

"God's Greatest Gift" - Part 1

Text: John 3:16

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 1, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We come again to the time of year when we reflect on the meaning of Christmas. What is Christmas all about?
 - The very word "Christmas" indicates it is about Christ, about the man named Jesus who was born 2000 years ago and whose birth Christians celebrate at Christmas.
- Now regardless of your views about Jesus it is astounding to consider the impact this one man has had on history and the interest people still have in him.
 - Jesus has been the subject of the greatest artists in history from Michelangelo's *Pieta* to DaVinci's *The Lord's Supper*.
 - The city of Rio Di Janeiro built *Christ the Redeemer* – a colossal 38 metre, 638 ton statue of Jesus which they placed above their city in honour of Him.
 - In pop culture Jesus constantly appears in T.V. shows like *The Simpsons*, in movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, and in musicals like *Jesus Christ Superstar*.
 - Some rock bands write songs against Jesus while other artists like and Kanye West and Bono write songs to praise him.
 - Public interest in Jesus is demonstrated by the fact that magazine sales increase by 45% when Jesus is on the cover.
 - History itself is divided by where it falls in relation to Jesus' birth date. Dates are marked either B.C. (before Christ) or A.D. (anno domini – Latin for after the year of our Lord). Political correctness has changed those letters to B.C.E. (before common era) and C.E. (common era) but the common era is still the approximate date of Jesus' birth.
- So regardless of your views on Jesus one cannot deny his impact on history. However, many people thoughtfully and rightly ask, **"So what? What difference does it make to me that some peasant guy named Jesus was born half way around the world over 2000 years ago? Julius Caesar was born around the same time but we don't shape our lives around him."**
 - The answer lies in the story of Christmas. To understand the story of Christmas one needs to understand its place in the big story of the Bible. So this morning I want to ask, **"What is the big story of the Bible?"**
 - When you understand this then you can understand the significance of Christmas and why billions of people worship this man named Jesus.
- There is one verse in the Bible that summarizes the total story perhaps better than any other. It is the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16.
 - If you don't know anything about Christianity then John 3:16 will teach you the ABC's. One man has called this verse, **"The Bible in miniature."** So for three weeks I want to unpack this verse and its surrounding context for you.
 - So, let's remind ourselves of the words of Jesus in John 3:16. **READ 16 - (SHOW SLIDE 2) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**
 - Here Jesus summarizes the big story of the Bible in four truths: *God exists, God has a Son, God loved, and God gave.*

GOD EXISTS

- So if we are going to understand the story of the Bible we need to see in the first place that Jesus says, **(SHOW SLIDE 3) God exists.**
 - Look again at the verse. Jesus begins by saying, **“For God so loved the world.”** The Bible’s story begins with the fact that God exists and that everything else exists because God created it. He created you and out of love for you gives you life and breath. As His creatures we owe God everything – worship, thanks, and praise.
- The clues for God’s existence are everywhere. For instance, look outside yourself at the universe and ask yourself, **“Why is there something rather than nothing?”**
 - Astronomers today believe that there are perhaps 140 billion galaxies in the visible universe. Just so you grasp how many galaxies that is, an astrophysicist named Bruce Gregory once calculated that if every galaxy were the size of a frozen pea they would fill a hockey arena like Rogers Arena in Vancouver.
 - How did all of that arise out of nothing? Bible asserts that God created it.
 - Or consider the clues in the marvels of our own planet. Dave Attenborough writes of the blue whale, the world’s largest creature, that its **“tongue weighs as much as an elephant, its heart is the size of a car and some of its blood vessels are so wide that you could swim down them.”**
 - For organic life to exist conditions must be perfect. That is why even Stephen Hawking says, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications.”** So look outside yourself at these marvels and ask, **“Why is there something rather than nothing?”**
- Then look inside yourself. Ask yourself, **“If I my existence is simply the meaningless product of blind random chance, as some say, then why do I sense that life has meaning and must have meaning? If there are no moral absolutes why does every fabric of my being cry out against injustice? If the material universe is all there is why have human beings always thirsted for the spiritual?”**
 - The Bible says you feel these things because the universe is not meaningless. God created you with purpose and a moral conscience.
- But one last reason to believe God exists is because Jesus said God exists.
 - When a man can raise the dead, heal the blind, cause paralyzed people to walk, and in the middle of a storm say the wind and waves, **“Be still”** and they obey his voice, we should consider that man’s constant assertion that God exists.
 - So the Bible’s story begins with this fact: God exists. He is your Creator, the one to whom you owe all things including the breath you just took.

