

## I. Introduction

Good morning! The stores are full of Christmas decorations and Christmas songs can be heard in many places in this season. I think it is good to celebrate and enjoy the Christmas cakes, the lights, and the sounds of the season. But we also want to take time to think about the meaning of Christmas and to remember why we find such great joy in celebrating Christmas.



At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus. But at a deeper level, Christmas is a celebration of love, because the story of Jesus is all about love. Not the kind of love of that a man has for a woman, nor even the love that a mother feels for her child; those kinds of love are wonderful, but they are only faint echoes of the kind of love that we celebrate at Christmas. The love we celebrate is far greater than any human love, it is the love that God the Creator has for us, for the people He has made. Unlike human love, God's love is a love of perfect purity and absolute commitment. The Apostle John speaks of this love in his first letter, let's read 1 John 4:7-16 together.

## II. Scripture 1 John 4:7-16 (NIV)

[7] Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **[9] This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.** [10] This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. [11] Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. [12] No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. [13] We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. [14] And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. [15] If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. [16] And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

## III. Teaching

John urges us to love one another, and he points to the love of God as the perfect model of what it means to love. John tells us that, "God is love," meaning that God's very nature is love. The love of God is not an add-on that came after God created the world. Rather, love is the very reason that motivated God to create the heavens and the earth. Motivated by love, God made the heavens and the earth by the power of His Word. God spoke, and they were created.



During the past fifty years, mankind has begun to explore space and to see more and more of the universe God created. Progress has been made in many fields of science, and we have taken the first steps into space. When I was a child, there were no photos of earth from space, but nowadays every child is used to seeing beautiful photos of our planet. Human knowledge has grown tremendously. Of course, there is no doubt that some current scientific theories will be proved wrong in the future, that is the nature of science. But even so, we certainly know vastly more about the universe that we live in than the generations that came before us.



Mankind has learned more and more about many things. And, if we understand that all of these things were created by God, by the power of His Word, then our amazement at the power and wisdom of God will also grow more and more. God created, not just our little planet, but all of the vast galaxies and all of time and space.

Mankind has learned much about many things. But, I wonder, in all of our research and exploration, have we learned anything new about love? To be honest, I don't think that we have learned anything new about love in a very long time. In fact, I think we are in danger of forgetting the few things that we do know about love. Consider for a moment, all of the vast reaches of space and, at the other end of the scale, the incredible complexity of every little tiny living cell. All of these things speak about the power and wisdom of God. But the Bible does not say, "God is power and wisdom," the Bible says, "God is love." The love of God is higher, wider, and deeper than the vast expanses of space and time, because God is far greater than the things He has created. The love of God is deeper than the oceans, higher than the sky, bigger than the galaxies, and longer lasting than time itself.



The nature of God, His very essence, is love. The ways in which God reveals His love vary from time to time and place to place, but the nature of God does not change. The nature of God is eternal, unchanging, perfect love. This love is revealed in creation, but the Apostle John does not point to the stars above or the flowers of the fields when he writes about God's love, instead, John points to an event in history. John says, **(1 John 4:9-10) "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."**

Our sins separated us from God, but God did not abandon us. Instead, God sent His Son Jesus to save us from our sins. What did it cost God to create the universe? As far as we know, it cost God nothing at all, God simply spoke and the universe was created. What did it cost God to provide for our salvation? It cost Him His One and only Son. True love gives, and God is love. **John 3:16** tells us, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** God gave His Son. And His Son, Jesus, gave His life as a ransom for ours. This is the picture of love that John points to: God sending Jesus, and Jesus offering Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.



I think there is deep meaning in the fact that Jesus did not die alone. Two other men, one on the right, and one on the left, were crucified together with Jesus. They were guilty criminals, but Jesus was the sinless Lamb of God. Yet, it pleased God to let the three of them die together. Here we understand that Jesus did not die some pristine death far from human suffering; Jesus died a bloody, ugly, horrible, messy, painful death, side by side with two other men. Our Savior is different than us; we are sinners, and He is perfect and sinless. But He chose to be with men in His life and He chose to be with men in His death. One of those men believed in Jesus and was saved. The other mocked Jesus to the very end. They all died together, each on their own cross: Jesus the Savior, the forgiven believer, and the stubborn unbeliever. Our Savior does not stand far off and aloof. He is not far away from the sufferings of mankind; He is at our side. He suffers alongside the believer, and He suffers alongside the unbeliever.

