



THE  
**BEGINNINGS**  
of CHRISTMAS

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## *Introduction*

Join me on a journey that looks at the meaning of Christmas. Too often we think of Christmas as a calendar event that we celebrate once a year. The truth is the event we celebrate, the birth of Christ, is only a pivot point, one page in the greatest story ever told.

Christmas' true meaning and purpose is about Christ with us, about understanding God's incredible plan to live among us, to become part of our lives in a way that we can truly understand and relate to. It is about how God has always been present but, in that moment, He made that presence personal and evident by coming as a baby. It is about how that gift never stops being real. How Christmas, Christ with us, is a forever gift that is always to be received and experienced in every moment of our life.

The Christmas we celebrate is only a symbol of the real, deeper concept of Christmas which is not to be limited to the birth of Jesus. The arrival of that gift is much more. Christmas actually began the day Adam was created and it will continue until we celebrate together in eternity.

So, join me as we look at a number of Scriptures that will help us deepen our understanding of Christmas by looking at its beginning. Hopefully as we examine these passages they will help us grow in our understanding of what we have received and how to deepen our enjoyment of the greatest gift ever given.

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## *Day 1 - Forever Christmas - Jo 1:1*

In the beginning was Christmas. Christmas was in God's mind in the beginning. And all that is Christmas is God. Christmas has always been with God. Through Christmas all things become reality, without Christmas there is no existence. Christmas is life, and brings life, and illuminates all mankind. (very liberal paraphrase of John 1:1.)

It shines in the darkness, but darkness does not understand, truly understand, Christmas.

Have you ever thought about when Christmas really began?

For God to be truly God, and the Son, the Word, to be God; then Christmas existed from before the moment of creation. For God to be God, He knew what would happen. He also knew that Christmas needed to be a part of that creation. From the beginning God knew He would send the Son, He knew the Son would come as a baby and live among us. From the beginning, there has been reason to celebrate the coming of hope for all mankind.

What a day of mixed emotions there might have been in heaven when God announced the coming creation of a universe. A unique universe where he would create a being unlike anything ever seen before. A creation that would be stamped with God's own image - creative, relational, and with the ability to choose.

That last one, the ability to choose, may have sent a shiver through the foundations of heaven. The heavenly beings knew from experience the dangers of choice. They had seen their realm divided and a large number of them thrown out because one angel decided to replace God with himself (Is 14:12; Re 12:9). One angel who convinced so many to follow him. One angel whose bitterness would surely poison anything God

created, at least until God says enough and bans them, not just from being part of God's great kingdom. But bans and binds them, for eternity, in absolute darkness and separation from God and everything else that exists.

In the same moment that they heard the announcement, they may have shuddered with the thought that it too would be marred because of this thing called freedom. They saw the reality that it would happen, there would be pain, but there would be Christmas. There would be hope and they would watch in wonder as God laid out the plans and how the present, Christmas would be given.

Time is a funny thing. We think of it as lineal. One second leads to another. One second is dependent on the prior and impacts the following. Once it is past it cannot be changed. And until it happens it is filled with almost unlimited possibilities. We can't go back and change anything that is past and we cannot avoid going forward. But every second becomes future and past in the same moment and it is impossible to remain in the present. It is lineal but never static. It is always in movement.

But for God and maybe for angels in some way, time is not lineal. It is a vast tapestry that can be seen all at one moment. A tapestry that has woven into it all that has ever happened, is happening, and will happen. It is a strange tapestry that at one moment appears like it doesn't exist, in another moment it is in a state of being woven all at once, and then it as if it is has been completed and there is nothing left to add.

All the threads of the tapestry existed even before the tapestry existed. The impact of every thread was known even as the weaving began. And among all those threads there was the thread of Christmas. But to call it a single thread would be an error. How can I explain what I mean? It is a thread with

multiple elements, but a single thread. It can be seen in many places but when you focus on it all you see is the one thread.

If you think you can touch it in one place you are suddenly drawn to all the places it exists and they all unite as one. It begins to look like a ribbon that all other threads are woven into. It is the foundation behind all the weaving that is happening. At times its presence is subtle almost invisible. Then it shines forth in brilliance to give brief glimpses of what is to come.

Then we arrive at the time that we call Christmas. The Son is born. And to us it looks like the celebration has just begun. But really the angels and all heaven have been celebrating this revelation of the reality of Christmas since the beginning. We are simply being allowed a glimpse of what has always been; a celebration of all that God has planned and prepared for from before creation. It is Christmas.

Now we are allowed to see clearly the thread or background that has always been part of the tapestry. Now it becomes brilliant. A moment so intense that a star is allowed to shine brighter than any others to help us see. The angels are allowed a moment of public celebration, so we can hear.

And so we get to be part of Christmas. To be part of what God has always planned from the moment the idea of creation entered His thoughts. There has always been Christmas. It is the day when He comes as the Son to do more than just visit but to live with us for a while so we can see more clearly the Christmas that has always existed since before creation. We, like the angel, can celebrate what God has always had prepared for us. Christmas.

In the beginning was Christmas. It has been from the beginning. It made all things possible. And Christmas is called Jesus.

*Day 2 - From the Ashes - Ge 3:15*

God said to Satan: “You have ruined my plan to dwell with mankind. And so, for there to be eternal peace between my special creation and Myself, I will make your relationship with them impossible and filled with animosity. They and their descendants will never trust you. This includes the One who will come to restore what you have destroyed. And while you may think that you can harm Him and cause Him to fall, in the end He will destroy you and restore peace.

