

“A Christmas Paradox”

John 3:16-21

December 22, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

John 3:16 is easily the most famous verse in the Bible, and with good reason. If you could only use one verse to explain the message of the entire Bible, this is probably the best one to use. It speaks of the love of God, of our mortal danger (perishing), of God’s provision of his Son as the way to escape the mortal danger and to live in everlasting joy, and of faith as the way we come to receive this gift. It is also a good verse for Christmas, since it explains why Jesus had to come. In his book *The God Who Gives*, Kelly Kopic says this about John 3:16: “Here at last we discover the grand paradox that God reclaims everything by giving everything away.”

There is some uncertainty as to whose words these are. If you have a red letter Bible, the words from verses 16-21 may or may not be in red. The uncertainty is due to the fact that the original language didn’t have quotation marks, leaving it up to the interpreter to decide where Jesus’ words ended and where the author’s started. The translators of our Pew Bibles concluded that these verses continue the speech of Jesus to Nicodemus, while other translations conclude that these are the author’s comments. At the end of the day, I don’t know that it makes much difference, since we believe that all these words are the inspired words of the Holy Spirit. And in the context, these words clearly reflect on Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus. So let’s explore the three main points of this paradoxical verse.

I. God’s Motive for Christmas – Love

At the heart of Christmas is God’s motive of love. What was God thinking and feeling when the Beloved Son left heaven to come to earth for his mission? What was the Son thinking and feeling? The complete, loving intimacy they had shared for eternity would certainly continue, but it would do so in a different way after the Son’s departure from the glories of heaven. And it would end, as we all know, and as both the Father and Son knew, in a massive disruption of the universe as their intimacy was broken on the cross.

I remember when Matthew, our firstborn, left home to go to college for the first time. The whole family took him, I think in three cars if I’m remembering correctly. There was a heaviness of heart as we said goodbye to him. Our youngest daughter, Kathryn, cried the whole two hour car ride back to Birmingham, grieving because things would never be the same with our family

again. This verse tells us what the Father and the Son were both thinking and feeling at this moment—love.

The striking thing about this phrase that “God so loved the world,” isn’t the idea of God’s love. We expect to read that. After all, the Bible says that love lies at the heart of who God is. **“God is love,”** (1 John 4:8, 16), the Bible teaches us. The striking truth of this verse lies in the object of God’s love, the world. Our common understanding of the word “world” is that it describes every individual living in the world. That is not the way John uses the word. He uses it consistently to describe the sinfulness and evil of this world. What is in view with this word is not the vastness of the world, but the badness of it. What makes God’s love so great is not that the world he loves is so big, but that it is so bad. Its inhabitants seek every possible means of living their lives apart from him. Our planet is filled with people who say, “God, we like your world, but we would prefer if you would just leave us alone.” We are like party-goers who enjoy the generosity of the host in making the party possible, but then lock him in a closet while we enjoy his generosity. This is the world God so loves and refuses to abandon, even though abandonment and judgment from God is clearly what this world so richly deserves.

II. God’s Action at Christmas – Giving

God’s love, like all real love, leads to action. Because God loved the world, he did something—he gave his only Son. Back to our grand paradox, God reclaims everything by giving everything away. His Son is everything to him, and this is what is given. Nothing less would suffice to reclaim lost sinners, so nothing less was given. A substitute must be provided, and it must be a human being, and this human being must be sinless. The only solution is for God to become man and to die in our place.

Imagine that you are reading Genesis 22 for the first time. That’s the passage where God commands Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice his only son, Isaac. It was an incomprehensible command, because God had also promised that Abraham would become a great nation through Isaac. God seems to heighten the tension in the language he uses when he gives this command to Abraham. **“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you”** (Gen. 22:2). God makes it clear through this language that Abraham had nothing as precious to him as his son Isaac. Abraham had three days to think about this, because that’s how long it took to travel to Mt. Moriah. As readers of the story, we too are perplexed. How could God ask such a thing? We are holding our breath to see how things are going to work out. Verse 5 tells us how Abraham had worked it out in his mind. When Abraham told his two servants to wait while he and Isaac went to worship God, and promised that they would return, the verbs are

first person plurals. He says, “We will go worship and *we* will return to you.” The writer of Hebrews interprets this to mean that Abraham was expecting God to raise Isaac from the dead following his death by sacrifice. **“He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead”** (Heb. 11:19). That’s not how things worked out, though. At the last moment, with the knife raised, God intervenes with a second command. **“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him”** (22:12). But a sacrifice still needed to be made. Abraham looked, and saw that a ram had been caught in a thicket by his horns. This substitutionary ram portrays for us the substitutionary work of Christ. Isaac did not lose his life on this day, but a ram did. It was necessary that some death occur on this day in order to satisfy the just demands of God. An innocent ram lost his life, not a guilty man. At the cross, the innocent Lamb of God died as a substitute for guilty man. In giving his Son, God did what he didn’t ask Abraham to do.

Let’s think about that little word “so” in our verse. “God so loved the world that he gave...” The value of the gift indicates the extent of the love. This is how much God loves this fallen, broken world—so much that he was willing to pay the ultimate price.