GOD HAS A SON

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Secondly, God has a Son.**
 - **READ 16 - For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.** Now if you haven’t been around the church much you might be thinking, **“That’s odd, I didn’t know God could procreate? Who did God procreate with?”**
 - It is here we need to understand what the Bible and what Jesus teaches about who God is. Follow me carefully now. This will become critically important later

on but I'm this is going to push your mental abilities to breaking point. So how are we to understand who God is?

- First of all, the Bible plainly and unequivocally teaches that there is only one God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** So unlike Hinduism or Greek mythology that believe in many gods, the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Easy enough to understand?
- However, in the second place the Bible also teaches that this one God exists in three person who are all the one God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** There is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are all the one God. The Father *is* God. The Son *is* as much God as the Father is. And the Holy Spirit *is* as much God as the Father and the Son are.
 - So the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the one God.
- But in the third place we must add that although the three are all the one God they are not the same as each other. Each one is a unique person from the others.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Although the Father is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Son or the Spirit. Although the Son is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Father or the Spirit. And although the Holy Spirit is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Father or the Son.
- Have your minds reached breaking point yet? This is a great mystery how God can be a Trinity, a tri-unity, three and yet one. One reason why Christians believe this to be true is that no one would or could make such a thing up. Moreover, if God exists should he not exceed our mental capacities.
 - This again makes Christianity unique because Islam affirms the oneness of God but denies the threeness of God. Also, unlike eastern religions that see God as an impersonal force, a three in one God is a personal God for He exists eternally in loving community with Himself.
 - Now this is going to become very important in a few minutes but for now we focus on the fact that God exists and that God has a Son. Now we ready to move into the meaning of the Bible and the meaning of Christmas.

GOD LOVED

- The third thing Jesus teaches us is that **(SHOW SLIDE 9) God loved.**
 - Look again at verse 16 with me. **READ 16 - *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.***
- So this God who exists and this God who has a Son has loved something. What did he love? This world. The fact that God loved this world should utterly shock you and melt your heart causing you to shout with joy, ***“Oh what gloriously good news!”***
 - But this is not the case is it? Why don't we fall on our faces before God saying, ***“Oh thank you! What glorious news”***? The reason we do not appreciate the good news that God has loved the world is because we have not grasped the bad news. So let me describe the bad news that the good news might be glorious.
- The key is found in this word 'world.' When John uses this word it always refers to humanity in rebellion against God. The Bible declares that although God is our loving and benevolent ruler who does everything for our good, all human beings have rebelled against his rule. We have rejected God's loving rule over us and set up our own rule. We have declared independence from God.

- This becomes obvious when we see how much we have rejected his commands. God's first command is to **"love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength."** But do you at all times make the worship of God your highest priority in life? Is it your greatest joy to serve Him with all your might? When he gives laws on things like sexuality do you perfectly obey with all joy?
 - The second command is to love others like you love yourself. But have you always put others before yourself seeking their good and not your own, never hurting or harming them in any way?
- The fact that we have all disobeyed God's laws is clear evidence that we have rejected Him and his good rule over us and set ourselves up as our own rulers.
 - We all join Frank Sinatra in singing and **"I did it my way."** Stand amazed at this: we the creatures have tried to usurp the Creator. In astonishing arrogance, we have shaken our puny fists in God's face and said, **"Your laws don't appeal to me and so I will reject you and I will be my own god. I will rule over myself."**
 - We have tried to de-god God, to rid ourselves of Him so we can live how we want.
- Over the past fifteen years the most popular fantasy books in the world are JK Rowling's books about Harry Potter. But there has been another set of children's fantasy books called *His Dark Materials* that have also received a lot of critical acclaim. They are by an author named Philip Pullman. The first book entitled *The Golden Compass* was also made into a movie. The books are a retake on the Christian view that humanity has rebelled against God. They portray such rebellion not as a bad thing but as a good thing because in Pullman's view when you get rid of God then you find freedom, specifically sexual freedom.
 - The series ends with a young teen girl finding the meaning of life in her first sexual experience because she has killed the God who held her back from such expression.
 - Pullman's attack on Christianity is clear: In his view, God is out to restrain you and pull you down. The real hero is the one who gives God the finger and kills Him to find freedom. Pullman once told an Australian reporter, **"My books are about killing God."**
 - Now the average person would never say they are trying to kill God but that is what we all do either by simply declaring he does not exist so we can live how we want or by living as if he does not exist so we can live how we want. We kill God by ignoring Him.
- Now let me ask you, what should a judge do with a criminal who habitually and willfully breaks every law of society and refuses to change? What would you say if that judge said, **"Oh, don't worry about it. No big deal."** We would call for that judge to be impeached. Why? Because justice matters. Rebels should get what rebels deserve.
 - The problem however is that we are the rebels in God's courtroom. The bad news of the Bible is that we stand guilty before him and because God is just he will judge us for our rebellion. John 3:16 talks about believing in Jesus so that we will **"not perish"** which means we are all perishing.
 - That should cause us to cry out, **"Is there any hope for me? Can I be saved from this terrible condition of perishing?"**
- But wonder of wonders, according to John 3:16, God has set his love upon those who have rejected Him and spurned His loving rule. This is shocking. Who ever heard of a king who loves those who try to assassinate him and take his throne?