The image here is fierce and violent. Very strong words are used in Genesis 3:15: enmity, crushing, and striking. There will be constant warfare between mankind and the serpent (Satan and his realm). Satan will use every trick, every con, and every lie to make peace with God impossible. At one point he almost did succeed and mankind, except for one family, was destroyed. That act of salvation acts was/is a reminder that no matter what Satan may do, or attempt will end in futility. He will not destroy man. He may be able to hinder, harm, and scare man, but he cannot destroy God’s creation.

The promised Christmas, the day when He who is capable of destroying all of Satan’s power and undo the ruin sin has brought on mankind, would come. From the ashes of the first Sin, would rise hope.

It is like the impact of a volcanic eruption. It destroys everything in its path and it looks like there will never be any hope of life being revived. Yet in the very material that brings destruction exists the resources for life to resurge. It may take time, but it will happen. Seeds will arrive on the winds. Insects will come and both seeds and insects will attract birds, then small animals, and so on, until the barren land is restored and life flourishes.

Sin almost destroyed the relationship of peace God desired with man. At times its restoration looked bleak. Yet through the passage of time faith would grow and the seeds of peace would be planted. A person, and a family would be established. They would grow to become a nation and change the direction of history to make possible the one who would end the constant lack of peace that had been created.

There were so many attacks over the years. Even the most faithful felt the serpent's bite and a moment of dismay:

Moses – His constant lack of faith (I can't speak) in God finally boiled over and he assumed too much (Ex 3:14)

David – He faced so many temptations and faltered to open the door to dissension in his house (2 Sa 12:10).

Elijah – The great victory followed by a personal threat sent him into despair for a moment (1 Ki 19:3).

No one escaped without being scarred in one way or another. Yet, they were only flesh wounds. Wounds that could be treated and from which each one recovered. They left scars, reminders of the hostility that existed. Yet, even the scars became a reminder of the promise given. God never abandons those who seek them. So, no matter what Satan could or would do, in the end it would not be enough to prevent God's promised Christmas from coming.

Even in the days leading up to that incredible day when peace would be restored, the attacks, the nasty biting reached a fearsome level. The pregnancy would cause so much pain and potential for doubt. The requirement to travel a harsh trail in the last days of the pregnancy was uncomfortable. Then the attempted murder that resulted in the death of so many, followed by the need to flee and live like refugees, unable to return home because of a further threat against the child. But in each case God provided protection, healing, and strength.

More years passed and then the time came for the end of the fear. It would come at an incredible price, like a venomous bite that appeared to succeed. It appeared to bring an end to the hope given that first day; the hope that the power of the venom of sin would be nullified.

The universe paused for those three days. The mourning was intense. Then came the crushing blow that had been promised. Death, that threat of eternal separation from God, was defanged; all its venom drained, and the head that had so effectively used both, was not simply crushed, it was annihilated. The promised peace and restoration with God was now a reality.

This may sound like a strange way to view Christmas but it is a key part of what God promised. A promise that one would come who, by His suffering... no, by His willingness to suffer for us... would end the terror of the serpent's bite.

### *Day 3 - The blanket blessing - Ge12:3*

On several occasion God came and opened the door a little to reveal the plan to restore our relationship with Him. This is the first of these events and God concludes His promises to Abraham with "and all peoples on earth will be blessed

through you.” God gives this same promise to Isaac (Ge 26:4) and then to Jacob (Ge 28:14). Then Laban declares that he has been blessed because of Jacob’s presence (Ge 30:27).

Now pause with me and think about what this means. God has a plan. And this plan, from its inception, will involve man; man, as a whole and man as individuals. God will use individuals to bless all of mankind. Let me restate this. Abraham the man (individual) would be used to bless man (all nations, peoples, and so on.) God’s plan makes it possible for a man to be a blessing to others. Instead of bringing a curse, as did Adam, God will work in a way that allows a person to be a source of blessing and a blessing.

The full promise is given in Ge 18:18 which states “through you and your offspring all mankind will be blessed. “

There are two ways to look at this. The first is the most common concept. The blessing would follow a physical line of fulfillment. Abraham’s lineage would make possible the birth of the Messiah. The second has a similar line of progression but does not follow physical human genetics and links. It follows the lineage of faith. In Galatians 3 we have a discussion of this genealogy of faith.

Abraham believed God. Those who believe are children of God. Those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. Christ redeemed us so that the blessing given to Abraham could come to the gentiles. A blessing that reaches beyond the physical genealogy but to all who hear and believe. The blessing would be available to all who, in faith, believe like Abraham. Both are critical to fulfillment of the promise.

So, Abraham received a promise (a promise not based on genealogy but on his faith). He and his faith would be a

blessing to all nations. The truth of this would be revealed fully in the birth of the messiah, the offspring (the fulfillment of the promise that the foundation of the blessing would come from his genealogy). And so the blessing is a blanket that covers all people and lays the foundation for others to be blessed. His faith opened the door for others to believe and to receive the promised blessing. His faith made possible the fulfillment of God's plan.

We too are part of this blanket blessing. We are a source of blessing to others. Our faith can open the way for others to know God and believe in Him. The more we learn to live by faith the greater the blessing will be, the more people that can be touched by the blessing.

Unfortunately, we do not think in the same terms that God revealed to Abraham. We do not see ourselves becoming a multitude without number. We do not know how to do the math, the math of God. It is not about how many people with whom we have direct contact. Remember Abraham only had one son. And the one son only had two sons. Only one of them was selected to continue the promise. And from that one, God raised up a multitude.

Being a blanket blessing is not about how many we reach, but how clearly we communicate our faith to the ones God gives us to touch. There are so many stories about one person faithfully serving yet feeling they have done little to bless others. But because they were faithful some were touched and they in turn touched others and so on until a multitude are touched. The multitude has little or no idea of where it began but one person serving faithfully will bless a multitude over time.

