

Title: Love Came Down at Christmas Time
Date: December 24, 2023
Subject: Love
Scripture: Luke 2:4-7; John 3:16 - 18

The video showed a young boy bounding down the stairs on Christmas morning. He saw a large present beside the tree and ran over to tear it open to see what was inside. He ripped off the paper and broke into a dance, jumping around the room saying, "Wow! Just what I wanted! I really love it! Wow!" He finally composed himself and slowly approached the present. He said to his parents, "What is it?"

That's the issue we face at Christmas: What is it that God has done? How do we explain God's indescribable gift? (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Since it's Christmas Eve, we begin with what the Bible says happened on that night 2000 years ago.

Read Luke 2:4 - 7.

Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. They all have a look of contentment, at least that's the way the art world pictures it. Mary was probably exhausted, at least very tired from the delivery process. Joseph is relieved the birth went well. And baby Jesus, was just like any other baby - moving like any other baby, making noises like any other baby, having the needs of any other baby. He was wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.

Jesus had already spent nine months on earth, if Mary's pregnancy went to term, and there's no reason to think otherwise. He left behind the power, honor, glory and the luxury of heaven belonging to the Supreme Being of the universe, trading it for a bed...in a feed trough.

To compare the adjustments the Son of God made to become human, to become one of us, would be like you and me trading our home for a.... uh ... um... It's really difficult to find any kind of comparison. Some people say it'd be like us becoming a bird to tell other birds the barn provides warm shelter during a blizzard. Others say it'd be like us becoming a worm. They may be helpful, but I don't think those go far enough. Completely comprehending what it took for God to become human isn't in our vocabulary or brainpower.

The good news is we can understand his purpose and motivation. This brings us to the most familiar verse in the Bible. Though it's not in the Christmas narrative, it's still a magnificent Christmas verse.

Read John 3:16.

The following verses offer an expansion.

Read John 3:17, 18.

The purpose for Jesus, the Son of God, the one and only Son of God, the one who is fully God in every way, the purpose is so people can have eternal life and not have to eternally perish. Jesus didn't enter the world to condemn it. That would be so easy as it was so obvious. People were already doing a really good job of condemning themselves because of their sin. At the core of the matter is they didn't place their trust and confidence in God. They decided they'd go their own way and trust in themselves to try to get to heaven

because of their goodness and good deeds. Or, they chose to ignore God. They were placing themselves in the position of being condemned. They were in a hopeless condition, even if they didn't know it.

Dan Inerra wrote a book titled *The Unsaved Christian*. In an interview (Family Life Today radio), he stated “many people refer to themselves as Christian because they aren't Jewish, Muslim, atheist or some other belief. If you ask what makes them a Christian, they'd answer they believe in God, they're good people and that's basically it. They don't mention Jesus and what he did on the cross.”

Dean shares his story: “I could definitely recite The Lord's Prayer, and The Doxology, and I could probably even do some of the Apostles' Creed, because we read it every single week. But I never had anyone actually tell me that I was a sinner, who needed to be saved; that only Jesus, actually, was the One who could provide that. Did I believe in Jesus? I believed he was born in a manger in Bethlehem, and he was a good teacher. I even believed he died on the cross. I mean, I knew that as an historical event, but the significance of that, for me and for others - it just didn't mean very much.

“What cultural Christians miss is, they admire Jesus, and like Jesus, and have a vague belief in God; but they appeal to themselves and to their own goodness, not actually to the work of Christ on their behalf... People who want “enough of” Jesus to be associated with, but not enough to be inconvenienced... People that claim to be Christians, but the Christianity they claim is not the Christianity of the Bible - it's sort of an American hobby or superstition type of approach.”

Jesus came to save the world, to provide the one and only way to having a relationship with God, forgiveness of sins and eternal life - the ability to live forever with God in heaven. He's described as the indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15) that people need to receive in order to gain any of the benefits.

Another scripture states it matter-of-factly: “God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; He who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11, 12). Pretty cut and dried. One or the other. Not both/and. Not either/or. It's not having your cake and eating it too. People either have life or they don't. People either have Jesus or they don't.

The key is believing. John 3:16: “whoever believes.” It says it again in v. 18: “whoever believes” where it's contrasted with the person who “has not believed.”

