

The Father's Gift

Christmas Choices – Part I

Selected Scripture

Introduction

A little girl came home from Sunday school triumphantly waving a paper over her head. “Mommy!” she said. “My teacher says I drew the most unusual Christmas picture she has ever seen.”

The mother studied the picture for a moment and concluded it was indeed a very unique picture of the nativity scene. She said to her daughter, “This is wonderfully drawn, but why have you made all of them ride in an airplane?”

The little girl said, “Well that’s ‘cause they took their flight into Egypt.”

She had a hint of disappointment that the picture’s meaning was not immediately obvious to her mother.

“Oh, of course . . . but who is that mean looking man at the front of the airplane?”

“That’s Pontius, the Pilot!” the girl said, now visibly impatient.

“I see. And here you have Mary and Joseph and the baby,” the mother volunteered. Studying the picture silently for a moment, she summoned the courage to ask, “But who’s the overweight guy sitting behind Mary?”

Her daughter said, “That’s Round John Virgin, of course!”

What an interesting perspective from a child.

What is your perspective of Christmas?

If you are like most people, you barely have time to think it through. The Christmas season is marked by deeper emotional strain, greater anxiety, and more

acts of violence than any other time of the year. I have read that more people suffer nervous breakdowns at Christmas than at any other time of the year as well.

Ironically, the word “bedlam” is an English corruption of the word Bethlehem. In the 1500s, St. Mary’s of Bethlehem, a London monastery serving as a hospital, was turned into a city-run insane asylum. It was soon filled with many people who were considered hopeless in their condition. For a small admission price, people could actually go there to heckle the inmates. It was, shockingly, a famous tourist attraction in the city. St. Mary’s of Bethlehem was shortened over time, and simply pronounced, “Bedlam”. In time, the word “bedlam” came to refer to the noise and confusion that symbolized the chaos within that asylum. Ironic, is it not, that these two words would be related to this day.¹

Certainly today, the message of Bethlehem has been lost in all the bedlam. In the midst of confusing messages about Christmas – especially to children; in the trappings and wrappings and traffic and long lines, it is certainly easy to forget the heart of it all. And I do not mean thinking that Pontius was a pilot, or that Joseph and Mary booked a flight to Egypt.

At the heart of this season is eternal, life-changing, eternity-determining truth.

As I sat listening to the wonderful Christmas music at our recent church Christmas Sweet celebration, the great hymn texts that spoke of our Lord’s descent from heaven to a manger and it struck me that at the heart of Christmas is indeed the word, “choice”. Christmas is all about choices.

The fact that we receive any presents at all is the choice of some giver. And we probably do not deserve half of what we will unwrap.

This fits perfectly with the gospel. The tradition of giving of gifts ultimately points to the greatest Giver of all time, who chose to give fallen humanity a gift – and we did not deserve any of it.

“The wages of sin is death” – which is what we deserve; which is the reason it is called wages; which is our paycheck for sinning – “*but* the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

We deserve our paycheck. We do not deserve the gift.

Did you note who the Giver was?

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When the New Testament refers to God, the authors are most often referring to God the Father.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (II Corinthians 1:3)

Paul wrote further to the Colossians,

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17)

To the Thessalonians, Paul distinguished,

. . . To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . (I Thessalonians 1:1b)

James clarified further the role of the Father when he said,

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)

The gift was God the Son and through Him, redemption; the giver was God the Father. That first Christmas, so to speak, was the gift of God the Father.

The heart of the Christmas nativity is the choice of God to keep His promise and send the Redeemer who would satisfy the long-standing debt of wrath and judgment due mankind. By this, He was paving the way for us to freely unwrap even more gifts from the Father, namely, the forgiveness of sin and inclusion into the family of God.

Christmas – God the Father’s Perspective

Let us take a look at the story of redemption from God the Father’s perspective. What did it mean to Him?

We capture the perspective and heart of God in a number of things. I will mention a few of them today.

- First, there is joy in the Father’s announcement of the Son.
- Secondly, there is satisfaction in the Father’s affirmation of the Son.
- Thirdly, there is love in the Father’s address through the Son.

Let us look at these.

