

The Call of Christmas

John 3:16b

David Sunday December 13, 2020



Good morning to all who are here in the sanctuary, in the gym and you who are worshipping at home. We're going to return again to John 3:16 this morning, the most famous verse in the Bible that describes God's design, purpose and plan in bringing His Son into our world that holy night.

Last week we marveled at the magnetic, immeasurable love of God for a world of rebel sinners. One of the early church fathers described it like this: "They who are but dust and ashes, full of ten thousand sins, ungrateful and have at all times offended Him—these are the ones He loves." That's what we saw last week. The Father loved us by giving us, not a servant nor an angel nor an archangel, but His one and only Son. That's the core of the Christmas message.

Now this week we're going to hear the call of the Christmas message from the second half of John 3:16. Let's read this wonderful verse once again, first from the ESV: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" The CSB translates it like this: "*For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*"

That last phrase focuses on the purpose and result that God the Father designed in giving His one and only Son for a world of rebels. Why did He do this? What was His purpose? What was the result at which He aimed? He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. In that phrase we are confronted with the inclusivity and the exclusivity of the gospel. In order for the gospel to truly be good news, we have to embrace both of these.

1. The huge inclusivity of the gospel: *whoever* believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

Let's consider first the huge inclusivity of the gospel which we find in that word "whoever." Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. I think the word "whoever" might be the most astonishing word in the whole verse. There's no one who cannot

fit inside “whoever.” Wherever you are in the world—whatever your racial, ethnic or moral background; no matter how you failed; no matter what point you’re at in life, even if you’re in your final moments on your death bed—is there anyone who is not a “whoever”? Anyone can fit. No one is left out for any reason. The ground is level here.

Max Lucado puts it like this: In the word whoever, “God unrolls the welcome mat of heaven to all humanity; ‘whoever’ invites the world to God.”

Let me tell you a true story about the extent of whoever. I found this first on the Gospel Coalition website and it’s been published in many different sources, including the Washington Post. It begins with a farm boy from Missouri who grew up to become a Lutheran pastor. His name is Henry Gerecke. During World War II, Gerecke served as a hospital chaplain for the U.S. Army. Then the war came to an end and he was asked to agree to another assignment. Then in his early 50s, they asked Pastor Gerecke if he would be the personal chaplain to the 15 Protestant war criminals in the Nuremberg trials.

It wasn’t easy for him to assume this charge. Henry Gerecke had been to Dachau. He had seen the horror and the repulsive atrocities of the concentration camps. Also, he and his wife had two sons, both of whom were severely wounded by the Nazis during the war. How could he be asked to minister to the very men who were responsible for these atrocities? They were Hitler’s men. They were his closest confidants. They were his very own pack of wolves. But Pastor Gerecke prayed and he knew the Lord was calling him to this.

So for these men, Henry Gerecke knocked a wall down between two empty prison cells and formed a 169 square foot chapel where he put some pews, some chairs, a communion table, some candles and a small organ. Then Pastor Gerecke went to their prison cells, inviting these men, one by one, to become part of his congregation. For the first service, 15 chairs were set up; 13 were filled. Over the next 11 months inside that tiny chapel, Pastor Gerecke read the Word to these men and preached sermons on the gospel of God’s grace to these men. They sang hymns together. Even a Christmas Eve service was held in Nuremberg prison for these men who were guilty of the murder of millions.

As the love of God for sinners was proclaimed in that chapel in the name of Jesus, hearts were changed. Some of the very lips that had roared “Heil Hitler!” now repented of their sins, confessed their faith and knelt at the altar to eat and drink the emblems of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. One of these men started reading his Bible with an intent to justify his unbelief, but as he read the Scriptures, he found that they were indeed the words of eternal life and he found faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

During those 11 months this congregation of Nazi war criminals became so dependent upon their pastor that when they heard a rumor that he was possibly going to be released from his duties and returned to the United States, they wrote home to Mrs. Gerecke, who was living here in the Midwest, pleading with her to ask her husband to stay. She wrote back to Henry a simple letter of sacrificial love that said just this: “They need you.”

So he stayed and walked with each of these men to the gallows and prayed for them as they went from this life into the next. An hour past midnight on October 16, 1946, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler’s foreign minister, was led to the scaffold. When asked if he had any final words, he said, “I place all my confidence in the Lamb Who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul.” Then he looked at his pastor and said, “I’ll see you again.”

