

“Embrace Jesus”
Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:1-5 and 10-18
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Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

John 1:1-5 and 10-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” ’) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

“Embrace Jesus”

Pastor Tom Steagald’s friend’s grandfather was a passionate preacher, stern and strict. The gospel he preached was uncompromising, and he preached it with thunder, lightning and hellfire. The preacher had two children, one of them a daughter, who in the course of time was found to be pregnant. She was unmarried, and unsure as to whom the baby’s father might be. The preacher was furious—and also deeply wounded. He kicked her, immediately, out of the house, and did not speak

to her again. She had had fallen short of her father's expectations. The preacher drowning in grief knew his anger and failure to forgive was wrong...but all of it was hidden under his hard shell of his uncompromising theology. So his daughter was out on her own. Rejected she found a place, somewhere to bring forth a child. And some days after that, long months later, in fact, she came home, in hopes of coming home again. She and her child stood at the door and knocked, hoping to find forgiveness and shelter under her father's roof. His wife answered the door when her daughter knocked, went in and told her husband, the preacher, that his daughter had come home. He did not speak, just turned his chair away from his wife and his back to the front door where his daughter stood weeping, cradling her baby. The preacher's wife, the girl's mother, went back to the door and took the child from her daughter's arms. She walked back into the room where the stern preacher sat with his arms folded. She put the baby in his lap, and she said, "This is your grandchild." Now it was the preacher who was weeping. He took hold of the child and rocked the baby for a while, the tears streaming down his face...just rocking and crying. It would be nice if the story ended there, if the baby and that moment had changed everything, had melted the preacher's heart and mended that poor family, so broken by anger and grief and shame. But the baby changed nothing; not really. For a moment...but then the moment was gone. There were tears but the tears did not cleanse the wounds or soften the preacher's hard heart. In fact he remained to the end of his days as stern as he ever had been, refusing to welcome home his daughter; when he died, they were still estranged.

Pastor Tom preached, "The baby changed nothing, really... and let those with ears, hear. Let those with eyes, see: what God is doing. God is trying to put a baby on the world's lap, in hopes it will change us, really change us. God is trying to put a baby in the church's lap, too, in hopes we will not only shed a tear or two over the beauty of the angel's song—"Peace on earth, and goodwill among all God's children"—but also that we will begin to live into that benediction, let go our anger, our fear and our shame so that we can embrace the Baby."

Christmas is not over rather Christmas is God's invitation to refresh our relationship with God; to embrace the baby, God with us; to embrace the light and let go of our darkness so we can shine; to embrace love for all people, God and ourselves.

All of us sin. We all make mistakes like the stern preacher. First John states, **1 John 1:8-9** "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to God, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." Will you embrace the baby Jesus so you can be forgiven, healed and drawn into the light?

Just eleven verses into the gospel of John we are asked to make a vivid choice: to either embrace Jesus, to accept the Word and participate in a continually renewing relationship with God or reject the baby and receive little of the life and light God offers. The gospel of John lays out a sharp contrast: the tragedy of Christmas is some people will refuse to embrace the baby Jesus; the joy of Christmas is some people will embrace Jesus and become new people and enter into a new life with God. The gospel puts it this way. **John 1:select verses "Jesus was in the world, the world was there through Jesus, and yet the world didn't even notice. Jesus came to his own people, but they didn't want Jesus. But whoever did want Jesus, who believed Jesus was who he claimed, and would do what he said, God made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten. The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son. Generous inside and out true from start to finish, full of grace and truth."**

Perhaps you are thinking, "I have embraced Jesus so I am in good shape." Certainly the stern preacher partially embraced Jesus. He believed in Jesus. God forgave him and he is in heaven today. The stern preacher served all his life and did abundant wonderful ministries in Jesus name.

He served with great passion and blessed numerous people. Yet he was unable to fully embrace Jesus. He had that one dark, joyless area of his life, his relationship with his daughter and grandchild. Jesus full of grace and truth longed to heal that relationship and restore love and joy to the family however the stern preacher pushed Jesus away from that corner of his life.

Where is your dark corner? What sin are you holding onto that is hindering you from fully embracing Jesus? How can you let that dark area go and embrace Jesus so God's light can illumine you today? The joy of Christmas in time will be fully realized. Notice the tense on the verbs. **John 1:5 "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."** Jesus is shining today and will shine forever. Jesus wants to shine light into your dark areas. All the darkness from the beginning of time through eternity tried to overcome Jesus but the darkness did not overcome Jesus, past tense. In time all your darkness will be overcome with the light. The question Christmas asks is, will you fully embrace Jesus today, so you can be renewed and joyful today or will you procrastinate, only partially embracing Jesus, pushing God's healing grace away from certain hurts?

In the dazzling glory of God's light we often become aware of our darkness. We tend to be fearful. Yet over and over again in the Christmas account and throughout the Bible we are told, "do not be afraid". The angels said "Do not be afraid," then sang, "for I bring you good tidings of great joy for all the people..." Did you truly hear that deep down in your soul? Do not be afraid? For God has given us God's Son, a Child, for all the people. God has put a baby in your lap, in hopes that you will welcome Jesus deeper and deeper into your heart so you can receive from Jesus fullness, more and more of God's grace, truth, power, glory and every spiritual blessing. God wants to be born again in you and in your thoughts, feelings, service, career, politics, giving in every aspect of your life. God did, and is doing, amazing things in the world, and everyone is invited to hold the Child. Yes there is plenty of darkness around us, in others and in ourselves, however Christmas reveals that God will renew us with hope, peace, love and joy that no darkness can overcome.

The gospel of John reveals the power of the baby, of the Word, of Jesus, to disperse all our darkness, to atone for all our sins, to fully identify and relate to all our struggles, pain and grief. John explains how Jesus was fully God and at the same time fully human. Fully God to have the power and authority to pay the debt of all our sins. Fully human to be our representative, to make atonement on our behalf.

John describes Jesus as the Word meaning speech and reason. Revealing how God is lovingly communicating with you, longing to be in relationship with you. The Word is the agent of revelation and salvation that took on flesh to reveal God's grace, God's forgiveness that can forgive everything and redeem everyone and everything. The Word is present physically in our flesh. God is with us. The Word is God's self communication in our very midst as one of us. The Word is how God communicated through the prophets. The Word is creative, wise, the source of all goodness, love, joy, peace and beauty. We are created in the image of the Word so all pure science, philosophies, inventions, fine art, music all flows from the Word. We are the image of the Word made to receive abundant life by being in relationship with God, by fully embracing Jesus. The Apostle Paul declares every blessing is accessible through the Word.

The gospel of John is full of accounts of how Jesus transformed tragedy into joy, how darkness was dispersed by light. For unto us a child is born. Will you fully embrace Jesus everyday in 2011 and beyond? Amen.