

God's Greatest Gift – Christmas Eve 2014

The Gift of Forgiveness

Genesis 3:8-15 – You'll find them under your Christmas tree. You'll find them hiding behind furniture or in the deepest, darkest corners of a closet. They might come out tonight. If not, they'll be out tomorrow. You know what I'm talking about—not little kids or the family pet, but gifts given by loved ones, friends, colleagues. Other than birthdays, this time of year is most well-known as a season for giving gifts to others and receiving them too. So it's only fitting that as we gather around the manger bed of the Christ-Child, we open up gifts that our gracious and merciful God has given and continues to give to his people. Above all, we see that all those gifts come from the greatest Gift that he gives to us—the lowly Child lying in a Bethlehem manger.

As our first parents, Adam and Eve, tried to hide from the all-knowing sight of the holy God, they had no idea what they needed. The Lord had created a perfect world and had given his perfect humanity a single command—don't eat from one tree in Eden. Yet Adam and Eve willingly disobeyed God and brought sin and its horrible effects into our world. They introduced guilt and shame and fear into our world, and they brought death to themselves and every generation after them. So they cowered in fear hoping that the holy God would not wipe them off the face of the earth. Little did they realize that when he came searching for them, yes, he pronounced consequences for their sins, but more importantly, he had a gift for them and the generations to come. Forgiveness for their sins was coming in the form of a child, a human being who would crush the serpent's head by his own death and would release humanity from the guilt of their sins. The greater Gift would eventually come, but God gave them and us full and free forgiveness for every one of our sins through Jesus.

Hear now a lesson from Genesis 3 (Me: Verses 8-14)

The Gift of Faith

Genesis 22:15-18 – Centuries pass after God gives his gift of forgiveness to Adam and Eve. We don't hear much about Abraham until he's 75 years old when the Lord tells him to pack up his wife and wealth and head west to Canaan—a land he had never seen. The Lord promises to be with him and to bless all nations through his offspring. So Abraham goes. Fifteen years later, Abraham is 90 and the Lord still hasn't provided that heir. Yet just as Abraham is about to give up on God's promise, the Lord of free and faithful grace assures him that all nations will be blessed through his offspring. Another ten years pass before the Lord fulfills that promise, yet Abraham remains faithful to the Lord. A son is born, but when he's a teenager, the Lord asks Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test of his faith. Surely that request tore at Abraham's heart, but God had given him a gift that he gives to us—the gift of faith in the God of free and faithful grace. Abraham trusted God's promise and the Lord delivered his son. This faith was not something that Abraham generated in his own heart. No, it was a gift from God. By faith, Abraham was fully persuaded that God had the power to keep his promises, especially that the greater Gift would one day come from Abraham's line so that all nations would be blessed.

Hear now a lesson from Genesis 22 (Me!)

The Gift of Peace

Isaiah 9:2,6,7 – More centuries pass and the promise of God's greatest Gift grows clearer. The expectation grows stronger, but by the time we get to the prophet Isaiah, God's people were wondering if the Gift would ever come. War ravaged the land God had given to his people. It wasn't unwarranted, because the darkness of unbelief had covered the eyes and shrouded the hearts of the people, but God's gift of peace was coming. In fact, the Lord used Isaiah to describe how it would come—a child, a son would be born and become the King of kings. As true God and true human, he would bear all the titles of the almighty God, especially that of Prince of Peace. The peace he would bring would last forever and never be ruined again. His coming would shatter sin's darkness with the light of God's peace even down to us today.

Hear now a lesson from Isaiah 9

The Gift of Joy

Isaiah 11:1-9 – With the coming of the Prince of Peace, God would have another gift for his people—the gift of joy. You see, the peace that Jesus brings is neither the world peace we hear about on the radio, nor kindness between fighting neighbors. His peace can't be enforced by a government or even come in glory or power or might. Instead Christ's peace comes in poverty and humility. It comes from the dead stump of Jesse's line suddenly restored to life, and it brings joy in the great and wondrous blessings of God's love. Angels would one day sing about this lasting peace that brings true joy. This peace changes hearts and, therefore, the world. It changes our relationship with the holy God. It changes creation's relationship with its holy Creator. What joy to know that God brings lasting peace through his Greatest Gift for you and me!

