I find that there is a lot of confusion around Christmas these days. So many adverts on TV and other media what Christmas is. It’s fun, or it’s cricket, or KFC, or buying this or that, or spoiling yourself, or having the best light display or serving the best ham etc. But there is never any mention of the real meaning of Christ-mas – the joy, hope & peace that a Saviour brings into our mess. Perhaps we need to be re-aligned. Have a listen to the Skitguys as they sort out the Christmas confusion.

Skitguys – Christmas Confusion (2 min 30 secs)

Introduction

Did you ever hope for something on Christmas morning ... but it never happened? It might have been a particular gift as a child, or perhaps you had hoped that someone might have turned up to family celebrations, but then they never turned up.

I had hoped for a Grey Nichols cricket bat when I was about 10 years old for Christmas. I woke up excited on Christmas morning, and got to open my present, and it was a tennis racquet. Not what I had hoped for.
When I got a bit older, and I had my own family I hoped for a new set of golf clubs one Christmas. I was all set that I had hinted enough to my family in the preceding months. I used to play a fair bit. They knew that all I had were a couple of really old clubs and I was desperate for a new set of Greg Norman signature clubs complete with the bag, and golf shoes. (Probably worth about $1,000, but I hadn’t really considered that.) But on Christmas morning as we opened our gifts, one square looking gift box was handed to me – it was a box of golf balls. I was gutted - Not what I’d hoped for.

Christmas time is a time of hope. But, what sort of hope are you & I holding on to & celebrating this Christmas?

What sort of hope are we wanting to share?

**Let’s pray …**

*Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for Christmas where we remember the birth of Jesus, the Saviour of the world. We think of salvation for every man, woman & child given to us as a gift wrapped up in your love. We thank you today for the hope we have in Jesus – a living hope – that’s the real message of Christmas. Expose our hearts this morning as we come to see the Christ Child – the blessed hope for this world. Amen.*

**POINT 1 – What they were hoping for**

Luke 2:1-3 gives us an insight into the world that Jesus arrived into. The Temple had been rebuilt but not yet restored to its former glory. The Israelites were living in an occupied nation under the Romans. There was rampant corruption and high taxes. In Luke 2 we see this demonstrated clearly. Caesar sends a decree and the whole nation responds.

But more than that – the Roman soldiers and the partially completed Temple were reminders of a bigger truth – the land was a gift from God, but it was taken from the Israelites because of their disobedience. Instead of living in the fullness of life that God intended through His covenant with them, they were living in the consequences of their disobedience.

So practically and spiritually, the occupation of Israel in Jesus’ time was disheartening to the whole nation. There were many uprisings that were squashed with great force by the Romans.
(imagine for a minute being occupied by the Barmy Army Poms and we all had to do what they asked us to. They over-taxed everything we did and ate and drank and we couldn’t do a thing about it. As a result most of us are on the poverty line. Every time we played cricket, the Poms won every time, the toss was rigged, the pitch would be sabotaged every night when the Aussies batted, the umpires were corrupt and were paid off. Steve Smith got a duck every innings. The whole think would stink.)

This is what Israel felt like. The whole nation hoped for a deliverer.

N.T. Wright in his book Simply Jesus describes the context of hope that Jesus was born into.

The people who were longing for God alone to be their king were clinging to the hope set out in Scripture; the hope that after all these years, Israel’s God would return to be with His people. To rescue them, to restore them, to condemn their oppressors, to take charge, to do justice, to sort things out, to rule over them like a Good King should.

APPLICATION – this is the type of hope we can be tempted towards too. We live in our own broken, fallen world – world that feels like its drifting further still from the one God creates and intends. We can probably relate to some of what the Israelites were feeling and what they were hoping for.

Yet, their hope ... and our hope, arrived in the most unlikely of forms – a baby born to a single Mum and her partner – an humble apprentice chippie (carpenter).

