

Marinade 10: The Gift of God



“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.”

Luke 2:1

At the mall, the week before Christmas . . . what was I thinking!

All the hustling and bustling about . . . the time of year where it seems that someone has been handing out licenses legalizing pure shopping insanity!

Walking through the mall, I felt as if I had entered a fishbowl, as I was immediately caught up in a teeming school of people flowing mindlessly from storefront to storefront. I felt that I had gotten there at feeding time; it was like someone had tossed in some raw meat and I had entered into the middle of a feeding frenzy. People were running around with large lists of names, checking them off as they tossed new packages of matchbox toys and underwear in their carts.

I saw mothers asking their children, “Won’t Daddy like this?”

The shrill answers came: “No, Mommy! I wanna give ’im this!” However, Mom responded, with a bit of firmness and an “I know better” tone of voice, “Yes, he would . . .” and tossed her choice in the cart anyway, concluding, “It’ll be from you, sweetheart,” flashing a halfhearted smirk of victory over the child.

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Then there were the daddies. It's fun to watch the guys who are never in the mall during the year, especially when they get to that one certain part—you know the place; the place where they run past the door of Victoria's Secret so they won't be seen near it! "I wasn't in that store . . . I-I-I wasn't even looking!"

Ah, but then there are the panic-stricken ones. It's written all over their faces: "What do I get for her? What do I get Aunt Sue and Uncle George . . . and there's Sally at the office . . . and there's . . . and there's . . ." And on and on as the shock wave sets in! The shoppers' fear is written all over their faces and can be seen through their eyes as they march in rythym, as if someone is going to take their lives if they've forgotten at Christmas.

So many bitten by the same shopping virus. It honestly makes you wonder: what was the scene like in heaven, so many years ago? (Please don't think I am being irreverent here.)

Think about it for a moment. Allow yourself the opportunity to eavesdrop into heaven some two thousand years ago. There's God, muttering to Himself over in the corner of the room; rustling about in the closest; mumbling. Your hearing sharpens as you get closer, and you actually hear God reviewing His Christmas gift list. "Um, let's see, what am I going to get my little angels? Michael's first on the list; I'll get him a new set of glorious wings. He'll be trying them out soon."

He continues, "Now there's, oh yeah, Gabriel. Ha! Great idea, I'll get him a shiny new trumpet. He'll be needing it to announce the coming king. Now, who am I forgetting? Yes, I thought so, Lucifer. Oh my, there's this naughty-or-nice thing to deal with. Well, that settles it, a box of ashes for that rebellious young fellow."

Thinking He's done, you begin to back away when you hear Him exclaim, "Oh, wait, there's one more on the list; there's Mankind! What could I possibly get Mankind? Well, let's see, how about my creation, Earth, adorned with colorful trees and flowers and animals. Hmmm, no, they'll worship that. Maybe I could get them an automobile ... no, they'll worship that ... maybe I could get them a TV... no, they'll worship that too. Let's see; I could get them a fine leader ... no, they'll worship him and set him up as a king. *I'm King!*"

The thoughts are whizzing through God's head and He's speaking them aloud. "What do I get for people who are going to an eternal torment in hell? What are their basic needs? What can I possibly do that won't be forcing Myself on them? I want to give them a gift that will give them the opportunity of choice they so adamantly clamor for. I want to get them a gift that shows that I really care, a gift that demonstrates that I genuinely love them. One that I have thoroughly thought out. Hummmmm, let's see, I've got it . . . Jesus, can You step over here for a moment? I need to speak to You, please."

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Now, we well know that particular scene didn't really play out in heaven, because the Bible tells us that God knew before He even made the world that He was going to provide *Himself* a sacrifice! (Genesis 22:14.)

Let's take a look at how God gives gifts.

We cover familiar terrain as we read the nativity account of Dr. Luke, chapter 2, a very well-read and well-known portion of Scripture, especially at Christmastime. However, so often something gets missed as we read the account of Christ's birth. There are some obvious and not so obvious points that we should review.

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Looking back at Luke 2:1, we see a small hint of the details God took into account as He thought this gift out. We can stop off at all sorts of waypoints to uncover God's thought-out gift to us. For instance, what's so special about verse 2:2—"And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria?" For many, many years this particular text was a troublesome one because it didn't add up date wise with history as we knew it. It wasn't well-known that there was a second tax decree when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. As it turns out, the shovel of the archeologist saves the day. Recently discovered papyri noted that Cyrenius was governor: twice! Dr. Luke notes that this was his first tax decree. That little detail in the account gives us the ability, thousands of years later, to accurately locate Jesus's birth in history, warding off those who believe there are inaccuracies in the biblical account and offering us one more reason for our solid faith!

