

JESUS CHRIST - GOD'S SUPREME GIFT TO MAN

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The Apostle John has been known for centuries as the apostle of love. It was he who reclined close to Jesus' breast on that last night. (John 13:25; 21:20). It was he who, never ceasing to marvel at the divine favor shown him, referred to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 21:20). It was he who had so much to say about loving one another (cf. I John 3:10-18; 4:19-21). And it was he who wrote the Fourth Gospel and told of God's love as seen in Jesus Christ.

The Greatest Passage of All

John 3:16-21 is usually thought of as the most outstanding paragraph in the Bible. Certainly no other expresses in such few words the depths of divine love and man's responsibility to react to that love. The words of the paragraph begin, "For God so loved the world..."

These are the words of John, not of Jesus. This is quite certain, as a careful study of the text reveals. The words "only Son,"¹ meaning the unique Son (there never was another Son like him), are used elsewhere only by John. (1:14, 18; I John 4:9). The phrase "believe in the name of" (vs. 18) is not found in the recorded words of Jesus, but it is a part of John's vocabulary. (1:12; 2:23; I Jn. 4:13). The tenses in the paragraph, "gave," "sent," "has come," and so forth, point to a crisis already passed: when Christ came, men *loved* darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. So it seems best to understand the passage as a Johannine reflection, which is characteristic of his narrative throughout. (cf. John 1:1-18; 2:21,24,25; 3:31-36; 4:9, etc.) Gushing with the message of the Spirit, John, near the close of his life, looked back to those momentous days of Jesus' ministry and summarized what the coming of Christ had meant to the world.

The Greatest Gift of All

In the greatest of all passages there is described the greatest of all gifts. If it is a gift from God, we know *a priori* that it is a great gift. Jesus once asked if any father would give his son a stone when he asked for bread, or a snake for a fish. If, He said, you give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give good gifts to His? (Matt. 7:9-11). God, then, is a Father and He will only give good gifts to men. (cf. James 1:17).

The best of all possible gifts God has given -- Jesus Christ. And John knew, as no one else, what a remarkable gift it was! What was the gift like? A gift of the Word made flesh and dwelling among men. What was Jesus like? (Have we not all asked that question?) "Full of grace and truth." What did men see when they saw Jesus? Glory, glory like an only child has from his father. What did Jesus bring when He came? "Grace and truth." What did Jesus come to do? To make known to the world what God is like, the God no man has as yet seen. (John 1:14-18). To this John adds that they had been privileged to drink of Jesus' fullness, fullness so extraordinary that it could only be described as a fullness consisting of blessing upon blessing. (1:16).

The Greatest Love of All

The greatest passage of all tells of the greatest love. A father gives good gifts to his children because he loves them. A father also gives gifts in proportion to his love. Great love bestows great gifts; thus the great gift of Jesus Christ must mean that God has great love for men.

The passage, then, shows us something about the *character* of God. He is not stern, vengeful, and unforgiving, ever waiting to catch men in some misdeed that He might sweep them into pits of eternal

punishment. God is love. This love is a love that first loved us and sent His Son as the remedy for our sins. (I John 4:9-10). In other words, the initiative in salvation is with God. He seeks men and by His love He draws men. Behind the salvation of each of us is the love of God.

The passage tells us also something about the *width* of God's love -- the world. Jesus came to His own people, and they rejected Him. But He did not come to save His own people only, just the nation of the Jews; He came to save the whole world. The breadth of His love was world-wide.

What love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul,
That caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful cross,
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.

What love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul,
That Christ should leave His home that He on earth might roam,
And claim me for His own, O my soul.

The Greatest Purpose of All

In the greatest passage of all there is seen the greatest of all purposes. God gave His Son *that*...In these words there is purpose. We also read that He *sent* His Son. (The word "sent" is one of the key words in the Fourth Gospel, being used more than thirty times of the special mission on which the Son was sent.) The sending of the Son can be viewed in two senses:

(1) It can be seen as a mission of condemnation. But John assures us that it was not this. "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world..." But how is it that some men are condemned? John answers in this paragraph. Before Christ came, the world was full of darkness. The night of sin had set in and the blind were leading the blind. Then Christ, who is the real and true Light, entered the world. The Light shined (and continues to shine; cf. John 1:5, NEB) in the darkness as never before. Some people rushed to it; others, unbelievably, preferred to remain in their darkened state. Did Christ come to condemn? No; light brings light, not darkness. If, however, some men reject the light, they are condemned not because the light came but because they chose to stay in the dark.

(2) It should be seen as a mission of salvation. Christ came, John says, "that the world might be saved through Him," "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." God could have destroyed the world because of sin, as He did in the days of Noah. He chose rather the way of love. He could have allowed the world to remain as it was. He chose rather to save it from sin by sending his Son. ("What wondrous love is this, O my soul!") And that salvation is open to all. Everyone who really believes, and continues to believe, has eternal life. "He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to live." (John 5:24).

After completing a teaching tour in Judea, Jesus went through Samaria on His way to Galilee. He stopped at a well and waited for His disciples to obtain provisions for the evening meal. A woman came for water, and Jesus asked her for a drink. The woman was surprised, because Jews and Samaritans did not usually drink from the same water buckets. But Jesus told her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." (John 4:10). The woman, absorbed in concern for her physical needs, is much like all men. She had no interest in spiritual matters whatever, not, at least, until Jesus talked with her. What

she had to do was what all must do - accept the gift of Jesus Christ and live.

Jesus' words to the woman, "If you knew the gift of God..." ring down through the centuries. To know God's gift is to have a spring of water within us, bubbling and gushing and leaping into eternal life. (John 4:14). To know God's gift is eternal life. (John 17:3)

1 The Greek term is *monogenes*, which means "only," "single of its kind," "unique." Some maintain, however, that in the Gospel of John it has a heightened sense and means "only begotten." This accounts for the differences among the various translations.

Questions For Your Study

1. Why is John designated "the apostle of love"?
2. Why is Jesus the greatest of the Father's gifts?
3. What does this passage (John 3:16-21) tell us about the nature of God's love?
4. Who were the objects of God's love?
5. In what two senses may we view the sending of Jesus to the world?
6. Which sense is correct? Why?
7. Why was the world "in darkness" prior to His coming?
8. Will Christ be responsible for any man's condemnation? Explain.
9. Would God have been unjust to destroy the world (e.g., as in Noah's time) into which Jesus came? Why, then, did He send Jesus?
10. Discuss the expression "gift of God" as used in John 4.

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