

CHRISTMAS: IT'S NOT YOUR BIRTHDAY 4

"It's the birth of Love!"

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John's gospel stands apart from the other three in many significant ways, but none more profoundly than the way he (John) introduces us to Jesus. Even though Mark skips the whole birth narrative, instead beginning his gospel with Jesus' entry into ministry; John's approach is uniquely theological. No long genealogy, no pronouncements of joy, hope or peace. No shepherds or wise men, not even a mention of a manger. Just this theologically pregnant reminder: *the Word was God...and the Word became human, and made his home among us*. It sure sounds like Emmanuel, but is so much more.

This Christmas we've spent our time considering that Christmas is not our Birthday: but it is the birth of Hope, Joy, Peace, and today, Christmas is the birth of Love. *He was full of unfailing love*. John's gospel also contains one of the world's most favorite verses: John 3:16. You know it so let's say it together:

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

I read recently of an elderly Sunday School teacher who had a walnut shell on his desk with this verse typed on a small piece of paper like a fortune cookie, because he believed that this verse was the gospel in a nutshell. He is right, and I want to explore that gospel from this verse this morning. Christmas, it's not our Birthday; it is however, the birth of Love.

1. THE GREATEST LOVE

For God loved the world so much...

What is it about the Love of God that makes it so amazing and unique and great? I'd have to say that it is the fact *that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*. Earlier in the week I was reading and writing in my devotional blog about Jesus' conversation with the two thieves on the cross, just before each of them died. One joined the crowd's mocking, and the other asked Jesus for entrance into His kingdom. Jesus responded to the second by promising that; *today, you will be with me in paradise*. I wrote about how that makes me feel.

I am glad that Jesus loves sinners like me, and you, and that no matter the place, time, occasion, or sin...Jesus is ready, willing and able to forgive our sins. I also spoke of how unfair that sometimes seems for some of us who've been faithful for so long. We hear about death-bed conversions, or jail-house decisions, or last-rite confessions, and wonder if that's really fair. I'm not sure God's love is always fair, as far as we understand fair...but I know it is vast! And I'm thankful.

If I could choose to give each of you one gift this Christmas season it would be this: that you might know that God loves you. I know we know how to say it, even how to share it sometimes; how to recite it, but have we really come to understand that God loves us? If so, it affects everything else we do. It affects how we treat others, it affects how we treat our bodies, it affects how we make decisions, it affects how we spend money, it affects every aspect of how we live. The fact that we are loved by God is the greatest single fact in the world, period, bar none. God loved the world so much...He proved it in Bethlehem. It is the greatest love.

2. THE GREATEST GIFT

that He gave His one and only Son...

'Tis the season for gift-giving, and gift getting. When I ask the children seated on Santa's knee, what their favorite part of Christmas is, what do you guess they say?

Almost without exception; the presents!

But last year I was taken aback when 3 children, two sisters and a little brother, almost in harmony, almost as if they'd been coached, responded to my question: "It's Jesus' birthday, that's our favorite part!"

Gifts are a part of the Christmas tradition, and that tradition was born...not in a stable with three wise men bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh, not with the shepherds offering worship, but IN THE MANGER...God gave the greatest gift. All others are pale reflections of His initial and His greatest gift!

What do you think would cause God to choose to give His most precious gift... His only Son...to people like you and me?

The story is told of a gem dealer strolling the aisles at the Tucson Gem and Mineral show when he noticed a blue-violet stone the size and shape of a potato. He looked it over, and then, as calmly as possible, asked the vendor, "you want \$15 for this?" The seller, realizing the rock wasn't as pretty as others in the bin, lowered the price to \$10. The stone has since been certified as a 1,905 – carat natural star sapphire, about 800 carats larger than the next largest stone of its kind. It was last appraised for \$2.3 million dollars! It took a lover of stones to recognize the sapphire's worth.