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Christmas gift of God to man was sent special delivery to Bethlehem.

Another thoughtful detail: the royal Jesus in His not-so-royal surroundings, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, responding to the mooing of the cows and the bleating of the sheep ... why wasn't He born in a palace like all the other kings? Why a stable? Why is his first crib a trough animals eat from and slobber on?

WHY A STABLE? WHY IS HIS
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The predicted and prophesied Messiah was delivered to mankind all wrapped up as the first Christmas present ever presented (albeit in swaddling clothes). The first

Here's a possible answer: who can relate to royalty? Only those of royal bloodlines. More of us—nearly all of us!—can relate to a king who was born in rough

circumstances, one who has “been there, done that.” Whatever it is that you are going through, how can an earthly king relate to that unless he has had those humble beginnings? You see, God has even thought that part out!

The sleepy-eyed shepherds get to play a role here also. There they were, minding their own sheep-tending business, probably watching over the sheep that were going to be used in the temple sacrifices, when all of a sudden, in what was the first Christmas choir program in history, the angels were telling them in their own way that they could let the sheep go—temple sacrifices wouldn’t be required any longer, as the Lamb of God had been born in Bethlehem. In fact, the angels urge them, go in and see Him!

In the meantime, God maneuvered the heavens to allow the appearance of a brilliant celestial object (a star?) so dazzling that it would draw men from the East to come visit. It’s interesting to note that as they arrived, they too had gifts ... they brought gifts to the Gift!

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Something stirs inside us as we see their gifts for Jesus. What did they know that the others didn’t? Did they know the prophetic Scriptures so well that their gifts reflected their knowledge and understanding of them?

They brought Him gold. Fine, gold was a symbol of His kingly role.

They brought frankincense. Okay, it’s a very expensive incense that symbolized His priestly role and even his divinity.

But interestingly enough, they also brought myrrh. Why myrrh? After all, as we’ve already noted, myrrh was used for embalming the dead. What did they know about this Gift to mankind?

In the movie *The Christmas Box*, the plot centers around mankind getting the purpose of God’s gift to man. A recurring question

brought up in the movie is, “What was the first gift given at Christmas?” And while the young man in the movie flippantly says “Love,” he is only partially right.

But then he discovers that the first gift given at Christmas was Jesus: because of love! Then he reads John 3:16, and it all comes together for him:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The famous John 3:16! (KJV)

GOD LOWERED HIMSELF
SO THAT MAN MIGHT BE
LIFTED UP.

God gave the first Christmas present ever, and it wasn't wrapped in shiny paper nor tied up with a bow, but wrapped in swaddling strips of

cloth, in a barn, in an animal's feeding trough. God lowered Himself so that man might be lifted up.

And man! Did God think this one out! His is a gift that is really many gifts wrapped in one. With one gift, we receive so many gifts. Here are a few:

First—We receive the gift *of* God. In John 4:10, Jesus was speaking to the lady at the well, and He asked her for water. When she hesitated and began to argue with Him, He said, “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.”

Second—We receive the gift of salvation. As we mentioned before regarding John 3:16, God's gift of His Son allows us to receive the gift of salvation.

Third—We receive the gift of faith. Ephesians 2:8 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from

yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Paul tells us that by grace we are saved through *faith* . . . which is a gift from the Gift!

Fourth—We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:38 we read, “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

Fifth—We receive various gifts from the Holy Spirit. “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:4).

Do your own word study on the “gift of God,” and you will see the many, many gifts from the one Gift swaddled in a manger—the gift of Jesus the Christ!

There’s something very significant about gifts. When you offer one, you usually don’t expect to reveal the cost. This past Christmas, I found myself concentrating on removing the price tags off the packages as I was wrapping them . . . sometimes because I didn’t want people to know how *little* I had paid! It made me think that God was not ashamed to tell us that His gift to us cost Him dearly. His Son, hanging on a cross, dying in our place, for us to refuse or accept—this was a very costly gift!

Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (KJV)

On Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, we’ll be spending time shredding wrapping paper to bits, tearing into boxes that have been so carefully wrapped . . . and we will be so absorbed into ourselves. “What am *I* getting?” “Oh *I* can’t wait . . . O-O-O.” Sadly, very few of us will even think about the gift that was placed in a manger, wrapped in dull, unadorning covers.

Even sadder, though is that the gift of God will be left unopened by many! In so many people’s lives, it is usually the last one remaining under the tree. The thought is that maybe someday, I’ll reach for it and open it up. For some people, “some-day” never comes.

BUT THE GIFT OF GOD IS
ETERNAL LIFE THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD!

Have you ever had a gift given to you that left you speechless? One that was indescribable? One that clamped your jaw tight and you just couldn't say anything? If you did not react the same way to the gift of Jesus, perhaps it's because you haven't recognized the value of this gift of God.