Belief isn't merely knowing information about God. The biblical idea is a settled conviction based upon the evidence presented in God's word. It's putting trust and confidence in Jesus (1 John 5:13).

Belief isn't a temporary thing. It's not something that passes quickly like people believing in their team. Dr. Pepper has creative commercials for college football called Fansville where people are caricatures of fans. One ad has fans react to a game they're watching by complaining the season is over, knocking snacks off the table, burning their team's jerseys, vowing to not watch anymore. The sheriff character speaks up: “It's the first play of the first game.” The others: “Maybe we reacted too quickly.” It shows how fickle “belief” can be.

The motivation behind God's gift is love. We go back to John 3:16: “for God **so loved** the world that he gave.” God's love is so wide it extends to all people – the poor kid in squalor and the rich guy in a penthouse;

to male and female, a radical thought for many in the 1st century; across all ethnic barriers. God's love is so long it reaches from heaven to earth, a distance unmeasurable even by light years. God's love is so high it allows people in a right relationship with him to be in the heavenly realms. God's love is so deep it reaches to desperately needy sinners so they can get out of the pit of sin. God's love surpasses human knowledge.

God's love is a love that acts. He gave the greatest gift, his Son. The Bible: "This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9).

God's love isn't a reactionary love. It isn't like what happens when some people receive an unexpected Christmas gift from somebody and have to scramble to find a gift to give back to the person. Otherwise, they might seem to be uncaring, cheap or something. God wasn't caught off guard by people loving him so that he figured he had to do something to maintain his standing as God. Rather, the Bible tells us: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

God's love towards people is so extravagant and lavish toward those who've placed their trust in his Son Jesus that he makes them his children (1 John 3:1). God doesn't love us as we are, but in spite of how we are, and for what he can make us.

On Thursday I sent out a link to O Holy Night sung by Andrea Bocelli, the phenomenal singer who just so happens to be blind, and his son Matteo. It was filmed in a marble and rock quarry in Tuscany, Italy with a view of the Mediterranean. Quarry workers watered down the surface where the Bocellis performed to add to the effect. At one point, Andrea plays the grand piano and sings as Matteo walks up from behind. The father either doesn't hear or pay attention until Matteo reaches out and gently puts his hand on his dad's shoulder. The elder Bocelli smiles.

I think God the Father smiles when people reach out to him. It warms God's heart when people turn to him. He longs for the re-connection. I realize that's addressing God in human terms but that's the way we look at God because he identifies himself to us as the Father.

This Christmas season we've seen gifts that God gives to us – hope, peace, joy and love. Love is the greatest gift because it isn't a thing, concept, or an object but it's the person of Jesus.

What more could God give? That doesn't mean God is done giving. He keeps on giving and giving. "He (God the Father) who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Since God has given the supreme gift of his Son, it stands to reason he'll give us other gifts. He'll provide whatever is necessary to continue to do his work of bringing people to full and complete salvation in heaven.

Michael Card weaves together the prophecies and implications of Christ's birth in his song Immanuel: "A sign shall be given. A virgin will conceive. A human baby bearing Undiminished deity, The glory of the nations. A light for all to see. That hope for all who will embrace His warm reality. For all those who live in the shadow of death, A glorious light has dawned. For all those who stumble in the darkness, Behold your light has come. So what will be your answer? Will you hear the call? Of Him who did not spare His son, But gave him

for us all. On earth there is no power, There is no depth or height That could ever separate us From the love of God in Christ.” Repeated through the song is the reminder: “Immanuel. Our God is with us. And if God is with us, Who could stand against us? Our God is with us. Immanuel.”

Henry Carter was a pastor and overseer of a children's group home run by their church (Take Hold of Love, by Henry Carter in Christmas Stories From the Heart, pp. 28-30). He recalls: *I was working feverishly on my Christmas sermon when a worker appeared at the study door. Another crisis upstairs. Christmas Eve is a difficult day for the emotionally disturbed children in our church home. 3/4 of them go home at least overnight, but the ones who remain react to the empty beds and the changed routine.*

I followed her up the stairs, chafing inwardly at the repeated interruptions. This time it was Tommy. He had crawled under a bed and refused to come out. The woman pointed to one of six cots in the small dormitory. Not a hair or toe showed beneath it, so I addressed myself to the cowboys and bucking broncos on the bedspread. I talked about the brightly lighted tree and the church and the packages underneath it and all the other good things waiting for him out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting at the time this was costing, I dropped to my hands and knees and lifted the spread. Two enormous blue eyes met mine. Tommy was 8, but looked like a five-year-old. It would have been no effort at all simply to pull him out.

