

John 3:16

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Date: 15 December 2024

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[0 : 00] If I was to ask the children, what are you most looking forward to at Christmas? I suspect, unless you've changed remarkably since I was a little boy, you would say that the thing you're looking forward to most at Christmas is the presents.

The gifts, isn't it? Changes slightly as you get older. Food takes on a greater prominence. But still, everybody loves gifts, don't they? Everybody loves a thoughtful, well-chosen gift.

And what I want to do in the time that I have with you this evening is I want us to think about God's gift this Christmas. You'll see behind me, it's the most famous verse in the Bible. Some of you will know it, some of you won't.

And for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That is God's great gift this Christmas.

And there's presents probably under your tree. On Christmas morning you'll come down. You might open the pile of presents that you have and then somebody will say, let's open the presents under the tree.

[1 : 13] You grab the present and what's the question that you ask first? Who's it for? Who's it for? A gift comes through the post. You get it as a family and you say, well, who's it for?

Who is God's gift for? Can you see it? For God so loved the world. The word world here means humanity. This gift is given to humanity in all its variety. Men and women, boys and girls, different races, different nationalities, different ages.

All kinds of people are included in this world. In this world, the world. What is the world like? Human beings are a problem, aren't they? Human beings do some remarkable things. Some of you do remarkable things.

There's amazing technology, isn't there, where people solve problems. This week, I was on the Elizabeth line. The Elizabeth line is an amazing thing, isn't it? Have you been on the central line? The central line, it's like a quantum leap forward. It's like a step into a different century. People do amazing things. You can get to East London if you want to do that in about half an hour. It's unbelievable, isn't it?

[2 : 36] Think of what our world is like. Think of Kevin Sinfield. He seems to run marathon after marathon after marathon with about a week's break in between, isn't it? All because of the sake of his friend, Rob Burrow. He does amazing things. Human beings have enormous potential.

Heroic achievements. And there's something of that in you, isn't there? You feel it. There's something of that in you. You would feel that you have the potential if the circumstances were right. But there's also a flip side to humanity, isn't there? Every day, you can go onto the news and you'll see the same thing, won't you? You will see killing, murder, rape, endless horrible things.

Things that sicken us to the pit of our stomach that happen in West London. And every single one of us, we, I have terrible thoughts. There are times I lose my temper. We can get very angry. We can even hate people. We can lie. That's what we're like.

And there's this contradiction, isn't there? The Bible's explanation, I want to say to you, is the best explanation of that. Our greatness is because you and I have been made in the image of God.

[4 : 00] We've been made to know God and to govern this world. But the flip side of that is because we have fallen, we're not what we should be. We've fallen to sin. We've rebelled against God and his standards.

And we do what we want to do. We are a fallen humanity. Somebody's described it this way. We are glorious ruins. But you come here tonight and you are told that there is a gift for this world, for you and for me.

Let's go to the next question. You pick up the gift from under the tree and you ask, it's for who? Who is it addressed to? And then you ask, what's the next question?

You ask, who's it from? Who sends the gift? Can you look at the verse again? Who sends the gift? It says, for God so loved the world that he gave.

God is the sender of this gift. And so what is God like? The Bible says that he is the God who created all things in the beginning.

[5 : 07] He's the God who sustains creation. He's a God who's mighty and powerful. He's the one who sends the gift. He's a God who's different to us.

The word the Bible uses is holy. His eyes are too pure even to look on evil. The Bible says that this God one day will sit on his throne for judgment and every single human being will have to give an account for our lives.

This is the God of whom we speak. He's the almighty and sovereign, powerful God. The postmark on this gift is heaven.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience. If you get a card or a present from someone and you're really surprised and you think to yourself, I didn't even know they were still alive.

I've not heard from them for years. And here they are sending me a gift. Or somebody gives you a parcel and you're a bit embarrassed because you say, I say to my wife, did we even send him a card?

[6 : 14] We react in different ways, don't we, to finding out who the sender is. And so how do you react tonight to the fact that God is sending you a gift?

You might be sitting there, you think, well, I'm surprised. I've not actually even thought about him. I didn't even know he was alive. I've lived my life my own way. It's a massive surprise that God has given me a gift.

You say, because I've never even sent him a card. I've never even prayed to him. Or there's an embarrassment. You think, well, there's loads of wrong things in my life and yet God sends me a gift.

