

THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

John 3:16

Several years ago my brother was given a task to help Mom during the Christmas season. He was asked to prepare a box of presents that was to be sent to our sister and her family in Pennsylvania. I think I have told you before that our sister has been dealing with Lyme's disease for a long time and consequently travels very little. I can't remember the last Christmas they came this way. With instruction from Mom, my brother wrapped up all the gifts, put them in the box to mail and then took the box to the Post Office.

Let me just say something about my brother and I think you will completely understand. He is a bachelor, always has been and he thinks he probably always will be. That said I'm guessing you might know someone just like him. He does his best and has the right heart. He does what he's told and he does literally what he is told. Sound like anyone you know.

Our sister received the box in the mail and carefully opened it up and removed its contents to place dutifully under the tree until the appointed day of Christmas. The wrapping on one present though, left her with an overwhelming sense of curiosity and wonder. It wasn't what was in the package because she knew what it was. For many years at Christmas Mom and Dad would send them a log of Summer Sausage from the Fairview Food Market. It is some of the best. So the curiosity wasn't the contents. Her curiosity was sparked by how the sausage was wrapped.

Puzzled by the wrapping paper she called home and talked to Dad about it. Now, just saying that Phil had wrapped it explains a lot. You see, he was told to wrap everything and send out the package. What he failed to realize was that the wrapping paper he selected to wrap this log of Summer Sausage was not Christmas paper. His choice of wrapping paper was

had this message "God bless this marriage." After 20 some years of marriage my sister wondered what they were trying to tell them.

At Christmas we spend lots of time wrapping presents to place under the tree. We select the paper, size it up, cut it out and begin the process of wrapping. We bring one side over, crease the edge, tape it down and then go through the process till its contents are sealed. Then we select the right color bow and tag, put a name on it and stick it under the tree.

Each Christmas we celebrate the wonder of a little gift wrapped in swaddling clothes, literally it was. Luke tells us that "all the world was to be registered." We understand that to mean that all territory under Roman rule. This registration had a dual purpose. One purpose was to have on record all the names and ages of men who were of military age who could be called on to serve the Roman Empire, not the Empire in Star Wars. The other purpose was to tax the citizens and colonies to pay for the ever expanding army, the Roman infrastructure and so on.

So it was that this census was the occasion that would bring to pass the prophecy of **Micah 5:2** that from Bethlehem would come the Messiah. Like everyone else in Israel, Joseph and Mary traveled to their ancestral home to register. It is unclear just how far back they had to go in their ancestry to determine where they had to travel, but because they were from the ancestral line of David they had to travel to Bethlehem in order to register. Luke continues by noting **"that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."**

This verse provides some insight into events we may take for granted that happened. Some sanctified imagination surrounding these events would have us believe that the very night of the day they arrived in

Bethlehem she gave birth. That's possible but not likely. The text says that while they were there. It could have been a day, or three days or even a week. The fact is we don't know how long they were there before she gave birth to the child.

Something we do believe is the account that the birth took place where animals were kept. While it doesn't specifically state that they were staying in a stable because there were no rooms available anywhere, it is implied given where the child was placed after He was born, that being a manger. The logical place one would find a manger is in a stable. The stable could have been a wooden lean-to or barn or most likely it was a small cave.

It was customary in those days and in that culture when traveling to find lodging with relatives or friends. Some scholars would have us believe that was the case for the first few days after their arrival. Yet, how ridiculous to think that relatives or friends or anyone for that matter would put a pregnant woman out into the street after having lodged there. Or maybe relatives didn't want to house them because Mary became pregnant before being married. Who would want to be associated with someone like that? We can only speculate because there was no rooms available not even at the Holiday Inn.

That there was not even any room in local inns is consistent with the many government officials and soldiers who were assigned the responsibility of registering all these people in an orderly manner. Jews would not house Gentiles in their homes because of the Law, so all the inns had no vacancy signs posted outside. Even Motel 8 didn't keep the light on. Bethlehem wasn't a big town so there weren't many inns to begin with.

So it was while they were there that the time came for her to deliver her baby. Notice carefully that it was her first-born son. It doesn't say her only son as the Catholic Church would have you believe. They teach that Mary remained a virgin until her death. However,

Scripture clearly teaches that she had other sons and daughters with Joseph.

Mary knew who this baby was and she knew how to wrap this precious gift up. This was God's gift to mankind. Perhaps no verse speaks more clearly than does our passage for today. It is a well-known verse that comes outside the Christmas story, but one none-the-less that speaks of the greatest gift that has ever been given.

