

CHRISTMAS LOVE

Christmas 2008, pt. 3

It was a snowy December day just before Christmas in 1914 when young 8 year old Marcella Gruelle dropped into her daddy's office. Now Marcella's dad was John Gruelle, a political cartoonist for the Indianapolis Star. And he was very busy trying to meet a deadline. But Marcella didn't know about that- she just had a problem and she knew daddy could fix it for her. So she had trudged thru the snow a block or so from their house to the newspaper office. Marcella's problem was with her doll. She had been playing in the attic, and had found this doll. But the doll didn't have a face. Could daddy give the doll a face? Well, John immediately recognized the doll as being the tattered doll that his mother played with decades ago when she was a young girl. And indeed, Marcella was right. The doll didn't have a face- it was all worn off. Well, daddy would fix that. John took his cartoon pen and sketched a happy face onto the doll. And Marcella was overjoyed. This was the best Christmas present that she would receive this year. Grandma's doll with a new face drawn by her dad.

It was about a year later that Marcella fell ill. She would not get better, but would become increasingly more and more frail until she would die at the age of 10. During that year of illness, 2 things brought her great comfort. One was that doll that was constantly with her, under her arm in the bed. The other was an invention of her father, John. You see, John found Marcella to be fascinated with adventure stories that he would make up starring her beloved doll. So John would tell her story after story, night after night.

Marcella passed away with that doll clutched under her arm. Perhaps that is the reason why John for the rest of his career took that doll every morning with him to work, and lovingly propped it up in its own special corner. Nobody at work asked about the doll- nobody had to, for everyone knew the story behind John's doll.

The political cartoons of John Gruelle are mostly forgotten now. But the world will forever remember that free Christmas present that he gave to his daughter when he drew that face on that doll. For shortly after Marcella's passing, John, in tribute to her, began to write down some of the adventure stories that he

had once told his little girl. Stories about that tattered cloth doll, named Raggedy Ann.

There is something very special about the love of a father for his child. There is power in that love to make great sacrifices, sacrifices of time and energy, for her happiness. And we can understand such sacrifices, for we all know from at least a child's perspective and from perhaps a parent's perspective as well, the bond of love that God has created within the family structure. But as great as this human love is, there is even a higher level of love than this. What about having that same love for an avowed enemy? What about being willing to pay a great price for one who hated you and was dedicated to your destruction? What about being willing to sacrifice even a child that was so loved, not for one who was also dearly loved, but for one who was an enemy? That's impossible, we say. That's too much for anyone to ask. That is beyond the realm of human possibility. And it is true that such an act is probably beyond the realm of human possibility- but such an act is very consistent with divine possibility.

We are celebrating such love during this Christmas season. For it was at this very time, almost 2,000 years ago, that God looked down from heaven upon a creation that had rejected and despised him. And God decided to make the ultimate sacrifice for them, to give to them that which was most precious to him- His one and only son to be their Savior and redeemer.

During these first 3 weeks of December, we have been looking at 3 abiding, foundational virtues given in the Bible that are interwoven throughout the Christmas message- faith, hope and love. And we have already seen that the Christmas story requires faith from us, and that it gives hope to us. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 13:13, "And now these 3 remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." This week we want to focus our attention on the love that God's Christmas story reveals to us.

How did God reveal his love to the world during that first Christmas season?

1. Well, first of all note with me that God revealed his love to his material creation as a whole in giving one to provide the redemption necessary to reverse the effects of sin.

In Romans chapter 8, we have a very interesting picture painted for us. It is a portrait of the earth groaning and agonizing in pain because of the consequences of sin. Listen to the Apostle Paul's description of it in Rom. 8:19-22.

"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

What a graphic picture this is. How often we overlook the consequences of sin on the material creation for we have never known anything but a world tainted with the effects of sin. We know nothing of the original creation that God made. When God first created the world, it was not marred by the effects of sin at all. God pronounced his creation to be good after each day's work. The earth that God created functioned in perfect harmony and unity. "Let the land produce vegetation, seed bearing plants and trees" God said on that third day of creation. It was just a natural thing for the land to be fruitful- everything worked together in perfect harmony.