I was talking to my daughter this week. She’s had a tough run in the past 12 months. She discovered that her husband had another girlfriend, and while she was up here from Sydney last Christmas, he took all the whitegoods and stuff from their house, and the vehicles and moved out with his girlfriend, leaving her with nothing to return to, and having to look after 3 little children. Trying to survive and working multiple jobs, recently, the old car that one of her friends gave her to get around in, broke down costing too much to repair. So now she is taking the children to school on the bus each day. Time consuming and unable to work the hours that her jobs demand, she is bleeding hours and money and unable to survive the cutthroat world of renting. Her middle child has been unwell and threw up on the bus all over her, and she accidentally left the other child’s backpack on the bus on the way to school. It’s a nightmare.

Both her and her youngest son (4 years old) fall ill and go to the doctor (on the bus). He tells them they have Parvo virus (and they need to wait outside the clinic in the car park because they are both contagious). After getting scripts for treatment, they are told to go home immediately and not mix with the public. Do not take public transport. Don’t
go out to shops etc. Stranded, they can’t do anything. Can’t call anyone. Can’t catch the bus. Can’t get any food from the shops. So they walk home in the hot sun, sick!!

Unwell, no hope in sight, no transport, unable to work her job, unable to take her children to school, my daughter is desperate and lacking in any sort of hope. Feeling oppressed. No hope for Christmas and her children this year. No Saviour on the horizon. NO HOPE in sight.

Similarly, you can understand how the Israelites felt – no hope. Oppressed. No messiah in sight. Can’t do anything. NO HOPE in sight.

**POINT 2 – From the outset it is apparent that the kind of hope Jesus was to deliver would look differently (Luke 2:4-9)**

How do I know this? Check out the cast of this story. An unwed mother, a carpenter, and a group of lowly shepherds. Look at the scenery – a minor town, a crowded inn, a smelly cattle shed. This is where the King of the Universe enters into this story ... in to His creation.

Later on there will be Prophets and Pagan Kings who point to the truth of the magnificence that occurred. Yet in their desperation for someone to arrive politically and deliver them, the Israelites had missed the size and scope of the good news that was to come – during his ministry Jesus was constantly asked if he was the Messiah, and if so, when was he going to start acting like it.

We all hear stories of people who missed it. Think about ...

1903 - MOTOR CAR – “The Horse is here to stay. The automobile is only a fad, a novelty.” (President of the Michigan Savings Bank advising Henry Ford’s lawyer not to invest in the Ford Motor Company)

1962 THE BEATLES – “We don’t like their sound and guitar music is on the way out.” (Decca Recording Company who rejected the Beatles)

2007 iPHONE – “There is no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share” (Steve Ballmer, Microsoft CEO)
APPLICATION – The Israelites were so stuck on the type of Messiah they were expecting that they missed Jesus and the type of hope his kingdom was inaugurating. It wasn’t a hope for political deliverance (like a type of Joh Bjelke Peterson). No ... it was much more than that (thankfully).

I wonder if we sometimes miss the truth of the hope that Jesus brings? He demonstrates this hope not just by his birth, but in the way he lived his life. We see that his ministry touches and serves, and pours out compassion and empowerment to the vulnerable, marginalized and the outcast.

The type of hope that my daughter might look for is for someone to just sweep in and change everything. Money for everyone – giving away cars and money to fix everything. But we know that hope doesn’t always look like that in our lives. It’s much deeper and richer and meaningful.

If we continue to look for God at work only in the large dramatic, miraculous moments (and they do occur from time to time) that seem to (for the most part) evade us, we run the risk of missing the truth – that God’s hope continues to break into our world in, sometimes small and mysterious ways – a kind word to a neighbour, a self-less act for a family member, an expression of generosity to the poor and vulnerable in this world. The ability to see God in the ordinary.

For my daughter, she is up against the wall and asking Why? Why has all this happened to me so suddenly? What did I do wrong? Why has everyone including God abandoned me? But then ... a friend calls on them and all of a sudden a meal appears – and out of something seemingly so small, hope starts to rise. Coping with life is that little bit easier.

From these seemingly small acts God’s hope can rise ... and His hope transforms lives. Sometimes it can surprise us. But if we remember the humble story of the first Christmas changing the very nature of the universe, we will better understand the all-pervasive ways in which God’s hope for our world can be birthed.

