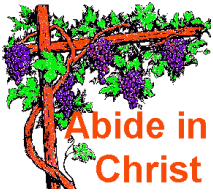


John 3:16-18 God's Christmas Tree



Did you find what you wanted under the Christmas tree? Did your wife figure out what you were hoping for? Or are you still playing the guessing game? Many people have just given up and given a \$100 dollar bill, or an Amazon card. But there is something special about worrying over and choosing a gift out of love for that person.

Our pastor loves colorful, unique socks. Ann gave our pastor a pair of socks with the Ecuadorian flag on them. Brad got a gaudy Christmas tie that he will never wear on Sunday. Ann wanted me to be dressed like our pastor. So you see what I got.

Gifts are important, and not just at Christmastime. They express our love for one another. Some of us will spend weeks looking for that very special gift.

Ann's Christmas tree has evolved through the years to the present time of being decorated with Ecuadorian Quechua Indian dolls. Sitting on top of the tree is a beautiful colorful cloth padded Quechua woman doll. She adorns the tree which reminds us of our love for our adopted country.

Have you been to God's Christmas tree? There are incredible presents under His tree.

God demonstrates His steadfast love on His tree. The most powerful message of Christmas is the transforming grace of God in Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:16-18, NASB).

You cannot separate the incarnation and the cross of Christ.

THE INCARNATION AND THE CROSS ARE INSEPARABLE

A. You cannot celebrate the incarnation without the cross.

Jesus Christ is the gift of God. He told the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:10, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you" Various passages of scripture describe Christ as God's gift to this world.

Christmas is not just a baby and a virgin and a manger in Bethlehem. Christ is the Second Person of the God-head, the Trinity, becoming flesh and living a perfect sinless life so that He could die as our perfect substitute on the cross. God cannot die, but man can die. By means of

the incarnation God became man in the person of His Son so He could deal with our sin problem.

If we miss that we miss the purpose of Christmas. Yes, the virgin conception, the angels who adored Him, the shepherds who worshipped Him, and the wise men who travelled bringing their treasured gifts for a King are important in those events at the first Christmas. But that is not the whole story. That is only the beginning of the greatest event in human history.

B. God's love is demonstrated on the cross.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The word "begotten" is sort of strange to us in modern English. The word is not translated in most of new translations. Yes, Jesus is the only Son, but there is more in this word in the original. I am an only son, but I am not the unique, only one of a kind son. The emphasis here is that God gave His unique, only one of a kind Son. There is no one like Him. There is no one who is His equal in this universe or in all eternity. He is the very image of God. He is God incarnate. "God gave the very best—Himself—for us" (Boice).

The Apostle Paul declares in Colossians 1:14-15 it is His beloved Son "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." Then he adds in 2:9, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." Therefore, we can say with conviction "For God so loved the world that He gave His unique, only one of a kind Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

God has demonstrated His infinite love for you in sending Jesus to the cross.

God's Christmas tree is covered with the undefiled and sinless blood of His Son Jesus. The writer of Hebrews notes, "All things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). He also tells us that it was "through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:12).

It is not the meek and mild "baby" Jesus that saved a radically depraved lost humanity.

It is the sacrificial, substitutionary, atoning death of Christ that deals with our human depravity and sin.

It is only those who "believe in Him should not perish" (v. 16). The purpose of His coming was "the world might be saved through Him" (v. 17).

Yes, there are eternal consequences for those who do not believe on Christ. "The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (v. 18). Verse 36 rounds out the

chapter, "The one who believes in the Son has eternal life; but the one who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

Without that bloody death on the cross we are eternally lost and judged to spend eternity in hell.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). What a contrast. God's free gift is a free and undeserved, unmerited gift of something given to a sinful man. It is unmerited, undeserved, denoting something given to man from God's grace.

In contrast to the wrath of God which we deserve, "God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our wrongdoings (trespasses), made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4-5).

There is only one way to be made acceptable with a holy and righteous God and that is at the atoning death of Christ on the cross. The grace of God in Christ alone saves the confessing believing sinner.

"For God so loved." God's love is so great that it reaches far beyond our ideas of greatness.

The apostle Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church is "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19).

Then Paul breaks forth in his great doxology of praise to God. Great theology always produces great doxology. Watch how Paul tries to describe the immensity of God's great love. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (vv. 20-21). To Him who is able above all things to do, exceedingly above. The idea is exceeding some number or measure over and above, a lot more than necessary. It is the idea of exhaustlessness. It is above and beyond all things, super abundantly, and over and above. Why you cannot exhaust this provision of God's grace. O what manner of God's love!

This is the infinite love God has for you this Christmas.

God the Father chose to send His very best gift because He loved you. God's greatest gift to you this Christmas is Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"

Perhaps the most marvelous thing about God's infinite love is that it is unchanging. There is nothing you can do to change it.