This is the story of missions. One person serving faithfully. One person laying the foundation. One person sacrificing all so that God, through them, can bless another multitude.

This is the promise of Christmas. The focus is on Christ. He makes the blessing function. He supplies the power that enables our faith to be a blessing to the nations. Don't think about who will hear, who will see. Think about how well they will hear and see your faith.

God promises that if we are faithful our faith will bear fruit. Sometimes 30-fold, sometimes 50-fold, and sometimes much more. But always with the idea that it will be a blanket blessing that will affect all it touches, whether near or far, whether directly or indirectly. We have been promised that we will be blessed and, like Abraham, become a blessing to many, many others. A blanket blessing for all.

We are the proof of Christmas. God has planned to bless us and make each of us a blessing to the nations. What a great gift and pattern for our gifts. The gift that opens the door to blessing.

#### *Day 4 - Born to Rule - Ge 49:8-12*

Christmas is about restoration and the focus is on putting the King back on the throne. This truth was reflected in the question of the Magi, "where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Mt 2:2

God is the true ruler and we are the usurpers. Even in the garden, the mandate was not that we would rule over all the world; just over certain aspects of it. We were to fill it and subdue it. We were not meant to rule over others or try to rule in the place of God. Yet, that is what we try to do and this error

is at the heart of the original sin. We try to replace God with “me.”

Adam and Eve decided not to obey God. Then Cain decided to give what he wanted and not what he should give. This was followed by an attempt to build a tower to heaven and supplant God as ruler. Jacob tried to use his own ability to rule over his brother, his family, and his life. It did not go well until he submitted his will to the true ruler. Then life began to change, although not smoothly. Years of heartache followed until he arrived in Egypt to spend his last days. Every time man tried to take God’s place, disaster followed.

In Bible days the family blessing went to the first born and so on. But the first three sons of Jacob had failed miserably in learning some key lessons. It was the fourth son, Judah, that Jacob saw hope in fulfilling the promise God had given that through his line the world would be blessed. Here we see the first stages of restoring rulership back to its rightful place.

Blessings were considered prophetic in nature. They reflected the father’s awareness of his heirs’ personalities and a vision for the future. The blessing was just that and contained some interesting points. First, that the heir would be honored. Those near would see him as the one chosen to lead. And those who opposed his rulership would be forced to submit, his hand would be on their neck, he would have control. This sounds very similar to the foot squashing the head of the serpent (Ge 49:8).

Second, the heir would be dangerous. Or one could say powerful. His words would have power and be final. The image is of a lion, one of power and not to be opposed (Ge 49:9).

Third, the heir had the right to rule. It is interesting how this image comes together. Though God is the true ruler, man does not want to submit. Even the nation of Israel requested that God be replaced. They wanted a king like all the nations. You can manipulate a king, maybe, if he strays from God. You can't manipulate God. Here we see that God allowed this but with conditions. The people learned this with the selection and rejection of Saul (a man that fit their image of a king) and then with his replacement, David (a man who fit God's image of a king). All of this to bring us to the final ruler. The rightful ruler, Jesus, Son of God, God in the flesh. His life brought things full circle.

Born to rule. All authority will be his. All will confess him as Savior and Lord. All nations will bow before him. And so goes the commentary about this One who would come from the line of Judah. The one who would establish the true kingdom, a kingdom not of this world that all will submit to in the end.

Christmas is about the one born to rule and restore all relationships to their intended state. God as ruler. What a gift we have received at Christmas. The true ruler of the universe has come and now lives among us.

The last part of the heir's blessing is about peace and abundance. Jesus' ruler will be based on peace and abundance. To obtain these will not require war or struggle. They will be readily available. This is made clear by the images of plenty in the expressions wash one's clothes in wine and teeth whiter than milk in Ge 49:11-12. Our access to the king will be without limit and provide freedom to enjoy his presence.

## *Day 5 - A Star to light the way - Nu 24:17*

This is an interesting prophecy coming from a very unusual source, a sorcerer, Balaam. This man had on several occasions been employed by Balak to curse the people of Israel; his purpose being to help him destroy them. Yet on every occasion, Balaam was forced by God to pronounce a blessing on them.

Remember Balaam intended to go to meet Balak, in fact, he wanted to go. Such a request by a king represented the possibility of great reward if his curse worked. But God blocked him and forced him to speak words that prevented any possibility of such a reward. Finally, after several attempts, Balaam no longer performed his rituals. He simply spoke, or rather, God spoke.

It may have been a terrifying but exhilarating moment, to be used by God to speak, to proclaim words that represented God's plan. Words that spoke of the rise of a star, the coming of the one carrying the scepter of Israel. Words that represented victory for God's people and destruction of the enemies of Israel.

What is even more interesting is the double layer to his words. They represented two time frames and the fulfilling of God's plan using two symbols, the star and the scepter. Both represented symbols of royalty and the nature of that royalty. The first was the star coming out of Jacob, and the second was the scepter rising out of Israel.

Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24 contains three parts. Let us look at them in reverse order. The third clearly implies complete destruction of the enemy. It is an action that will end the capacity to act, for the head is the center of decision. It also means the prevention of the future possibility of action. When the head is destroyed the body dies and can no longer carry

out the desires of the head. This refers to the current enemies of Israel. The verses that follow provide a list of them and their fate. But behind this is another enemy that will be destroyed and that is where we need to look at the other two parts.

The second part is about the scepter rising that will carry out the first of the actions of punishment. Historically this was carried out by David who defeated all of the enemies listed in this oracle, fulfilling the word and vision given to Balak. It was David who brought an end to Moab, Edom, Seir, and many others. They were either destroyed, made powerless, or subjugated.

