

“Gifts of God to Remember at Christmas”

Matthew 2:1-12

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶“‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (ESV)

Today I want to look at some of the gifts that God gives to us that we can remember at Christmas, and I want to start by just getting you to reflect upon some of the movies you may have seen. I understand that as a congregation once in awhile you hear about movies. So, I thought I might be remiss if I didn't at least start that way. One of the things that has impressed me as I've watched a few of these is how many Christmas movies there are. Channel after channel, theme after theme. But the incredible thing that they all have in common, whether you like “Miracle on 34th Street,” or “It's a Wonderful Life,” or “Perfect Christmas,” or “Christmas in Cana,” or whatever, all of those movies end in a fantastic way after two hours. It's incredible! In two hours time they have absolutely resolved everybody's problem in that movie. I actually think that that's part of the caricature that gets imbedded in our lives. It makes it so difficult for us as believers at times to rejoice in Christmas because we know that our world is not like that. Our world is not made perfect having watched a Hallmark movie. It doesn't always work out the way it ends in a movie. And as a result of that, sometimes we forget many things that God does for us because of Christ, and I want to take a few minutes this morning to list some of them.

I'm going to go through some of these things very quickly to get us to think about the many things that God gives to us because of Christ, and I hope that they'll begin to create a sense of the wonder and awe and the overwhelming grace that has been poured out to us because of Jesus. Not just in one way, but in a complexity of ways that God has come to become flesh and touch our lives. I'll give you these by a verse, and then by a point, and then I'll talk for just a minute and try to say where we are along the trail of these twenty-one points.

Number one, the verse is Deuteronomy 12:10. The point of this verse is that God wanted His gifts to His people to give them rest from their enemies, or a simple way to put that is, “peace.” We know from the Christmas decoration, that angels, that's one of the central things that God did in the proclamation of the angels. “And on earth peace toward men on whom His favor rests.” Peace is a central theme through the scriptures. Deuteronomy 12:10 says this,

¹⁰When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you so that you live in security. . . (NASB)

One of the things that God always had in mind from the beginning is for His people to live in peace. Some of our ancestors, our forefathers came to this country because they wanted to worship God in peace without religious persecution. It became a hallmark of our constitution as well. But the point is in the Old Testament God provided a land, the Promised Land, to be a foreshadowing, a taste of God's desire that His people be able to live in peace. How many of us this Christmas have wanted different things in our life to be at peace? God wants that for us as foreshadowed in Jesus. It says in Isaiah 9,

⁶. . . His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor . . . Prince of Peace. (NASB)

And His coming was intended to bring that to us. Jesus said, “Peace I leave you. Not as the world gives, give I unto you. But nevertheless peace I’m giving you. Therefore do not let your hearts be troubled.” [John 14:27]

For the second point, the verse is Job 5:10. I thought this appropriate living in Seattle. One of God’s gifts is rain. Job says,

¹⁰*He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields. (NASB)*

Having lived in Australia for almost thirteen years, my wife and I can tell you what a gift rain is. Do you let the water run when you’re brushing your teeth? Don’t do that. Do you make sure all your spigots are off unless it’s sub-zero weather and then you have to let them leak a little bit, and then you’re worried about all that stuff? But apart from that, do you treasure and value rain? We lived in a sunburnt country where you left the bath water in the tub in order to water the gardens. You caught the rain off your drain spouts of your house in order to preserve the water. You saved the water in the washing machine that spilled over into the tub to save the water. Okay, the environmental speech is over. But water is a gift. In the Great Northwest, one of its beauties is because it is so resplendently covered with rain so much of the year.

Number three, another gift of God, Job 5:18, is a relief from suffering. And remember Job, no one suffered more than he did except Jesus. Job says,

For He inflicts pain, and gives relief; He wounds, and His hands also heal. (NASB)

Even in the midst of his worst suffering, Job was hanging out for a time that was going to come, that God was going to bring healing to his life. And guess what? Isaiah chapter 53, when the prophet Isaiah is talking about the suffering servant who was to come, says this, “By his stripes we are . . .” what? “Healed.” Part of the Christian Gospel says that while we presently suffer, it shall not be so forever. For our God will bring about a day when He comes back, when He will raise us from the dead, and one of the things He’s going to do is wipe every tear from our eye and remove all sources of grief and sorrow, and there shall be no longer any mourning or pain. Relief from suffering is a gift, and those of you that have suffered much also know that in the midst of your suffering God has brought you tons of relief.

