

The Greatest Gift
John 3:16
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We're going to read this passage together in John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

This verse is one of the most loved and best known in all the Bible. If you go to In-N-Out, you'll find it on the cup of an In-N-Out drink. It's all over the place. Everyone knows John 3:16. But I think that a lot of times because we know it so well that we don't really stop to meditate on its meaning and significance and what is there.

One of the frustrations that we often have at Christmas time is knowing what gift to get for the right person. What shall I buy for this person? Sometimes we'll just buy haphazardly or randomly; we'll just grab anything.

I remember when I was a young boy, I didn't have a lot of money, I wasn't really into buying gifts, and I would just go into the garage and find something and grab it, wrap it up and give it as a gift. It didn't matter if it was broken or what it was or if it matched; I just grabbed it and gave it to somebody as a gift. So if you think about that, sometimes it's really a challenge to know what gift to give a person.

Now think about this: if you had to give one gift that is suitable for every person on the earth, one gift that would meet the need and be suitable for every human being on planet earth, what could you get? John 3:16 is that one gift. God gave the greatest gift. God gave the perfect gift.

Why is it such a great gift or a perfect gift? Number one, because it meets the greatest need. Jesus came to save us from our sins. His very name, Jesus or Yeshua, means that He came to save us. He's God who is our Savior.

Secondly, it's the greatest gift because it produced the greatest results. What does it produce? Everlasting life; we will live forever with God. It's life more abundantly.

Thirdly, it requires the greatest cost. Why is this gift that God gave on this first Christmas the greatest gift and the perfect gift? Because it was the gift of His only begotten Son. Jesus is the Son of God who came into this world.

I want to speak to you about Christmas Eve as God's greatest gift from John 3:16. In this marvelous passage, as some have described as the Bible in miniature, there are six facts about God's greatest gift that I want you to see as we unpack this verse.

The first fact is the giver. Who is the giver of this gift? John 3:16 says, "For God...." The giver

is God. I think it's awesome that Christmastime is a reminder that there really is a God. This God is a God of love who gave His Son. God is the giver of the greatest gift. Christmas is God reaching down to man. I like to think of Christmas as God reaching down to us, God coming down to us, God leaving His splendor in heaven and coming down in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. God is the one reaching out to us. Christmas is God coming after us.

When God made the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, God would walk with them and have fellowship with them in the Garden in the cool of the day. They would talk to God and they would commune with God. It was an awesome time. But sin came into the world; they sinned against God and broke God's laws. As a result, they were separated from God and driven from the Garden. All the sorrows and all of the problems that we have in the world today are the result of the disobedience or sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Ever since that day in the Garden, God has been reaching out to man. God has been pursuing man. God has been wanting to reconcile with man and bringing man back to Him.

Immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve and they were driven from the Garden, God actually said that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. He was actually predicting that Jesus, the Messiah, would come and conquer sin, the devil and the grave and be the forgiver of our sins.

So Christmas is God reaching out to us, calling to us. Jesus came as the seeking Savior. In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables: one of the lost sheep, one of the lost coin and one of the lost son, or the prodigal son. In all three of those parables He is saying that God is seeking that which is lost.

The shepherd has 100 sheep and one gets lost, so he goes out and finds that one lost sheep and brings it back. A woman has a coin but loses it, so she sweeps and lights a candle searching for that coin until she finds it. She then rejoiced that it is found. A man has two sons. One rebels against his father and goes to a far country and wasted his substance on riotous living. But when he came to himself, he turned back to his father. The Bible focuses on the father. The father saw his son when he was a great way off and actually ran to him. It is a story in the Bible when God actually ran; God was running to his rebellious son.

So Christmas is God reaching out to us, God running to us and God calling to us to come back to Him. God is a seeking God, and He's seeking you at Christmas.

The second thing I want to note in John 3:16 is the motive of the gift. The motive is that "God so loved..." Not only does God seek us, but God actually loves us. The Bible tells us in 1 John 4:8 that "God is love." What Jesus means by that is that God, in His very nature and in His very essence, is love.

Christmas is God saying, "I love you." By God sending His Son, He is actually saying to you and me, "I love you." It's a love message from God. The Bible says that God's love is great, God's love is infinite and God's love is eternal.

We sing a song,

“Oh, the wonder of it all.

Oh, the wonder of it all.

Just to think that God loves me.”

I want you to know this Christmas that there is a God in heaven, and God loves you. He knows all about you. He knows all of your sin and all of your rebellion, yet God loves you. He wants to change you and forgive you. He’s a God of love.