Consider the words of the angel’s promise – “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” (Luke 2:10) It is good news – a source of joy for all people. This is the promise we celebrate every Christmas each year – THAT JESUS’ BIRTH AND LIFE IS GOOD NEWS AND HOPE TO ALL OF US.
POINT 3 – Today, then, we need to consider: What sort of Hope are we holding to and celebrating? What sort of hope are we wanting to share?

I have a family member who detests Christmas and how commercialized it is. The presents and the spending. Yuck!! (Truth is, that it’s probably that they don’t know what to buy everyone). Yes, I don’t like how crazy & disconnected Christmas has become with the massive spending spree each year. But what sort of hope are we holding to and celebrating?

Christmas is a significant time to ask the question. As we look to the reality of world that fails to reflect what God intended, we question we need to ask is this ...

How can we share a taste of this hope with a hurt & broken world?

Let me give you an example. Each one of us has a Bulletin this morning. In it I have written about the Christmas Appeal (BE HOPE) offering envelopes. For over 50 years, Baptist World Aid has been helping Baptist Church folk to give the gift of hope to some of the world’s poorest people

Play the 2017 Be Hope Christmas Appeal video.

APPLICATION
The story began with a simple act of generosity here in Australia .... But it ends with the birth of a life-changing hope for a family struggling with poverty.

The heart of Christmas is about celebrating the hope we have in Jesus. (Story of Rudy’s Dad giving a new car to one of his employees one Christmas). You might’ve got some of the greatest gifts ever in past Christmases. Jesus’ birth is the greatest gift you & I have EVER received, and nothing will ever compare to the everlasting hope we have because of it. When you give to the BE HOPE appeal this year, you are revealing God’s love and hope to others ... to families.
CONCLUSION

Today there might be lots of ways that Jesus is asking you to be a part of sharing His hope with all people. Maybe it’s through cooking a meal, or mowing a lawn for a busy/sick neighbour. Maybe it’s cooking a meal for who will gather at your Christmas table (maybe they have nowhere to go this Christmas). Perhaps it is offering a kind word to frazzled parents at the shops, or writing a letter to your kids or parents this year for Christmas.

If nothing else though, today you can be a part of giving hope to a family like Fulans in poverty. Just pick up an envelope at the Info Desk. There is so much we can do when we understand what real HOPE is and what sort of HOPE we want to share.

In the face of all the need around us, it’s easy to feel that we don’t have enough to make a difference. But if you feel this way (that your offering is way to small) then just remember ... the story that changed the universe began in a cattle shed in a small town with a baby.

In my case, I’m going to use the frequent flyer points that I received from our recent trip to Israel and visit my sick daughter tomorrow morning to help her out. I can’t do a lot but I can use what I have to bring love and hope into the life of the vulnerable and in need. In other words, Dad to the rescue.

The Christmas story is all about our heavenly Dad comes to the rescue bringing HOPE through Jesus. That’s the type of hope this world needs.

Let’s pray ...

Heavenly Father, In a world without hope, you stepped in. God made flesh. It is this incarnation that brings us the hope of eternal life in Your presence, surrounded by your glory. There You will wipe every tear from our eyes and death will be no more; the end of mourning, crying & pain. All things will be made new. We thank you for the heart of Christmas. We thank you for the HOPE we have through the birth of Jesus your Son. Yet, as we celebrate this hope Lord, there are others in this world who have lost hope completely. Right now there are families who are so consumed with the struggle to survive that hope of any kind will be far from their minds. Help us to recognise Your own supreme generosity in giving your son so that we might respond in kind to ones such as these. Father, this is our prayer.
Because of the hope we have in Christ, we ask that you compel us by Your Spirit to show loving generosity to those in need this Christmas. Today, please use our giving to spark hope in lives that desperately need your touch. And as this small act helps to meet a physical need, reveal to them your great love. Bless those who do not know you with the good news of Your Son, that we celebrate at Christmas time. Might they experience great joy. It is your will that the hope He brings would cause great joy for all people.

We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Closing Song – Emmanuel (Hallowed manger ground)
In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.