

CHRISTMAS – A STORY OF LOVE.

December 20, 2009.

Introduction.

Most people appreciate a good love story. And our world is filled with famous love stories, both fictional and real. Some have ended well and some have ended in tragedy. But regardless of their ending, they are still appreciated. Shakespeare's famous tragedy, Romeo and Juliet, has become something of a paradigm for most tragic love stories. Several fictional love stories have been made into movies. Real life modern love stories would include King Edward and Mrs. Wallis Simpson. The King abdicated England's throne to marry the divorced Mrs. Simpson. India's famous Taj Mahal is rooted in a beautiful story of love.

There are also many beautiful love stories that never get told. They never get told because the world has no time to take note of the poor and / or common peoples and their stories of great love and sacrifice. In the Bible we all know the most famous love story recorded in the Song of Solomon. We know the man in the story, King Solomon. Now here is a question that may stump you : do you know the woman? She is called the Shulammitte. On the other hand we pay little attention to the love story that developed between Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah had an arranged marriage.

The love story between Joseph and Mary is also a beautiful one even though we are not given any great details. But there are hints in *Matt.1:18-20*. (**read**). Note the verb **“betrothed”**. This verb speaks of the legal engagement that preceded marriage. But the verb also means *“to woo; to win.”* Joseph found out after the engagement that Mary was pregnant. One can only imagine the emotions Joseph experienced after this discovery was made. Joseph would have been greatly and publicly humiliated. He would have experienced anger, frustration and a deep sense of betrayal.

But Joseph was a righteous man and out of the great turmoil he was experiencing, His righteous character surfaced and prevailed. His righteous character guided him in charting a course of action. It was a course of action rooted in great personal sacrifice. But it was a course of action that also revealed a deep love for a Mary, a love that was crushed but not dead. It was a love that didn't quickly evaporate in the midst of the boiling heat of anger and betrayal.

There are three verbs I want you to note. Firstly, the verb **“considered”** in *vs.20*. This verb describes the process of thinking through a matter. But in this process the mind is in an agitated state. The verb Matthew used is derived from the Greek word ***thumos*** which means **“anger”**. So the primary emotion that was agitating Joseph's mind as he sought to think through this whole matter in a righteous manner was anger. The second verb found in *vs.19* is **“planned”**. It means to make a decision after contemplation. Since Joseph was a righteous man, we will have to say after *“careful contemplation”*.

The third verb also found in *vs.19* is **“wanting”**. This verb also means *“to desire”*. The verb **“disgrace”** means *“to publicly expose and humiliate.”* Joseph was a righteous man. He was angry but he did not want revenge. Mary's pregnancy had publicly humiliated him. But Joseph had no desire to hurt Mary. He had no desire to publicly expose, shame and humiliate Mary. So he made a plan. His plan was to shield Mary from public shame and humiliation. He would secretly divorce her. But his plan also meant the public focus will remain on him and he will have to keep bearing the public shame and humiliation for some time to come.

Joseph's action revealed something very important about him. He was a righteous man who was compelled to obey the law. And this he did. But let us note the following now about his obedience. Firstly, his obedience to the law was not legalistic. Secondly, his concern to obey the law was not clouded by an idolatrous desire to protect his honor and vindicate his good name. Thirdly, his concern to obey the law was combined with love, a love that manifested compassion for Mary and having regard for her well-being. He must divorce Mary but he would not abandon her to those who would be waiting to destroy

her. The love story does not end here. The story of sacrificial love continued as righteous Joseph married Mary in obedience to the Lord's command.

Christmas – God's Story Of Love For Us.

Today, I want to speak to you about a different kind of love story – a love story for which there is no comparison in our world. We admire the king who gave up his throne so that he could marry the woman who was disqualified from being queen. We admire Joseph's love for Mary and obedience to God. But there is a love story we have failed to think through, to contemplate, and to admire. The sad reality is that we normally take this love story for granted. It is the story of God's love for sinners. It is the love story that is beyond all comparison.

The apostle John pointed out this fact for us in *1Jn.3:1*. John wrote, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God; and such we are." John was an old man when he wrote this epistle. And you can easily sense here that the apostle John is still literally overwhelmed by God's love for him and all of us who the children of God.

The verb "see" is a command that is intended to arouse your attention. The command calls upon us to contemplate, to behold. The words "how great" are the translation of one Greek word. But it is not easy to translate this word. Other translations are : *what kind of; what sort of; what manner of*. The original meaning of this word is : *of what country*. It was a word that implied astonishment.