Before we look at the first part let us consider the two concepts being used. The scepter, which represents the power and authority of the king, and the star, which represents imperial greatness and splendor. Both of these are evident in David. He was chosen by God and given the power and authority to rule the nation of Israel. His reign was great and filled with splendor but in a limited way. Its true greatness and splendor would not be seen in its fulness until the reign of his son Solomon. David's exercise of the power and authority given to him laid the foundation for the greatness and splendor that was Solomon.

But, it is the first part that takes us beyond the more immediate fulfilling of the words of Balaam, to a more complete fulfillment of this oracle. While the symbols are descriptive of the time it would not be until the birth of Jesus that a star would in fact arise to be seen. The star of Bethlehem.

No star marked the birth of David. No star marked his ascension to the throne. In fact, his rise was tumultuous and difficult. And it would not actually destroy the sons of confusion (As translated by Keil and Delitzsch and the Darby

Bible). Destroying a particular people, army, or nation will only limited their activity.

The star rises at Jesus' birth. The magi correctly interpreted this and went in search of the king of the Jews. Jesus was born of the line of David and so had the right to hold the scepter and wield its power and authority. Jesus reflects this truth in his declaration that it was his (Matthew 28:18). But the splendor and majesty were also his. The magi connected the two and revealed this in the nature of the gifts they brought, the gifts of splendor and greatness that are due a king.

It is Jesus who brings an end to the sons of confusion, Satan and his realm, and death. The two things that man fears most and have been his enemies since that fateful day in the garden.

This star lights the way to Christmas. It lights the way for us to see how God has been working. A star will light the way and the people will see a great light.

### *Day 6 - Proud Genealogy - Ps 2:7*

How many parents have children they would like to disinherit? Children they don't want to be identified with? Children they don't want to call their own?

We know the reasons for such feelings. Their children are obnoxious, disrespectful, and disobedient. They criticize everything their parents do and see their parent's lives as embarrassing. Or the children rejected their parent's beliefs and morals and do whatever they want. They have no concern for the parent's beliefs and concepts of right. The parents are treated as old fashioned or out of step with the times. Or the children have become criminals and are unwilling to admit this fact, they are even proud of how they behave.

When we hear such stories, we can see why a parent might disinherit a child. They may still love them and expend great energy in trying to help them change, but in the end, they will be unwilling to turn over anything of value to these children. They do not follow in the footsteps of their parents, they have not inherited any characteristics of their parents.

As a result, the parents become unwilling to encourage or support such behavior. While they may not remove them from their legal will, they will not provide anything that will allow the behavior to continue or worse be replicated in others. So things of great value or which provide access to power and resources are given to others.

But Christmas is the opposite. This is a story of the Father believing in the Son. It is about a Son who follows exactly the example of his Father. It is the story of a family business and the pride that exists in such a history. This is the story of a child who sees everything the Father does and does the same. It is about the child hearing all the father says and then sharing it with others. The phrase, “like father like son,” comes to life and brings honor to both.

In a case like this, the parents do everything possible to make sure the child will inherit all the resources needed to carry on the family business. The children and parents are proud of each other and are pleased when people comment on how much they think and act alike. Every effort is made to publicly reveal their relationship and their confidence in each other.

Here in this Psalm we hear about such a family business. A unique family business. The business of saving mankind from his sin. It is desperately needed and at the same time forcefully opposed. The Father is letting people know what to expect from the Son. He is declaring the nature of the relationship,

and the confidence he has in his son to carry on the work and succeed in all that has been planned.

This Psalm contains the public declaration of this relationship and the inheritance that will be given to the Son when his time comes to carry on the work. This takes two forms. One, the legal declaration, the will. I install you as my King, my CEO. Though the people of the world oppose my decision, I will not allow them to alter it. Second, the family declaration, the genealogy. You are my son, and I declare for all to hear, I am your Father. I give You all that I possess as your inheritance, and in so doing, give You the right to rule over all I have created.

Christmas is about a proud genealogy, handing over of an inheritance to the promised heir. He will receive all authority and power to judge and to bless, because the Father has complete confidence in Him and knows He will bring honor to all that the family business represents.

Christmas is so much more than just the arrival of the One promised. It is the arrival of the heir who will carry out all the Father has planned. As a result He will have a name above all names (He 1:4), at his name all knees will bow (Ph 2:10), and He will have all authority (Mt 28:18) to do the work of salvation.

God is proud to call Jesus his Son and Jesus is honored to be His Son. We are invited to share in this incredible inheritance. We are invited to be the children of God and rejoice in being able to serve in the family business.

Christmas is the celebration of a Father who is pleased with His Son and wants the world to know the worthy heir, the Son, has come.

*Day 7 - Born for a purpose - Ps 22:9*

What is my purpose? Why was I born?

In all of life, in many moment of life, we ask these questions and many similar ones. Why did this happen? What is the reason for this?

Every time something bad happens we ask these questions. We want to know if there is some reason or purpose that is guiding our lives. We want to know if what happens is more than just a random event or as some fear, fate. We can search to understand a random act and possibly alter our life in some way to avoid a repeat of the actions that led to the event. Maybe we can choose a different path, a different time, a different routine and so avoid the dangers that cause bad to occur.

The second what scares us, because if everything is controlled by fate then there is little or nothing we can do to alter our world and so avoid our fate. It will not matter what path, time, routine we choose - the danger follows us. Our actions do not make a difference in what will happen. There is no hope, not even in God.

This Psalm looks at all of this from the perspective of one's birth. From birth, my life has purpose (vs 7).

Yet many of the people around this birth have a different perspective. It is one based on a fatalistic view of life. It is view that says there is no real hope and the birth of one person will not make a difference. In this view, even God is mocked and seen as unable to act on the behalf of those who trust in Him.