1. **First, there is joy in the Father’s announcement of the Son’s birth.**

In Luke 2, we are given the scene outside of Bethlehem. Look at Luke 2:8, which tells us,

In [this] region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

This is not just any flock, by the way.

The *Mishnah*, the code book of Jewish law and tradition, stated that any animal found between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, six miles south, was to be available at any time for sacrifice in the temple of Jerusalem.

Josephus, the Jewish historian living in the first century, reported that at a typical Passover festival, more than 250,000 lambs would be sacrificed in Jerusalem.

These sheep were destined for the temple – they were paschal lambs. They would be among the tens of thousands that would be sacrificed in the temple system.

In this night scene, the shepherds are resting and watching the lambs that are ultimately destined for the altar of sacrifice. They are about to be the first to see the Lamb of God with their own eyes.

Notice Luke 2:9.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

Understand that the joyful announcement of the Father has come to the ceremonially unclean. The shepherd was the bottom of the social and religious

ladder – considered unclean for touching dead animals and blood; unable to wash his hands at prescribed times; without even the benefit of purified water for ceremonial cleansing.

Furthermore, the shepherd worked seven days a week – day and night, including the Sabbath, of course. Since the sheep were not in the habit of taking Saturday off, the shepherd could not either.

Shepherds then, were literally disqualified from worshipping God in the temple, yet they will be the first ones the Father invites to worship the Son. To them, the Father delivers through His angels, this message of joy!

Continue to Luke 2:10-14.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people;

“for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord . . .”

And suddenly there appeared with the angle a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest . . .”

Skip to Luke 2:20.

The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen . . .

Why not? For unto them – the unclean ones – a Savior had been given! This was the gift of God the Father to the world of mankind.

Colossians 1:19 informs us,

. . . it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him [Christ]

This was the Father’s announcement; this was the Father’s joy; this was the Father’s gift.

Not only do we observe joy in the Father’s announcement of the Son, but we can make a second observation.

2. Secondly, we hear satisfaction in the Father’s affirmation of the Son.

If we fast forward the tape to the next chapter – to Luke 3 – a text appears that remarkably reveals the heart of God the Father. We hear the Father make a special announcement. Only this time, it is not through angels, but with His own voice.

Luke 3:21-22 records,

Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened.

and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.”

Christ has come to the Old Testament prophet, John the Baptizer, and is baptized by him in the Jordan river. He had nothing of which to repent, but He purposefully identified with the righteous actions of His people, fulfilling all that the law required.

With this act, Jesus officially begins His ministry. It is not coincidental that He is thirty years of age.

Joseph was thirty when Pharaoh elevated him to the seat of power in Egypt, thus saving the lives of both Gentiles and Jews who came to him for food. Jesus Christ will save the lives of both Jews and Gentiles who come to Him to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

The Jewish priests began their ministry at age thirty. Jesus, the High Priest, was beginning His service for the court of heaven, and to this day is the mediator between God and man.

David was thirty years old when he ascended the throne in Jerusalem. Now, the son of David steps forward to declare that He is the long awaited son of David, the Messiah.

Every detail in this redemptive plan was perfectly arranged.

Mark’s gospel informs us that as,

[Jesus was] coming up out of the water, He saw heaven [torn open] . . . (Mark 1:10a)

Matthew gives us the Lord’s perspective,

. . . He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him, (Matthew 3:16b)

John gives us John the Baptist’s viewpoint,

. . . “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him.” (John 1:32b)

Since John the Baptist saw it all happen, we have every reason to believe everyone else did too.

Can you imagine? In this scene is the Trinity or manifestations of the Triune God. The Son is standing in the water; the Spirit is descending from the sky, and the Father is speaking in the heavens.

The Spirit and the Father are two witnesses, which, according to the law, are necessary to affirm the truth. These two witnesses are:

- one visual – the dove,
- one audible – the voice of the Father affirming the authenticity of the Son’s divine nature and calling.

Imagine this unforgettable demonstration of each member of the Triune God at the same time. You could touch God the Son; you could see God the Spirit; you could hear God the Father.ⁱⁱ

What did the Father say? Luke 3:22 tells us,

. . . and a voice came out of heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.”

