

## “The True Meaning of Christmas – Love”

December 24, 2023

John 3:1-2, 11-18

### I. Introduction

There are a lot of nice Christmas movies. Movies like: “Scrooge,” “It’s a Wonderful Life,” “The Santa Clause” series, and my favorite the original “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” They are all about learning “*the true meaning of Christmas*” but not one of them is actually about it. The world’s idea of the “true meaning of Christmas” is to be nice to other people. It’s not a bad message, it’s just not the meaning of Christmas; it’s really not even close. But “*be nice*” is all the world has to offer. “*Be nice, help others,*” it’s a great sentiment—but that is not the message of Christmas. As good as the message to treat others well is, God offers something much better.

Verse 16 from today’s Scripture describes the true meaning of Christmas—the reason for Christmas: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Christmas is about God’s love for the world. The Bible describes true love—agape love; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a says, “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever!” Unlike the implications of all the ads we see this time of year, true love cannot be bought—it is seen in our actions and attitudes towards others.

Let me tell a story about true love—agape love; sacrificial love. *This is supposed to be a true story from the time of Oliver Cromwell in England. It seems that a young soldier had been tried in military court and sentenced to death. He was to be shot at the “ringing of the curfew bell.” Several hours before curfew time, his fiancée climbed up into the bell tower and tied herself to the bell’s huge clapper. At curfew time, when only muted sounds came out of the bell tower, Cromwell demanded to know why the bell was not ringing. His soldiers went to investigate and found the young woman cut and*

*bleeding from being knocked back and forth against the great bell. They brought her down and, the story goes, Cromwell was so impressed with her willingness to suffer in this way on behalf of someone she loved that he dismissed the soldier saying, “Curfew shall not ring tonight.”*

This story about true love may or may not be true, but Christmas and the love demonstrated by the birth of Jesus are definitely true. The real reason for the season—for Christmas—is the demonstration of God’s love for mankind. Christmas should remind us of the real suffering and death of God’s one and only Son that would follow His miraculous birth. This morning, let’s take some time to look at these familiar verses from John 3 as we consider “The reason for the season; the true meaning of Christmas - love.”

## **II. God’s Reason or Motive for Christmas--Love**

God’s reason or motive for Christ’s birth; God’s motive for Christmas was love; agape love—sacrificial love. **John 3:16** begins with **“For God so loved...”** It is easy to think of God looking down on mankind—His creation—and their rebellion and disobedience, their sinfulness and hatred and saying, *“I’m going to discipline them and punish them until they come back to me!”* It’s easy for us to think of God demanding the allegiance of mankind to satisfy His desire for power; His desire to be recognized for who He is! It’s easy because that is how we would think and act. But that wasn’t God’s motive—God didn’t act for His sake, but for our sake. It wasn’t to satisfy His desire for power or His desire to bring the world under His total rule, God’s motive for the birth of Christ—for Christmas—was love—agape love for His creation.

**Turn to Romans 5:6-8.** There was nothing in man that required God’s love. Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 64:6** that **“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”** God loves us—really in spite of ourselves—God loves us because God is the personification of love; **1 John 4:16** says, **“God is love.”** Before the world was created, God foreknew the failure of Adam and Eve and made plans for sending His Son to save all who would believe in Him. The question is why? Why would God do that? The answer is simple, it’s the true reason for the season—love—sacrificial love. In **Genesis 22** Abraham’s love for God

is seen in his willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son, Isaac; on a much larger scale, God the Father offering His one and only Son was the ultimate demonstration of His saving love for sinners.

In Acts 2:23 Peter preached, “This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Jesus’ coming to earth and dying on the cross wasn’t an accident or a decision made on the spur of a moment; it was planned before the beginning of time. Just as He told Nicodemus, Jesus, as God Incarnate, knew that He would be “lifted up” on a cross just like the bronze snake in the story told in Numbers—turn to Numbers 21:4-9. The solution to this “poison snake problem” was not in killing the snakes or making a special medicine or pretending they were not there or passing anti-snake laws or even climbing the pole. The answer—the only answer—was in looking in faith at the bronze snake lifted up on the pole.

In 1 John 4:9-10 John wrote, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Because of God’s love for mankind, Jesus came to be lifted up on a cross to die for the sins of the world. This is the motive—the reason—for Christmas: Love. God couldn’t help Himself—He loved us too much.