A couple years later, Henry Gerecke was back in the United States, pastoring a church here in Chester, Illinois, along the Mississippi River. He was seen by Americans as both a hero and a traitor. The Saturday Evening Post wrote a story about him in 1951 and after that story, many Americans were incensed that one of their very own had pointed Hitler’s lieutenants to Christ. They wrote him hate mail, calling him a Nazi lover. But Pastor Gerecke took the “whoever” of John 3:16 to heart regarding the huge inclusiveness of God’s grace.

What would you feel, what would you think, if a terrorist or a pedophile or a North Korean dictator confessed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Chad Bird, who wrote about Pastor Gerecke’s ministry in Nuremberg reflected upon what his ministry tells us about the gospel:

The scandal of Christianity is not that these men went to heaven; it is that God loved them so much that He was willing to die to get them there. Had it been a human decision, many would have thrown these men, guilty of such atrocities, into the flames of hell.

Would you have done so? Have you ever, in your heart or with your lips, said to someone who was guilty of lesser crimes than these Nazi war criminals, “Go to hell”? It stretches the limits of our mercy to imagine God extending the welcome mat of heaven to sinners such as these. It offends our moral sensibilities—until you bring yourself under the blazing light of God’s holiness, until you are confronted with something truly shocking about yourself—when you realize, “I’m not the good and moral person I thought I was.” Then you start to see your own imagined goodness as the sham that it really is.

When you look into your heart and find, not life, but darkness and when you discredit your own theory of your own basic wonderfulness and realize what a wretched sinner you are, that’s when you’re glad God’s definition of “whoever” extends beyond the reach of your own

mercy and compassion to include people like Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, because if it includes him that means God's mercy extends to a sinner like you too. This invitation is inclusive enough for anyone. As someone has said, "Everyone can get inside 'whoever.'" But many people stay outside. That's why we desperately need to come to grips with this second point this morning: the radical exclusivity of the gospel

2. The radical exclusivity of the gospel: whoever *believes in Him* will not perish but have eternal life.

We find this exclusivity in the words "believes in Him." "*Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*" What God is telling us is that He has located His all-inclusive, wide-embracing, immeasurable love for sinners in an exclusive Person. He's located that love in His one and only Son, Jesus.

So if you want to get in on the experience of God's love, you've got to come to terms with Jesus—Who He is, why He came, what He did for sinners. You've got to come to grips with the fact that your own sense of moral goodness is warped. You're actually so morally bankrupt and so spiritually depraved you needed God's Son to give up His own life on the cross to die for you. You needed that; I needed that. All are welcome into the Father's arms of love, but there's only one way in—and that way goes through Jesus. That way goes through His cross. Everyone who *believes in Him* will not perish but have eternal life.

Do you see there are only two options open: perishing and eternal life? So what does it mean to perish? Well, it's the opposite of eternal life. To perish means to suffer eternal death. We get a closer glimpse of what it means to perish in the very next verse—John 3:17: "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*" So to perish means to be under the condemnation of God. It means to have God set His just anger on you forever.

In verse 36 we get another glimpse of this chilling prospect: "*The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead*"—and here are those chilling words— "*the wrath of God remains on him.*"

Sometimes we ask, "What's the worst that can happen?" Death, right? But the worst that can happen to you and to me is not death. It's what happens after death when we face the judgment of God. Nothing you could imagine is worse than dying and having the almighty God oppose you under His just wrath forever.

Another place in the Bible that describes perishing is 2 Thessalonians 1:9, speaking of those who reject God's gift of His one and only Son: *"They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from his glorious strength."* Think about it. There are all kinds of ways in this life on earth that all people experience lavish expressions of God's kindness, compassion and goodness. We call this "common grace." God is so generous in His common grace for humanity.

Even Saddam Hussein knew what it was like to enjoy a desert sunset. Even Adolph Hitler had a spectacular mountain retreat in the Alps of Austria. The worst of criminals knows the sound of human laughter. They've tasted delicious meals. They've experienced the warmth of a blanket at night. All of these are good gifts from a God Whose kindness is over all He has made. It's God's common grace to all humanity.

But in hell there will be no more laughter. In hell there will be no more Alpine vistas. In hell there will be no more desert sunsets. In hell there will be no more cool showers after you've been in that heat, no more refreshing drinks, no more comfort, no more common grace. Everything we've enjoyed here on earth as a reflection of the Lord's presence, goodness and power will be removed in hell forever. Hell will be an unending menu of everlasting destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His strength.