I am certain that no one on the banks of the Jordan breathed or even moved. What a moment!

What a moment for Jesus Christ – the Son – to be ministered to by the Spirit and to hear the voice of the Father.

What an affirmation!

There were two parts to this audible message.

- The first part was, “You are My beloved Son.”

The Father was not telling Jesus that He was His beloved Son because Jesus might have forgotten this fact or did not know it.

At age twelve, the Lord told Mary and Joseph that He had to be about His Father’s business, right? It had not slipped His mind over the last thirty years.

God was not saying this for the benefit of Christ, but was saying this for the benefit of the crowd.

The news would travel far and wide – God the Father has authenticated the validity of Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God; to have come from the Father and be one with the Father.

This is the first phrase of God the Father’s affirmation.

- The second phrase was not as much for the crowd, I believe, as specifically for the benefit of Christ, “in You I am well-pleased.”

With what exactly was God the Father pleased?

Obviously there was nothing with which to be displeased! So what would have brought this signature affirmation from the Father?

The Father was pleased with the humble incarnation and earthly conduct of the Son. For thirty

years, the Son had humbled Himself to live as man, walk the dusty path as man, work with His hands in a carpenter’s shop. The way He accomplished all of this, pleased the Father.

One author wrote,

The Father would have been pleased with unparalleled communion, unparalleled prayer, unparalleled meditation as He grew in His comprehension of who He was and what He was to do. The Spirit had governed the Son’s progress and the Son had submitted and patiently waited all these years in earthbound time and restrictions to bring about redemption’s plan.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Father was pleased with the prospect of Christ’s ministry and the work He was about to perform.

The Holy Trinity was rejoicing at the Jordan as they commemorated and celebrated and authenticated the beginning work of the royal son of David who was the great High Priest.

We discover the heart of God the Father in His joy at the *announcement* of Jesus’ birth.

We hear the satisfaction in the voice of God the Father as He *affirms* the Son’s person and work.

3. Finally, we revel at the love in the Father’s address through His Son as the gospel is delivered.

John 3 summarizes the gospel well enough in one verse. It is, in fact, the centerpiece of the gospel.^{iv}

John 3:16 says it all. Jesus is speaking on behalf of the Father. This is the Father’s address through the Son.

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

Let me give an outline of this with eight points:

- For God – the divine Giver;
- so loved the world – the maximum degree;
- that He gave – the utmost proof;
- His only Son – the supreme gift;
- that whoever – the broadest invitation;
- believes in Him – the simplest response;
- shall not perish – the greatest escape;
- but have eternal life – the ultimate promise.

Let us look at these points.

1. “For God . . .” – the divine Giver.

Do not miss it. Salvation is God-given, God-driven, God-empowered, and God-originated. The gift of salvation is not from man to God, it is from God to man.^v

“For God . . .”

2. “. . . so loved the world . . .” – the maximum degree.

The “world” God loves is the Greek word “cosmos”. It is a word used 186 times in the Greek New testament and always with a sinful connotation. It is an amazing truth – God loves a world of sinners.^{vi}

The English text reads, “For God so loved” as if it has trouble expressing the breadth and depth of God’s love – He so loved the world.

I am reminded of a story of F. B. Meyer’s son. One night before bedtime, Meyer’s son came into his study and padded over to him, who, as usual, was studying at his desk for the next sermon. His son climbed into his lap, looked up at him for a moment, and then said, “Daddy, I love you like a hundred pounds!”

This was the largest weight he could imagine. It did not satisfy him, so after more thought, he said, “Daddy, I love you like a hundred miles!”

This was the longest distance he could imagine, but even this was not enough.

Finally, Meyer’s son reached up, cupped his father’s chin in his little hands, and said, “Daddy, I love you so much.”

The language of any nation cannot fully describe the height and depth and breadth of God’s love. We are best to leave it with the little word, “so” – “For God so loved the world . . .” – this is the maximum degree.

3. “. . . that He gave . . .” – the utmost proof.

In truth, the love of God is not a feeling, it is action.

