

**December 17, 2023**

**Easy-going, half-hearted, hobby-religion? I don't think so!**

**John 1:1-18**

John is obsessed with Christmas ... but not in the way we think. Matthew tells us about Joseph and the Magi; it's a story of hope. Mark speeds past Jesus' birth, rushing on to talk about peace through Jesus. Luke tells us about Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary, the shepherds, and the angels; it's a story of joy.

***John tells the story of God's love. It's about re-creation.***

How does Genesis begin? *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ..."* The story goes on to describe God creating the entire cosmos, including the earth, and declaring it all "good." After He created human beings, male and female, *"God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good"* (Genesis 1:31).

In that perfect world, humans were to *"tend and care for"* God's good world (Genesis 2:15). God loves all His creation, including His people. God would come among them, walk with them, and talk with them, in a free, open, perfect, loving relationship (Genesis 2-3). That's what we are created for. That's who we are created to be.

Of course, Adam and Eve choose to disobey God. The perfect world and that open, free, perfect relationship with God, one another, and God's good world is tainted.

The story of the Old Testament is the story of God reaching out, in love, to restore this relationship with us. Through Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, God calls out to His people, inviting them back to Himself. He gives them guiding principles to teach His people how to live wisely, freely, perfectly (like the Ten Commandments). Nothing works. At least not for the long-term. God describes us as "stiff-necked people."

Now, John tells us about a new Genesis, a new beginning. For John, Christmas – Jesus' birth – is as significant and cataclysmic as the initial creation of the cosmos:

*"In the beginning was the Word (Jesus). The Word (Jesus) was with God, and the Word (Jesus) was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word (Jesus) gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it."* (John 1:1-5)

Jesus comes as the light of the world, to restore that free, open, perfect, loving relationship for which we were created. The Law, the Commandments, and all the drama of the Old Testament could not restore us to that perfect place of community and fellowship with God, one another, and the world. But Jesus can.

John goes on to talk about this as a whole new birth – the beginning of a whole new life – in Jesus. *"To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God"*(John 1:12-13).

Jesus, God Himself, comes among us. He makes His home with us. *"The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son"*(John 1:14).

### ***John tells about God's love for us, for everyone, for all creation***

Why did God do this? Because God loves His good creation, including each person. He loves All people. And ALL His creation.

*"God **loved** the world (Greek 'kosmos' – all creation, not just people) so much, He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him"*(John 3:16-17).

In one of John's letters to some of the first followers of Jesus, John adds, *"God showed how much he **loved** us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real **love** – not that we loved God, but that he **loved** us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."* (1 John 4:9-10)

*"We have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God **living in** them, and they **live in** God. We know how much God **loves** us, and we have put our trust in his **love**. God is **love**, and all who **live in** love **live in** God, and God **lives in** them"*(1 John 4:14-16). Jesus, God Himself, comes among us. He makes His home with us. And we, in turn, live in God. We find our home – our true home – with Him.

### ***So What? John tells us this is VERY practical.***

Jesus, the Messiah, God Himself, has come in flesh and blood to redeem us. This is not just some nice theological statement. This is the heart of what Christianity is all about. Our Christian faith grows directly out of the conviction that in Jesus, the one true God has revealed Himself to be God's-love-in-person. He loves His creation – and us – so much He came among us, died on the cross, and rose, triumphantly, from death.

John goes on to talk about some very practical implications of all this: *"Dear friends, let us continue to **love** one another, for **love** comes from God. Anyone who **loves** is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not **love** does not know God, for God is **love**"* (1 John 4:7-8).

Those of us who believe in Jesus as Savior and God know He is where our hope and life come from. Then, John says, we should ourselves reveal that self-same fact to the watching world. We preach Jesus as God's-love-in-person. Then we live out God's-love-in-person as who we are. We are people who know God's love, have experienced God's love, and allow that divine love to flow to our neighbours in practical ways.

Of course, that's easy to say, it's hard to live out.