And you might be a bit embarrassed or surprised. And some of us might be sitting here thinking, I don't understand it and I don't deserve it. And so let's ask our next question.

Why does God give the gift? Why does God give to human beings a gift? Can you see what it says? It says, for God so loved the world.

[7 : 18] Everyone, everyone, everyone wants someone to love them. You might be sitting here tonight and you're lonely and you'd love someone to love you.

And we come to a verse, a sentence in the Bible that tells you that God loves humanity. With our lying and losing our temper and the cracks in our personality, he loves us.

And he gives a gift. I think those of us who are parents, we understand this. On Christmas Day, you do not give your children gifts because they deserve them.

You know that threat, children? You've had that threat of new? If you don't behave, you're not going to get any Christmas presents. I've never known a parent do that. Never, ever have I known of a parent who's done that.

You give your children gifts because you love them. And God gives this gift because he loves men and women, boys and girls like us.

[8 : 25] With our mixed up emotions and our mixed up feelings and all our confusions and our burdens and our anxieties and our cares. And he loves us. What's the next question?

The next question is what's in the parcel? Open it up. We've seen who it's to and who it's from and why it was sent. And then let's open it up.

And it's really peculiar, isn't it? Have you ever had a gift like this? For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. And my neighbor knocks the door tomorrow morning.

He says, happy Christmas. Here's the card. He says, I'd like to give you a gift too. I said, that's different. It's unusual. But the neighbor says, I'd love to give you this gift. I said, well, what is it?

And he says, it's my son. You'd say, no, no, no, no, no. There's something wrong there. He's about 24 actually, this guy. We wouldn't want that, would we?

[9 : 27] What is going on that the gift is his son? Who is his son? It's Jesus Christ, isn't it?

Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem. He lived in Nazareth. He was baptized in the River Jordan. He spent three years teaching, doing the most amazing things. This Jesus, he was crucified. He died.

He was buried. He rose from the dead three days later. He lived 40 more days on earth. And he ascended to heaven. What do we make of this? My dad is 89.

About three years ago, we gave him an iPad. I've never known a man looked so confused when he opened it up. Didn't know what it was. He didn't know whether the present was a box.

He couldn't understand it. He looked at it. He couldn't work out how to turn it on. He was totally and utterly bewildered. If anybody wants to buy a second-hand iPad, we've got one.

[10:27] He's totally befuddled. And I suspect you're sitting here, maybe here tonight, some of you, and you feel a sin. This sounds so odd, doesn't it? So let me ask you another question.

How do you react to God's other good gifts? Because we do react to gifts, don't we? You might say, if you're a little bit rude when somebody gives you a gift, I've got this already.

You might say, it's just what I want. You might say, I love it. It's just what I was looking for.

How do you react to this? God gave his only son. How do you react to God's other gifts? Think about that. How do you react to the fact that you woke up this morning?

Not everyone else does, but you did this morning. How do you react to the fact that there was food on your table this lunchtime? And that you've got clothes to wear? And the fact that you've got your safely tonight?

[11:38] And that you've got family around you and friends? How do you react to those gifts from God? Because everything that you have comes from him. Well, you say, when you put it like that, well, I'm thankful I'm alive.

I'm thankful that I've got food and shelter. I'm thankful I've got clothes. Why are you thankful? You're thankful because those gifts meet needs, don't they? You need food.

And you need clothing. And you need family. And you need friends. And God gives you those gifts to meet needs. And all God's gifts have a purpose. They meet a need.

So if the son is a gift, what need does that meet? What need do you have and I have that the only gift that can meet that need is the gift of his one and only son?

Can you see what it says? For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish. But have eternal life. I don't know lots of you tonight.

[12:45] We all have needs. And some of you will have really poignant needs. And some of your needs you can talk about. Many of your needs you can't talk about. But your greatest need and my greatest need according to the Bible is to be saved from perishing.

I mentioned earlier that God is different. That God is holy. And we are people who have lived disregarding him. And we have said I don't want you in my life.

And so we have lied and lost our temper. And we have done that repeatedly through our lives. And if God is just, we deserve to be punished.

The Bible tells us that that is a place called hell. And I know that the idea of hell is not very popular at any time. It's certainly not popular at a carol service.