I believe one of the fiercest torments of hell will be to recognize that you chose to be there, because hell is the inevitable consequence of a life that says to God, "I want to do it my way. I'll let You know if and when I need You. Until then, God, just leave me alone and let me live my life." Perishing happens when God gives the godless heart its own desires.

Today God's not doing that to you or to me. Today God is putting up barricades around hell. Today God is sending out flares. Today God is putting a warning siren in your ears and telling you, "Flee. Flee from the wrath that is to come." There is a wrath that is coming upon the world and God is warning you that there is a danger so severe He sent His only Son into this world to rescue sinners. If you think that danger is not all that great right now, you are on a collision course with God.

You're basically saying He sent His Son into the world on a rescue mission that was really just a false alarm. You can either believe in Jesus' ability to rescue you from your sins or you can continue to believe in your own ability to conceal your sins, to hide and minimize your sins, even to deny your sins. One path is the path to eternal life; the other is the highway to hell. God sent His own Son to rescue you from perishing. His rescue mission is mostly positive. God sent His Son to rescue you for eternal life.

Let's talk about what that means for a little bit—what is eternal life? It doesn't mean you just exist forever. Everyone is going to exist forever, actually. The difference is that some people are going to exist forever in the experience of everlasting life while others will experience everlasting destruction away from the presence of the Lord.

In Greek, the word for "life" is *zoe*, like the lady's name Zoey. In John it doesn't mean just to exist. It's not just about physical, biological existence. In the Gospel of John, life is referring to the supernatural life of God that has forever existed in the Father and in the Son without beginning and without end. Jesus is Himself the Life Who came into the world to bring the world into that divine supernatural life that has existed between the Father and the Son for all eternity.

That's what Jesus says in John 10:10: "*I have come that they have life and have it more abundantly.*" So this means that we don't have this life in ourselves. We are actually born spiritually dead which is how chapter three in John begins. Jesus is talking to a religious scholar named Nicodemus, who is a devout Jewish leader. Nicodemus knows all about the Scriptures and is probably highly esteemed in the sight of men. But Jesus looks this devout leader in the eye and says, "You must be born again or you cannot see the Kingdom of God. You need the life that is in God to invade your spiritual deadness with new life from above." You see, we are spiritually unresponsive to the life and light that shines in the world. That's the truth of humanity apart from Jesus Christ.

Recently, Kate's beef stew was cooking all day in the house—even the dog was salivating. I was thinking, "It's so good to be eating this food." But what if you take delicious meal into a morgue for those who are "residing" there. No one is going to say, "Oh, that smells so good. You're really making me hungry." No. Likewise, if you take a hammer and go to the residents of the morgue and hit them over the knees, they're not going to kick you in the face. If you shine a bright light into their eyes, they're not going to wince. That's what we're like spiritually.

Then there's another problem. Just like a dead body doesn't feel like it's dead, a spiritually dead person doesn't know they are spiritually dead. They're insensible to that spiritual deadness. Furthermore, we don't like to be told we're dead spiritually, but hear me out. Think about all the things people get excited about. We get excited about football, great meals, music, art, friends, relationships and much more. But then comes the best news in the world—the Word of God—and we tend to be bored, indifferent and apathetic. If you find yourself yawning all the time and saying, "I just don't understand what's so exciting about this religious stuff," there could be a number of explanations for your spiritual indifference.

Maybe the person who's proclaiming the Word to you isn't doing a very good job of it that day. Maybe they themselves don't have the life of God in them, so there's no real resonance. Maybe you are so depressed at the time that the good words of God are falling like rain on concrete when your heart is just so full of sorrow it can't really receive it at the moment. If you find that your response to the teaching of Jesus and the Word of God is consistently indifferent, consistently apathetic, consistently disinterested, I am 99.9% sure the reason you're responding that way is because you're still dead in your sins—and you must be born again.

One of the great universal marks of dead people is they don't recognize it. Tim Keller says, "The best way to know you are alive is to know that you were once dead. The way to know you are dead is that you don't know you are dead." So if you're alive in Christ, you know you were once dead, but He has made you alive. How does Jesus do that? He speaks. That's how He does it.

