

John 3:16

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

God Keeps His Promises

I.

Remember, there is a lot to unpack in the gospel in a nutshell. We skim over the passage so quickly because we know it so well, but there is more than meets the eye, especially if we just take a little time to contemplate all this short passage has to say.

To recap: “For.” The first word of the passage looks back on what came in the first 15 verses in John chapter 3. In fact, you could look back further and find that the little word “for” really looks back on everything God told his people in the past. That’s a hint, by the way, of what we will be looking at today. The second word of the passage is “God.” God is the One who requires perfection of people, but God is also the God of full and faithful love. “So loved.” The God of full and faithful love is the God who made possible our redemption because he had great love. And who was that love for? It was for “the world.” God’s plan was put in place to cover the sins of every human being, not just a select few.

There. That brings us to today’s group of words in the gospel in a nutshell.

II.

Anticipation. That’s what the season of Advent is all about. You anticipate Christmas. Perhaps there are already gifts, wrapped and waiting, under the Christmas tree. You don’t know what’s inside the packages marked with your name, but you are brimming over with excitement as you wait for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to find out.

That kind of anticipation is what believers in Old Testament times had to go through. Their wait wasn’t over in four weeks’ time, however, as ours is at the end of the Advent season. They waited and waited. For centuries. Sometimes even the wait between prophets who added to the body of knowledge in the prophecies concerning the coming Savior was decades.

The Old Testament prophets themselves didn’t know what to expect. Isaiah said in last Sunday’s Old Testament Lesson: “A shoot will spring up from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1, EHV). I would be surprised if I could talk to Isaiah and he were to tell me that he had completely understood the words God gave him to write down as soon as he recorded them for generations to read. But think of how comforting these words must have been to Jeremiah as *he* wrote what God told him to say: “Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the good promises that I have spoken to the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 33:14, EHV).

Jeremiah said: “They know that I am the LORD, who shows mercy, justice, and righteousness on earth” (Jeremiah 9:24, EHV). The people knew from the prophets that God would be both merciful and just, and that he would show righteousness on the earth.

All the Old Testament believers could do was wait.

It’s hard to wait. The Psalmist says: “Out of the depths I have called to you, O LORD” (Psalm 130:1, EHV). Sometimes all we have is the promise, and it hurts.

No doubt you can think of times in your life when all you had was the promise. All you could do was cry out of the depths. Do you recall the loneliness? The frustration? The

anger? The doubt? Maybe you even had guilt that you were feeling those feelings. How can God love me when I feel like this?

For many people the Christmas season is painful every single year. It brings back all the memories of the losses and frustrations of life. Many people can't wait for Christmas to be over each year. They feel that on the outside they must show joy and good cheer, but on the inside they are trying to deal with the pain. "I don't have the perfect life everyone else seems to have. I can act it, but I don't have it. I'll just fake it so that you don't know what I'm really feeling."

So it goes....year after year. Will the pain ever end? Will Christmas ever pass? Christmas is the time of greatest depression, loneliness, and suicide in our society.

Sometimes all we have is the promise. We wait. That's all the prophets and the Old Testament people had—the promise. They waited. The time came.

"He gave" (John 3:16, EHV). Remember that passage from Jeremiah? He spoke of the Lord who shows mercy, justice, and righteousness on earth. They trusted and looked forward to that, but they didn't understand. They didn't know that this would be for more than just their own nation. They didn't know that it would be for all nations and for all eternity. They didn't know how freely God would make it available and how richly and generously he would dispense it.

IV.

What did God give? "His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16, EHV). It turns out, what God gave is not a "what," but a "who." The NIV translated: "his One and only Son." There's nothing wrong with that translation. It speaks to the Son's uniqueness. The Evangelical Heritage Version chose to go the way of the Nicene Creed, which speaks of Jesus being "begotten of the Father from eternity." Translating "his only-begotten Son" emphasizes that this unique quality between Father and Son existed from eternity and is unchanging.

All those prophets anticipating the Messiah to come didn't know or understand any of *this*. They didn't know that the Messiah would be God himself. They didn't have or understand the concept of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so they didn't realize that the second person of the Trinity would take on human flesh and live like one of us to fulfill the Father's grand plan for salvation. But that's who he is and that's what he did.

"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4, EHV). The prophets and people of the Old Testament had not been privileged to know exactly when or exactly how God would fulfill his promises. They simply had to trust that he *would* keep his word. They could look back on the things that *had* happened in the lives of God's people and trust that he would continue to be faithful to them in the future, even as he had been in the past.

God's times will fully come in your life, too. God sees you through the good times and bad. You don't always see how it will end...or when...but trust that he knows, and he cares.

He has taken care of your greatest need. He sent his only-begotten Son for the world—for you—to take your sins and pay for them on the cross.

Trust him and his love and his will and his goodness for the rest of your life, too.

Recognize the hurting people around you this year at Christmas, and the Advent season leading up to it. See their special pain and help them endure it. Tell them the great Christmas truth: God kept his promises from the Old Testament. God sent his only-begotten Son. God keeps his promises to all who wait on him—in the fulness of time, in the most unexpected ways. He still sends his Son. Amen.