- Yet hope rises in these five short words **“God so loved the world.”** The good news shouts louder than the bad news. God did not reject us but loved us.
 - Our last point now ties it all together - the big story of the Bible and the meaning of Christmas, for Christmas has everything to do with *how* God has loved the world.

GOD GAVE

- The last part of the Bible’s story can simply be put like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 10) God gave.** Christmas is all about the loving God giving a gift to an undeserving planet who has rejected Him. What is that gift?
 - **READ 16 - For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.**
- What is the gift that God gave this world? God the Father gave us the Son. How did he do this? He asked the eternal Son of God, whom he loves, to give up his rights as God, to step off his throne, to humble himself and take on human flesh.
 - The Son voluntarily did this. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Son was born as a human baby and given the name Jesus. The man Jesus, born 2000 years ago, is none other than God the Son in human flesh. He is God’s gift to us.
- But why would God give us His Son? Why did God become a man?
 - The answer is to rescue us from perishing. When Jesus was born the angels came to the shepherds and said, **“A Saviour has been born to you.”**
 - He is a gift **“to you”** and He is the **“Saviour”** – that is, one who saves or rescues. Jesus’ very name means, **“The Lord saves”** or **“God to the rescue”** Out of love God sent his beloved Son on a rescue mission to save guilty rebels from perishing.
- How does Jesus rescue us?
 - Through his life, death, and resurrection. Our greatest problem is our guilt, the judgement that is due to us for our rebellion. But rather than executing that judgement on us, God gave His Son up to death. Jesus was crucified on a cross. On that cross God took the judgement that is due to rebels for their rebellion and he inflicted it on Jesus instead. Jesus gave himself as a substitute in the place of rebels. Jesus faced the full force of God’s wrath so that you do not have to. Then he rose again conquering the power of death and God raised him to the highest place and set him as king over the universe.
 - Oh marvel at the love of God. Here is the meaning of Christmas: God the Father loves His Son and has loved Him for all eternity. But in order to rescue perishing humanity God gave His Son, His one and only Son, who is the heart of his heart. Jesus died a terrible death so that you and I could be forgiven and not perish. Oh the depths of God’s love. Oh what a gift.
- That is the story of the Bible – God exists, God has a Son, God loved the world, and God gave His Son to save those who are perishing.

CONCLUSION

- Two last things need to be quickly said about this gift. First, like any gift it must be received. You cannot enjoy the benefits of a gift if you reject it.
 - Notice what the rest of the verse says. **READ 16 - For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**
 - Notice that *only* those who believe in Jesus are rescued from their perishing condition and given eternal life. To believe in Jesus means you stop your rebellion against God and submit your life to him. To believe in Jesus means you trust that Jesus is able to save you and you call out to him to do so.
- So you must receive the gift in order to be saved from your perishing condition but secondly notice how inclusive the love of God is.
 - He does not just offer this gift to famous people, to smart people, or rich people. **“Whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”** Put your name in the ‘whoever’, **“If Barton believes he will not perish but have eternal life.”**
 - So friends this is the story of the Bible. God offers you this great gift of His Son who will rescue you from perishing. Will you receive this gift today?
- Now perhaps some of you are saying, **“I don’t want this gift.”** You need to realize that you are perishing and without this gift will perish eternally.
 - But perhaps some of you are saying, **“this sounds interesting but I would like to understand more.”** Any of our pastors would be willing to speak further with you. We also offer a six week course entitled *Christianity Explored* that we will run again in the New Year for anyone interested in learning more.
- Perhaps others of you are saying, **“I see clearly that I am perishing and desperately want God’s gift of Jesus that I might not perish.”** In a moment I will put a sample prayer on the screen for you to receive this gift.
 - This is the story of the Bible. This is the meaning of Christmas. This is gloriously good news for perishing rebels like you and I. **“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.”**
- Let’s pray together. **(SHOW SLIDE 11)**