Please turn with me to **John 3:16**. Would you recite it with me aloud?

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten (one and only) Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

This verse describes the motive of God's gift – His love.

This verse describes the measure of God's gift – whosoever.

This verse describes the means of God's gift – His Son, Jesus Christ.

This verse describes the method of God's gift – belief/faith.

I. THE MOTIVE OF GOD'S GIFT – HIS LOVE

The world proclaims that there are many gods. The Bible proclaims that there is one God. This one God, the true and living God is the source of this gift. He is the giver. In the Greek it is the word *theos*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament it is the word for God that is used for *Elohim* – the God who creates.

It is the word for God that is used for *Jehovah* – the God who covenants.

It is the word for God that is used for *Adonai* – the God who commands.

Gabriel revealed to Mary the very triune nature of God. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a son, He spoke to her in reassuring words that God, this God, the only living

and true God looked with favor on her.

When Mary asked how she could have a child not ever having a physical relation with a man, Gabriel told her that the Holy Spirit would bring about the miracle.

When Mary was told that this child would be a son and He would be called Jesus – the name that means Savior, she understood this child to be divine. To Joseph was added that this Jesus would save His people from their sins, clearly identifying the purpose for His birth.

It was the triune God who worked together to accomplish this miraculous birth. God thought it up and made it happen. He didn't just think it up and then wonder how such a great feat would be accomplished. He had both the plan and the power to do it.

God didn't even break a sweat when He created the world. Why would a miraculous birth to a virgin be difficult for Him?

Luke 1:37 “For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

Listen to how the 1907 American Standard Version reads of that verse:

“For no word of God shall be void of power.”

The Psalmist states it this way very clearly: **“For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm.” (Psalm 33:9)**

If He said it, it would happen. Someone once asked Spurgeon about a difficult passage. His response was that if the Bible said it, that's what it meant.

Here is God who is able to make the eternal, infinite Son, an infant boy. Wasn't it God who told Abraham when He spoke of Sarah having a son in their old age **“Is there anything too hard for the Lord”?**

Man's so called intelligence wants to muddle the whole thing up by coming up with other plausible ideas, that this wasn't really God, this was just an ordinary man. This is refuted in John's gospel when he articulates that **“In the beginning was the Word,**

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”

(John 1:1-2, 14)

So what motivated God to be the giver of this gift? Our text tells us that **“God so loved.”** The word love used here means to choose to do what is best for the other person.

If God were not love, then what He would choose to do is what we deserve. The Bible clearly states that because we are all tainted and stained with sin, what we deserve is the eternal wrath and punishment of God. But because God is love and because God loves He seeks to do something that seems irrational to us. He chose to do something because He is love, because He loves. He chose to do what is best for us. Instead of condemnation, He gave us a gift.

His love is the motive for this gift. We give gifts at Christmas purely out of love. That is the motive behind our gifts. We don't give because we think the other person deserves or merits it. We don't give with the hope that we'll get something in return. We don't give and expect payment for it. Our motivation is out of love.

God's motive in giving is His love. It is not only in His nature, it is who He is. **I John 4:8** states succinctly that **“God is love”**. It cannot be any clearer. Those who think that God is vengeful and filled with wrath clearly miss this verse.

It is obvious that God is love and this love is an essential component of His character. Everything He does stems from His love.

His forgiveness stems from His love.

His grace stems from His love.

His mercy stems from His love.

His justice stems from His love.

His compassion stems from His love.

Everything He does is because of His love. And while we can say definitively that God is love, we can never say that love is God.

The love God has moved Him, motivated Him to do what He did. That's why He chose to do what is best for us. Warren Wiersbe writes "God does not merely have affection for us; He wills to achieve our good for His glory." It is a result of His love for us. There was no other motivation behind His actions. God loves us and that's why He wants you to have this gift. It is His nature to love and to demonstrate it He gave this gift that we celebrate annually. Let us not forget the great love with which He loves us and let us not forget that His love for us moved Him to do something.

Now let me say just a word about this love. He did not love just a little and neither is His love limited. By that I mean that His love is not just for those who are of the right social status or that His love is only for a certain race. It also doesn't mean that His love is limited to those who never commit certain sins or who keep their sins under a certain number. And neither is His love exhausted when we commit yet another sin and confess it one more time. His love extends to the person who commits the most egregious sin and the one who commits the most sins - it is for all people.