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born the prophet Isaiah foresaw the coming of Jesus, the suffering Messiah, and he penned these words. **Isaiah 53:3, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."** Jesus, our Savior, was a man of sorrows, a man who was familiar with suffering. Whatever you are going through in your life, whatever pain, or sorrow, or heartache you may be hurting from, know this: Jesus understands and He suffers with you. He is by your side, weeping with you.



Many people struggle with the problem of how an all-powerful God of love could allow so much suffering in the world. Perhaps only God is fully able to answer that question, but part of the answer must lie in the fact that God is not aloof from our suffering. God suffers with us. We know this because Jesus suffers with us, and Jesus is God come in the flesh.

The picture of love that John wants us to see is not complete until we understand that Jesus is God. This is very clear in Scripture, for example, **Philippians 2:6-8** speaks of Jesus saying, **"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!"**

Jesus, in His very nature, is God. Yet, He left the throne of God and humbled Himself, coming into this world as a little baby, making Himself nothing. Jesus came to us in human likeness so that He could reveal the love of God to us, by living as a man and by tasting every sorrow and pain of human life, and finally by dying for us, so that we might live. The vast galaxies of the night sky and the delicate flowers of the field proclaim the power and glory of God. And in their beauty, they also whisper about God's love. But the cross of Jesus is different. At the cross, the power and glory of God are hidden and the love of God is proclaimed. God is love. Look at the cross of Jesus and understand. Our God does not always take the pain away from our lives, but whatever we suffer, He also suffers with us.



We are human beings and, as humans are prone to do, we sometimes say foolish things. I have even heard people say that they would like to be all-knowing like God. And some even say that they would like to be God. This kind of talk seems very foolish to me. Why? Because I am convinced from my study of Scripture that God knows all things, not only in some kind of fuzzy abstract way, but also in concrete experience. The nature of love is to suffer with the one you love, and God loves each and every man, woman, and child, because God is love. And so He suffers with us.

What am I saying? I am saying that the sufferings we see at the cross of Christ are only the visible tip of the iceberg of God's suffering for us. Most of God's suffering lies beyond our view, just as most of an iceberg is below the water. I believe that God feels every pain - every pain of cancer, every wound from a gun, every broken heart and every skinned knee in the world. I am convinced that all of the pain of the world's wars, diseases, rapes, murders, and starvation are felt by God. I think that God feels every pain that you feel, and every pain that I feel. God is a suffering God. This does not fully answer the question of why a loving God allows so much suffering in this world, but it gives us a new perspective to know that God loves us so much that He suffers with us. When a child falls and skins a knee, the loving mother feels the child's pain almost as if it were her own. In a similar way, I think that God also chooses to feel all of our pain, because He loves us.



#### IV. Conclusion

Two thousand years ago, the angel Gabriel appeared to a young girl named Mary. Luke tells us that Mary was fearful. But in **Luke 1:30-31** we read that the angel told her, **“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.”** Mary asked how this could be, since she was a virgin, and Gabriel explained it would happen by the power of God through the Holy Spirit. a few months after this Jesus was born. Jesus is Lord and Savior; He is Immanuel, which means, “God with us”.



God was with Mary then and, through His Holy Spirit, God is also with us here today. Why did God come to Mary? Why does God come to us and to all people, inviting us into relationship with Him? It is because of love. Love brings God to us again and again. Because of love, God invites all people to His grace, to forgiveness of sin and to eternal life. The best preparation for Christmas is to make sure that we welcome God into our hearts, by trusting in Jesus and by believing in His Name, Immanuel, “God with us”.

Let's close for today with **2 Timothy 1:9-10. 9 [God], “who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”**

#### V. Closing Prayer