In *Matt.8:27*, after Jesus calmed the storm, His disciples are astonished and asked : "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" This word is found again in *2Pet.3:11*. Peter is describing for us the end, the destruction of the present heavens and earth when Jesus returns. And Peter wrote, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy

conduct and godliness.” In other words, the lives you live in view of Christ’s return must astonish you and astonish the watching world.

But getting back to *1Jn.3:1*. God’s love for us is of what kind, what quality, of what country? The answer is : it is an out-of-this-world love. God’s love for us is a love that astonishes the mind. John’s point is that the quality and nature of God’s love for us is such, you cannot find a comparable example in this world. Paul described God’s love as “**great**” and it reveals to us the riches of God’s mercy. (*Eph.2:4*).

Jn.3:16 says, “For God so loved the world.” John’s emphasis here is on the word “so”. John wrote, “*So for loved the God the world.*” When we read what John wrote we must read as follows : “*For God so loved the world.*” In *1Jn.4:11* John wrote, “Beloved, if God **so** loved us.” Once again the emphasis is on the word “so”. The word “so” emphasizes the manner, degree and extent of God’s love. We can paraphrase *Jn.3:16* as follows, “*For in such an astounding manner did God love the world.*” “For to such an infinite degree did God love the world.”

God’s love is so great and majestic because of who God is. But this is not John’s primary focus. John’s primary focus is on the greatness and majesty of God’s love because of who we are. The word “**world**” does not emphasize quantity – there are over six billion people in the world. In other words, God’s love is not great because He must love over six billion people. The word “**world**” emphasizes quality – we are sinners. John’s point is that God’s love is great because of how bad we are. Our sinfulness dictates that God should not love us. Yet the Bible declares, “For God so loved the world.”

Now most of us do not understand how serious this fact is. Ask any person : are you sinner? And you will get a “**yes**” answer. If you ask them to explain what it means to be sinner, you will receive a man-centered explanation that will be either flippant or mildly serious. You will get something like this : *we are sinners. We all do bad things from time to time. But we are also basically good.* Now ask a second

question : as a sinner, do you think God should love you? The answer you will get is : *I think God should love me. Why? Well, I am a sinner but I am not all that bad.*

In order to understand the seriousness of what it means to be a sinner, you must get God's description and explanation of what it means to be a sinner. But before you do that, you must, of first importance, come to understand who God is. And the primary fact you must come to understand is God's holiness. God's holiness is His crowning attribute. God's holiness governs all that He is and does. For example, God's love is not an indulgent love. God's love is holy. Because God's love is holy God cannot tolerate sin regardless of how small or big that sin is. When you truly come to understand this truth you will never let the following words come from your lips when you do wrong, *"God is love, He understands."* The Biblical truth is : *God is love, He does not tolerate sin.*

Now turn to *Isa.6:1-5*. (**read**). Isaiah was a man of God and God's prophet before the nation of Israel. Isaiah had a vision. He said, "I saw the Lord." Here we are told that Isaiah saw "the LORD of hosts" or "**Yahweh of hosts**". In our study last Lord's Day we saw from *Jn.12:41* that Isaiah saw the pre-incarnate Christ.

In this vision Isaiah saw the superlative glorious holiness of God. Note the three-fold repetition of the word "**holy**". It is rare and emphatic. The holiness of God marks His separation from His creation. The three-fold repetition emphasizes the superlative extent to which God is separated from His creation. Holiness also emphasizes God's ethical purity, His separation from all that pollutes and degrades, and His opposition to all sin. The three-fold repetition emphasizes the superlative nature of God's ethical purity and opposition to all sin.

Isaiah was a part of this fallen creation. He was a man of God and a prophet but also a sinner. It is quite likely that Isaiah saw himself, by God's grace, as a good man. But now, seeing himself in the light of God's superlative holiness made Isaiah realize how truly sinful he was. This realization of how truly sinful he was devastated him and he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" Put more bluntly, *"Woe is me, for I am a*

dead man!” Now note the sin Isaiah identified as his own. He said, “I am a man of unclean lips.” We sin most often with our lips and most often we overlook these sins of speech. We treat them more lightly than any other sin. In the presence of God’s superlative and awesome holiness Isaiah did not need to identify any serious sin in his life in order to declare, “*I am a dead man.*” Isaiah chose what we may regard as the least serious of sins and declared, “*I am a dead man.*”

Do you want to understand what it means to be a sinner from God’s perspective? Come to grips with God’s holiness in your mind and in your experience and you will come to some understanding of what it means to be a sinner from God’s perspective. Consider the following two passages :

Psa.5:4-6, “You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with You. The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.”

