily in overcrowded shops, mentally, by the effort of trying to remember all the right recipients and think out suitable gifts for them.

He says, people who do this are in no trim for merrymaking. Secondly, most of it is involuntary. The modern rule is that anyone can force you to give them a present by sending you a quite unprovoked present of his own.

Who's not heard the wail of despair and indeed of resentment when, at the last moment, just as everyone hoped the nuisance was over for one more year, the unwanted gift from Mrs. Busy, whom we hardly remember, flops unwelcomed through the letterbox.

[5 : 56] And back to the dreadful shops, one of us has to go. He's speaking, of course, in the days before Amazon came to our rescue. He concludes, can it really be my duty to buy and receive masses of junk every winter just to help the shopkeepers?

Now, folks, I don't know if you're here this evening as a Christmas lover or a Christmas hater or something in between. But whichever, the big difficulty at this time of year is that Jesus tends to get sidelined.

Picture the school nativity play. Last nativity play I was at at school, the whole place was absolutely heaving with people. And they piled onto the stage.

Mary and Joseph and wise men with gifts and shepherds and stars, a whole galaxy of stars, and a small army of angels and more donkeys than you could comfortably fit in any stable.

And it was a great affair. The only inanimate character on the stage was the baby. And, of course, you wouldn't want to put a live one in the middle of that scrum. However, I was not wrong in feeling that the baby is somewhat peripheral to the activity.

[7 : 06] At Christmas, the stage gets just full up of all kinds of stuff. So for a few minutes, we're going to look at this famous passage from one of the accounts of Jesus' life to get a bit of perspective on Jesus.

John, the person who wrote this, saw Jesus in the flesh. Did you notice that phrase in the second last paragraph? We have seen his glory.

I saw him, he says. What exactly did he see? Well, I want to mention three big surprises from this passage that I think will help us have some perspective on Jesus at this busy time of year.

Number one, the baby is much bigger than we might imagine. Look how he starts.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

[8 : 20] Which places the one who came into the world right back at the very beginning of everything. The next sentence places him behind the existence of everything.

Through him, all things were made. And just in case we didn't get the point, he adds, without him, nothing was made that has been made. So folks, just think for a moment of the bigness of everything.

The sun is the biggest thing in our solar system. Over 99.5% of the matter of our solar system is in the sun. It is 150 million kilometers away.

If you drove there keeping to the speed limit, it would take you 148 and a half years. It takes light from the sun about 8 minutes and 18 seconds to reach us.

Which is a good improvement on road travel. However, if you were to stand outside on a dark night. And shine your torch up into the blackness. It would take your torchlight to get to the edge of the observable universe.

[9 : 30] 40,000 million years. And that's only as far as we can see. Make you feel small?

Well, according to this, all of that, every bit of that, is within the control of the one who came into the world to lie in an animal trough.

It's a breathtaking claim, isn't it? Last couple of centuries, people have tried to explain the existence of everything, including ourselves, in terms of impersonal forces.

Here's a modification of a well-known nursery rhyme. Twinkle, twinkle, little star. I don't wonder what you are. You're the cooling down of gases in the shape of solid masses.

And according to that view of the universe, we just live in a world of stuff. Cold, impersonal, inanimate. Everything that happens is entirely random.

[10 : 36] Which actually is hard to live with. I was picking up my wife from the airport this morning, and her plane was delayed. So I had a chance to kind of find out what was in the airport.

And they have a Christmas tree. And beside the Christmas tree is a notice saying, please feel free to write your wishes and prayers on a star and hang it on the tree.

So as I had a bit of time, I read some of the wishes on the tree. Some of them were entertaining. I wish for my flight to Dublin to be uncanceled. I wish for some Lego Star Wars I love you.

I wish for my shift to be over. But most of them were not like that. Edmund, rest in peace.

JM, miss you lots and always. I wish for my mum to be better and cancer-free.

[11 : 42] In a material universe, purely matter and random, how do we even make sense of our feelings of loss like that?

And of course, this means if this year has been a bad year for you, if you've lost people close to you, if relationships have broken up, if your studies have been ruined by ill health or domestic trauma or something.

That's only what you'd expect in a universe that's just stuff, impersonal, random, comfortless. But according to John, reality is not impersonal.

For right at the heart of everything is a personality and loving relationship. He was with God in the beginning.

Relationship has always been there. That's where everything comes from. Through him, all things were made. Personality is behind it all, everything.

[12 : 57] The baby is much bigger than we imagine and much more intimately involved than we might imagine. Look at the next sentence. In him was life.