We sometimes sing the song *He Giveth More Grace*, the chorus which says :

His love has no limit;

His grace has no measure.

His pow'r has no boundary known unto men.

For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,

He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

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The motive of God toward us is His infinite love. We are reminded from the pen of the prophet Jeremiah these compelling words that fix our gaze on the extent of God's love. They are words to a nation held in

captivity, wondering about the deliverance and promises of God.

Jeremiah 31:3 "The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore, with loving-kindness have I drawn thee."

When you consider the gift that He gave, never, ever doubt God's love. We will in a moment consider how we know God loves us, but before we get there consider the measure of God's love.

II. THE MEASURE OF GOD'S LOVE – WHOSOEVER

"For God so loved the world,...that whosoever..."

God's love extends to every tribe and tongue and nation. It includes Jew and Gentile alike. His love is not greater for one than it is for another. It is toward the world and to the whosoever in the world, for people past present and future. His love is sufficient for all.

The reach of the word "**whosoever**" goes beyond the gifted or the popular. It isn't just for the elite or pious. It surpasses the prosperous and pompous. It's not just for one nation or class of people. It's not just for the rich or just for the poor. It's not just for people who lived centuries ago or for people who only live today. This verse is very clear that His love is for anyone and everyone – it's for the "**whosoever**". You are a whosoever. I am a whosoever.

God's love is for the bum on skid row,
for the athletic superstar and the one who never makes the team,
for the corporate CEO and the janitor,
for Wallstreet's financial wizards and the one who just lost it all,
for the person in the poorest ghetto and the richest palace,
for the suburbanites and city dwellers,
for the castes of India and the tribes of Africa,

for the religious and the atheists,
 for the drug dealers and users,
 for the pimp and prostitute,
 for the convicted and the judge who tried them.
 His love is for everyone and anyone. His love is for
 you and for me. We might as well put our name in
 there – “for God so loved me.”

We, you and I, and well really the whole world, we
 are all the objects of God’s unconditional love. No
 one is excluded. No one is exempt.

The unlikely are on God’s list of “whosoever.”
 When it comes to God’s love, we are all part of Dr.
 Seuss’s *Whoville*. That is the measure of God’s love.
 And there isn’t anything that can diminish that love.

It is an immeasurable love for an immense
 population. For those who have had children born or
 brought into their family, you love that child with the
 depth of love never before felt and you wonder how
 you could love anyone more deeply, yet if another
 child is added to your family you understand that you
 can have the same intense love for both – at the same
 time and in the same way. God’s love is the same for
 you and you and you and you and you... That is the
 measure of His love.

And we think that is great, but how does He show us,
 what is the proof, where is the evidence? Our verse
 reveals the means of His love.

III. THE MEANS OF GOD’S LOVE – HIS SON/JESUS CHRIST

**“For God so loved the world, that He gave His
 only begotten Son...”**

What is the means of this gift that has been given?
 This verse has an answer. It is only through His Son,
 Jesus Christ. This is the one who was born in
 Bethlehem of whose birth we celebrate. Jesus is the
 means by which we can have the gift of eternal life.
 He’s the only way.

The word gave reveals the practical nature or result of
 His love. His love cost something, the most precious
 thing that He had – His Son. He didn’t just say He
 loved us, He proved it. He, God, gave His Son. **It’s
 much different than what Alfonso Maria dei Liguori
 wrote about in 1750 in his book *The Glories of Mary*.
 In it he wrote “Mary so loved the world that she gave
 her only begotten son.”**

My Bible says that God so loved that He gave His
 only begotten Son.

Christ is not only the focal point of the Christmas
 story; He is the focal point of all Scripture. It unveils
 God’s plan to redeem mankind from the prison of
 darkness, the penalty of depravity, and the
 punishment of death.

God the Son set aside the splendor of His heavenly
 throne to reach into and enter the corridor and
 confinement of time and space and come as an infant.
 He is the gift God gave to man whereby we can be
 saved.

**I John 4:9-10 exclaims, “In this was manifested the
 love of God toward us, that God sent His only
 begotten Son into the world, that we might live
 through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved
 God, but that He love us, and sent His Son to be
 the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins.”**

**Romans 5:8 “But God manifested His love toward
 us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for
 us.”**

Every word in **John 3:16** points to the central focus
 of Christ. Without the Son there is no gift. Without
 the Son there is only eternal banishment. So it was
 that God gave His Son. The word “gave” implies a
 duality of purpose. It includes the intent of the gift
 and the culmination of the gift. The intent of the
 word implies the reason for His coming – **“To seek
 and to save the lost.”** **How would that be
 accomplished?** It would be accomplished by Christ
 giving Himself to die on the cross as an offering for

sin. The word gave also implies His death on our behalf. God gave His Son to die.