### III. The Recipient of God’s Love—the World

Next, we see the recipient or the beneficiary of God's love—“For God so loved the world.” It was “the world” that God “so loved.” It wasn’t just a particular nation or all the good people or the people who loved Him, it was the world; the unlovely, the unlovable, those who love Him, those who hate Him, and those who never-give-a-thought-about-God-at-all. All are included in God’s love. As the early church leader Augustine put it, “*God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.*”

But God loving the world doesn’t teach universal salvation, i.e., that everyone is going to be saved. In verse 18 Jesus said, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

Everyone must choose. They have to choose to believe or not to believe. Jesus didn't come to judge the world; He came to give the opportunity for every person to be saved. Just like those who were bitten by the poisonous snakes had a choice to look or not look at the snake on the pole and be saved or not, people today have a choice. They can choose to not believe in Jesus and then, like those who didn't look at the snake, they will die in their sin. They will not have eternal life; they will not spend eternity in heaven but in hell. But, like those who did look at the snake and were saved, those who choose to believe will be saved. They **will** spend eternity in heaven.

When Jesus said, "**Whoever believes is not condemned,**" He was saying that for the entire world, there is one Savior, there is one way for salvation for the world. Later, in **John 14:6** Jesus said, "**I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father except through me.**" Peter put it this way in **Acts 4:12**, "**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**" God's gift of love is made available to the world—"to whoever believes in Him." Every person can receive God's gift, but they each have to make a choice—accept it or refuse it—to look to Christ or not.

#### **IV. The Gift of God's Love—Eternal Life**

Then there's the Gift of God's Love. In **2 Corinthians 9:15**, Paul wrote, "**Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!**" The gift is seen in the last three words of **John 3:16**: "**Have eternal life.**" Contrary to the thoughts of the world, the gift wasn't God coming to dwell on the earth in human form, but as **Romans 6:23** says, "**The gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.**" This is the gift of Christmas, the gift of God's love—Eternal Life.

Jesus came to die as a sacrifice for the sins of every individual. He knew from the beginning of time what was going to happen. There were prophesies about the coming Redeemer sprinkled throughout the Old Testament. For one example, **turn to Isaiah 53:5-6**. As Jesus said in **John 3:14**, "**the Son of Man must be lifted up**"—He came to be lifted up on a cross; to be crucified but following that He came to be resurrected and later lifted up into heaven. Turn to another prophesy, this time told by Jesus; **turn to**

**Matthew 20:17-19.** This is God's ultimate gift of love to the world: the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and then His resurrection three days later so that the world might have eternal life. This is the only way that anyone can be healed from the wages of sin and live forever in heaven. As Jesus said, "Whoever believes is not condemned." Or as **Romans 8:1** says, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is the gift of God's love—of Christmas—eternal life.

## **V. The Outcome of God's Love—Life or Death**

Finally, also in the last part of **John 3:16**, we see the outcome of God's love, "whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." This offer—this gift—is for "whoever"—there are no restrictions. But know that God's judgment is black and white—there is no grey. A person is either a sinner (regardless of the severity of his sins) or, if he has accepted God's gift of forgiveness, he isn't a sinner. You are either a child of God or you're not.

Paul wrote in **Romans 3:23**, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." For this reason, no one can ever be good enough to get into heaven on his or her own merits. There is no way an imperfect being could get into a perfect heaven. So, something had to be done. The penalty for sin had to be paid. So, God took care of it; this is God's gift. This is the outcome of God's love: Life or Death.

But the outcome of God's gift is up to "whoever." All "whoever" needs to do is believe in Jesus. To have eternal life, "whoever" needs to believe that Jesus is the Son of God; that He died for "whoever's" sins and that He rose 3 days later from the grave. As we read so often from **Romans 10:9**, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Whoever believes will have eternal life—they will spend eternity in heaven. But whoever doesn't believe or chooses not to make a choice condemns himself. Not making a choice or choosing not to believe sentences one to an eternity in hell—a place of eternal torment. The outcome is up to "whoever"—to every person. The outcome is eternal life in heaven or eternal death in hell.

## VI. Conclusion:

Advent and Christmas have many memories for many people. It is a time for getting together with family and friends; a time for sharing, catching up, and exchanging gifts. But it is also a time to stop and think of the Greatest Gift ever given. We need to take time to thank God for the reason for the season-- His gift of love—His gift of eternal life. God's gift was more than the birth of a baby who was born in a manger. God's gift really was the sacrifice for sin so that **"whoever believes in him, i.e., Jesus Christ, shall not perish but have eternal life."** Without this, there really isn't any reason to celebrate. Without Jesus, life is a miserable existence full of blood, sweat and tears which ends with death followed with an eternity in hell. Without Jesus there can be no true hope, no peace, no joy, no love.

So, what is your choice? What have you decided to do with Jesus and God's gift? Have you accepted God's gift and the hope, joy, peace, and love that come with it or is God's gift still unopened—unaccepted? The choice is yours—choose wisely. **John 3:36** says, **"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."** God loves you so much, He wants to give you the greatest gift He could possibly give but it is up to every individual to accept it or to reject it. What is keeping you from enjoying God's gift of eternal life and all the benefits of being a child of God? **John 1:12** says, **"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."**

For those who have accepted God's gift of love, a song of praise from **Revelation 5:13** would seem to be appropriate, **"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, all that is in them, singing, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.'"** Amen