And that life was the light of all mankind. He's behind everything. He's behind us. So the fact that you are the person you are is not an accident.

Your life comes from his life. And the reason that we're precious to one another and it hurts when we lose one another or abuse one another is not a random quirk of matter and time and chance.

It's because we really are precious. His life is the source of ours. And the reason that we're complex and engaging and interesting and gifted is not some random fluke.

But an expression of his creative power. Jesus, the one who was the baby, is the key to our existence and identity, according to John.

[13 : 57] He's much bigger than we might imagine. Secondly, the baby is much less loved than we might think.

Amazingly for all its tat and junk, at Christmas, the baby is still remembered and given a big cheer at this time of year. And that's no more than you'd expect, really.

When the loving creator comes into his world, you'd expect a bit of a welcome. But notice the growing tension in these sentences. The light shines in the darkness.

That's a positive statement. But the darkness has not overcome it. Less positive suggests that there was conflict there.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. How wonderful we might think to have the light come into the world. And yet, says John, though the world was made through him, the world did not know him or recognize him.

[15 : 02] He came to that which was his own. But his own did not receive him. Well, why? I wonder if you've ever experienced being ignored in public.

You know, you see a person you know and you kind of try and catch them in the eye and step towards them and you're just about to hold your hand out and they look right past you and walk on.

That's the kind of idea that's being expressed here. The world did not recognize him. His own did not run up and shake him by the hand. How glad we are you're here.

And actually, nothing much has changed. Often we're a bit more polite about it than that. I talked to a carol service goer a while ago who said this to me.

You know, I come to this every year. This is my one thing every year, which is a kind of polite way of saying 364 days a year, my creator is a complete irrelevance to me.

[16 : 05] And you can see that more generally in the way that the Jesus story never seems to get any further than the manger. Have you noticed that? Jesus the baby never seems to become Jesus the man.

Every year he's the baby all over again and we go, hooray, a baby. The thing about babies is that they're quite controllable really. Now, let me caveat that.

I know there are maybe people here who've just had a new baby in the household and I know you think they're not nearly as controllable as I'd like them to be. I'd really like a switch at the back to switch them off.

But you can still put them in a cage, playpen, and you can still pick them up and move them around wherever you want to go because they're small.

They're relatively controllable babies and Jesus is the perpetual baby in our culture. Like Peter Pan, he never seems to grow up, which is really a way of avoiding who he is, I think.

[17 : 05] The Lord of all with the light to rule over everything and over us. Of course, we hate it when people behave as though we're not there. It's such a hostile thing to do and it's an even greater hostility to relate to God like that.

A scandal because everything we are and have comes from him and a huge sadness, really, for in rejecting the key to life, we find ourselves loveless, comfortless, clueless, in an empty universe.

The baby is much bigger than we might think and much less loved than we might think. But also, thirdly, the baby has done so much more than we can imagine.

The coming of Jesus into the world, the coming of the creator into humanity is such a huge thing. It's almost, well, it is impossible to illustrate it, but let me have a go.

It's like the landlord becoming the lodger or the headmaster getting detention or Beethoven queuing up for one of his concerts or Picasso painting by numbers or Alan Sugar becoming the apprentice or Elvis auditioning for the X Factor or Fred Astaire being the amateur on Strictly or the king appearing on I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here.

[18 : 33] It's huge. And those are really small things in comparison. The word became flesh, says John. Almost inconceivable.

The word, that's referring to Jesus becoming flesh and making his dwelling among us. Being one of us.

And you've got to ask, haven't you? You've got to ask, why did he do that? It cannot be that he was short of cash or needed the publicity or was desperate to reinvent his career.

It can't be for that reason. Well, I think it's encapsulated in the rest of verse 14. Just look down at number 14, please.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory. In John's book about Jesus, that word glory is not referring to the nativity scene.

[19 : 44] You know how Christmas cards often have that slightly warm, cozy look to them? You know, the donkeys have no fleas and the sheep have no ticks and the shepherds definitely don't swear and the cows don't smell and everyone has that kind of radioactive glow in Christmas cards.

You know that? That's not the glory that John is talking about here. No. Wind the clock on 30 years to the city of Jerusalem, to outside the city, where three wooden crosses stand.

Jesus uses that glory word in this book to describe another scene. Not the crib, but the crucifixion.

That terrible day when the most powerful, most loving man who's ever walked the face of the earth was nailed up on a cross.

That's the glorious day in this book because that's the day when what's really great about Jesus is seen more clearly than it can be seen anywhere else.