Psa.11:5-6, “The Lord tests the righteous, and the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.”

Note carefully the expressions : **God takes no pleasure;** *God hates;* **God abhors;** *His soul hates.* These are very strong expressions of God’s holy revulsion of and reaction to sinners and their sins. A person who understands God’s holiness does not speak about being basically good but doing bad things from time to time. A person who understands God’s holiness cries out, “*Woe is me, for I a dead man!*”. A person who is gripped by God’s holiness lives with fear and trembling before God.

Let us turn to the word of God now and seek to discover **God’s description and explanation** of what it means to be a sinner. If you take the time to study this subject in

the Bible you will discover the following : firstly, as a sinner you are morally polluted and filthy. Secondly, you are spiritually dead in your trespasses and sins, dead to God and the things of God. Thirdly, in your spiritual deadness, you are alive to sin and its lusts and Satan and his rule over you. (*Eph.2:1-3*).

Now when we say the Bible teaches that man is totally depraved, we do not mean that man is as evil as he can be. Total depravity means that sin has polluted every part of your being. Every cell, every nerve, every organ in your body has been polluted by sin. Your mind, your emotions, and your will have been polluted by sin and enslaved by sin. I will give you just one N.T. passage that you can look at in your own time : *Rom.3:10-18*.

Let us go a step further. God acknowledges the fact that man is capable to do natural good works. We see the evidences of man's natural good works every day. *Tit.3:5* says God "saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy...." (cf. *Eph.2:8-9*). There are millions of people who believe that they will be saved by their good works. They live in the hope that their good works would outweigh their bad works in the final judgment. But why is it that God cannot save the sinner based on the sinner's righteous deeds? The simple Biblical answer is that your good deeds have been polluted by your sinfulness.

I have used the illustration of the ripe guava in the past. A lot of people in my generation know what it was to pick a big beautiful ripe guava in the hope of satisfying your hunger but only to discover that the guava is full of worms on the inside. And you respond by throwing it away in disgust. Now this is where the illustration stops short. If you were really hungry, you would clean out the inside of the guava and eat the sweet thick skin. And you didn't really care if you ended up eating a piece of a worm. Now, let us not miss the point. Our natural good works are like that beautiful worm infested guava. And when God looks at our good works He is both disgusted and repulsed.

The Biblical descriptions of fallen man's natural good works are very repulsive. You must keep in mind that in conveying this description to you God must work within the

limitations by human language. Now if these Biblical descriptions of sin are repulsive to you, just imagine how repulsive they are to the superlatively holy God of heaven!

We begin with *Isa.64:6*. Please turn to *Isa.64:6*. The word of God says, “For all of us have become like who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.” The word “**unclean**” tells us that as sinners we are like lepers. Leprosy is ugly and repulsive. Lepers were required to shout “*unclean, unclean*” so that people would know they were lepers and no one would come close to them. Lepers were also regarded as being unfit for the fellowship of God and the worshipping community. In other words, lepers were not allowed into the temple or synagogues. In the second line the imagery changes. One would think that God would have said that our righteous deeds, our good works are like the horribly defiled garments worn by the lepers. Instead, God said our righteous deeds are like “a filthy garment”, that is, like used bloody menstrual pads.

If you are a sinner and not saved, picture yourself now standing before God in the final judgment. What does God see? God sees you as a repulsive spiritual leper. You are holding out your good works as an offering to God. But what does God see? He sees an offering of used bloody menstrual pads in your spiritually leprous hands. And the superlatively holy God is repulsed.

The verse continues, “And all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” This is the picture of death. The sinner who is a leper is facing death. We wither and die like a leaf and then the wind blows us away. The wages of sin is death. And if we die in our sins, in the final judgment our sins will blow us away from God’s presence into the lake of fire.

Now let us go to *Zech.3:1-5*. (**read**). Joshua is the high priest. One would expect him to be dressed in clean festal garments. He is standing before “the angel of the LORD”. Note the definite article “**the**”. This is no ordinary angel. This is not even Gabriel or

Michael the archangel. Those who know their Bible would know we have met this “**Angel**” before. And He is divine. Most think He is the pre-incarnate Son of God.