Then, thirdly, we see in this passage the object of His love. Verse 16 says “the world.” “For God so loved the world.” What does He mean by “the world”? Who is “the world” here? He’s not talking about the created world. He’s not talking about the sun and the moon and the stars, the hills and the ocean. He’s not talking about the trees and the animals. He’s talking about people. When the Bible says, “God so loved the world,” he’s talking about mankind or humankind. God actually has a love for every human being. This is what this verse is telling us: that God sent His Son because of His great love. What a marvelous thing that is. God loved even a rebellious planet.

This world that we’re reading about in John 3:16 is a world that is in rebellion toward God. It is running from God. The Bible says that we’re at war with God. We’re at enmity with God. Yet God still reaches out by sending to us His Son.

In the context of John 3:16, Jesus is talking to a Jewish religious leader whose name is Nicodemus. If you are following me in a red-letter Bible, you’ll notice that John 3:16 is in red letters. There are some scholars who debate whether or not these are the words spoken by Jesus. They argue whether they should be in black letters or red letters. I think it’s fitting that they are in red letters. They are likely the words that Jesus spoke.

Can you imagine the shock and surprise of this very religious Jew, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews who was very devoted to the law, when he heard Jesus, the Son of God, say, “For God so loved the world”?

“Well, why would You say that?”

The Jews believed that God loved only the Jews. There are people today who think that God loves only a certain race of people or of a certain ethnic background or only people who live in certain places. But here Jesus is teaching us, as well as the Bible teaching us, that God loves the world and that He gave His Son for the world. Even though the world was running from Him and the world was rebelling against Him, God sent His Son. So that’s the object of this gift: God’s love.

Then, fourthly, notice in John 3:16 the gift itself. “...that He gave His only begotten Son.” “For

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” So the gift God gave in love to the rebellious world was the gift of His only begotten Son. The word “gave” could be translated “sent.” God was sending His only Son. The Bible teaches that Jesus also came willingly and voluntarily.

Where it says, “His only begotten Son,” the word “begotten” there means “His only unique Son.” It doesn’t mean that Jesus came into existence at Bethlehem. The Bible teaches that He preexisted Bethlehem, that He was God the Son from all eternity past. “Begotten” means that He is the only unique Son of God; there is no one else like Jesus. So when God gave a gift, God gave the best.

In John 1:1, John tells us that “In the beginning...”—or “in eternity past”—“...was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” or “God was the Word.” John tells us in that verse that Jesus is the eternal Word, that Jesus was with God the Father face to face and that Jesus is God Himself.

Then in John 1:14 we read that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” So this eternal Word, this personal Word, this divine Word became the incarnate Word. That’s the Christmas story: God became a man in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

How did this happen? The angel Gabriel came from heaven to a young woman named Mary, who was living in Nazareth. She freaked out when she saw the angel. You would freak out if you saw an angel, as well. In those days, it meant certain death if an angel showed up; it was judgment from God. The angel assured her right away. He said, “Fear not, for you’re going to have a son. He shall be the Son of the Highest. He shall sit upon the throne of His father, David. You will call His name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

And when Mary heard that she said, “How can this be, seeing I know not a man? I’m a virgin. How is this going to happen?”

Then the angel explained the virgin birth. He said, “The power of the Highest will come upon you. And that which is born in you will be the work of the Holy Spirit.”

Then Mary submitted to the Lord’s plan and said, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” What an awesome thing that was: that this young peasant woman would become the mother of our Lord.

Then when it was time for the baby to be born, Luke 2 tells us that it was in the days when Caesar Augustus was sitting on the throne in Rome. He sent out a decree that all the world should be taxed. Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth, and Mary was in the last stages of pregnancy. In order to enroll for this taxation, they had to journey from Nazareth all the way down south, about 90 miles, to Bethlehem, which was the city of David, where they had their ancestry.

So in the last stages of pregnancy, Joseph no doubt put Mary on a donkey, and they took off on that long ride. You want to start into labor? Then take a donkey ride when you're nine-months pregnant. You'll go into labor. That will get it going.

It's interesting that they had to go to Bethlehem, because several hundred years before, the prophet Micah actually said that "Bethlehem...though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth...the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." So God was using this great king, Caesar, to make this decree to get this couple all the way down to Bethlehem, where the Messiah would be born, to fulfill that prophetic Scripture.

Then when Mary and Joseph got there, because of the purpose of taxation, the city was full of people, and they couldn't find a room. They went everywhere looking for a room, but there was no room in the inn. So they were sent out to the manger, to a barn or a grotto where the animals were kept. And the Bible says that Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son...and laid Him in a manger," which is a feeding trough for animals.