If there is ever a moment when you think God does not love you, go back to the cross. It was there God demonstrated His love for you. That love never changes. Romans 5:8 declares, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

God's Christmas tree is a cruel Roman cross splattered with the blood of God's unique, one of a kind Son. Without Christmas we would not have the cross. And on that cross our Savior died to save us for all eternity.

Moreover, God's greatest gifts are found at the foot of His Christmas tree.

GOD HAS CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR YOU

Have you been to God's Christmas tree? Have you looked under His tree?

God's greatest gift to us of course is Christ. And in that gift He gives us all the rich gifts of His grace.

Have you received His gift of eternal life?

He invites us to come and abide in His presence for all eternity.

God loves you so much that Christ died for you. Based upon that death He freely gives eternal life in the Presence of the Lord God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). That faith in Christ produces change in our lives.

God paid for that gift in full. It is freely received by faith. There is no down payment. There is no installment plan. It is paid in full, therefore it is free to receive. It is not cheap. This gift is the most expensive gift heaven can give. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

The apostle Paul says, "knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified" (Gal. 2:16).

Only those who believe on Christ will be saved. To "believe" in someone and to "have faith" in someone are exactly the same thing. Have you with deep conviction confessed to Him that you are a sinner, and without Him you are going to spend an eternity in hell separated from

Him? Do you believe Christ died for you and He alone can save you? You can ask Him to be your Lord and savior right now.

Have you receive that gift from God? That is the greatest Christmas gift you can ever possibly receive.

Moreover, there other gifts under that tree.

Have you received the gift of assurance of eternal life?

Do you have the assurance of salvation?

"And the testimony is this, God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13).

Yes, not only are you saved, but you can know you are saved with deep, wholehearted conviction. From the depths of your heart you can proclaim, "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to protect what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). "I am not ashamed," I am enthusiastic with profound conviction in whom I have believed and am convinced that He is able to keep that until the day when I meet Christ. With Paul we say, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Have you received the gift of forgiveness of all your sins?

King David gave praise to God in Psalm 32:1, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!"

First John 1:7 and 9 the apostle John says, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanse us from all sin.... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"

There is the gift of peace with God.

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ" (Rom. 8:1). Why? Because we have been declared right with God. We have been justified by faith in Christ alone. Rom. 5:1-2

"Therefore having justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

What as spiritual gift of blessing. By faith in Christ you are right with God. You are no longer enemies. You are justified, meaning you are legally declared right with God for all eternity.

We are reconciled with God. Romans 5:11, "we exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." The relationship has changed from hostility into a relation of peace. 2 Cor. 5:19-21

There is the gift of propitiation.

You no longer stand expecting the wrath of God being poured out on you. Christ bore that wrath in your place. God turned His wrath away from you and Jesus bore it.

There is the gift of positional sanctification.

You are now a saint. You have been separated for God's exclusive use. You are not your own; you have been purchased and dedicated to Him.

You are now a child of God, not just a created being.

That can never change once received Christ as your Savior and placed your faith in Him.

There is the Baptism with the Holy Spirit.

You were baptized in the Body of Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit the moment you were born again. That is a free gift. 1 Cor. 12:13

Gifts freely and abundantly given to all believers.

We have the gift of propitiation, sanctification, child of God, etc.

Lewis Chafer in his book, *Salvation*, lists 33 riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus that took place the very moment you were saved.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3).

Where do you get all these gifts? At the foot of God's tree. These are all blessings of His grace.

This all leads to the question, how will you decorate God's Christmas tree?

GOD'S DECORATIONS ON HIS TREE

Yes, His tree is splattered with the blood of His Son. And when we give Him gifts we give back to Him what He first has given to us. He gives to us gifts that enable us to serve Him and His church.

If you give God a gift this Christmas, what do you choose to give to Him?

God's Christmas tree is decorated with the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

By His sustaining grace He conforms us to the likeness of the character of Christ. That makes His tree light up. Are you being conformed daily to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ? That is a gift of the richness of His love and grace. Ephesians 4:7 says, "to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Peter admonishes the church: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the multifaceted grace of God. Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking actual words of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

What is the one thing God desires of you this Christmas? He wants us to love Him with all our body, mind, heart and soul.

ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Have you received God's greatest Christmas gift of eternal salvation?

Without receiving that gift you cannot receive any of His other gifts. Apart from Him you can do nothing. Christ in you accomplishes His eternal purpose.

As a redeemed, born again, child of God, how will you light up God tree?

Go ahead and decorate God's tree with holiness, righteousness, forgiveness, faith.

Turn on the light of the fruit of the Spirit in your life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Matt. 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Your light must shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

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