This person is despised, seen as forsaken, even by God (vs 1). The crowds mock and insult him for having faith in the God

of the past (vs 4-8). He struggles with despair because of what is happening (vs 12-18). He cries out to be rescued because of his faith and commitment (vs 19-21).

In the middle of all of this is the declaration that his life has purpose. In verse 9 it is God who created him. It is God who taught him to believe from the day of his birth. It is God who made life possible. His life has purpose because it comes from God. And this has made possible deliverance, vs 20, rescue vs 21, and praise of God, vs 22-25.

All of this leads to a clearer understanding of one's purpose.

Vs 25 –I can make and fulfill my vows because I have purpose

Vs 26 –People will be nourished and satisfied because of my life

Vs 27 –People will remember God because of my life

Vs 29 –Future generations will know God because of my life

Because of the purpose God has instilled into each life that trust in him.

We are not controlled by random events or fate and the need to constantly review our lives in the hopes that we may somehow avoid all the bad and only encounter the good. Christmas reveals God's purpose through the life of Jesus and seeing the reality of that purpose reborn in everyone who chooses to believe and trust in God.

We are able to choose. We have been born with a purpose and can choose to allow God to carry out all He desires and has planned for us. We can trust Him and so bring hope to others even as Christ did. We are born with a purpose, to fulfill the

promised blessing and open the way for all mankind to receive it.

### *Day 8 - Christmas the family business – Ps 23*

The concept of the family business was mentioned in a previous study. But it will be worthwhile to look at the concept of a family business in more detail.

Have you ever seen a sign that says ...and sons? Then at the bottom of the sign you will see a phrase like serving the community for (x number of) generations?

These signs communicate a message. They suggest a business that is stable, reliable, pays attention to detail, and has a friendly approach to doing business. The family members have become part of their community and people know what to expect from them. Decisions and work are made based on doing the best work possible, at the best price, not simply to make money. Their products may cost more but there is the belief that it is a better product because they are concerned about family pride and maintaining a good name.

In a family business all the members of the family are involved in one way or another in the business. Decisions are made as a family. Work is done as a family. Problems are dealt with as a family. There is less spent on appearance and more on maintaining the quality of the work and making sure the family is cared for.

But you may ask what does this have to do with Christmas? How is Christmas a family business?

Take a moment to reread Psalm 23 and you will see what I am saying. It is discussing God's business. A business that will be passed on to the Son and carried out by the Holy Spirit. It is

interesting that two of the key terms related to Christmas are Father and Son.

1. Promise of rest – In the Psalm, the image is of green pastures. A tranquil place. In Jesus it is the phrase “come to me all that are heavily laden and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy.” Mt 11:29-30.
2. Promise of calm – In the Psalm, the image is of quiet water. A place undisturbed by trouble. In Jesus we have his promise that he will bring peace. A peace the world doesn’t understand. Jn 14:27
3. Promise of Guidance – in the Psalm, it talks about being guided in the paths of righteousness. Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, the one who will guide and teach those who follow. Jn 14:16, 26
4. Promise of courage – in the Psalm, the image is of a dark path and the ability to not be afraid. Jesus told his followers they did not need to be afraid because the Father has decided to make them heirs. So there is no need to be afraid. Lk 12:32
5. Promise of comfort – in the Psalm, this is in the form of the rod and staff of the shepherd, tools designed to protect and comfort. Jesus promises to be with us always, and to send the comforter to teach us how to live. Jn 14:26; Mt 28:20
6. Promise of defeat of enemies – in the Psalm, this is the table prepared for me in the sight of my enemies. They can do nothing to interfere with God’s plans and provisions. In Jesus our two greatest enemies, death and the grave are defeated. As a side bar the power of Satan is broken and he is now a defeated enemy.
7. Promise of blessing – in the psalm it is the image of a cup running over, a never-ending stream of God’s presence and blessing. Jesus uses the concept of

blessed in referring to all who believe. Over and over Jesus says God will hear and respond to us. We are blessed. Jn 20:29

8. Promise of a future – in the Psalm, this is dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. Jesus promises us that there are many rooms in God's house and that he is going ahead to make sure our room is ready for our arrival. Jn 14:2-3

Everything described and promised in Psalm 23 is continued and expanded in the coming of Christmas. Christmas is THE family business. And we are invited to become members of the family and enjoy all its fruits and benefits. We are invited to carry it to the world.

### *Day 9 - Christmas Victory – Ps 68*

In this Psalm, there is a verse that is often quoted in relation to the coming Messiah. It declares that when He ascends He will lead captives in His train and He will receive gifts even from the rebellious (vs 18). It points to Jesus conquering death and the grave, and its companion victory of defeating Satan and his host of followers.

This Psalm paints a picture of what this victory means. It means an end to the power of the wicked. They only last a brief moment in time and are gone. God, and his victory will be eternal. And this makes it possible to rejoice and to sing praises to the One who rides in clouds; an image that surrounds Jesus' ascension after his resurrection.

This victory means that God is in His proper dwelling place among men. He is in our hearts. He is the one we love. No one is abandoned, no one will ever be truly fatherless, no one will be defenseless, there will always one who knows the plight of

the widow, the orphan, the rejected of this world. There will be an end to the prison of sin. It will no longer be unescapable. Anyone who wishes can leave and do so in joy and celebration.

These are just a few of the images used to describe what the victory means and how it will affect those who are willing to see. The Lord has spoken and the company of those who proclaim His message is great and growing daily.

This victory is about breaking down barriers and removing obstacles. It will relieve us of the burdens that crush us. It will provide escape from death. It will crush the heads of his enemies (a not so subtle reference to the promise in Genesis 2). It will bring about the procession of victory and the great congregation pictured in Revelation 7:9 where people from every nation will gather from every corner of the earth to praise God.

