A Gift Worth Giving

December 15 & 16, 2012

God is the ultimate gift giver. He gave us the one and only perfect gift! It’s the gift you will never want to return!

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What was the one present you really wanted as a kid at Christmas? Some of you got exactly what you wanted. Most of us did get a gift that looks like any other. It’s wrapped up nicely. You’re excited. But when you open it up ... underwear and socks.

You may need it, but you don’t get too excited about it. The first Christmas was a lot like that. Jesus is the Gift the world desperately needed, but it went largely unnoticed. No one seemed too excited about Him.

John 3:16, For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

When Jesus was born, most of the world didn’t even notice that a present had been placed under the tree. Why was it so unnoticed? It wasn’t what people were looking for. It came in some unexpected way. The world should have stopped for this holy moment. But when you read the story, the wrapping paper wasn’t very impressive.

We’ve heard this story so often I’m not sure we stop and ask, “Why did this happen the way it did?” We see the story like a Norman Rockwell painting. Jesus is born to a poor virgin, she gave birth in a stable ... and she placed Him in a manger.

As we prepare for Christmas, let’s think about the uniqueness of Jesus and what makes Him a gift worth giving even though unexpected.

1. **We expect the Christmas story to be comfortable ... but He identifies with our struggles.**

   You’d expect Jesus to be born into a wealthy family and have a pretty comfortable existence ... but He was born to a poor family who struggled because He wanted to identify with us in our struggles.

   If a person has never struggled, they have a hard time identifying with people who live paycheck to paycheck. And, sometimes, we envision God on His throne, and He cannot really understand what we’re going through. He doesn’t quite get us. He hasn’t been through what we’ve been through. But that’s the unexpected gift of Christmas.

   Are you struggling financially? It’s a tough Christmas because you don’t have money for presents. But Jesus grew up in a very poor home. He was homeless as an adult ... “no place to lay His head.”

   You have some strained family relationships right now? You’re dreading the next couple weeks because you know it’s going to be tense. Jesus knows what it’s like.

   He came into the world the way He did so He could say to you, “I know what you’re going through.” Jesus went through this life in such a way that He could identify with our struggles.

   Hebrews 4:15, This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. And because He identifies with our struggles, Hebrews 4:16 says, So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most, because God knows what it’s like to struggle and hurt.

2. **We expect the Christmas story to be a recognition of royalty ... but He serves in humility.**

   Even with His birth, He shows us how we are to serve others. The surprise is not that the angels announced His birth, but who received the announcement—the lowly shepherds. The miraculous virgin birth is not the surprise, but the unexpected part is that God chose a poor uneducated teenager to be the mother of Jesus.

   God came into the world in humility so He could set an example for us to follow.

   Philippians 2:5-8, Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. (The Message)

   We all tend to think of how we’ll benefit from whatever gift we give. But Jesus came in such a way as to show us how to live. “He came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.”

3. **We expect the Christmas story to show His power ... but He demonstrates His love by His sacrifice.**

   The surprising details of this story are a demonstration of His love for you. God had the world at His feet, but He came as a helpless baby, born to a poor family and placed in a feeding trough. And that sacrifice is a statement of His love for you and me. The greater the sacrifice, the more clearly we understand His love.

   Close your eyes ... do you see the stable? (The size of a small shed.) Hear the noises of the animals? Smell the aroma? Picture a feeding trough, not an ornament. Picture the Son of God laid in the manger. Say to yourself, “He did this for me.” God knows what you’re going through. He has called us to serve ... God loves you very much.
1. What was the best unexpected Christmas gift you ever received? What was the worst?
2. As you look at the way people celebrate Christmas in our society, what is one thing that surprises or disappoints you? Why?

God has come to earth, and the world will never be the same again. Jesus has existed from the beginning of time. He was already in a place of heavenly glory, above all angels and all worlds. He didn’t have to leave that exalted position, but He chose to. The significance of His obedience throughout His life, death and resurrection is hard to fully comprehend. It is easy to grow so familiar with the story that we forget the cosmic impact His coming really had. God has come to man. He has reached out to us and offered us love, grace, forgiveness and redemption. We should be willing to do the same to others. That is the real meaning of Christmas.

John 3:16, Hebrews 4:15-16 and Philippians 2:5-8
1. From a spiritual perspective, what do you think is the most important aspect of God coming to earth in the form of a man? How does that reality impact you?
2. If the birth of Christ was this year, in our culture, what would you do in order to help people see the importance of this incredible event? What would you say? If you could post a message on Twitter, using only 140 characters, what would the message be? Can the significance of Christ’s birth be communicated in such a way? Why or why not?
3. Why did God choose to send His Son to the world in this humble way? What does that say about the nature of God?
4. Have you ever reflected on Jesus Christ’s place of heavenly royalty before He came to the earth? What must have been like? Can you think of an equivalent situation here, where someone would leave such an exalted place to dramatically humble themselves? What might that look like?

The four gospel stories each emphasize different aspects of Christ’s coming and His work on earth. Matthew repeatedly refers to Jesus as “the Messiah.” He was the one that Israel was waiting and hoping for. Mark shows that Jesus’ life, although relatively short, made a huge impact in definite ways. Luke shows us the humanity of Jesus. He can relate to our feelings and our problems. He faced difficulties that were part of daily living, but He lived an obedient and Spirit-controlled life. John shows us that Jesus was God from the very beginning. Jesus was wholly human and wholly God. It’s kind of hard to understand, but the four gospel writers help to paint a composite picture of Jesus. Together they show the enormity of what happened when God became man.

1. Matthew emphasized Jesus’ role as Messiah, the promised One of Israel. How can you relate to Jesus as the fulfiller of promises in your own life?
2. Notice the times the word “immediately” is used in Mark. Have there been times when you felt compelled to immediately respond to Jesus? Have there been times when you called out to Him and He immediately responded to you? How did those times impact you?
3. Luke shows us that Jesus and His family were affected by laws and decrees just like we are. How might this understanding of Jesus’ humanity help you to relate to Him?
4. Compare the first verses of John with your version of the Christmas story. How do they differ? How can reflecting on Christ being in existence from the beginning of time help expand your understanding of the significance of His birth?

This week take some time to think through the many aspects of the birth of Christ. What are some parts you haven’t really thought about before? Ask God to help you to be open to Him and the unexpected ways He invades our lives. Prayerfully look for ways you can share the wonderful gift of Jesus with someone who may be in need but not really expecting any help.

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