Fourth gift, Job 33:4, the very air that we breathe, the very air in our lungs is a gift from God.

⁴*“The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life. (NASB)*

Job is reflecting back on that picture in creation where God had formed Adam out of the dust of the earth and He breathed life into him and Adam became a living being. The Bible says that Jesus does the same thing spiritually to us, breathing in us His spirit, pouring His Spirit into our lives to bring us eternal life from God. The very breath in our lungs is a gift. When we woke up this morning, none of us thought, “I need to breathe.” We just did, and it was a gift from our Father in heaven.

Gift number five, Psalm 68:35, the gift of God’s strength and power for His people.

³⁵*O God, You are awesome from Your sanctuary. The God of Israel Himself gives strength and power to the people. Blessed be God! (NASB)*

This is what Jesus said the Spirit of God would do when He was poured out upon the church, “Wait until the Spirit comes for you shall receive power from on high.” And it was the pouring out of God’s strength and power to His people that transformed a rag-tag bunch of denying disciples into a group of men and women that transformed the Roman Empire. Strength and power to His people.

We’re at gift number six. God also gives grace and glory to His church, Psalm 84:11,

¹¹*For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. (NASB)*

One of the promises that God makes is that He doesn't withhold any good thing from us, but He gives us the grace that we need in the midst of the things that are put on our plate to deal with, and through that He gains glory for Himself. Jesus said in John 17, "I have given my life for them, but I am doing so, so that they might share in my glory. I have glorified your name with the church and now I'm about to glorify your name with my death, and the glory that you've given me is now going to be in them." When was the last time you looked in the mirror and said, "I am here for the glory of God"? We are, and His glory is being seen in you.

Gift number seven, Psalm 119:130, is insight for the journey.

The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. (NASB)

The design of God's word, one of His expressed purposes for it is so that we might read and understand not only who God is and His character, but His will for our lives. And as we read God's word, as we ask His Spirit to open up our understanding to it, it gives us insight and direction for what we need to do. How many times have you wondered, "What on earth am I going to do?" And God tries to pop a verse in your brain or your heart or your soul to remind you of something, and you pushed that down and said, "Yeah, but not now"? "Oh, that's a good verse, but that's not applicable here." Who are you talking to? God is bringing things to remembrance to give you insight and direction and encouragement.

Proverbs 3:5 we all know,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. (NASB)

And that's where we spend most of our time, in our own understanding, trying to figure it out, trying to fix it, trying to make it work. The more we try the worse it gets, the more broken it is. And God says, "Trust me. This is my gift to you." Insight for the journey.

Number eight, one of God's gifts is freedom, Psalm 146:7. God is the one . . .

Who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free. (NASB)

At the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, He came into the temple and was handed a parchment of Isaiah and He unrolled it to the place where it says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach the good news to the poor, and he has anointed me to open the eyes of the blind, to give sight to those that are blind, open the ears of the deaf and to preach freedom to those who are in prison." Jesus came to set us free from sin, but also free from the bondage of thinking our circumstances are too much beyond His ability to deal with. We look at the life of Joseph. How many times was that young man imprisoned in different ways? As he had dreams, he was mocked by his brothers. His brothers finally threw him into a pit, then sold him to Egypt. They counted him as dead. He thought his life was over but God blessed him in prison. He was noticed in prison, brought out of prison, and all of a sudden he was falsely accused of adultery—back into prison. How many times did Joseph's hopes go up and down, up and down but God sets prisoners free. The Psalm says that God kept him in shackles until the word of the Lord proved him true [Psalm 15:17-19]. Then God set him free to be a source of salvation and grace to his people, the Israelites. God wants to not only free you. If you haven't given your life to Jesus, you will not find freedom anywhere else. But if you are the Lord's, know this, all of us have burdens, all of us have struggles, all of us have things that will from time to time enslave us. But Jesus wants to turn the key and let us out again because He came to set us free. That's His gift.