Now, today, there is a battle going on out there. Thorns grow up to choke off the life of fruit bearing plants. Weeds compete with the vegetation for water and sunlight. Beautiful gardens do not just happen today. We must till the soil, plant the seeds, and then we must weed and weed until the day of harvest. We are still amazed at the miracle of nature and how well the balance of nature continues to function in spite of the effects of sin, but we can't even imagine how glorious this earth must have been before Adam and Eve sinned against God. And we also can't even begin to know how grieved the heart of God must be as he looks at this distorted form of creation. Only God knows how far this present earth is from the purposes that He had originally created for it. It must grieve him greatly to see his creation groaning in pain.

Now we are seeing a renewed emphasis today on the responsibility that we have to do our best to take care of this world that God has created for us. God has made us stewards of this material earth. God has given to us the plant and animal kingdoms for our use and care. As Christians, we should be careful to do our best in taking care of the environment around us. Always mindful of the fact that humans are the pinnacle of God's creation being the only beings created in His image and likeness, we should be active in protecting and caring for the natural resources that God has given to us for our use. We should use these resources wisely

and not pollute or contaminate them unnecessarily. But even our best efforts often fall short because of the grievous effects of sin on this planet. We feel like we are in a constant battle, often a losing battle.

One of the purposes of Christ's coming was to free God's creation from its bondage. As Jesus Christ, the son of God, came to this earth, and then lived his perfect life and finally died to pay the penalty of sin, one of the results of his coming was to redeem God's creation. The down payment has already been made- that was made with Christ's perfect life and death. So the purchase has been secured. Now all that remains is the completion of that redemption. The Bible speaks of a day in the future when the earth will have the curse of sin lifted from it. What a blessed day that will be. The Lord Jesus Christ will physically rule and reign over his creation at that time. *All creation waits in expectation for that day*, Paul says.

Christ's coming showed God's love for the world that he had created, for his coming secured its redemption from the enslaving effects of sin.

2. But in the second place, note with me that God revealed his love to the human race that first Christmas. He did this in providing what was necessary to pay for our sins.

Romans 5:6-8 tells us God demonstrated his love for us in the sending of his son to this earth to pay the penalty for our sins. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

There are 2 groups of people mentioned here by the Apostle Paul- the ungodly or sinner and the righteous or good person. Now we realize that the term righteous is used in a relative manner by Paul here for he has already said in Romans 3 that there isn't anyone who is morally perfect before God. There isn't anyone who absolutely meets God's holy standards. "There is no one righteous, not even one" he wrote in 3:10. But Paul is speaking here of a relatively good person, one who is respected and admired by his fellow human beings as being a good person. Paul says it is conceivable that someone might give his or her life for a good person, one whom they loved dearly here on the earth.

I read a story once about a young girl who had contracted a very serious disease. As the doctors

examined her case, they determined that an immediate blood transfusion was necessary to save her life. But the girl had a very rare blood type, one not available in the blood bank at the time. As the doctors questioned the family, they found that the girl's older brother had the very same blood type. So the doctors prevailed upon the brother to be willing to give his blood for a transfusion so that his sister might be able to live. After a moment's hesitation, her brother said "yes" he would be willing to give blood for his sister. The doctors noted his tenseness as they were drawing blood from his veins, but suspected that he was just nervous about the transfusion process as many are. But they were startled when the boy turned to them after they were finished, and said, "how long will it be until I die?" The doctor then realized that in the rush of getting the blood for the young girl's life, he had failed to give complete details concerning the giving of blood to the young man. Here the brother had made the decision and gone thru the process thinking that all his blood was going to be taken from him and that he was going to die, giving his lifeblood so that his sister might live.

We see or hear of that kind of sacrifice occurring sometimes in life. And when we do, we recognize that we are witnessing the highest kind of sacrifice that we know. Being willing to sacrifice one's own life for the welfare of another friend or family member seems to be the greatest sacrifice that we can offer. And certainly it is from a human standpoint.

But God has demonstrated yet another step in sacrificial love. He was willing to give that which was most precious to him- his one and only son- for those who were his enemies. For sinful people who were unworthy of his blessing. For the ungodly who had turned their backs on him. The Bible says that God revealed the greatness of his love in this sacrificial act.