Hear now a lesson from Isaiah 11

The Gift of a Miracle

Isaiah 7:10-14 – The next gift that our God has for us might be a little tough for your human reason to fathom. The Lord would bring his Greatest Gift into this world through a miracle. The baby would be born of a virgin—unlike any other baby born to human parents. This baby would have a special name—Immanuel, literally “God with us.” God himself would stoop down to be with us by making himself weak as an infant in a mother's womb. King Ahaz didn't believe it when the Lord made the promise through Isaiah, but we know God made it happen for that is what his Word tells us. The greatest Gift would come through a miracle!

Hear now a lesson from Isaiah 7 (Me: Verses 10-13)

The Gift of Grace

Luke 1:26-35, 37-38 – Thousands of years passed after that first promise and many gave up hope. For many, the world was as hopeless as it had been when Adam and Eve fell into sin. A few remained faithful and longed with expectation for the promised Savior to come. When the time came for God to give his greatest Gift to humanity, who would be the mother of that long-promised Child? No human being deserved such an honor for the very simple reason of sin, but the Lord purely out of undeserved mercy and love chose a poor, lowly virgin named Mary. Like every other Old Testament believer, she longed for the coming of her Savior from sin. By God's gift of grace—his completely undeserved loving kindness, the Lord fulfilled his promise through her.

Let us read responsively a lesson from Luke 1

The Gift of Life

Luke 2:1-7 – The next gift that God has for us to open is one that is common to every parent, really every human being—the gift of life. When a child is born, we rejoice at the gift of life, but this was no ordinary child. In spite of the challenges, in spite of the poverty, in spite of the danger and poor conditions, the long-promised Savior finally came into this world, and that was a miracle in and of itself. Just as Mary and Joseph celebrated God's gift of life resting in their arms that first Christmas, we can celebrate all the more because this Child came to give us eternal life. Where before we had guilt and shame and death, in Jesus, we now have life!

Hear now a lesson from Luke 2 (Me: Verses 1-2)

The Greatest Gift

John 1:1-14 – For a moment, stare into that lowly manger and behold the face of God. In that manger is more than just a cute, cuddly baby for there in that manger is God's greatest gift for you! That Child has come in lowliness that you might be raised to eternal life. That Child has come to take on your sin and guilt and fear and worry and death that you might have forgiveness and faith and peace and joy and life. There in that lowly manger lies God's gift of grace for you, the peace of God incarnate—in the flesh for you and me. So with shepherds and angels, apostles and prophets, rejoice in God's greatest gift—our Savior Jesus Christ!

Hear now a lesson from John 1 (ME!)

The Gift of Good News

Luke 2:8-20 – Everyone loves to get good news. That’s a gift that God has for you and me too! Peer into the manger and rejoice because the Christ Child is God’s pure and holy love for you. God allows himself to be born in a barn. The Prince of Peace whom Adam and Abraham and Isaiah longed to see sleeps in his mother’s loving arms, while faithful Joseph looks on in amazement. See the shepherds stare in terror and amazement and finally joy as the holy angels proclaim the greatest news of all: **“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”** The God of heaven comes to the lowly who have nothing to give him and he gives them, he gives us everything! Run with them to see your God, your Savior, and then share that good news with everyone you meet. The Christ Child comes with the gift of good news!

Hear now a lesson from Luke 2 (Me: Verses 8-9)

The Gift of Eternity

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 – Look beyond that manger and see the shadow of a cross, for there this beautiful Child will die. He comes to bring peace by going to war with sin and death and darkness for you. He comes so his blood will be shed not yours. He comes so his life would be sacrificed in your place, but God’s greatest Gift does not end with the sadness of the cross. At an empty tomb the Savior conquers death that has so terrified every one of us. This Jesus, who came to save as the Babe of Bethlehem, as Christ Crucified, as the living Prince of Peace, comes to give you the gift of eternity as you look forward to being with him in heaven forever.

Hear now a lesson from 1 Thessalonians 4