

**“The Best Gift Ever”, John 3:14-21, Ephesians 2:1-10 (09/12/21)**

A few years ago, Ran and I watched one YouTube video. It was about a surprise present from a husband for his wife. **(Slide 1)** It seemed that the wife wanted to raise a puppy, but for some reason, they could not do that. Finally, on Christmas Day, he prepared a cute puppy as a surprise Christmas gift for her, and his Christmas present made her very surprised and moved her to tears. She cried loudly and was very happy to have a new puppy.

Personally, I really wanted to raise a puppy— especially a black lab- at home, but unfortunately, Ran has a severe dog & cat hair allergy, so it is too much for her to live with a hairy puppy at home. Anyway, since I understand that really well, I tried to give up my wish to raise a puppy at home. However, raising a puppy at home has been on my mind as a hope for a long time, so every time I see a cute black lab in our neighborhood, I always ask her again, “I think if we raise a puppy, he can be the best friend for Caleb, but you know? I love you so much, so I can’t see you are suffering for Caleb’s best friend. So, I will tell him about no best friend at home.” Yes. I am a romantic guy always considering my wife more than my wish. Since we watch that YouTube video, every year on my birthday or Christmas, I speak to her in fun, “Ran, I just want you to know that I am totally ready to be very surprised and also I can cry louder than that lady. So, now you can give me a puppy as my special present.” If that happens it will be very surprising for me, and I bet I will cry louder. Pastor Ran and I have really different personal characters. Ran does not understand me well, because there was nothing that she wanted to have so eagerly, like me. However, there was one present that made her very surprised and cry for joy. It was her first Christmas gift from me.

**(Slide 2)** During that time, both of us were full time seminary students, it was an especially troubling financially time for me. However, I knew that she needed to buy a new wallet so I saved my lunch money to buy a wallet for her for our first Christmas after dating. Since she did not expect any gift from me, as soon as she opened the box, she was very surprised and cried. Later she told me that it was not her style at all but my love and thoughtfulness touched her heart. At that time, she realized that I was the one! Likewise, have you ever had a very surprising gift that you were really expecting for a long time? Or have you ever got a very surprising gift/ that you have never expected? What was your best gift you have ever received in your life? Or what was the most

surprising present that you have ever received in your life?

**(Slide 3)** Today's lessons in both John and Ephesians talked about the best gift God gave to us. John 3:16 said "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And Ephesians 2:8 said "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God —" "These two scriptures told us that Salvation & eternal life is the best gift that God gave us. But to take this best gift as our own, there is one condition that both scriptures emphasized. It is belief, faith. "We have been saved through faith", and "everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Actually, one thing that we are told the most frequently and importantly is about faith. And this faith means believing in the triune God, which is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**(Slide 4)** In the Bible, there are tons of verses talking about the importance and power of faith. For example, in John 14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me;" in Mark 9:23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes;" in Matthew 9:22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. If we only read those verses in the Bible, it looks like faith is the secret method makes all go well in our life. However, actually, there are difficult situations facing Christians, and we all know that life does not always go as we had hoped for. Therefore, many times, when we are confronted with hardship, we try to reproach ourselves with lack of faith, otherwise we cynically say that there is no power in faith or we blame a powerless God, and live following the way of a worldly and godless life. However, both sides come from a misunderstanding of faith or never experiencing the power of faith. Then, what is faith? Does faith have no actual power? Then, do we live by investing our time, gifts, presence, and effort for nothing? Why does it seem like our faith has no power in front of hardship? Then why does the Bible emphasize the importance of having faith in God?

To get this answer, we need to focus on what John 3:18 said, "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." There are two different kinds of people: those who believe, and those who do

not believe. Believers will not be condemned, but unbelievers are already condemned. Some people may misunderstand that divine judgment is having trouble, so they think they are sick or have a car accident because of their lack of faith. However, that is not true. Troubles can happen in everyone's ordinary life regardless of faith. What the scripture said in "Those who do not believe are condemned already" has a fundamental meaning. Since Jesus is the only savior as the Son of God, those who do not believe in him are totally separated from his work, salvation. This state – separation from God's salvation - means divine condemnation. This may hard to understand. We can see a lot of people who enjoy a happy life without faith. Then, why can unbelief because for divine judgment? To understand this, we have to have a concrete understanding of what John 3:16 said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

**(Slide 5)** In today's gospel reading, John spoke about "the believer" three times. In verse 15, "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." In verse 16, "everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" And in verse 18, "those who believe in him are not condemned." Salvation and having eternal life mean that we are saved from this world, which is everything that is not permanent. In other words, we have a new life in Christ Jesus. When we have faith, we need to focus on the one in whom we believe – Jesus Christ. In many ways we – believers- are very vulnerable, we are weak, we are tempted, we doubt, and we fall down. Therefore, to have true faith, we have to not focus on ourselves - the believer, but to focus on the object of our faith. Jesus Christ is not just a person who came to this world about 2000 years ago and made various powerful miracles and ended up dying on the cross. He is way beyond those historical facts. Having faith in Jesus Christ means believing in the triune God – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We believe the one who creates us, saves us, and sustains us. This God is the only source of our being, and the only foundation of everything that we have. Also, this God came into this world in the most humble way to save us and experienced all kinds of suffering and died on the cross, but was resurrected and ascended to heaven, but being present in us always as Spirit, and will come back again. If we believe this God, we will not be condemned, we will get wisdom to overcome all kinds of hardship, we will find real peace and comfort in the midst of sadness, we will find the truth in chaos, we will get back up again from falling, we will be resurrected from the dead and enjoy everlasting life. This is the power of faith in God.

**(Slide 6)** Let's come back to today's story about your best gift ever. I'd like to paraphrase it to you as a Christian that your most faithful gifts are from God and that your most meaningful faithful moment in your life is with God. Do you remember when you cried out because of joy, thanks, grace, and love from God during your faith journey? When is the time your heart is fulfilled with the Holy Spirit?

**(Slide 7)** John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, rather famously had a Holy Spirit moment that is often referred to as his "Aldersgate experience." Wesley records in his journal what happened on May 24, 1738: In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death". Have you had some similar spiritual experiences like John Wesley had?

Today is the Rally Sunday on which we celebrate and start all our new faithful year with church educational program. As the pastor and a faithful believer, I pray and hope that our children, youths, and the entire congregation will have a time to be filled with grace, love, hope and joy from God through this year's Sunday School.

**(Slide 8)** According to an African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child and apply it to the church that it takes a church to raise a faithful child! Let's remember to desire your faithful moment like John Wesley had and be thankful for this best gift which God has given the opportunity to us to raise faithful children together through the church. Even though God already gave us the best gift to us, we do not even know whether we have it or not, we do not appreciate it, we do not enjoy this joyfulness, thankfulness, and hopefulness. Just having a little bit longer life, more fame, and become rich cannot be the criteria of judging the happiness in our lives. Every day, by walking with God, realizing who is the one and the only source of our very lives, joy, and salvation, let us be thankful and rejoice in him. This is the real life in faith.

Praise God. Amen.