There are no more enemies to stand in the way. Death and the grave no longer exist. Satan, the tempter, the enemy no longer exists. Satan and his host, are defeated and imprisoned for eternity. Our past, our struggles, our sin have been dealt with and we are free to enjoy the bounty of God's presence.

Christmas is the day of the victory. The wall is breached between God and man. Once Jesus is born the scene is set and victory is assured. A baby rocks the world and shakes the foundations of the wicked. A baby forces history to change and revolve around him. A baby, and the wise bring gifts in recognition of who He is, THE KING.

Listen again to these two verses

Vs 11. The Lord announced the Word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it.

Vs 12. Kings and armies flee in haste; in the camps men divide the plunder.

The Word has been announced. The true king has come and the host of heaven announced it, but they are only a representation of the continually growing company of people announcing Christmas and its victory. The kings and armies of this world have been rendered helpless. The camps of men have only one thought, divide the plunder and run.

Dare I repeat it once more. Death and the grave are rendered helpless. The long-promised defeat of the enemy has come. We are free to come before God as He has desired since creation.

### *Day 10 - Establishing the Line of Authority - Ps110*

Two phrases stand out from this passage as relates to the coming of Christmas

Vs. 1 Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool

Vs. 2 The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: “you are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

If we think of Christmas as the beginning point of God’s plan we make a serious mistake. A mistake that is easily made. It was a mistake that the leaders of Jesus’ time made often. They assumed that the arrival of the Messiah was to be the beginning of a new era, a new and better realization of the kingdom as they interpreted the concept.

The truth is much grander and more expansive.

Jesus was already at the right hand of God long before he was incarnated, long before he went through the process of being

born, living, dying, and being raised to life. The defeat of the enemy is a forgone conclusion. The crushing blow was always a reality in God's reality. Jesus' coming just made it real for us.

But there was another aspect which is revealed in vs 2. We needed more than just a conqueror, one to free us from our enemies and bondage, one who could rule. We also needed a representative, one to argue our case before God. But even that is not enough. A representative can only present the information and plead the case. We needed more than that. We needed one with authority and ability to impact the outcome. One who was both advocate and judge.

In the structure laid out in the Old Testament there were two key lines of authority. The first was represented by the king. The second was represented by the high priest. The king led the people in carrying out God's plans in the world. The high priest led the people before God in dealing with their spiritual state.

Both of these had serious flaws that could impact how effective they were in carrying out God's words and plans. Both of them had to deal with the problems of sin and how it impacted their ability and desire to do what God desired. They both had to deal with the temptation to misuse their authority. But the one, the high priest had a unique problem; a problem which existed no matter how perfectly they followed the guidelines given to them. They could not provide direct access to God. They could only help the people present their sacrifices, act as a limited go-between, but only for the moment of the sacrifice, which would have to be repeated at least once a year or as needed.

Thus, the need for Christmas became critical at another level. It provided a person authorized to stand before God and

present the one sacrifice that would satisfy for all time the debt of sin. This high priest was capable of satisfying any question related to the state of a person and their debt of sin. This priest, perfect in the eyes of God, fulfilled all the responsibility of the high priest and had the authority to act.

In Jesus we have that person. The king with the right to rule, and the high priest with the right to provide the sacrifice and then judge. What a gift we were given at Christmas, a victorious king, and the eternal perfect representative. The one given all authority and power to restore what had been lost.

### *Day 11 - The Best Present Ever - Is 7:14*

We all like getting presents. So, we like celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and special holidays. The biggest gift-giving event is Christmas and the whole world is impacted by it. And while it is true many don't celebrate the reason for Christmas they still take the day to give gifts.

For some, giving is a difficult process. It involves a sometimes painful and sometimes joyful time of searching for the right gift. THE GIFT that will bring a smile and clear approval that we bought the right gift. For others, the receiving is the same, it can be painful or joyful, because if the gift is not something we want or need then we have the challenge of appearing like it is.

Remember your younger days as a child? Whether it was a birthday, Christmas, graduation, marriage, you hoped for, even expected, a gift or gifts. Remember. There were the packages, hopefully more than one, just waiting to be opened. They sat there on the table, under the tree, or hidden, but you knew they were there.

Remember trying to guess what was inside them? Shaking, turning, lifting each package to try and imagine what it contained. Or if they were hidden, remember those very private hunts, not wanting anyone to see what you were doing, and the satisfaction you experienced when you found the gift? You spent hours dreaming and imagining what was inside each one.

Then came the day to open them. Now here is where it got interesting. There were always the gifts that related to your needs. Remember the packages with clothes, school supplies, and other similar items. Remember your failed attempts to appreciate the gift and what it cost for your loved ones to provide those very important items?

Then there were the toys, games, and fun stuff. The things you thought you wanted but... But they were all about you. And because they were about you, you didn't share with others, or just the opposite, if a game, you forced others to play with you. But... typically you focused on the gift to the exclusion of those around you.

Then there were the gifts of money. Nothing says love like this gift, or does it? We think so because we can buy whatever we want based on the amount given. The giver thinks so because in their mind they have opened the door to successfully giving and receiving a gift. But...it could also mean the giver didn't have time to do the work of good gift giving. The giver didn't invest time in knowing the person receiving the gift, so they could give a good gift. They didn't invest the time to find it, buy it, wrap it, and be present to see the response to the actual gift. They didn't do the things that connect the giver and the receiver. They took the easy way out and gave money.