Without Christ we have no Christmas.

Without Christ there is no cross.

Without Christ there is no crucifixion.

Without Christ there is no salvation.

This last week while watching a segment on Hannity, he interviewed the president of an atheist group that purchased a billboard to advertise that you don't need Christ to celebrate Christmas. He claimed that you can still exchange gifts and host parties and decorate with lights and holiday trees and go the whole nine yards and while we can show that the celebration of a winter solstice goes back much further into pagan celebrations with all the things we come to associate with Christmas, without Christ there is no Christmas. He is the means of God's love, the demonstration, the proof, the result of God's love.

But Christ's coming to earth in the form of an infant who would grow and then die on a cross for the sins of the world is not enough. This verse shows us the method by which we receive His love.

IV. THE METHOD BY WHICH WE RECEIVE GOD'S LOVE – BELIEVE/FAITH

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten (one and only) Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Another word for belief is faith. We have to believe that God loves us and gives us eternal life only through His Son Jesus. We have to believe that our sins were paid for by Jesus. He gave, we receive.

Romans 10:9-10 – “that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

John 3:16 describes salvation as eternal life. It is unending life in the presence of God. Without salvation the verse says that we will perish. This isn't just annihilation where we cease to exist. It is eternal banishment from the presence of God, incurring His wrath as He pours out the punishment we deserve for rejecting His gift, this gift who came wrapped in the flesh as you and I are, wrapped in the shroud of a burial cloths at His death, to die the death we deserved in order to give us a gift we don't deserve. But make no mistake about it. This final state of the unsaved is not what God wants. **“He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”** That's why He gave His only Son as a gift that upon our belief we might have everlasting life.

Suppose for a moment that you were Mary and Gabriel came to you with the news that you have found favor with God and you were to bear the Christ child.

Suppose for a moment that you were Joseph and Gabriel came to you with the news that the woman you are engaged to was to bear the Savior.

Suppose for a moment that you were the shepherds watching your sheep out on that hillside when the angel announced the birth of the Savior.

Suppose for a moment that you were the Magi traveling many miles to find the King of the Jews that you might worship Him. If you were to ask that all important question why, there would be but one answer. The answer would come from this verse **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”**

Notice five couplets in the passage.

There is the Father and there is the Son. One is the giver the other is the gift, the author and finisher of salvation.

There is loved and gave. It is God's benevolent act. Love is the prerequisite, the gift is the proof.

There is the world and there is the whosoever. It is all inclusive, without distinction or exception, yet it is individual to include each of us.

There is believe and have. **John Phillips writes that “it is the hand that stretches out in confidence to the giver and the hand of faith drawn back in contentment with the gift.”** It is a gift that totally satisfies the giver because He was the one who gave it, demonstrating that He chose to give the very best He had. Anything less would not satisfy Him or save us.

Finally there are the words perish and life. For the one the person is eternally lost, for the other the person has eternal life.

Two eternal destinies are wrapped up in the person of this newborn child, Jesus. For those who receive it there is heaven. For those who reject it there is hell.

God took the initiative. He gave. It is ours to receive, to unwrap. I can't imagine you leaving any presents underneath the Christmas tree, no matter how the present is wrapped.

Within the last stanza of the Christmas lullaby “O Little Town of Bethlehem” are these inviting words:

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
 Descend on us, we pray.
 Cast out our sin, and enter in;
 Be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels
 The great glad tidings tell.
 O come to us, abide with us,
 Our Lord, Emmanuel.

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John 3:16 encapsulates the Christmas story: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”**

It was a gift greater than just the birth of an infant boy miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit to a virgin maiden.

It was more than a gift awed by shepherds, worshipped by Magi, and adored by angels. This gift was for all time, the redemption of mankind from sin through his or her faith. This gift was the fulfillment of every word, every page, every chapter, every book, every promise given in Scripture.

It shows the motive of God's love.

It shows the measure of God's love.

It shows the means of God's love.

It shows the method of God's love.

If you are here today and have never unwrapped the gift of God I urge you to do so today. A gift unopened is a gift unaccepted. God wants you to receive this gift. He loves you and wants you to experience the joy of everlasting life with Him in heaven. It's only through Jesus, the babe born in Bethlehem. Don't wait.