What does the Angel of the LORD see on Joshua? He sees Joshua clothed in filthy garments. The Hebrew word used here appears a number of times in the O.T. and was used describe human excrement (*Deut.23:13*); vomit (*Isa.28:8*), and sin. In *Prov.30:12* the word “**filthiness**” is used as a synonym for “**sin**”. And in *Isa.4:4* the word “**filth**” is used as a synonym for “**sin**”.

Parents and babysitters have seen babies do their numbers in their diapers. Sometimes, some babies take off their diapers and then pretend to become an artist with their bodies as their canvas. Then you go into the room to see if the little angel is asleep because he has been so quiet and, after you recover from the shock of smell and sight, the neighbors hear a blood-curdling scream. Joshua the high priest looked like this baby.

Verses 4-5 describe for us Joshua’s salvation. The Angel of the Lord ordered that Joshua’s filthy garments be removed. And then Joshua was dressed in clean festal robes. This is the picture of double imputation that we find in the New Testament. This is the picture of the great exchange and the sinner’s justification in Christ. We’ll return to this shortly.

Now let us go to *Phil.3*. The Judaizers are making all kinds of trouble for Paul. They are in Philippi and they are boasting to the Gentile Christians about their pedigree as Jews. Paul has had it with them. In *vs.2* he calls them dogs, evil workers, the false circumcision or the mutilation. These are very strong words that I do not have time to expound today. From *vs.4-6* Paul said to them, “*You want to boast. Well let’s see how your list will match my list.*” Paul set out a list of seven great qualifications that very few Jews could match and that no Judaizer could match. They were playing rough and so Paul played rougher. Once again time will not allow me to expound to you the details of Paul’s great list.

In *vss.7-9* Paul said when we stand before God boasting and great points of natural and religious good works mean absolutely nothing. In these verses Paul writes as an accountant balancing his books. He placed his seven great points in one column. But when he totaled them, he got zero. And he is puzzled. $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$ should equal **7**. But Paul is getting zero. What's worse, Paul is getting less than zero. He is not breaking even. He is in debt, great debt.

Transfer this picture to the final judgment. Paul pictures himself in his pre-conversion days standing before God in the final judgment. He is standing with confidence. (*vs.4*). He has seven great points to win God's favor. He comes to God and presents his seven great points only to discover his seven great points are worthless like counterfeit money. What's worse, he discovers that he is in serious debt to God and he has nothing of value to clear his debt with God.

At the end of *vs.8* Paul changed his imagery. Take note of the word "**rubbish**". Paul said his seven great points were more than worthless. They were actually "**rubbish**" in God's eyes. The word "**rubbish**" is a repulsive word. It means excrement or filth. It was also used to describe the half-eaten rotting corpse of an animal. In the context before us, since Paul described the Judaizers as "**dogs**", it is quite likely that "**rubbish**" means "**dog excrement**". Transfer this to the final judgment and what do you have? You have a pre-conversion Paul presenting to God seven heaps of dog excrement in exchange for salvation. You have a pre-conversion Paul presenting to God a dead, rotting, half-eaten dog for salvation.

Paul's personal righteousness is worse than worthless counterfeit money. Paul's personal righteousness is "**rubbish**". So what is Paul's hope? Paul says in *vs.9* his hope is the righteousness of Christ. Paul said in the final judgment he must not be found in his own righteousness. He must be found in Christ, in Christ's righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith. Your only hope of salvation is having Christ's righteousness. If you face God in the final judgment with your own righteousness, you are utterly hopeless.

Now let me bring this together for you. Let us pretend we are all parents with a couple children. Our children are educated with a great future. And you have carefully put aside a good inheritance for them. Now which one of you will search this country and find the filthiest street-child, take him home, clean him up with appropriate medical help, legally adopt him, give him his own room with all the perks, educate him from scratch and make him a fellow heir with your children? Now add to this that when you find this child you discover that he is the child of your sworn enemy, one who hates you with the fiercest hatred.

If you are able to do that, that does not even come close to what God has done in loving you and saving you in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Firstly, your filthiness as a sinner is beyond description. You are an infinitely unbearable sight in the eyes of God and an infinitely unbearable stench in God's nostrils. Secondly, the Bible says that in your filthy condition you hate God. (*Rom.1:28*). You are an active enemy of God, waging war against God. (*Rom.8:7*). You are a child of God's sworn enemy, the devil. (*Jn.8:44*). Thirdly, as we have seen already, God is also your enemy. He is filled with holy anger against you. He hates you with holy hatred and He is waging war against you. Fourthly, you have absolutely no hope of saving yourself. You are a breaker of God's laws. Sin is the breaking of God's laws. The wages of sin is death. You are doomed to die and spend an eternity in hell.