Then there is the really good gift. The one that reveals commitment and relationship. One that comes to mind is an engagement ring. This speaks volumes about the relationship, the commitment, and an intimate knowledge of the person it is given to. There are also gifts that fathers give sons, mothers give daughters and so on, that represent a commitment to be together and share life. These gifts reflect a knowledge of the goals and desires of a person and a commitment to be a part of their journey. These are extra special gifts.

This is what Is 7:14 is about, a special, unique gift that reveals the depth of God's knowledge of us and His commitment to share in our lives and our journey. A baby and his name, God with US.

### *Day 12 - The Gift that Keeps on Giving - Is 8:8*

This passage is not a typical passage when talking about Christmas. But it contains concepts that are critical and are based on the name of the gift that is coming, Immanuel, "God with us."

This is a frightening passage about judgment and suffering but with a promise that God is with us. And that is how life is. Gifts, even the incredible ones don't change the reality of the world around us, but good gift helps us to live and deal with all that is happening in the world around us.

Do you understand what I just wrote? A good gift, a true gift, helps us grow and become a better person. It helps us know how to make good decisions and examine what people say and do. A good gift helps us see truth and decide which is the right path for our lives.

Look at the rest of chapter 8:

Part one – Danger is coming but O Immanuel (“God is with us”)

Part two – Prepare for the attack but know it will not work because “God is with us”

Part three – Chose wisely who you will listen to. The goal is to understand who God is, what it means for Him to be with us, and realize that it is more than “God is with us”. He is our sanctuary and “we are in Him.”

Part four – Realize that with this gift we become a sign, a gift to others, guiding them to the “God who is with us.”

Part five – Describes the life of those who do not have this gift. They are broken, they have no light, they are hungry, and lost, and all they can see is darkness.

But we have the “God who is with us.” The gift that never ends, never fails, never leaves. And that is the key to the gift we have received. This gift is much better than the energizer bunny.

The ad for the energizer bunny is it keeps on going, because it has a better source of power. Yet even that battery will eventually lose power and the object using the battery will stop functioning, at least until you replace the battery.

This is so true of most gifts. They have a limited warranty. They are guaranteed to work or not break for so many months or years. Actually, even that is not always true. Sometimes the guarantee is only that it will arrive to you unbroken and ready to work. Further guarantees may only cover operation and parts. If you misuse or abuse the item and it stops working, then the guarantee is void.

So the user must be careful to use it correctly and in controlled environments. It must be cared for, with proper maintenance,

and used according to the directions given. Any variation and the guarantee are void. Which means there are always conditions in which the company will not be responsible for repairing or replacing the gift you gave. Which means it is not a gift that will last.

So here we are in chapter 8, just after God has promised the most incredible gift, Himself dwelling with us. Then He promptly defines the situation and the conditions of the guarantee, but He does so in reverse stating that the gift has been given in the midst of a dangerous situation, knowing that it will be abused, ignored, and misused.

Verse 20 is. In the midst of all the dangers, lies, and problems, take time to review the guarantee, the teachings and the agreement. If you follow them there will be a future. The gift will always work no matter what has happened in the world around us.

Verse 16 expands this idea. It says take the gift and place it in a safe place with this idea in mind, it will be maintained and unchanged. No matter what happens you can rely on the fact that the agreement remains in effect.

It is truly the gift that keeps on giving.

### *Day 13 - What's in a Name - Is 9:6*

It used to be that names were given for some very important reasons. In many cultures it was to represent a quality or hope the parents had for their child. The name spoke of possibilities. In others, the name was a way of linking the past to the future. Names were connected to family and history. Today that is not as common and often not considered when choosing a name.

Most commonly names are chosen because of personal preferences and interests.

But there is one part of a name that is always constant, the surname. It represents a connection to the past and one's heredity. We do not choose this name. It is ours because of who our parents are and their origins. Originally, it may have taken the form of "son of", or "daughter of" a person, usually the father.

Here in this passage we are given a set of names that connect the past and the future. A last name and first name with deep meanings and heritage. Here is the list

Counselor – Wonderful

God – Almighty

Father – Everlasting

Prince – Peace

These names give us an incredible description of the gift we received at Christmas. Actually, we can do this same analysis with the gifts we give, because they often represent deeper issues and focuses.

Toy – diversion: We hope that what we give will provide a time of enjoyment

Clothes – provision: We hope that what we give will provide what is needed

Jewelry – relation: We hope that what we give will help to develop and strengthen relations

Money – independence: We hope that what we give will bring freedom and not restrict lives and plans

We may not be consciously thinking about these issues but they are there in the background. When our gifts bring about anyone or more of these results we feel a sense of satisfaction. Even more so if the gift fulfills more than one of them.

But let us return to the names in Isaiah. These are but a few but are key to revealing the incredible value of God's gift to us and its long-term impact on our lives. They represent ideals that we should always consider when thinking about what God has given us.

### Counselor – Wonderful

In every aspect of life, we are searching for direction, but not just any direction: a direction that will lead us to wonders and insight that will help us be successful in our lives and world. To make this possible we seek the advice or counsel of others in making wise decisions that will lead us on our path. Jesus was a teacher without equal and He opened the door to the coming of the Counselor into our lives.

### God – Almighty

The potential to succeed is a deep desire we all have. We want to receive all the resources and skills needed to do just that. When we don't have access to what we need we associate with others we believe have the power and resources we don't have and who we believe will not fail to provide us what we need. Jesus was and is God. His life was filled with proof of this might. His death and resurrection confirmed that the gift was truly mighty, almighty. None could hinder His plan to help us be restored and receive our deepest desire, forgiveness and restoration.