But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed - it was trust. So, crouched there on all fours, I launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. I told him about the stocking with his name on it provided by the women's group.

Silence. There was no indication that he either heard or cared about Christmas.

And at last, because I could think of no other way to make contact, I got down on my stomach and wriggled in beside him, bed springs snagging my suit jacket. For what seemed a long time I lay there with my cheek pressed against the floor.

At first I talked about the big wreath at church and the candles in the windows. I reminded him of the carol he and the other children were going to sing. Then I ran out of things to say and simply waited there beside him.

And as I waited, a small, chilled hand crept into mine.

“You know, Tommy,” I said after a bit, “it's kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up.”

And so we did, but slowly, in no hurry. All the pressure had gone from my day, because, you see, I had my Christmas sermon. Flattened there on the floor I realized I had been given a new glimpse of the mystery of this season.

Hadn't God called us, too, as I'd called Tommy, from far above us? With his stars and mountains, his whole majestic creation, hadn't he pleaded with us to love him, to enjoy the universe he had given us?

And when we would not listen, he had drawn closer. Through prophets and lawgivers and holy men, he spoke with us face to face. But it was not until that first Christmas, not until God stooped to earth itself, not until he came to dwell with us in our loneliness and alienation, that we, like Tommy, dared to stretch out our hands to take hold of love.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth as a little baby. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full

of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Though God continued to speak to us from above, he decided to get down on our level. He expressed his love in a way we could understand so we could know him, his great love and the wonderful life he planned for us. The Savior of the world wanted us to grab his hand so he could lead us home.

There’s more. Jesus is Emmanuel - God with us. In the mystery of being fully God and fully human, in his life as a human being, he shared in our experience. He faced all the struggles, temptations, and tragedies that break our hearts - and broke his heart so he could help us in our times of need. His love reaches down all the way to where we are with arms open wide to welcome us. We can run to him and trust in his care.

Snow in Alabama is rare and even rarer on Christmas morning. Randall, age 4, and his three siblings were excited about their Christmas gifts, but ecstatic about the 3 inches of snow that covered the ground on Christmas 1949. He recalls: “There was only one threat to our euphoria: it was not only Christmas day, it was Sunday. We were cautiously confident that the rare snowfall would prevent our interrupting the Christmas celebration to go to Sunday school and church.”

They were wrong. They found out after playing with their new toys for a little bit when their dad informed them it was time to get ready for church. The trip to church was an adventurous ride as his dad drove carefully on the almost deserted highway. When they arrived at church, their dad built a fire in the old coal stove that heated the sanctuary and they waited for others to arrive.

No one else did. Not even the pastor. The three boys thought it was their out: “No one’s coming, dad. Let’s go home!”

In Randall’s words: “But dad determined that, as for him and his house, we would serve the Lord that Christmas Day. He directed my sister, Gail, to sit down at the piano. Mom, dad and we boys gathered around and sang together as Gail played all the familiar carols. When the song fest was over - and still no one else was in sight - we assumed that it was time to head for the house.

“Wrong again. Dad read the Christmas story, and finally my four-year-old heart began to grasp for the first time how special was this Baby whose birth we celebrated that Christmas morning. If the Baby Jesus meant so much to my dad, whom I adored and trusted without question, then Jesus must be someone very, very special.

“A little more than four years later - on an Easter morning - I asked Jesus into my heart. But looking back on that snowy Alabama Christmas, I remember it still as a turning point for me. It was a special, faithful act of a loving father, preparing the hearts of his children to know the Savior of mankind” (Randall Murphree, DECISION, December 1996).

If you haven’t made that personal decision to place your trust in Jesus Christ, I invite you to do that this morning. It’s the best Christmas gift you’ll ever receive.

If you have made the initial decision to trust in Christ, keep trusting him. Keep running to him. Keep reaching out for his hand to help you.