

The Greatest Gift

Romans 8:32 (Christmas Eve)

There were so many expectations for this year. It was an Olympic year. An election year. A year for some to graduate and others to get married. Then came COVID. So many things were canceled or postponed. And even when they weren't canceled, so many things were not what we wanted or expected. A year of expectation turned into a year of disappointment. With only six days left in the year that has seen so much suffering from pandemics, racial tension, political tension, natural disasters, and death, we may very well look back and think, "That's it?"

Disappointment isn't always on a global scale. How many children are going to be disappointed tonight or tomorrow in their living rooms? For weeks, they've been looking at those shiny-wrapped gifts with eyes of excitement, but the gift on the inside may fail to live up to their expectations. Depending on their age, they may be too ashamed to say it out loud, but internally they'll wonder, "That's it? That's all I'm getting this year?"

With thousands of years of prophetic marketing, there was so much hype leading up to the first Christmas. God's people couldn't wait to open the shiny gift that God had wrapped up for them and now was finally giving to them. They were promised a head crusher in Genesis 3, a restorer in Isaiah 11, and ends of the earth greatness in Micah 5. Jesus was the most-hyped person in the history of the world. But had someone peeked into the stable that night, and seen a tiny baby, they might well have thought to themselves, "That's it? That's the Gift?"

Sadly we, too, may sometimes find ourselves disappointed with God's Christmas gift. He doesn't do what we want or give us what we think we deserve. We want to get accepted to that college, marry that person, get that job, etc. And our expectations aren't met. We look around at the suffering of the world this year, maybe even the suffering in our own life, and we wonder, "That's it? That's what you have for me? You can't do anything more about all this?"

Feeling such disappointment, maybe we ought to take a step back and ask this: Why do we become so disappointed? Could it be that we don't fully grasp or we temporarily forget who Jesus is and what he does for us? On this Christmas let's look again at the manger through the lens of a verse in Romans chapter 8. Let's see just who this "it" is when we peer in and say, "That's it?"

Romans chapter 8 is a section of God's Word that is dedicated to how to live in the face of suffering. When I said Romans 8, did any particular verses come to mind? Did your thoughts almost turn to verse 28 where the Apostle Paul says, **"We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose."** I know I have had that verse on my mind all year long. Or maybe your thoughts turned to the last verses of the chapter, verses I have also had on my mind this year, where Paul says, **"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Just as it is written: For your sake we are being put to death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."** (vs. 35-39)

But between those often quoted verses is the reason why we can face suffering and sin, the cause of suffering. The reason we can go forward is the Gift, that "It" in our question. In answer to our question of disappointment, Paul

asks us a question to ponder. Verse 32 says, **“Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?”**

When you look at the gift under your tree, do you simply see the gift or do you see the love behind the gift? Often it's what's behind the gift that makes it a “great gift”. Homemade gifts demonstrate love as someone was willing to sacrifice not just money, but also time to show you their love. Or sometimes people spend a lot of money on gifts because when it comes to bringing others joy, they don't count the cost. Look what God gave you in the manger. He was showing you his love. He wasn't counting the cost. God wasn't just giving you a baby. He was giving you his Son. More than that, he was giving **up** his Son for you. “He who did not spare his own Son, but *gave him up for us all.*”

That baby in the manger was God's Son from all eternity. Think of all the experiences they shared. They worked side-by-side creating the world. They went through the flood together. They went through the days of Abraham, promising that he would be a great nation. They served together as they rescued God's people from slavery in Egypt. Together they received honor and glory from the psalms of David and the worshipers in Solomon's temple. With all these shared experiences, imagine how close the Father and the Son were. And yet, the Father was willing to give up his Son for sinners like you and me.

There used to be a tradition at our Seminary that the professors would share their most memorable Christmas stories with the students. I recently heard a story about a professor who relayed how his most memorable Christmas was the first Christmas he was going to have with his newborn son. The new parents were so excited to celebrate their baby's first Christmas and with that anticipation he went to the crib on Christmas morning to pick up his son...only to find that his son had died, on Christmas of all days. As the professor shared the story with his students, he then added, “It was then that I knew how much God loved me, that he was *willing* to give up his Son for me.”

Earlier we talked about how God promised to send a Savior as soon as the first sin occurred in the Garden of Eden. For thousands of years God watched a world constantly disobey him and turn their backs on him. God could have said, “Forget it. I'm not going to send my Son to them. I love my Son way too much to have him live with them only to be ridiculed, mocked, beaten, and killed.” God had every right to say that. It was what the world which disobeys and turns their backs on God would have deserved. It's what you and I deserve. But 2,000 years ago, God kept his promise as he wrapped up his Son and said to the world, “Here! Look in this stable. Peer into the manger. See your gift wrapped in cloths. I'm giving you the greatest gift this Christmas. I'm giving you my Son. In fact, I'm giving up my Son for you.”

If God followed through on that promise, doesn't that give you confidence that God will keep all his other promises as well? Because of Christmas, you can be sure that God will send his angels to guard you (Psalm 91). Because of Christmas, you can be sure God will be with you wherever you go (Joshua 1). Because of Christmas, you can be sure God will work out all things and that nothing can separate you from his love (Romans 8). Be assured, because God gave you the gift of his Son, “how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Today we realize that statement isn't just lip service. God's Word is true to his promises, and the manger proves it.

Look at the manger. Look at God's gift - to you. Humanly speaking, the Gift looks small. The Gift looks fragile. The Gift looks dirty and maybe even disappointing. But after what we heard today, I pray you don't look at that Gift and say, “That's it?” Rather, look at this Gift and say, “That's it! That's what I need! That's God showing his love to me! That's God keeping his promises for me! That's quite a Gift. That's the Greatest Gift!” Amen