Number nine, one of God's gifts is also an ordered universe, Psalm 147:4.

⁴*He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. (NASB)*

Think about that. Every star in the universe has a direct name from God. God has named each one of them. Colossians chapter 1, speaking of Jesus, says that, “By him all things are held together. He is before all things, and in him all things are held together.” This universe, the order of it, it is not a result of chaos. It is not the result of time and chance. It is the direct result of the creative act of God. To bring about a universe in which we can live for His glory and in which His praise could be sung from our lips, and that’s a gift.

Number ten, wisdom in general is a gift from God, Proverbs 2:6.

⁶For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding. (NASB)

The Bible tells us in Acts chapter 17 as Paul was preaching to a pagan crowd, he said, “God gives rain to the just and unjust in order that men might seek him – in order that they might reach out for him.” And God’s general character of giving wisdom is for the pursuit of him. We see that especially in Jesus who as Paul says in I Corinthians 1, “Is the wisdom of God.”

Number eleven, grace to the afflicted, Proverbs 3:34. Listen to this.

³⁴Though He scoffs at the scoffers, Yet He gives grace to the afflicted. (NASB)

You know, Christmas is one of the hardest times of the year, isn’t it? It’s one of the most depressing times of the year. All that God would have us enjoy is often snuffed out by our trials, difficulties, end-of-year crisis, whatever. But guess what? One of God’s promises, one of His gifts is that He gives grace to the afflicted. God will not allow us to go on alone. His story will be told through His people. I’ve often been asked, and some of the things that Gloria and I have seen in our lives, “How is it that you guys are keeping on through what’s going on in your lives?” I’ve often asked that of other people who are struggling with things. But God gives grace to the afflicted at the moment in which that affliction requires it. You get your ticket punched to get on that train when it’s about to leave the station. You don’t get it punched ahead of time, but He will give grace to the afflicted.

Number twelve, Isaiah 14:3, one of God’s gifts is rest from harsh service and turmoil.

³And it will be in the day when the LORD gives you rest from your pain and turmoil and harsh service in which you have been enslaved. (NASB)

You will see His hand in your life. Jesus said in Matthew 7, “Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Rest from our turmoil, rest from our trials, rest from our harsh service. There’s a scripture that says that God understands what we are going through and He does not put on us more than we are able to bear. He gives grace in the midst of hard service.

Number thirteen, one of God’s gifts is found in Isaiah 40:29.

²⁹He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. (NASB)

Paul says in Philippians chapter 4, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” In fact he says, “I can do this and no matter what state I am found I have learned to be content in any state” – in Florida, in Washington, Colorado, and New South Wales. Strength and grace and power.

Number fourteen, resurrection life, John 5:21,

²¹“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.

Eternal life. The apostle Paul says that that starts now. When God pours out His spirit in our life, that resurrection life starts to work in us now. One of the Proverbs says, “Don’t stand outside a righteous man’s house. Though he falls seven times he shall rise again.” [Proverbs 24:15-16] How many times in your life have

you wondered why you haven't been ultimately defeated? Why you're going again? You turn back and if you're like me, can look over this past year or maybe the last ten years and ask, "Why am I still here?" Because God is still at work in you. When you think about all the deliverance he's brought in the past and that's come about because His resurrection power is at work, know that as you face this year to come, God is going to continue to work out grace in your life. Paul says in Romans 6:4 that, "We were buried in Christ, being united with him in his death, but so we are also being raised with him so that we might walk now in the newness of life."

Number fifteen, God gives the gift of hope in hopeless situations. The verse is Romans 4:17. Speaking of Abraham, God said,

¹⁷*(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (NASB)*

I love this story of Abraham and his son Isaac, going to the mountain, the fire, the torch, the wood, the son. Abraham going to that mountain knowing that Isaac is the one in whom all the promises rest and yet God has told him to slay his son, his only son. Paul says that as Abraham was approaching that mountain and raising the knife to kill his son, he was reasoning to himself that God was able to raise his son from the dead and fulfill His covenant promises because God would not ask him to do that and not let His promises go unfulfilled. God stayed Abraham's hand so that Isaac lived, but God did not stay His hand from His own Son so that you and I could live. Hope in hopeless situations. Habakkuk 2:4 says, "We walk by faith, not by sight." Can't figure it out? Neither can I. Can't understand it? I don't either. Ask me what to do? I don't have a clue. But know that God does.

