

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

Dear Friend,

Have you unwrapped the greatest gift ever given? It was given by the Creator of the universe and recorded in John 3:16 where we read, “God so loved the world that He gave...” Perhaps you have become so familiar with this verse you somehow have not recognized the ultimate gift that it described. It goes on to say, “God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Those who consciously or unconsciously say “so what,” have missed out on the true significance of that gift. The verse continues, “Whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” This means that while we were yet sinners, destined for hell, God gave us the ultimate gift of His Son who died for our sins, rose from the dead and now invites us to spend eternity with Him.

Max Lucado in his book, *The Gift for All People*, tells us about Eric a college student who one day walked out of his home, ending up homeless in San Antonio, Texas. After sixteen years of searching his younger sister Debbie found him living in a vacant lot. At first Eric refused to acknowledge Debbie but her persistent love finally caused them to be reconciled prior to Eric's death of cancer. That is how God's ultimate gift of love is. While we were yet lost God sent His Son to restore us to God Himself. Max. Lucado states,

“God had come near. He came, not as a flash of light or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. Mary and Joseph were anything but royal. Yet heaven entrusted its greatest treasure to these simple parents. It began in a manger, this momentous moment in time. He looked anything but a king. His face prunish and red. His cry, still the helpless and piercing cry of a dependent baby. Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. This baby had overseen the universe. These rags keeping him warm were the robes of eternity. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshipping angels had been replaced with kind but bewildered shepherds. Curious, this royal throne room. No tapestries covering the windows. No velvet garments on the courtiers. No golden scepter or glittering crown. Curious, the sounds in the court. Cows munching, hooves crunching, a mother humming, a babe nursing. It could have begun anywhere, the story of King. But, curiously, it began in a manger. Step into the doorway, peek through the window. He is here!”

John described this ultimate gift this way. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that had been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. He came unto His

own, and His own received Him not... He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-5, 11-14).

This ultimate gift is described this way in Matt.1:22, 23. “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

This ultimate gift of the personification of God’s love which we celebrate at Christmas isn’t just for us human beings. Remember God so loved the world (the whole cosmos) that He gave His only begotten Son. This ultimate gift is for all of creation. What nativity scene would be complete without the animals present? C.S. Lewis in his poem, *The Nativity*, explains how recognizing the presence of animals gives us further insight on how this helps us understand this ultimate Gift. “Among the oxen (like an ox I’m slow) I see a glory in the stable grow. Which, with the ox’s dullness might at length give me an ox’s strength. Among the Asses (stubborn I as they) I see my Savior where I looked for hay; so may my beastlike folly learn at least. The patience of a beast. Among the sheep (I like a sheep have strayed) I watch the manger where my Lord is laid; Oh that my baa-ing nature would win thence some woolly innocence!”

Dr. De Witt Talmage described how God chose to give His ultimate gift in the midst of animals and how this gift also includes them. “Behold... on the first night of Christ’s life God honored the animal creation. You cannot get into that Bethlehem barn without going past the camels, the mules, the dogs and the oxen. The animals of that stable heard the first cry of the infant Lord. Some of the old painters represent the oxen and camels kneeling that night before the newborn babe. And well might they kneel. Have you ever thought that Christ came, among other things, to alleviate the sufferings of the animal creation? Was it not appropriate that He should, during the first few days and nights of His life on earth, be surrounded by the dumb beasts whose moans and plaints have for ages been a prayer to God for the arresting of their tortures and the righting of their wrongs? It did not merely ‘happen’ so that the unintelligent creatures of God should have been that night in close neighborhood. Not a kennel in all the centuries, not a robbed bird’s nest, not a worn-out horse on the tow-path, not a herd freezing in the poorly-built cow-pen, not a freight car bringing beef to market without water through a thousand miles of agony, not a surgeon’s room witnessing the struggles of the fox

or rabbit or pigeon or dog in the horrors of vivisection, but has an interest in the fact that Christ was born in a stable surrounded by animals. He remembers that night and the prayer He heard in their pitiful moan He will answer in the punishment of those who maltreat them.”

Billy Graham is quoted as saying, “interpersonal relationships are the most valued and cherished gifts of all. The Bible teaches that God gave a person as a gift to every one of us, and that person is Jesus Christ.” Those who have received this ultimate gift will desire to develop the cherished gifts of interpersonal relationships with not only other human beings but also with all of God’s creation. Such relationships are possible when we receive God’s ultimate gift, The Prince of Peace. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The might God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is.9;6).

Corrie Ten Boom wrote, “He brought peace on earth and wants to bring it also into your soul – that peace which the world cannot give. He is the One who would save His people from their sin.” Sin results from anxiety driven lives where people believe they have to do it their way rather than God’s way. Sin is rebelliousness against God and His direction, method and purpose. Jesus, God’s ultimate gift, is the antidote for the poison of sin. When one accepts this free gift and surrenders to the will and ways of the Creator of the Universe, he or she receives forgiveness for the sins that have been committed, resulting in a peace that passes all understanding.