That's why, from the beginning, Christian writers have emphasized over and over that we are to be a different kind of people. We are 1 Corinthians 13 kind of people – unconditional and gracious in our love for all people (see November 19). *"Get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, sexual immorality, and filthy language,"* Paul says on several occasions. We're not angry, rude, or judgmental. We love as God loves.

When we reflect on God's love for us, it ought to overwhelm us. John says, *"Since God **loved** us that much, we surely ought to **love** each other"*(1 John 4:11). Immediately, he adds, *"No one has ever seen God. But if we **love** each other, God lives in us, and his **love** is brought to full expression in us"*(1 John 4:12). What's John saying?

Let's zoom back to John 1. There, John says, *"No one has ever seen God. But the only begotten One (Jesus), who is himself God is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us."* We don't really know who God is, until we look at Jesus. When we read the gospels and see Jesus, we see God. We see who God is by seeing Jesus.

Now, look again 1 John 4:12 again: *No one has ever seen God. But if we **love** each other, God lives in us, and his **love** is brought to full expression in us."* In 2023, people don't really know who God is either, until they see Him revealed in Jesus' people, Jesus' church, us. God's revealed His love to His hurting world in Jesus. Through our love, we reveal God to our hurting world. What God launched decisively in Jesus – bringing His love to the world – He wants to complete in and through us. Love is that important.

John makes this point over and over again, *"Let's not merely say we **love** each other; let us show the truth by our actions"*(1 John 3:18). He goes on to say, *"We **love** each other because he **loved** us first. If someone says, "I **love** God," but hates their brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't **love** people we can see, how can we **love** God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who **love** God must also **love** their brother or sister."*(1 John 4:19-21)

God loves us. We love God. That love MUST translate into love for what/who God loves: His creation, His people, our neighbours. If you're not loving your neighbour, you're not loving God. It's a simple – and difficult – as that.

### ***How is this possible?***

One of the words that runs through John 1 and John's letter is *"All who declare that*

*Jesus is the Son of God have God **living in** them, and they **live in** God ... God is love, and all who **live in** love **live in** God, and God **lives in** them”(1 John 4:16). The word in Greek is a simple one. It means “live in”/“abide in”/“make one’s home in”/“remain in.” It’s the heart of what our faith is about. God loves us so much, He “makes His home in” our lives. And we are called to “make our home in” God. We are family with God, sons and daughters of our Creator and King. God is our loving – unconditionally loving, welcoming, forgiving, gracious – Father who invites us to be “at home” in Him.*

We are then called/challenged to love all our brothers and sisters with that same unconditional welcoming, forgiving, gracious love. We welcome broken people “home.”

God’s love led Him to the cross. His love was not a sappy, sentimental thing. It was a hard-nosed, determined, stubborn love. Tom Wright comments, *“Did we expect that having the true, living God come to make his dwelling with us, inviting us to make our dwelling with him, would be a kind of easy-going, half-hearted, hobby-religion?”* Of course not. God gave everything of Himself for us. He asks everything of us in return.

All this can and must come about only because of the gift of God’s Spirit, His personal presence, within each of us. In our strength and by our own willpower we can’t do it. But when God, through His Spirit, is at work, within us, He can change us to be more and more like Jesus, more and more like God. *“As we **live in** God, our **love** grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world”*(1 John 4:17).

A recent newsletter from the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, in Beirut, Lebanon, tells the story of Sanaa, from Syria: *“I grew up very distant from God. I felt empty inside. One day, my brother, who knew I had a lot of questions, kept insisting I go to church with him, so I did. We attended a service where the sermon was on God’s love. The words reached deep into my heart. After the service, the pastor said words I felt were coming from God Himself. He told me that Christ loved me, that He had died for me, and had paid the cost of my sin, and he asked me to pray with him. As I did, I felt God’s love and a warm embrace and came to know true Fatherhood in that moment. My husband and I pastor the Baptist Church in Jaramana (part of Damascus, Syria). The church seeks to serve its community through relief and outreach. We want to build bridges and share the love of Christ with those around us.”*

- How did God love the world?
- How can I love the world as God did?
- How did Jesus live in this world?
- How then am I challenged to live in this world?