Maybe that's why God choose to give His most precious gift...He alone recognized the true value and worth of ordinary people like us! Maybe we've failed Him in our life, but listen children; we are still valuable to Him. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, he proved it on Calvary. It is the greatest gift.

3. THE GREATEST FAITH

so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish...

It's not hard for me to believe that God loves the world. It's not even hard for me to believe that God loves people, even some individual people. But it is hard for me sometimes to believe that God loves me! Cause I know me! I know I fail more than I succeed, I fall more than I triumph, I'm a sinner more than a saint!

I'm so glad that the "whosoever" is in this verse. I'm a "whosoever"...and so are you! Some people claim that Jesus and Christianity are too exclusive...I'm here to tell you, that this verse makes it clear that Jesus Christ, is the most inclusive of all the major and minor religions of the world..."whosoever" will believe shall not perish.

I have to be honest; I don't spend a lot of time worrying about hell. I don't understand much of it, and I know I don't want to go there, and that's about it. I do, however spend much time wondering if I'm wasting my life. When opportunities to do good go undone, because I've kept myself too busy...I wonder. When I spend money on things that don't really matter...I wonder. I don't want to waste my life, any more than I don't want to perish. Here is the key. The promise to 'not perish' is within our reach; all it takes is faith.

Faith simply means that we open the gift. An unopened gift is in insult to the giver, and useless to the recipient. Faith simple means that we open the gift. Most of the time most of us have a pretty good idea what our gifts might be, especially as we get older. A shirt shaped box, is probably a shirt. A book shaped package, is not likely a new gun. But when it comes to opening the gift that God has given, we're not really sure what it might be. Following Jesus scares some of us, so we casually say we believe, but we leave the gift essentially unopened! We're afraid what our life might become if we really yielded ourselves to the opened gift. We're not sure we can pay the price so we pay lip-service and hope for the best.

The gift is free, but it has to be opened, it has to be received. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in Him will not perish; he proved it beside an empty, open tomb.

4. THE GREATEST LIFE
but have eternal life.

As much as I don't spend time worrying or wondering about hell, I also have to confess, I don't spend too much time wondering about heaven; I'm told I will the older I get. For most of my adult life I've subscribed to this philosophy: "If there were no threat of hell, or promise of heaven, I'd still want to be a Christian...because I've determined it is the best way to life." I believe that. I believe that the followers of Jesus have the best of all lives. They are not perfect, they are certainly not immune from pain, they include much brokenness, sadness, sacrifice, and messiness; but the authentic Christian life, honestly lived for and with God, is still better than any other option. Why and how can I say that?

Well, it comes down to two things for me. 1- knowing that if I continue to believe and do the best I can, with all I've been given assures me that I'll spend eternity in heaven with Jesus; pretty much colors all the rest that I have to endure in the process. 2- knowing that I am not alone, that God loves me, forgives me, uses me, and even needs me, saves my life from meaninglessness. That is enough for me. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life, and He will prove it once and for all at our death or His return.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian was fond of telling the following story. A certain young prince approached the time of life when an acceptable woman must be found to become his princess. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand?

He could order her to marry him. But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion. He could put on his most splendid uniform and drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six magnificent horses. But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of his splendor.

The prince came up with another solution. He would give up his kingly robe. He moved, into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time the maiden grew to love him for who he was and because he had first loved her.

This very simple, almost childlike story, is exactly what John is describing in these few verses we've considered today - God came and lived among us. It is the Christmas story. God has to reveal Himself to us in an understandable way, and the best way for him to do so would not be to order us to obey and love him, or dazzle us with his majestic splendor, but simply to become one of us. Eventually we'll fall in love with Him, especially when we realize how much and for how long He has already been loving us! God has given us the Greatest Love, the Greatest Gift, the Greatest Faith, and the Greatest Life. All we have to do is accept it. The Love is free. The Gift is free. The Faith is free. The Life is free. It might not be our Birthday, but it is the birth of Love, and it is a free gift to all who would receive it!

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