

DIVINE LOVE AND GRACE

God's Astonishing Love
John 3:16–17; Romans 8:35–39



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Every Christmas we hear the familiar story—so familiar that we almost move our lips when we hear the words. There's a virgin, a baby, a bewildered husband, a dirty manger, a few shepherds, some traveling magi, and that's all there is to it. Right?

Wrong!

Christmas represents the most magnificent message that's ever been told, which so far exceeds the details we have memorized. Unfortunately, most people don't pause to think about the significance of the message.

Yes, a baby boy was born to a virgin in a dirty stable, but this baby boy was not just any baby. He is God in the flesh—Immanuel, God with us. This message will explore the *reason* for Christ's coming: *God's astonishing love*.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Origin of God's Astonishing Love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8–9, 16)

Let's cut to the chase. The reason for the Christmas story and the mysterious baby born in the manger comes down to three words: *God's astonishing love*. To drive home the importance of believing these words, we must reexamine one of the most familiar verses in the whole Bible, John 3:16, and connect it to the birth of Messiah.

Before God *gave* His only Son to be born on Christmas day, He *loved*. “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Because love is an essential part of His character, God's love is unconditional. Love is just as much a part of God's being as holiness, truth, justice, eternity, goodness, faithfulness, and all the rest of His attributes. Out of His being, God *loved*, and therefore, He *gave*.



Quotable

*To you who have
lost hope, who
have shame,
heartbreak, and
a trail of wrongs:
God loves you.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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God's Astonishing Love *John 3:16–17; Romans 8:35–39*

2. The Extent of God's Astonishing Love (Romans 8:35–39)

Many people, even some Christians, have a twisted view of God, believing that He is a gigantic, angry deity, roaming heaven with a big club, looking for somebody to smash because he or she has stepped out of line. That's not the God Christians serve. His love penetrates to the depths of our sin and encompasses our past and our future. We all have moments when we lose our temper, those times when we are really unlovely. At times we refuse to forgive, hold revenge in our hearts, or worse. God's love covers all of that and so much more.

God's love extends to every person around the world, from those with great notoriety and wealth living in big cities, to the unknown and poor in the middle of nowhere. God's unconditional love for the whole world resulted in the sacrifice of His Son, with whom He shared perfect fellowship and love from eternity past. And nothing will ever cause God to withdraw His love from those who believe in Jesus.



A CLOSER LOOK

A God with Two Faces?

Some have observed that God as He revealed Himself in the Old Testament is One of stern justice and capricious wrath, bordering on the thin edge of madness, while God as He revealed Himself in the New Testament is loving and merciful, a grandfatherly type who smiles a lot but doesn't quite know why. Both extremes distort God's character revealed in Scripture.

This dual vision of God is not only unbiblical (Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17) it reduces God to a god (with a lowercase "g") . . . which is to say it reduces Him to no god at all, because it denies His unchanging nature or reduces Him only to a god of our making. The problem lies not in the reality of God but in the perspective of those who cannot see God's love in the Old Testament and His justice in the New Testament. Many have wrongly concluded that love and justice are mutually exclusive. But justice is not the opposite of love (nor is hate), indifference is. (Even hatred recognizes the existence and worth of another, at least worthy of time and negative attention.) Indifference treats another as a nonperson, as nonexistent; justice treats another as worthy of redemption, as worthy of love. Justice may seem a cruel cut, but the cruelest cut is the cut that never comes—that is indifference. God's love is too great not to cut out our sin with the scalpel of justice. He cannot be indifferent and let us die from the cancer of sin.

We may take God as He really is or reject Him on the same basis, but the one opinion not open to us is to create Him as we'd like Him to be. He is and has always been the God of love and justice in both the Old and New Testaments.



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LET'S LIVE IT

Many people, Christians or not, live their lives feeling defeated, guilty, and unloved by God. For those of us who know God's love, now is the time to meditate on it and thank God for it. For those who have never known unconditional love, make this Christmas the one in which you truly accept God's astonishing love through Jesus Christ.

Do you truly believe that God's unconditional love surpasses your deepest pain and your darkest sin? If so, take some time to thank God for His love. If not, what is preventing you from receiving His love this Christmas?



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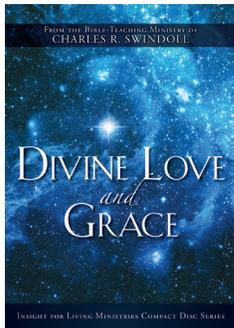
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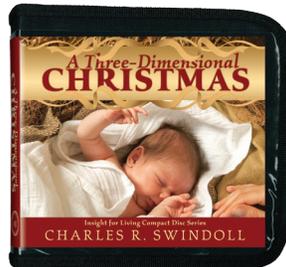
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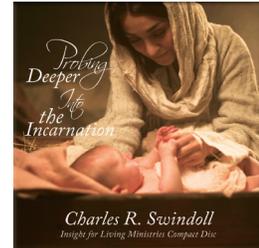
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DIVINE LOVE AND GRACE

Christ's Audacious Grace

John 1:14–17; Romans 8:1–2, 31–34



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Every Christmas we all receive two amazing gifts from the Creator. First, we receive a reminder of God's astonishing, unconditional love. Second, we receive a reminder of Jesus Christ's audacious grace. In this message, let's focus on the grace Christ demonstrated on the first Christmas day so long ago.