And it's mocked isn't it? It's laughed at. But Jesus spoke of it lots as much as he spoke about heaven. Because Jesus recognised that our greatest need is to be saved from perishing.

[13:51] And what does this verse tell us? It tells us that if food meets our need for food. And if clothing meets our need for it to be covered. And if homes meet our need to have shelter.

And family meets our need to have others. Then his only son is the one who meets the need for our perishing. And so how can this man who lived 2,000 years ago save you from perishing?

Let him tell you. Jesus said I've come to seek and to save the lost. I've come to save people who are perishing. And how does he do that? He lays down his life.

He has to perish instead of them. He prays in his death. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And he prays that so that we might not need be forsaken.

He takes our punishment. There's an exchange that needs to take place. He suffers our hell so that we will not perish but have eternal life.

[14:51] All of God's gifts meet needs. But the greatest gift meets the greatest need to be saved from perishing.

How do you react to this? Let's go back to our parcel. We've seen who it is for. And we've seen who it's from. And we've seen what it is. But you respond to gifts in different ways.

Think about this Christmas. Maybe you've helped someone this year. And they have given you a gift to thank you. And you open it and you say, No, no, no.

It's way over the top. It's too much. It's too much. I don't deserve it. Maybe you feel really embarrassed at the greatness of the gift. Or maybe you've been given a really expensive gift. And you say to your friend, You know they can't really afford it. And you think it's way too much. And you say, Can I give you something for it? Can I contribute to it? And there are different ways to react, aren't there?

[15 : 52] Or maybe you react and you just say, Wow, this is what I need. Well, God has given his one and only son who will die on the cross so that we will not perish but have eternal life.

And the word in our verse that best describes how we are to react is the word to believe. To believe in him.

What does that mean? It means to take it up. It means accepting that it is truth. That when God says, You're all sinners and you all deserve judgment.

But I've given my son in your place. Take him up and believe in him. It's just what I need. God gives his son the most expensive thing that you could imagine.

Who would die for us to deal with our greatest problem. And all we have to do is believe in him to take him up. It leaves one more step, doesn't it?

[16 : 53] Children, do you know, after Christmas Day, probably about three or four days after Christmas Day, your mum will come to you with a pen and paper. And the thank you letters.

Do you remember them? Thank you letters. We thank the giver for gifts, don't we? What is a Christian?

It is somebody who has been on his knees thanking God for sending Jesus Christ to die for him or her. It says it all.

It's so simple. Thank you, God, for sending Jesus to die in my place. Let's imagine a young family. They're poor. Cost of living crisis. And as Christmas Day approaches, they've saved up. They've given one great gift for their little son, Johnny.

[17 : 53] But on Christmas Eve, they realise that if there's only one gift, it won't look very good. We need to get him some little gifts. So they go out and they buy him old school presents like a Satsuma and a walnut.

and they get crackers and the presents from a cracker. Christmas morning, he comes down, he pulls the cracker, he kind of looks at all his presents.

He enwraps the big, great presents. But what would the parents feel if little Johnny spent all his day playing with the tangerine and the walnut and the little box of Smarties?

And the main present was totally ignored. And is that what you're doing with God this evening?

You've got family and food, job and health, but the one and only son that God gave you reject, you ignore.

To leave God's greatest gift to one side and it doesn't have to be like that tonight. You can say in your heart, thank you God. You can go down on your knees, you can thank God for sending this great gift into the world so that you do not need to perish but have eternal life.

[19 : 01] And you can do that now or you can do that when you get home. One of the things we'd love you to do is to sign up for Hope Explored. It's a three-week course.

It's a brilliant course on really exploring Christianity. Loads of us are going to do it on Wednesday nights during January. Surely, if God has given this gift, it's too important to ignore you.

There's a QR code somewhere. I'm sure there is. Or you can sign up. Talk to the person who's brought you. Loads of us are going to be there. You can ask any question you want.

No question or off-limit. We'd love you to join us. And then there's this little booklet that's been written by one of the guys in our church. It's a really brilliant introduction to the Christian message. We'd love you to take one to read it. We're really glad that you've come tonight. But we'd really encourage you to think not only about the gifts that you will get and the gifts that you will give, but think on God's greatest gift.

[20 : 04] For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Let's pray together.

Thank you.