What value is there in this gift of eternal life? Well, let's say you received a tie for Christmas, value about twenty dollars. Or you received a diamond bracelet, valued at three hundred dollars. However, some of you received a Boeing 787 Dreamliner, valued at two hundred million dollars. Each of these items has a price relative to its market value. But what about Jesus? What would His relative market

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value be? What price or relative market value does eternal life in heaven have? One thing is for sure—everybody will receive “eternal life,” but not everybody will spend it in the same place!

The apostle Paul describes this as an “unspeakable, jaw-dropping, off the charts” kind of gift (2 Corinthians 9:15). Remember, this is the same Paul/Saul of Tarsus, who was killing people who had accepted that same gift in their lives. Now, the penitent Paul is Praising the gift as the gift to beat all gifts!

In that humble beginning, in a stable sprinkled with straw and crowded with curious onlookers, glowing candles over in the corner cast a foreboding shadow. Along with the shadows of cows and sheep and people, stood the ominous shadow of the cross. A shadow that the young Christ would always see as He looked over His shoulder. From the crèche to the cross, He is the gift of God to mankind.

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The tree is taken down; the last pieces of pine needles and tinsel have been vacuumed up; this year's Christmas melee is over

... but in some people's lives, there remains one solitary Gift left unopened.

The gift of life . . . eternal life.

A costly, precious gift . . . expensive because it was paid for not with money, but with a life!

The tree is gone, all remnants of Christmas have been stored away until next year, the season is all wrapped up, except for the one gift that remains. And God wonders, what will it take?

If you and I were to see a gift left under the tree for someone we loved, a gift that we had thought out, paid a dear price for, lovingly wrapped up and offered unconditionally, and the recipient refused it because they simply didn't want to surrender all the fun of their lifestyle ("You mean give up the fun of my measly seventy years on earth for eternity in heaven? Sounds like religion. No way!"), you and I would walk away dejected. Perhaps even feeling rejected. Shucks, maybe we'd even reach out and take the gift back and say, "I'll just give it to someone who really deserves it, or someone who will appreciate it better. I'll show you!"

But not God!

He continues to patiently hold out the gift to all who will receive it. Now is best! Later is okay. But to refuse is disaster.

During the Christmas season, don't be fooled by jolly old men in red pajamas. Instead, remember the gift of God, a gift that has many gifts that come with it. Truly a gift that keeps giving!

And give God a gift in return ... *your* heart and your life! Why not? He's already paid for it. That's tantamount to me handing my son some cash and asking him to buy me a gift with it, then saying it's from him!

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Man cannot fully fathom the value of what God gives. The gospel is a gospel of giving and forgiving. You can sum it all up in these few words: "To whom God gives freely, He also forgives."

This wasn't a one-time, soon-to-be tossed gift, but one that had a destiny. Can there be any more perfect a gift than the one God has given us? He was born to die. The amazing purpose of His birth was that He was born solely to become a sacrifice.

Jesus represents to us a gift from God that hasn't worn out, will never wear out, won't rust, won't break, won't need replacement parts or spark plugs. It is a gift that continues to give life and hope to the downcast, the downtrodden, and the joyous alike.

Amazingly, for all its joy and glory and angels singing, this story had a sad beginning that leads to an equally sad ending as far as stories of human adventures go. Inasmuch as there was no room for Joseph and the soon-to-deliver Mary in the Bethlehem Inn, in essence no room for the Messiah, in the same way the world treats Jesus today. No room for the Messiah. The world has crowded Him out. There is time for business. There is time for pleasure. But there is no time for Jesus.

It would behoove us to ask ourselves today: have we left room in our hearts and in our holiday celebrations for Jesus? So often, I fear that if we were to search through the morning-after-Christmas wrapping paper, there, shoved in the trash can along with the crumpled paper and the torn bows would be Jesus, because He wasn't the center of the celebration.

What can you say about such a gift: it's unspeakable, it's indescribable! The gift of God becomes the hope of humanity! Doesn't that make you stop and think about the magnitude of such a gift, and wonder about the God who provided it? *The gift of life, in exchange for the life of the gift!*

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

2 Corinthians 9:15

Marinating Moments

1. In your own study time, grab a concordance and go through the Bible to see if you can find all the mentions of “gift” or “gifts.” How many of them tie to God as the gift-giver? Have you received these gifts from Him?
2. What is it that is crowding Christ from your life? During the holidays in particular, what pushes Him out? Do these things hold true throughout the year? What can you do to change that?
3. Search through the Scriptures and discover five verses that speak of God’s love for us. Write them down. Be prepared to meditate on them or share them with the group.