Jesus came to this earth, but we didn't deserve His visit. Jesus modeled mercy, but we don't deserve His pardon. Jesus set aside all His glory, took humanity upon Himself, and suffered a death that we deserved. Jesus extends forgiveness, doesn't hold our failures against us, and promises us eternal life. The grace Jesus gives stands in stark contrast to the tit-for-tat world in which we live. This Christmas, let's focus our attention on Christ's audacious grace.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Christ's Audacious Grace "In the Beginning" (John 1:1–4, 14–17)

It's easy for us to overlook Jesus' example of grace because we live in a world of such disgrace and unkindness. Though grace is supposed to characterize the people of God, very few nonbelievers look at the evangelical church as a place of grace. Instead, they often see legalism, infighting, and hypocrisy.

How can we get back to the foundational truth of Christ's grace? First, we must look at Christ's identity *before* He showed up in a manger several thousand years ago. It's interesting that the apostle John, unlike the other gospel writers, didn't include any of the details of Jesus' birth. Instead, He started at the beginning with "the Word," the Son of God, the Creator, dwelling in heaven with the Father and the Spirit. Then, the Word became flesh and moved into our dark, sinful neighborhood and demonstrated audacious grace.



Quotable

*The voices from
your past saying,
"You'll never
amount to much,"
are all silenced
by God's grace.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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John 1:14–17; Romans 8:1–2, 31–34

2. Christ's Display of Grace and Truth (Romans 8:1–2, 31–34)

Grace is the shocking reality and central truth of the Christmas message. Each year, Christmas should remind us that God dispenses gifts, not wages. Jesus embodies the perfect combination of grace and truth.

From nursery school on, we learn that *we get what we pay for, there's no such thing as a free lunch*, and other karma-based philosophies. Then Christ enters our reality and extends grace when we deserve punishment and life when we deserve death.

And not only do we need Jesus to deal with our sin, we also need Him to deal with our mortality. From the cradle to the grave, sin and death dog our steps. Try as hard as we can, we cannot escape. Then Christ comes, proclaiming the truth that He has conquered sin and death, and He invites us to accompany Him in His triumph!



GETTING TO THE ROOT

When God Emptied Himself

Not only did God the Father demonstrate His astonishing love by sending His Son; Jesus revealed His audacious grace by leaving the perfection of heaven and entering our dark world as a helpless baby.

To plumb the depths of Christ's grace in the incarnation, we have to get to the root of the original Greek. In Philippians 2:7, Paul said that in His incarnation, Jesus “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant” (NASB). The New Living Translation says He “gave up His divine privileges.” Paul used the Greek word *kenoo* to describe Jesus' voluntary resignation of His divine rights and abilities for a period of time.

The birth of Jesus was the most extraordinary evidence of God's love in human history. While Israel's high-born, well-educated elite advanced their status and pretended to seek God's favor, their Messiah quietly slipped into the world in the unassuming hamlet of Bethlehem, into the arms of a humble nobody named Mary. God not only became a baby, but He did it knowing that He would one day face death on the cross. And for every nanosecond of His earthly life, from conception to resurrection, He remained God. As a man, Jesus bowed to God the Father's will and emptied Himself of His own life so that those who believe won't have to face eternal death. And He asks us to follow in His grace-inspired, self-emptying footsteps each and every day of our lives.



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Christ's Audacious Grace

John 1:14–17; Romans 8:1–2, 31–34



LET'S LIVE IT

This Christmas, remember that the baby in the manger is the guardian of grace and the announcement of bondage-breaking truth. Christ was willing to risk everything, leaving the comfort of heaven, to reveal His audacious grace. To Him, there are no “nobodies” or “has beens.” Every person has intrinsic worth and is the object of His love, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

Just as Jesus has given us grace, here are two ways we can extend His grace to others this Christmas.

1. Express your words of love to someone who hasn't heard you say that you love him or her.
2. Extend a touch of grace to someone who would qualify as “among the least.”

Are there people in your life you find hard to love or difficult to forgive? Why? Pray that God would help you show them love and grace this Christmas.



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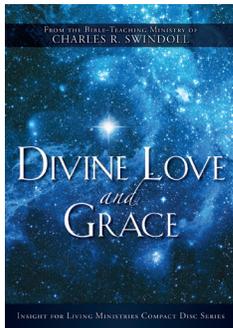
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Christ's Audacious Grace

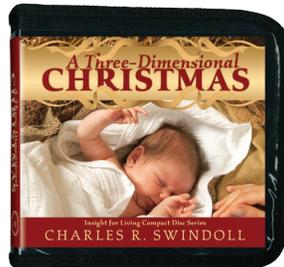
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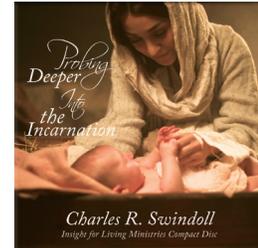
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