[21 : 00] The day that Jesus died is the day when God's goodness is made clearer than it is anywhere else. God is truly good deep down all the way through, which means that evil cannot be ignored in God's world forever, which means that payment has to be made if people are going to be forgiven.

What is more evil than to live in the world of a good and generous God and behave as though he's a perpetual baby to be smiled at once a year and ignored for the rest of the time?

Jesus died for the sins of the world on that day. It was a great and glorious thing to do. But the day Jesus died is also the day God's kindness is made clearer than you can see it anywhere else.

For he died in our place to get what our evil deserves. His opposition to evil and his kindness meet together on that day when that great one voluntarily endured God's hostility to evil so that we might not.

So that we might be welcomed into the family of God, that we might come to know God for ourselves. Look how John puts it in verse 12.

[22 : 33] To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God properly in the family.

It's a gloriously loving thing of God to have done. Here are some of the results of a survey taken from a bunch of four to eight year olds.

They were asked the question, what does love mean? And their answers range, as you'd expect, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Love is when you kiss all the time. Then you get tired of kissing and you still want to be together and you talk more.

My mommy and daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss. Or, love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.

Or, when my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore, so my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too.

[23 : 42] That's love. Or, God could have said magic words to make the nails fall off the cross, but he didn't. That's love.

Now, I don't know how much you know about Jesus and what he came to do. This might be your first time ever in a church building or you may have been to billions of carol services before. But whether you're a Christmas lover or a Christmas hater, a novice or an old timer, let me ask you this.

Do you really think it's possible that that great person came into the world to do a little tiny baby thing? Do you think that's possible?

Something to raise a bit of a cheer about every Christmas and then be forgotten? Do you think he came to generate the exchanging of junk for the good of the shopkeepers?

No, he didn't. He came to die for the sins of the world so that we might come to know God and escape disaster. Nothing less than that was on his mind. Coming into the world was life and death for him and it's life and death for us.

[24 : 55] Normal babies are controllable, but this one is much bigger than we might think and much less love than we might think and he's done much more than we could possibly imagine.

But it does need to be received. Thelma Howard worked for 30 years as a housekeeper for a well-to-do American couple. They got on very well.

She became part of the family. Every Christmas, the couple, whose names were Walter and Lillian, gave Thelma a present. It wasn't a very special-looking present. It wasn't big. It didn't have a fancy wrapping.

Just an envelope with a piece of paper inside. Walter and Lillian told her to keep these things and never sell them. And she did. She didn't sell them. She put them in a drawer at home and didn't really think too much about them.

She died in 1994. Her employer, who'd been so very kind, had died some years before that. And the certificates that he'd given to Thelma every year and told her not to sell and which she'd kept in her drawer for years were share certificates for shares in his company.

[26 : 08] At the time she died, Thelma was living with a handicapped son on a small pension in a small apartment in Los Angeles. She wasn't at all well off. But in her little apartment, in her drawer, were share certificates in the Disney Corporation, that was her employer's second name, worth more than \$10 million.

The sad thing about Thelma was that she'd been given marvelous presents every year, but she never really understood what they were or how much they were worth. And so she died a poor person.

Why tell you that story? Because many people are just like that with Jesus. Every year, we hear something about a great gift. gift, the biggest possible present, God coming into the world so that we can know him, be forgiven for living life without him, be welcomed into his family and secure with him forever.

And every year, people like Thelma look at the present and don't really get what it is. And every year, people like Thelma, who've had riches at their fingertips all their lives, die without ever realizing what they could have had or the disaster they could have avoided.

I hope this Christmas isn't like that for you. There are great riches on offer. They're there for the taking. Anyone can have them. They last forever. And there's no greater tragedy than to miss out on that.

[27 : 39] So, why don't you take the next step forward? There's all sorts of things you could do this Christmas time. You could, if you've come here with a friend, you could ask your friend about what it is about Jesus that really grabs them.

We are having a number of things that Martin will tell us a bit about later on. We've got a Back to Church Sunday early in January. Come along and learn more about Jesus. We'd love to give that opportunity to you.

He can't possibly have come to do a tiny little baby thing. It would simply be the right thing to find out what that involves. Thanks for listening.

so patiently. Let me pray briefly and then I'll hand back to Martin. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for John's words about Jesus and the extraordinary things they teach us.

We pray, please, that wherever we are in our understanding, you would help us to take the next step in finding out more. Please help us to do this for his sake.

[28 : 42] Amen. Amen.