

## WHEN GOD JOINED HUMANITY

Christmas is a time for receiving. Yes, that's right; we do enjoy getting gifts at Christmas time. Even if we buy our own gifts it is a chance to indulge ourselves and buy ourselves what we really wanted. It's also great to get a gift from someone who really knows you and gets just the right thing.

So maybe Christmas is a time for receiving graciously as well. For there are times when you receive a gift that does not fit who you are or who you think you are. You have to smile and politely say "thank you, how thoughtful."

A couple of years ago on America's Funniest Home Videos, a young boy was shown on Christmas morning. He came down to see a large present beside the tree and ran over to tear it open to see what was inside. The paper went flying and suddenly he broke into a dance and jumped around the room saying, "Wow Just what I wanted. I really love it. Wow." After awhile he went over to look at it again and said with a puzzled look on his face, "What is it?"

On that first Christmas the angels announced the birth of a new child. The heavens were opened and all the company of heaven broke into praise. Shepherds went racing to Bethlehem to see what it was all about. And for two thousand years we have been jumping up and down saying, "Just what I wanted. Exactly what I needed." But in the next breath we look again inside the stable and ask, "What is it?" We are puzzled by God's gift. And like gifts that we think don't "fit us" we cast it aside.

As we look into John's "Other Nativity" we catch a glimpse of God's perspective of his Son's birth, his gift to humanity. We see the romance of the Nativity stripped away and the cold reality that humanity did not understand what they had received from God. If people had understood what was given to them they really would have sang "Joy to the World."

Do we know what we have received? Are we still looking in the wrapping and asking "What is it?" Sure we know what it is. But like the wonderful gift that it is, let's gaze at it and enjoy it as we unpack John 1:10-14 again.

### 1. The Incredible Blunder of Humanity

John took a detour to introduce John the Baptist in verses 6-9, the forerunner of Christ. In verse 10 John returns to writing about the Word when he became part of humanity. And here we read of the incredible blunder of humanity – not recognizing what they had received:

**"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"** (10-11).

Verse 10 tells us that the creator of the world was neglected, and verse 11 tells us that the Savior of the world was rejected. How could the same God who created our world with the precise specifications for our needs be completely rejected by His own creation? Very simply, this is the same reaction God has received consistently throughout our entire history.

Just think of OT days when they killed the Lord's prophets and ridiculed them for their messages. We read in Jeremiah, **"From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers"** (Jer 7:25 ff). Then think of the birth of Christ and how Herod the Great felt threatened by the Messiah and killed all the children under two years of age in Bethlehem. Consider the cross when Christ's enemies stripped him, beat him, and nailed him to the beam and left him to die. Remember the early church and how every apostle except for John died a violent death. And for the last twenty centuries the Church has suffered for believing Jesus. And even today Christmas is downplayed so that the malls cry "Happy Holidays" and the schools have "Winter Festivals." To reject Christ is humanity's modus operandi. **"...He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor"** (1 Peter 2:4).

What is truly astounding is that the people to whom Jesus came were his own people. This could be translated “He came home.” They had the prophecies that foretold how and when the Messiah would come. These were Jews, the keepers of the flame of hope, possessing the proof that Jesus was who he said he was.

Dr. Peter Stoner of Westmont College once wrote about “compound probability” referring to 8 of the prophecies of Jesus coming true. He said that the odds of one man accidentally fulfilling 8 of these prophecies is 1 in 10 to the 17<sup>th</sup> power. That’s a 1 with 17 zeroes behind it. Picture it this way: That many silver dollars would cover the land mass of Texas to a depth of two feet. If you took one of those dollars and marked it with a red dot, dropped it from an airplane, then blindfolded your friend and told him to go somewhere in Texas, bend down and pick a dollar with the hopes of finding the dollar with the red dot, that would be the same odds as 8 of these prophecies coming true in one man. And Jesus fulfilled 48 of those prophecies.

Jesus came to that which was his own, his own people, and they rejected him. They had God in their midst and did not recognize him for who he was.

Coming home is hard for some. Others have no home to come to on Christmas. There is a pervasive loneliness in our world when Christmas rolls around. When we do have family gatherings, some of us must tiptoe around being careful of what we say lest we step on an emotional landmine. Some family members dread getting together at all and make excuses not to come.

The rejection and loneliness and neglect that you feel at this time of the year is a taste of what Jesus felt when he came home to his own.

## 2. The Greatest Privilege for Humanity

Our families may disappoint us. I know that many of you come from good families so not all of us dread Christmas gatherings. But whether you have a good family or a dysfunctional one, Jesus came to make us part of a great family:

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (12-13).

C. S. Lewis said it well, “The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God.” This is our greatest privilege as human beings and the heart of what Jesus came to do. As John said in his first epistle, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!...” (1 John 3:1).

But are we? Or should I say, are we all children of God? The Bible is quite clear that those who God calls his own children do not encompass all of humanity. Many today will say, “We are all God’s children.” No we are not all God’s children, and verses 12-13 make it clear who is.

