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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ADVENT LOVE”
John 3:16; Christmas Texts

Does God really love the world? Can God love all humanity?

Some churchgoers are so cocksure the answer is “No!” that they carry signs saying, “God hates _____”.

They are a tiny minority. Still, I have met a number of professing believers who use vile racial slurs, and I know more than a few who take joy in the expectation that the Almighty will strike dead a particular public figure.

Most of us reject such blatant hate. But are we convinced in our heart of hearts that God loves everyone? Or have some of us have projected onto the Lord a terrible inability to despise the sin while yet loving the sinner?

Does God really love this sin-sick world? Can God love *all* humankind, including the severely degraded, the utterly corrupted, and the thoroughly anti-God?

Consider John 3:16: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”**

“So loved” points to the scope of God’s love, its unequalled {Eph 3:18} width, length, height and depth.

“The world” specifies the object of God’s love: the whole human species, every member of {Rev 7:9} **“every nation, tribe, people and language”** – including God’s enemies who {Ro 8:5-7} are hostile to him, incapable of pleasing him or submitting to his law.

“That he gave” indicates the action God took because of his love. When we think and talk about divine

love, we are quick to focus on Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. Yet God’s giving did not begin at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry; it started with his conception and birth. The Lord’s first advent is, in and of itself, irrefutable proof of God’s love.

What is more, the people to whom God revealed the Savior early on further confirm the extent of his amazing love. Let’s do a brief, chronological survey of those revelations.

□ In Luke 2:8-18 we read that **“an angel of the Lord appeared to”** some shepherds and announced: **“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”** The shepherds **“hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby... When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.”**

As a group shepherds were scorned. Their work kept them from obeying many of the rules and regulations that religious authorities and the general public considered indispensable to Judaism. In addition many shepherds adhered to the motto: “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine.” {Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 25b} Shepherds were so unreliable that their testimony was officially inadmissible in a court of law.

They represent the social rejects.

★ Yet aside from Mary and Joseph, these lowly shepherds were the first to see Jesus! And get this: God chose them to be the first human beings to spread

the good news! **“God so loved”** the despised of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son”** for them.

□ Luke 2:25-35 tells how, on about the 40th day after Christ was born, the Holy Family went to the temple to perform Mary’s purification and ritually redeem Jesus.

Moved by the Holy Spirit Simeon found them, took Jesus in his arms, and **“praised God: ‘Sovereign Lord, my eyes have seen your salvation... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’”**

Verse 25 calls Simeon **“righteous and devout.”** This is a reference not only to his private character, but also his public persona. Simeon’s neighbors categorized him as a **“righteous”** man who fulfilled God’s Law and a **“devout”** man who dedicated himself to worship and prayer.

Simeon represents the good people.

★ **“God so loved”** the respectable of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son”** for them.

□ In Luke 2:36-38 a **“very old”** woman named Anna approached the Holy Family, **“gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”**

Anna was a widow. She never remarried even though she was young when her husband died, which suggests that she was poor or childless or both.

Widowhood was all about {Job 27:15} weeping, {Lam 1:1} desolation, and {Ruth 1:21} poverty.

Anna was also a prophet who **“never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.”** But when most people looked at Anna they saw

a helpless victim of circumstance, a barren old woman without a future.

She represents the people everyone feels sorry for, and no one wants to be.

★ But **“God so loved”** the pitiful people of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son”** for them.

□ That brings us to Matthew 2:1-11. Carols and crèches and movies and story books portray the wise men crowding into the stable the night of Christ’s birth; however, we can say with certainty on the biblical evidence that they did not show up until later (up to two years later). Furthermore, they were not kings.

The Magi *were* unconverted Gentiles, and their meeting with the Messiah is a compelling witness to God’s great love for everyone in the world.

The vast majority of ancient Jews regarded gentiles as filthy, immoral, unclean dogs, and did not hesitate to call them that. To them, “gentile” meant *enemy, oppressor, alien*. First century Jewish males began each day by reciting this thanksgiving: **“Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has created me a human and not a beast, a man and not a woman, an Israelite and not a gentile.”**

To be sure, the Old Testament prophets foretold the day when Gentiles would receive God’s salvation and come under his Law. However, no first century Jews chose those texts as their personal favorites. Those prophecies did not fit with their worldview, and they did not know what to do with them. And so those texts were generally ignored.

Individual Gentiles could convert, and a few did. But the process was arduous, and the Jewish community made no effort to attract converts.

The ruler of the universe did not bless these magi by creating them Israelite, nor did they submit to the strenuous conversion process. They came from a land of filth, immorality, uncleanness. Regardless of their personal virtues they embodied the enemy, the oppressor, the alien.

The wise men represent the utterly unworthy, the completely contemptible, the entirely unfit, the scum of the earth who are so low you have to dig up to bury them.

★ Yet **“God so loved”** the undeserving of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son”** for them!

“God so loved” the respectable, as one might expect. God also **“so loved”** the despised, the pitiful, and the undeserving people of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son”** for them, too!

Allow me to share three observations.

1st, **“God so loved the world.”** No one’s sin is so egregious that God has not given his one and only Son for them.

This is good news, brothers and sisters! Some of us might see ourselves as the “respectable,” the good people of the world, and maybe we are – at the moment, or on the surface. Yet there is very little distance between people who are admirable and worthy and those who are despicable and unworthy, {Ro 3:23} **“for all have sinned and sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (including us!).

2nd, **“God loved the world”** and he calls us to do the same, without exception. You may be able to identify a group or individual whom God should excuse you from loving – but God cannot, does not, will not.

This is good news, brothers and sisters! Our gracious God never requires anything of us without also helping us to do it. The same God who **“so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”** will freely provide us with every resource we need to heed his call.

3rd, because **“God so loved the world”** we need never doubt his love for us. It does not matter who you are or what you have done: God **“gave his one and only Son”** for you.

This is good news, brothers and sisters! In the end, none of us are worthy of God’s amazing gift of life and salvation in Jesus Christ. None of us deserve God’s love.

And yet it is poured out for us. All we have to do is receive it.

This is the word of the Lord!