In John 5:24, Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.*" So what happens then? What happens when the word of Jesus is spoken and someone believes? The Holy Spirit is working, taking the words of Christ, the words of the Bible—the words that once meant nothing to you—and He's using those words to create new life in you, to produce a new birth. And when that new birth happens, you discover that things you once had no appetite for now are things you savor. What you once could see no beauty in, now you find altogether lovely and life-transforming. You start saying things like, "Why didn't I ever see this before?" The reason is because you were blind, you were dead, but now you're alive and now you see. The eternal life that was in the Father and in the Son has now invaded your life.

What I'm hoping you'll see from this is that eternal life in the Bible is not something you have to wait for in the long-distant future after you die. Eternal life in the Bible is something that begins the moment you start believing in Jesus. That's when the life that is in God comes and invades your soul. Jesus Himself believed this. Listen to Him praying to His Father in John 17:3: "*This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ.*" So knowing the Father and knowing the Son is an experience we don't wait until we get to heaven for; it's something that begins now here on earth. Eternal life begins when we trust in Jesus.

Jesus is so fully alive that once you've found your way into Him, death itself cannot break your relationship with Him; death just becomes another place where you go to find Jesus in more fullness. Wherever you go, even in death itself, Jesus is waiting there to meet you. The life

you've begun tasting now—knowing Him and knowing the Father here on earth—opens up whole new vistas of glory then. This experience of knowing Him will continue with increasing measure into a never-ending future in a new creation, where all the effects of sin have been erased, where the world has been sanitized from all the effects of the Fall and death will be no more forever. How long will that be? Forever. How long is that? A man at Bethel College once described it like this. “If a little bird should fly from the coast of the sea to a great plain in Nebraska and deposit one grain of sand once every thousand years, when that mountain of sand is the height of Mt. Everest, eternity will have just begun.” That’s mind-boggling!

This leaves us with just one more vital question to ask: what does it mean to believe in Jesus? The exclusive claim is, “...*whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*” God doesn’t say, “Whoever is righteous will have eternal life,” because He knows none is righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10-12). God doesn’t even say, “I will give My Son to die for your sins in the past, I’ll wipe that slate clean, then I’ll put you in a state of probation. Now you’re on the clear with Me. As long as you stay sin-free for the rest of your life, then you’ll enter into eternal life.” That’s because He knows we’re going to blow it again.

What does God say? “Simply believe in My one and only Son—My love gift to you—and you will not perish but will have eternal life.” So what does it mean to believe? Well, some people say, “Yeah, of course I believe in Jesus, kind of the way I believe in George Washington or apple pie. Yeah, I agree that George Washington was the first President of the United States and I like apple pie a lot.” But these things are not transforming your life.

When God tells us to believe in His Son, He’s not merely asking us to agree to a few facts about Him or to acknowledge that His teaching is true. The construction John uses actually means to “believe into” Jesus. It’s getting into Jesus, what the Bible calls “union with Christ.” In John’s Gospel, believing in Jesus means coming to Him. It means receiving Him, drinking Him as living water (John 7:37-38), feeding on Him as the bread of life (John 6:35-40). It means being connected to Him the way a branch is to a vine, receiving its vital nourishment from Him (John 15:1-11). It means following Him and loving Him.

Believing in Jesus is coming out of hiding your own self-righteousness and your own sin denial, saying, “I need real forgiveness from my real sins from a real Savior, so I place all my confidence in the Lamb of God Who made atonement for my sins. May God be merciful to me, a sinner”(Luke 18:9-14). When you look at Jesus in that way—as all your hope for salvation, nothing in yourself, no merit of your own but casting all your hope on Him—you enter into Him and He enters into you.

This isn't just a quickly fading feeling; it's a living, lasting, loving union that has been forged by the Spirit of God with the Son of God according to the plan of God the Father. And when that happens, nothing can separate you from Him forever (Romans 8:31-39).

I heard a pastor put it like this: "God doesn't care how good you've been or how bad you've been or how you measure up to other people. God doesn't care about any of that. All God cares about is how you've bonded with His Son, Jesus Christ."

That's the only thing that matters.

Are you united to Christ, or are you aloof toward Christ? Are you trusting in Christ or are you trusting in yourself and defensive toward Jesus—however good or however bad you might have been? Have you placed all your confidence in the Lamb Who atoned for your sins? If you have not, heaven's welcome mat is unrolled, the Father's arms are open wide and Jesus' blood is still sufficient to cleanse you of all your sins. Today, if you see Jesus as the Savior you need, you can confess your need of Him, you can come to Him and you can ask Him to be merciful to you.

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