You see, God's love, as with all of his other attributes, is infinite, without any limitations at all. Unlike human love, that begins with small feelings and then grows in momentum when the conditions support it, God's love is incomprehensibly great. Human love is like the Mississippi River- a potentially great and powerful force. But one that begins with small streams and melting snow, and gradually builds momentum thru positive responses, acceptance, good feelings, and the like. Constant rejection, harsh criticism, apathy- these can dull human feelings of love and leave them cold. But God's love is like the Rhone River in

France. Those who have followed that river up the valley to its source say that the valley grows more narrow until it seems that there is no break at all in the mountain ahead. And, indeed, there is none at all. The headwaters of the river just lead into a cliff that rises hundreds of feet straight up to block the valley. But then gushing out of the foot of the rock is the fountain of Vaucluse. Thousands of gallons of water a minute cascading out of solid rock. The greatest spring in the world. The Rhone River does not start as a stream and grow into a river. It starts as a complete river. That is what God's love is like. And that is the reason why God's love unlike human love cannot be diminished in any way. God's love cannot turn cold. God's love can never be fickle. If God loved us while we were still sinners, he has already loved us in our lowest of all states. And God revealed that kind of love for us during that first Christmas season, when Jesus Christ was born in that Bethlehem stable.

3. But there was a 3rd recipient of God's love who is often overlooked during this time of year. Certainly, God showed his love towards his creation sending the one who would relieve the world from the bondage of sin, and God demonstrated his love for that human race by sending the one who would pay the penalty for our sins. But God is love by nature, and his actions are loving to all. So as God the Father gave his one and only son to us, he was demonstrating his love even to that son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the babe born to the Virgin Mary.

But you ask- how was that first Christmas season a message of Christmas love to Jesus Christ? How could the Son of God leaving the glory of heaven to assume a position in the lowly confines of this earth possibly be an act of love on God the Father's part? Well, a great plan had been devised in the mind of God. God loved his son so much that he wanted to secure a bride for that son. A dowry, a payment needed to be paid for the securing of that bride. So God the Father knowing that it would ultimately bring great joy and happiness to the Lord Jesus Christ, desired to secure a bride for his son. So God the Father took the steps necessary. The down payment on the dowry was given that first Christmas as God gave his one and only son to this world. The payment was completed when Christ gave his life as a ransom and the bride was betrothed to the groom. The Holy Spirit was then sent as the engagement ring guaranteeing the future wedding. So the marriage of the Lamb of God to his bride the church is secured, and each of us who are

members of the bride await the wedding day with keen anticipation.

Listen to the words of the Apostle John as he speaks of that wonderful wedding day in Revelation 21:1-3: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

What wonderful truths are found in this passage when seen in the light of God's message of Christmas love during that first manger scene. God came to become a human being so that we as human beings might become children of God. God came to dwell with us so that we one day would be able to dwell with Him. God became a member of the human race, so that we being a part of the bride of the Son of God himself might one day be married into God's own family. God became human for a brief period of time, so that we might be able to live on for all eternity. Yes, God's love was even shown to his own son during that first Christmas season, for Christ's birth was the down payment in the securing of his bride, the church.

A group of college students was touring the slums of a large city one time as part of a research project in a sociology class. They stopped to observe a group of children skipping rope. Noticing the filthy and slovenly appearance of one of the girls, a coed was heard by the teacher to remark, "Why doesn't that young girl's mother clean her up." The teacher very wisely answered. "That young girl's mother probably loves her very much, but she doesn't hate dirt. You, on the other hand, hate dirt, but you don't love her enough to go down there and clean her up. Until the hate for dirt and the love for the child are in the same person that young girl is likely to remain just as she is."

In the Christmas story, God the Father demonstrated the perfect balance between his divine love and absolute holiness. He loved his creation enough to send the only one who could bring relief to its groaning and suffering because of the effects of sin. So Christ came, in part, to free the world from the bondage of sin's slavery. This demonstrated God's love for his creation. God loved us, creatures whom he had created in his own image and likeness, so much that he sent the only one who could pay the penalty for our sins. So

Christ came to give his life as a ransom, a payment to free us from the bondage of sin's slavery. This demonstrated God's love for the human race. And God loved his one and only son so much that he wanted to secure for that son a gift of precious value to Him, a gift that would bring that son joy and happiness for all eternity. A bride, a partner with whom to spend the endless ages of eternity. So Christ came to seek and to save his bride from the bondage of the enemy's slavery. This demonstrated God's love for his son, Jesus Christ.

Yes, the Christmas Story requires a measure of faith from us. We must believe it to be true as revealed from God himself in the Bible. And the Christmas Story gives hope to us- the only hope that we really have here on this earth. But the Christmas Story also reveals God's love to us. It reveals the love of God in a way that we would never have known otherwise. And we will miss the complete message of Christmas if we fail to see in it Christmas Love.