The only people who were around at that time to tell about the coming of the Messiah were the shepherds. Those lowly, humble shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder. Shepherds couldn't even testify in a court of law. Shepherds weren't allowed to worship God in Jerusalem, because they were so despised and rejected by men.

But the angel came to them and said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." Then the shepherds left their sheep and took off for Bethlehem. They found the babe and they worshipped Him. They went everywhere telling everyone the glorious news. So that was the gift of God: giving His only Son.

In 1 John 4:10 it says that God "sent His Son to be the propitiation..."—or "sacrifice"—"...for our sins." The angel told Mary that "You shall call His name Emmanuel," which means "God with us." So that baby born in Bethlehem was actually God in the flesh, who came to die for the sins of the world.

Notice, fifthly, in verse 16 the reception of the gift. How do you receive this greatest gift? It says, "whoever believes in Him." God's greatest gift is for "whoever believes in Him."

Now, again, can you imagine what Nicodemus must have thought? Nicodemus must have thought You're telling me that the Gentiles can even be saved? That anybody can be saved? "Whoever" actually means "whoever." It's amazing. It doesn't matter how bad you are, how good you are, what color your skin is, where you live, what you've done, whether you're old or young or middle aged, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're educated or not. It's for "whoever believes in Him."

How do we receive this greatest gift that comes from God? By faith, by believing, by trusting in

Jesus Christ. Faith isn't just a blind leap in the dark; our faith is on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. It's based on the fact that He is God's Son, that He lived a sinless life, that He died a substitutionary death, that He was buried and rose from the dead, that He is alive and can save me. So I put my trust in Him. God's greatest gift is for "whoever." It's received by believing through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Notice it says, "whoever believes in Him." "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him..."—that's "Jesus Christ." So you're not saved by faith in anything else. If you have faith in yourself, you won't be saved. If you have faith in your righteousness, you won't be saved. If you have faith in your good deeds, you won't be saved. But if you put your faith in Jesus Christ and trust Him, you will be saved. The Bible teaches that we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Christmas is the message of salvation. Christmas is the Gospel.

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him..."—and here is the result, our last point—"...shall not perish but have eternal life." If you reject God's great gift, you will perish.

Now I know this may seem a little radical. When you usually go to church on Christmas Eve, they usually have shepherds on the stage, sheep running around and little kids singing O Little Town of Bethlehem. Sorry that's not happening now, but I want to do something that isn't normally done, and that is to read verse 17 of John 3. It says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Then John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Yes, I read "the wrath of God abides on him."

You're saying, "Pastor, this was a great little Christmas sermon until you read the verse on "wrath."

Yes, God is a God of love. Yes, He is a God of grace. Yes, He is a God who is reaching out to you today. Yes, He is a God who gave His Son to die for your sins. But He is also a holy, righteous God. God will judge sin. The Bible says, "The soul that sins shall surely die."

In John 3:16 where it says, "...shall not perish," implies that if you don't believe in Jesus Christ, you will perish, you will be lost, you will be separated from God for all eternity. The only way to get to heaven is by believing in Jesus Christ, by putting your faith and trust in Him.

But when you do that, there's also the assurance: "shall...have eternal life." Did you know that you can have assurance that when you die you'll go to heaven? Did you know that you can have assurance that your sins have been forgiven? Did you know that when you die you will spend eternity with God in heaven? You don't have to hope. You don't have to pray that it works out. You can have assurance right now by believing in, trusting in and putting your faith in Jesus Christ.

What is this greatest gift of eternal life that God wants to give us? It is not just living forever. It's also living right now. It's life with a new dimension and a new quality. It's life to a new degree. It's a dimension of life, a quality of life. It's a spiritual life. Without that, you're not really living; you're just existing. That's why there's emptiness in the heart; it doesn't have Christ there. But when you trust in Jesus Christ, you have eternal life.

Yes, you'll go to heaven and live forever, but right now, right here, you'll have His love, you'll have His peace, you'll have His joy, you'll have His hope that He brought at Christmas and you'll have His purpose for living that He brings to the heart of those who surrender to Him.

Christmas is about gifts; it's about giving and receiving gifts. But don't forget that the greatest gift that was ever given was given by God. And He gave that gift because He loves you. He gave that gift to "whoever." And He gave that gift so that "whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." What a blessed hope that is.

Again, when the angel spoke to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem on that first Christmas, he said, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." What an awesome thing. The shepherds ran to see the Savior. And I pray you will open your heart and trust Him as your Savior.

Let's pray.