Verse 12 says “to all who **received** him.” This is an active word with a deep meaning. It literally means, “to take, or to seize.” Those who receive Christ are those who welcome or accept Him into their lives. This word can also mean “to welcome him in to your home.” To “receive” Christ means to welcome him as an honored guest and to have him make your heart his home.

Then it says “to those who **believed** in his name.” To believe means to engage our total being so that we put our trust completely in Christ by committing our lives to Him. It involves more than just intellectual assent or an emotional response. Biblical belief always involves receiving, or responding to what God in Christ has done for us.

Finally, to those who receive and believe, “he gave the **right** to become children of God.” This is not the “rights” that we demand. This word means “honor” or “privilege.” The moment you receive Christ into your life, God gives you the honor of becoming a member of His family. We are given permission to become a child of God when we believe and receive.

The NT speaks heavily of adoption. We as Christians call God “Father” which was unheard of before Jesus came. Jews would never dare to call God Father, let alone Abba. But we have the privilege

of having been adopted into God's family. As Paul said "...he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will..." (Eph 1:5).

I once asked in a SS class on prayer if it mattered to whom we prayed, Jesus or the Father. The majority of the class didn't think it mattered. And I agree essentially that it doesn't. But as I was reading James Packer's *Knowing God* I discovered the beauty of adoption that God wants to be our Father and Jesus calls us brothers and sisters. So I have begun praying to my Father in heaven with a new attitude, through my brother Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit. That's quite a family.

### 3. Humanity's Perfect Man

We come then to the key of this great mystery, the incarnation. That which the world rejects as impossible and yet through whom we receive adoption into the heavenly family – God became a man.

This is a fantastic verse, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v. 14).

The phrase "made his dwelling among us" comes from the tenting analogy. John Piper says that what pitching a tent with us implies is that God wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction. If you come into a community and build a huge palace with a wall around it says one thing about your desires to be with the people. But if you pitch a tent in my back yard you will probably use my bathroom and eat often at my table. This is why God became human. He came to pitch a tent in our human back yard so that we would have a lot of dealings with him. (John Piper)

Tenting may sound temporary but people lived in them in the OT all the time. The real foundation of this analogy comes from the Lord's tabernacle among the Israelites. It was the tent of meeting with God. "...have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them," the Lord told Moses (Ex 25:8). Jesus came to tabernacle among us; to live with us.

Then John says "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only..." Moses desired to see the glory of the LORD when he was leading the people of Israel in the wilderness for he believed this would distinguish them from other peoples. He said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence..." And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..." (Ex 33:18; 34:5-6).

Only Moses ever saw such a wonder in ancient times. But now, the glory that was revealed to Moses when the name of Yahweh was sounded in his ears, this glory has been manifested on earth in a human life – the life of Jesus. John says in his first epistle, that which he had seen, heard and touched, this he proclaimed along with the other witnesses. What did he see, hear and touch? The Word made flesh; God enjoining humanity. Don't you wish you had been there? When John says, "we have seen," he uses a word that means to gaze intently upon, to study as in a laboratory. It's the word from which we get the English word "theater." As Jesus walked on the earth, people could see God's glory shining through him. The shepherds saw it, and so did the angels. So did the doctors of the law who interviewed him when he was 12 years old. The glory was seen in a major way at the Transfiguration. When Jesus turned the water into wine at Cana of Galilee, John tells us that "he thus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11).

He came to us full of grace and truth, a perfect combination in a perfect man. Because he was full of grace, he died for you and me while we were yet sinners. Because he was full of truth, he was able to pay for our sins completely. Because he is full of grace you can approach him and receive forgiveness. Because he is full of truth he is the light that reveals why we need grace.

This is our brother, Jesus, the perfect man, who came not just to visit but to live with us. And he lives with us still through the Holy Spirit if you receive him, believe him and accept God's adoption of you.

## Conclusion

If you have read the recent edition of the Messenger you will have come across an article by Daniel Epp-Thiessen. He refers to another writer who asked, *Do Christmas cards tell the truth?* The conclusion was: they don't.

Think of a typical Christmas card and the story it portrays: beautiful sentimental scenes of a confident and calm Joseph, a radiant Mary, and a peacefully sleeping baby Jesus, surrounded by cute and cuddly animals. It is a romanticized Christmas which turns the story of Jesus' birth into a perfect event that lacks the pain, agony and unpleasantness that is the real story of the NT.

Jesus was born in a stable, with smelly animals and smelly byproducts. They were there because they already were experiencing the rejection of the world. Eventually they would be fugitives from Herod and running to Egypt. This is a messy, violent and heartbreaking story of rejection, ignorance and pain.

Isn't that great? Isn't that the real story of Christmas? Jesus came into a world of pain and darkness, into our hurt and loneliness, and brought healing and light, forgiveness, renewal and true life. He came into your woundedness to feel what you feel and to deliver you from it. That is good news.

That may not show up on a Christmas card but it does show up on the cross. A rugged cross on a card – now that's Christmas.

**“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil...For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (Heb 2: 14; 17).**

So to be on the receiving end at Christmas is actually a good thing. It takes humility to receive and to believe, but the gift of being God's child is certainly worth losing all.

AMEN