Your only hope is God, the very God you hate, the very God whose soul abhors you, the very God who is your Judge. Now here is an astounding holy mystery. The very God who abhors you also took the initiative to love you and save you. The Bible says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us...." (*1Jn.4:10*). *Vs.19* says, "He loved us first." Why did this holy God love you? Why did this holy God take the initiative to love you? Was there anything in you that this holy God saw that moved Him to love you? Absolutely not! So why did He love you? The answer is the same He gave to the Israelites in *Deut.7:7-8*, the Lord loves you because He loves you. The reason is in God, not in you.

Now God had a most difficult dilemma. Let me try to simplify it. Firstly, your repulsiveness, filthiness and hatred of God should have closed the door tightly shut on God's compassion toward you. Secondly, His holy justice demanded that you be condemned and sent to hell. Thirdly, His holy yet gracious love moved Him to compassion and placed in Him the desire to save you and set you free. How could God solve this dilemma? The only answer to this dilemma was in God Himself. God had to become a real and full flesh and blood man, live a holy life and die in your place, on your behalf as your substitute. It is for this very reason the Son of God came into this world. The death of the Son of God as your substitute is the ultimate expression of God's love for you, the sinner. *1Jn.4:11* says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." *Rom.5:8* says, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." What happened when Christ died?

From the world's standpoint Christ's death was murder and martyrdom. From God's standpoint Christ's death was judicial. Christ's death was substitutionary. As sinners, we are the breakers of God's law. The wages of sin is death. As sinners we were condemned in God's court. Christ took our place, our condemnation, our sentence, our punishment. We were cursed. Christ took our curse. We were sentenced to death. Christ took our place and died our death. By His death on the cross Christ endured hell itself on our behalf. Here's divine mystery : the Son of God endured your eternal hell in those hours He endured God's wrath for our sins on the cross.

2Cor.5:21 says, "[God] made Him who knew no sin, sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." We are back here to *Zech.3* and how the Angel of the LORD dealt with the high priest Joshua. What is Paul saying to us? The picture is still judicial. The sinless One took our sin. The Holy One took our sin filthy clothing. And He gave us His righteousness. He gave us the righteousness of His clean festal clothing. He made a legal exchange with us in becoming our substitute. Dressed in Christ's righteousness, God the Judge declares us righteous and sets us free. But Christ, dressed in our sins, is condemned and taken away to die.

Having been set free, God then legally adopted us in to His family. He made us joint-heirs with Christ. **Rom.8:17** says we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” And then God laid aside His judicial robes, put on His fatherly clothing and took us into His home. If you are saved in Christ you will never have to face God in His judicial robes again. He is now and forever your Heavenly Father. Your judicial final judgment took place the day you repented of your sins and put your trust in Christ to save you. Your judicial final judgment is finished forever.

This is the story of love that Christmas is about – God loving you, the totally undeserving sinner, and sending His only begotten and beloved Son to die for your sins. It is the story of the eternal Son of God humbling Himself to become man and to live as a man and to die for your sins. Paul declared, “the Son of God ... loved me and gave Himself up for me.” (**Gal.2:20**).

If you are sinner and without salvation in Christ, you are a dead man walking. You are not on your way to execution. You are on your way to an eternal hell from which there is no return. As I said last week, hell is the sinner’s final destination. There are no exit doors in hell. You can stop this no-return journey to hell that you are on by falling to your knees and putting your trust in the One who loved you and died to save you – God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. And you can rise from your knees to the shouts of the rejoicing angels : living man walking and never to die again.

Christmas is the story of love. Christmas is God’s love story. Christmas is the story of God’s love for you, a love that began in eternity. Today Christmas can become your love story. The true and living God of heaven and earth loves you and wants to save you. For God so loved the world. Put yourself in there. *For so loved me, that He gave His only begotten Son, that if I believe in Him, I would not perish, but have eternal life.* If God had planned to save only you, Jesus would still have had to come and die. This is why the apostle Paul was able to personalize in **Gal.2:20**, “the Son of God ... loved me and gave Himself up for me.” Enter into this holy divine love story to day. Become a part of this holy divine love story today.