I read some time ago, of a minister who was counseling a couple who were having marital difficulties. They were at a standstill when the husband, in obvious exasperation, said to his wife, “I have given you everything – a beautiful home . . . a new car . . . designer clothing – you name it, I have given you everything.” To which she quietly responded, “That’s true – you’ve given me everything, but yourself.”

So God loved the world? What action did He take to prove His love?

He chose to give Himself – in the person of His Son.

“For God so loved the world that He gave . . .”

4. “. . . His only begotten [‘monogenes,’ ‘His only unique’] Son . . .” – the supreme gift.

In the days of the Great Depression, a Missouri man named John Griffith was the controller of a great railroad drawbridge that spanned the Mississippi River. One day, in the summer of 1937, he decided to take his eight-year-old son, Greg, along with him to work. At noon, John Griffith put the bridge up to allow ships to pass and sat on the observation deck with his son to eat lunch. Time passed quickly. Suddenly, he was startled by the shriek of a train whistle in the distance. He quickly looked at his watch and noticed it was 1:07 – the Memphis Express, with 400 passengers on board, was roaring toward the raised bridge. He leaped from the observation deck and ran back to the control tower. Just before throwing the master lever, he glanced down for any ships below. There a sight caught his eye that caused his heart to leap into his throat. Greg had left the observation deck and had evidently fallen into the massive gears that operated the bridge. His left leg was caught in the cogs of the two main gears!

Desperately John’s mind whirled to devise a rescue plan, but he knew there was no time to do anything for Greg. The train whistle shrieked again in the air and John could hear the clicking of the locomotive wheels over the tracks. That was his son down there – yet there were 400 passengers on the Memphis Express. He knew what he had to do, so he buried his head in his left arm and pushed the master switch forward. The great massive bridge lowered into place just as the Memphis Express began to roar across the river. When John Griffith lifted his head with his face covered in tears, he looked into the passing windows of the train. There were businessmen casually reading their afternoon papers; finely dressed ladies in the dining car sipping coffee; children pushing long spoons into their ice cream. With wrenching agony, John Griffith cried and said as the cars whipped by, “I sacrificed my son for you.”^{vii}

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

5. "... that whoever . . ." – the broadest invitation.

This is the invitation to the world to accept the gift of God the Son, given by God the Father, out of love for the world in need.

"Whosoever will may come."

I like the way D. L. Moody divided the world of mankind into two parts: the whosoever wills and the whosoever won'ts.

Are you one of the wills or won'ts?

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever . . ."

6. "... believes in Him . . ." – the simplest response.

We invite Him into the stable of our hearts.

John wrote,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God . . . (John 1:12a)

7. When we believe in Him, we, "... shall not perish . . ." – the greatest escape.

This is the greatest escape clause ever put into print.

God does not condone our sin, nor does He compromise His standard. He does not ignore our rebellion, nor does He relax His demands. Rather than dismiss our sin, He assumes our sin and, incredibly, sentences Himself. God's holiness is

honored. Our sin is punished – in Christ – and we [escape eternal condemnation].^{viii}

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, . . ."

8. "... but have eternal life." – the ultimate promise.

Conclusion

This is Christmas from the perspective of the Father.

- We hear it in the joy of the Father's announcement about the Son;
- We sense it in the satisfaction in the Father's affirmation of the Son;
- We understand it in the love in the Father's address through the Son.

Christmas was the choice of the Father to send the Son.

Christmas is the Father's gift – from His heart to ours.

One final reminder from a poet who wrote it for us in this way:

*Christmas is the gift from heaven,
Of God's Son given for free;
If Christmas isn't found in your heart,
You won't find it under the tree.*^{ix}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/10/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, *God with Us* (Zondervan, 1989), p. 66.

ⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, *The Origination of Something Glorious* (Word Publishers, 1994), p. 80.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 1* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 126.

^{iv} Kenneth Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: John* (Holman, 2000), p. 47.

^v *The Glory of Christmas* (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 17.

^{vi} R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Crossway Books, 1999), p. 85.

^{vii} Charles Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Ox Cart* (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 542.

^{viii} *The Glory of Christmas*, p 16.

^{ix} *Christianity Today*, vol. 34, no. 18.