

The Best Christmas Gift Ever

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I want to tell you the story of the second best Christmas gift ever. It happened when these guys were, the twins were 7 and Anna was about 4, I believe, and Christine and I decided and planned way ahead of time that it was time for our family to get their first puppy and so we started by telling the children that they were not going to get a puppy this year, so we just started by lying to them, I guess, sorry, because they were just driving us crazy, "We want a puppy!" So, "No, not this year. We'll get one but it's gonna have to wait." And so then I started looking online trying to find a breeder because what we wanted was a miniature dachshund, and so I found a breeder and they were going to have a litter of puppies that would be ready just in time for Christmas, they needed to be six weeks old and weaned and ready to go.

Well, lo and behold, the puppies were born on my birthday, November 9, and three weeks after that, Christine and I drove out 45 or 50 minutes away from where we lived and we saw the litter and we got to pick our puppy and we went ahead and named him, since he's German, we named him Luther after the great Martin Luther, and Luther means "warrior," by the way, and this little guy was, you know, a three pound warrior.

So that was three weeks before Christmas. Christmas night, we had him ready. Got those kids in bed and it was raining that night and after they got in bed, I drove 45-50 minutes out to pick up little Luther, brought him home. Thankfully he kept pretty quiet through the night in the little crate in our closet and didn't make a peep, and then the next morning, Christmas morning, we had a plan. Christine had purchased his little doggie dish and some doggie toys and a leash and a collar, I think, and she had those placed out in the sunroom away from the living room where we'd be doing the gift giving around the tree, and what probably now probably seems kind of cruel, we said to the kids, "Hey, go look out in the sunroom and see what's out there." And so they went out and looked and there's doggie dishes and toys and doggies things. Well, being the young, innocent, little, foolish children they were, they said, "Oh, fun, now we can play doggie together!"

Well, that was all a distraction to keep them distracted while I got Luther in a little Christmas box with a lid on it. He could breathe, I promise. No dogs were hurt in this activity. Into the living room and ready and so they came in and we said, "Okay, guys, your big present is in this box and to gather around it and when we tell you, you can take the lid off and see what's inside." So they did and amazingly Luther stayed still and on

the count of three, they pulled off the lid and, "Uh!" and Abby said, "It's a puppy!" And she looked at us and said, "Can we keep him?" And being a loving father I said, "Well, sure you can keep him."

That was the second greatest Christmas gift ever given because we just wanted to overwhelm our kids with an awesome amazing gift, and we planned it, and we provided it, and it worked and it was probably, I'd let them vote and say, best Christmas ever? ["Yeah."] Okay. But tonight we're talking about the best Christmas gift ever and there's one verse I want us to focus on for just a minute, John 3:16.

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Let me just break this verse down for you a little bit. "For God so loved." God so loved. The Father, the Son and the Spirit, the three-in-one God, the Bible says he has planned from eternity to provide the greatest gift ever for us. He has planned from eternity and listen to what the verse says, his motivation, his heart behind this was love. Don't ever forget that Jesus was given for you because God the Father, the Son and the Spirit love you. They want to overwhelm you with love. For God so loved that he planned in advance and provided at the perfect time the gift of his Son.

But it says, "For God so loved the world." I was giving a puppy to cute little kids, God was giving his only Son to rebellious sinners like you and me to the world that was broken because of the rebellion of God's children, Adam and Eve, and everyone since then. Romans 5 says that even while we were still his enemies, Christ died for us. God so loved the world. God so loved his enemy.

"He gave his only Son." And God gave us not what we wanted but what we needed so that then we could have what we ultimately want. What all of us want, anyone made in the image of God which we all are as humans, we all want what we lost in Eden. We all want to be fully known by God and one another, fully loved by God and one another, and fully engaged in what God has created us to do. That's really really when you get down to it what we all want, and that's really why we run after people and possessions and positions and power, prestige, we're running after all these things trying to get what we lost in the garden and, that is, this unhindered relationship with our Creator, this unhindered relationship with others that he created so that we could be in community with him and then an unhindered mission to take what he's given us in this world and make it glorify him and make others glad because it's good. But you see, we were able to give Abby and Mike and Anna something they wanted because they were already our children, the problem with the world that God so loved is that we are his enemies. We couldn't have that thing that we deeply longed to have, that being fully known and loved and fully engaged with God and others in his mission because we didn't belong to him, and so he had to first give us what we need. In order to make sinners his sons and daughters, God made his Son to be sin in our place. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says he "who knew no sin," that's Jesus, "became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." So he had to first give us what we need and we needed a Savior.

I love these words from Paul Tripp in his Advent devotional, he says, "You see the real historical events of the Incarnation of Jesus, our guarantee that God will continue to deliver to us everything we need. We need divine rescue. We need forgiveness. We need to be transformed and we need to be delivered. We need God's faithfulness. We need his patience. We need his wisdom. We need his power. We need his mercy. We need his rule and we need his love. None of these things are at stake." Think about in comparison to the things we want for Christmas. "None of these things are at stake. None of these things will wear out. None of these things will quit working. God will never get tired of blessing us with these things. God will never get impatient and decide to quit. He will never get so irritated with the things we say and do, that he'll turn his back on us and walk away. He will not get distracted or become weary."

He gave his only Son so that we might be sons and daughters too, and finally the verse says, "whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." That eternal life is what we want, that Adam and Eve had in the garden with God, unhindered relationship with him and one another on God's mission. Eternal life is not just quantity, it's not just length of time, it's quality, it's the life of God. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, to know me and the one who sent me." And God says whoever believes in Jesus, that trust in him, rest in him, will not perish like they deserve but they will receive eternal life.

In a love that it says "whoever," if God has taken care of the only thing that will separate you from him and that is your sin, then there's nothing else about you, whoever you are, that will keep you from being able to receive the gift of Jesus. So I'm asking you tonight: have you received what you need in Jesus so that you can get what you really want and that is to know him and the one who sent him? To know his love? It's easy to be impressed with Jesus but I'm asking have you embraced Jesus? It's easy to say, "Wow, this Jesus, that's unbelievable! I get it, I understand the story. Wow!" But do you want him? Abby said, "It's a puppy!" That was the wow. She was impressed. But then she said, "Can we keep him?" She wanted him. She wanted to embrace him as her own and I'm asking you tonight are you just impressed with Jesus, "Wow, it's Jesus, a Savior!" Or is your heart saying, "Can I keep him? Can I keep him because I want him, I need him. I need to embrace him." I'm asking you tonight have you gotten to the place in your life where you're not just impressed with him but you want to embrace him because you need to keep him? Whoever believes him, wants him, wants to keep him, you will receive him. Thanks be to God.