Number sixteen, Romans 15:5, one of God's gifts is perseverance and encouragement. Paul says,

⁵*Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement . . . (NASB)*

Where do you get that stuff from? It's not because we keep a stiff upper lip. It's not because we just have the tenacity to keep going. It's because God gives perseverance and encouragement. Paul says, "May he

⁵*. . . grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus (NASB)*

When you think things are going really rough for you, the Bible says, "Look to Jesus." Hebrews 12:1-3, "Consider him." You and I have not yet struggled to the shedding of our blood, but Jesus did.

Then there are the gifts of victories, number seventeen, I Corinthians 15:57,

⁵⁷*but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (NASB)*

All of us are going to be facing things this year. Tommy earlier prayed for the families that have already lost loved ones. As a pastor in Australia sometimes I did two and three funeral services a week because I was a pastor over a region of people, not just a congregation. If you don't have hope in a resurrection, dear ones, you don't have anything. But if you've got Jesus, you can face this year ahead knowing that God has the victory in store. Paul says in verse 58,

⁵⁸*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain . . . (NASB)*

In about a week's time we're going to be into 2010. I can't believe that! 2010. How about approaching this year knowing that whatever you are going to face, God has already given you the victory in Jesus. He's going to work it out.

Number 18, Hebrews 2:16, a gift of help because we are God's sons and daughters. Listen to this first, Hebrews 2:16. It's incredible.

¹⁶*For assuredly He does not give help to angels . . . (NASB)*

Did you hear that? God doesn't even help angels!

¹⁶*. . . but He gives help to (us) the descendant of Abraham. (NASB)*

Angels are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting help from God. But we are recipients of God's help, and God even sends angels to be ministering servants to us, to help us in our time of need.

Number nineteen, the gift of wisdom, in particular James 1:5.

⁵*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (NASB)*

Have you ever thought about that verse where it says, "without reproach"? What does that mean? God isn't up there saying, "I'm going to give you wisdom but I'm going to tell you how you screwed up first." It's not with reproach. It's wisdom just as a gift. "Son, you've asked for it. Let me help you. Daughter, you need wisdom? I'm there for you. I'm not there driving you all the way and telling you all the things you've done to mess up. I'm there for you. I love you. I've proven that with my Son." So ask for wisdom in particular circumstances.

Number twenty, James 4:6, this one is greater grace for great needs.

But He gives a greater grace therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." (NASB)

I have to tell you, being a pastor for thirty years, I don't know why we think we have to have all the answers. I don't know why we think we have to be right all the time about everything. I don't know why we think we can fix stuff because we can't. Every time we think we have something in order or fixed or whatever, God's going to do something to remind us that we need grace. We need grace. We need grace. But he'll give us greater grace than the great needs that we have.

Lastly, the gift to think about and perhaps tying all these together comes from Philippians 1:29, the gift of suffering. Paul says,

²⁹*For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (NASB)*

That wasn't one I was hoping God would wrap up for me, not a package under the tree that said "suffering" on it. But you and I both know that it's in the times of suffering and loss that we learn to treasure the most about Who God is and what He really means to us. James Elliott, who was killed by Indians in South America, said, "It's no sacrifice to give up that which you can't keep to get what you can't lose." Jesus is all that I need.

Christmas is all about giving. The Father gave His Son. The Son of God gave His life and then poured out His Spirit. The Spirit of God gave of Himself to us, to equip us with spiritual gifts for ministry. Paul says, "God's calling and his giftedness to us are irrevocable" (Romans 11:9). God's calling and His gifts are irrevocable. God hasn't sent us to stand in line at Kohl's to take back some gifts. He hasn't changed His mind about how He's decided to use us, and He will not let us go. So how is it going for you this Christmas? Don't be just like the wise men who came to give gifts. Understand also the great gifts that God has given to us this Christmas.