I read a story several years ago about a young man who had quarreled with his father and left home. He continued to keep in touch with his mother, and wanted very much to come home for Christmas. What prevented him from doing so was his fear that his father would not allow him. His mother wrote to him and urged him to come home, but he said he could not until he knew his father had forgiven him. Finally, Christmas was near and there was no longer time for further letter writing. So the mother wrote one final letter in which she promised to talk to the father to find out if he had forgiven the son. If he had, the mother said she would tie a white rag on the tree which grew right alongside the railroad tracks near their home. The plan was for the son to look for that rag as the train pulled into the station. If there were no rag, he would simply stay on the train and ride on. So the young man started for home. As the train drew near his home, he was so nervous that he explained his situation to the person sitting in the seat next to his. He said to this new friend, “I can’t bear to look. Would you sit in my place and look out the window. I’ll tell you what the tree looks like and you tell me whether there is a rag on it or not.” So his friend changed places with him and looked out the window. After a bit the friend said, “Oh yes, I see the tree.” The son asked, “Is there a white rag tied to it?” For a moment, the friend didn’t say anything. Then he turned and said with great emotion, “There is a white rag tied to every limb of that tree!” The cross is a tree with a white rag tied to every limb, virtually shouting the forgiving love of the Father.

III. Man’s Response to Christmas – Believing

The gift of the Son has one purpose—to deliver its recipients from perishing and bring them to eternal life. Those are the only two alternatives for every human who has ever lived. Since the gift of eternal life comes through believing, it is crucial that we understand what John means by believing. This verse is in the context of Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus, a man who comes to Jesus as an unbeliever. There are several indications of this in the text. The first is the fact that he comes to Jesus at night. This is more than an insignificant detail. Nicodemus is mentioned three times in John’s gospel, and the last time he is referred to again as **“the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night”** (19:39). John often mentions these themes of light and darkness, and he employs them to describe moral categories. That’s clear from verse 19 of our text. **“The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”** The unbelieving state of Nicodemus is also evident from Jesus’ statement to him that he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God.

If Nicodemus is an unbeliever at first, then we learn three very important truths about faith from this fact. First, faith is more than viewing Jesus kindly. Nicodemus did so, seen in his first words to Jesus. **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him”** (v. 2). Second, faith requires more than believing in the existence of God. Jesus referred to Nicodemus as **“the teacher of Israel”** (v. 10), which means that he was among the most prominent and well-known Bible teachers in the nation. He certainly believed in God’s existence, and taught it to others. Third, faith requires more than living a moral life. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and they were famous for the effort they devoted to living moral lives.

So if faith is more than viewing Jesus favorably, believing in his existence and living a moral life, what is it exactly? It is trusting God to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, seen in Jesus’ insistence of the necessity of being born again. Nicodemus claims that he is able to see something of who Jesus is by his miracles, to which Jesus replies that he can see nothing of God’s kingdom without being born again. Nicodemus then confirms Jesus’ statement by his snarky reply. **“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”** Nicodemus, in spite of being a prominent Bible scholar, understood little of what Jesus was saying because he had not been born again. Calvin says it well. “By the term *born again* he means not the amendment of a part but the renewal of the whole nature.” This only God can do.

Kent Hughes tells of an old Arabian fable in which a young Arabic man was travelling along a road on his donkey when he came upon a small, fuzzy object lying on the road. He dismounted to look more closely and found a sparrow lying on its back with its scrawny legs thrust skyward. At first he thought it was dead, but closer investigation proved the bird to be very much alive. The

young man asked the sparrow if he was all right. The sparrow replied, "yes." Then the Arab said, "What are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed toward the sky?" The sparrow responded that he had heard a rumor that the sky was falling, so he was holding his legs up to support it. The Arab replied, "You surely don't think you're going to hold it up with those two scrawny legs, do you?" The sparrow, after a very solemn look, retorted, "One does the best he can."

The best we can do is woefully inadequate. So faith is despairing of anything we can do to see the kingdom of God, and trust instead on God's provision for us. This understanding of faith is captured well in Toplady's hymn, "Rock of Ages." "Not the labors of my hands can fulfil thy law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

Let me apply this to the joy of Christmas by contrasting artificial joy with true joy. There are many things we do at this time of year to try to manufacture joy. We eat a lot of good food, we have parties, we give and receive presents and we adorn our houses with all manner of lights, greenery and bright decorations. There is nothing wrong with any of that, but can it bring joy? Only God can do that, and he does so as we trust him.

Wendy read me a story this week of a family who procured their Christmas tree this year on the day after Thanksgiving. They brought it into their house and decorated it immediately. Then, on December 12, two weeks after the tree had been brought in, a little girl in the family was standing in front of the tree admiring it. It featured an ornament or two of small owls. She was looking at one of those when it moved. Amazingly, and without the family knowing it, a young Screech-owl was in their Christmas tree when they bought it. They brought it into their house and decorated the tree without ever detecting its presence. To wrap up this story, wildlife rescuers were called, and the owl, a little dehydrated and quite hungry, was successfully released back into the wild.

CONCLUSION:

My prayer for you this Christmas is an awakening of joy, as if a dead, artificial Christmas tree ornament were to come alive. God is able to bring about such life as we trust him. So ask God to show you the ways you are guilty of self-trust, repent of that and look instead to God's loving provision to you of Jesus. It is through this gift that you come to see the kingdom of God.