Surrendering, accepting, and believing all sound so easy until that moment when the pressures are on. I know from personal experience that when I don’t have a tangible answer for the problem at hand it is easy for me to panic. How I must consciously relax and meditate on the Scriptures to understand what it means to receive God’s ultimate gift of Jesus and let Him work in my life. Here are some of the things we discover from examining the world of God. #1. In Eph. 2:13 we see that through Jesus Christ we are brought near to God. #2. We now have access to God at any time according to Eph. 2:18 #3. As recipients of God’s ultimate gift of Jesus we have an eternal inheritance awaiting us as promised in 1Peter 1:3-5.

Now I have to make a choice just like you must choose. This choice isn’t just made once but many times each day. It involves whether or not I am going to trust God in the midst of the mounting pressures. Am I going to accept that He is in control, that He loves me and has given us the ultimate gift of the Prince of Peace and Life? How ironic it is that one of the most stressful times of the year is

the Christmas season that is supposed to be the time we celebrate God's ultimate gift Jesus.

Once a little girl caught in the frantic activities of Christmas found herself crying as she went to bed that night. She felt her parents burdened by worries and pressures didn't have time for her. As she prayed the Lord's Prayer she found herself saying, "Forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us." Perhaps her prayer reflects something that all too frequently, takes place at Christmas. This involves leaving Christ out of Christmas. As He is crowded out of our busy lives we need to remember the best gift won't be found in a box but in a person. Dale Evans Rogers was quoted as saying, "When we receive Christ, we experience completely the gift that is Christmas. Then, for us, Christmas is truly always, for Jesus said, 'Lo, I am with you always.... And Christmas is Jesus!'"

Robert Louis Stevenson gave us the following Christmas prayer. "Loving Father, help us remember the truth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and the worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be Thy children, and the Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus sake, Amen."

God so loved the world that He gave the ultimate gift of His only begotten Son. If we are going to grasp the significance of that gift we also must be willing to give. The reason many find it difficult to give is because the paralysis of fear has gripped their hearts and minds. The angel knowing that if Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds were going to understand the greatness of the gift God was about to give them, they would have to rise above the fear that held them in unbelief. For that reason in each appearance the angel began with the words "do not be afraid" (see Luke 1:13, 30 and Luke 2:10).

The question is what are you afraid of? What is holding you in such unbelief that your life is filled with anxiety and fear? When fear has shoved faith out of your life you will always be more than one french fry short of a happy meal. As the Holy Spirit shows you a need and the Word of God direct you to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless or share the word of God with the lost fear will keep you from doing such unless faith in God's ultimate gift prevails in your life. In order for this miracle to happen you must choose to accept God's invitation to come and receive His ultimate gift. Think about it. God gives us the choice. We

can't choose when or where we will be born or die, yet He gives us the choice where we will spend eternity. The decision is ours.

Max Lucado put it this way: "God's voice gently thundering, 'I want you.' And your response? Jesus said, 'I am the bread that gives life. I am the door. I am the way, the truth and the life. I will come back and take you with me' (John 6:48, 8:12, 11:25, 10:9, 14:3). Jesus proclaiming – ever offering but never forcing. Standing over the crippled man: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man? John 9:35. Near the tomb of Lazarus, probing the heart of Martha: 'Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Martha, do you believe this?'" John 11:26 Honest questions. Thundering claims. Gentle touch. Never going where not invited, but once invited never stopping until he's finished, until a choice has been made. God will whisper. He will shout. He will touch and tug. He will take away our burdens; He'll even take away our blessings. If there are a thousand steps between him, and us He will take all but one. But He will leave the final one for us. The choice is ours."

What will you choose to do at this moment? Will you choose to accept God's ultimate gift of Jesus Christ, or will you reject Him going your own way. The choice is yours. The opportunity is now. What will be your response? The Bible says, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13). The fact is when you choose to unwrap God's ultimate gift and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior you will no longer be the same person doing the same things you did before. 11 Cor.5:17 says, "If anyone be in Christ they are a new creation. The old has passed away and the new has come."

As a new creation you will no longer choose to be a slave to sin. You have been recreated through God's ultimate gift and will not be content to go through life without meaning, purpose or direction. When you encounter homeless, hungry and hurting people, as a new creation in Christ, you will not be able to harden your heart and go your own way, you will step out by faith helping those in need for Jesus said, "As often as you have done it to the least of these even as you have done it unto Me" (Matt.25:40). As one who has received the ultimate gift, strive now to protect God's creation as you let His Holy Spirit work in you daily to share with everyone you know that there is hope for Christ is risen.

Yours in God's Love,

Larry Rice