### Father – everlasting

No one wants to see a parent die. This loss is more than just the loss of a person but the loss of all the history and knowledge of the parent. They know more about many parts of our lives than we know, and they understand much we have yet to learn. Parents help us connect the past and the future and so see a much bigger picture. Jesus does this and more. He walked among us and connected all the past with all of the future. He helps us see our place in God's eternal plan, a plan where no one is lost or forgotten.

### Prince – Peace

Everyone is looking for someone or something that will create a space in their life that is without stress and gives a sense of peace and calm. We seek satisfaction and hope that it will bring peace as well. We willingly submit to others, to our goals, to our possessions in the hope that they will provide a place of peace in our lives. Jesus is much more than that. He is not just a place we go to, to find a time of peace. He comes to us and reigns over our fears and stress and brings peace wherever we are and in whatever is happening. He has authority over everything. If we are willing and allow it he can rule in our lives and bring peace.

So what's in a name? In this case more than we can ever imagine or hope for. And rightfully so the season is called CHRISTMAS.

### *Day 14 - The First Stone - 1s 28:16*

Do you remember your first step? Do you remember your first word? How about your first inoculation? Or the first time you cried? No.

How about your first smile, your first hug, your first laugh?  
Nothing.

Life is like that. The things that become the basis of everything else in our life are the things we can't remember. If we are fortunate our parents and others took pictures and videos. Maybe. However, the first time may been a surprise and the parents eagerly waited with the camera for the next opportunity.

The best gifts we give to others are often the same way. They are not the obvious ones we give that are seen and held and easily called to mind. They are more like the first step, the first smile, and so on. They happen, and it is not until they happen again or until we are watching for them to happen that we realize what had already taken place.

This is the gift God has given us. Here it is called the cornerstone. It is not the stone we see in a building that has a date on it. That is a symbol and not the true cornerstone. The true cornerstone often cannot be seen, especially as it relates to very old buildings. Unlike construction today which uses concrete and bar to create a foundation, early construction was based on laying great stones in the ground to create a base for the rest of the foundation. The first stone laid was the cornerstone and it was laid with great attention to precision. It had to be perfectly set or the rest of the work would be faulty. A small error would be multiplied over and over until it could be seen and could make it impossible to do the work properly. Walls would not be plumb, floors would not be level. This meant the doors would not fit properly, and windows would not open and close correctly if at all. And it would definitely impact how well the roof would set. Properly done the building would be strong and secure. A small error could

cause the building to collapse under its own weight or for minor reasons.

This is a great way to measure the value of a gift and of Christmas. It can be built on and the result will be useful, durable, and able to withstand the stresses and pressures that will come in life.

The same is true of God's Christmas gift to us. Jesus is the cornerstone of all that God wants to give us. He wants us to understand that this cornerstone is well placed and will be the basis of all that God plans to do in our lives. It is the true cornerstone which does not move; it is perfectly set in place so that as we build our lives on it we can be sure that if we use the right materials and trust the cornerstone we will be secure.

There is one other aspect of a cornerstone that we must consider. When forming the cornerstone, the masons took special care in its design. It had to be exact. Perfect for the location, type of building, and climate where it would be placed. The material used had to be considered. The tools used to cut and shape it were carefully selected. And the most skilled workers were selected for this work. A mistake meant starting all over.

The Christmas stone was carefully designed by God. It was not a last-minute choice. God carefully planned what it would be made of, the time needed to prepare the stone, and how it would be done. As you read through the Old Testament you can clearly see God's preparation of the stone.

The last aspect of this idea is the preparation of the place where the stone would be set. This was a critical part of the process. If the ground was too soft the stone would shift. If the ground was hard, then more work needed to be done to be sure the stone could be placed correctly. The Bible tells us that

Jesus came at the correct time. A time, a place if you will, properly prepared by God for the stone. A place that would allow for the proper building of His kingdom and the church. His church - all those who believe and become part of an incredible structure; all based on the perfect cornerstone, perfectly placed.

*Day 15 - He is Like Us We are Like Him—Is 53:2*

The gift was not what we expected. Instead of a king we got a baby. Instead of a world-ruling kingdom we got a world-changing family. Instead of a leader of power we got an itinerant teacher.

The passage above says the gift would have nothing great or beautiful to attract us to it. Have you heard the saying that “good things come in small packages?” Why do we say this? And why are we so disappointed when we see small packages instead of big ones?

Think about the following comments:

- A car without keys goes nowhere.
- A house without lights is a dark place.
- A television without an antenna shows only static.

Many times the big things we desire (transportation, light, television) are actually dependent on small things to make them work or to be useful.

The promised gift from God was something simple that would open the door to great miracles. It came as a baby who would live like us and overcome the crucial issues that prevent life, joy, and peace from becoming a reality in our lives.

Unfortunately, people want the big stuff without thinking through the little things that are essential to fully understand and use them. Look again at the car. There are several small items that are essential before you can drive the car:

- Keys – This represents control. You have control of the vehicle and can use it when you want to.
- Title – This grants approved access to the vehicle. It's not yours without this. Small piece of paper but without it anyone can say it is their car.
- License – This proves that you have the skill to drive the car. You have fulfilled all the regulations and you are approved as a qualified driver. Without this small card, the car will remain parked and be no more than a symbol.
- Insurance – This shows that you accept responsibility for the use of the car and the risks involved.

So many things in this world depend on something small, and not especially attractive or pretty, to function properly.

God's Christmas gift is the same way. It arrived as something small, weak, and, in the eyes of the world, not very impressive. That is unless you understood the purpose and function of the gift. A few did, the angels and the magi. And one feared it, Herod. So much so that he tried to kill the baby. Even so, as the baby grew up there was little to suggest what God was about to do through a lowly carpenter from a forgotten town.

Actually, this is true of each of us. When a baby arrives there is no knowing what will happen with that life. As this small gift grows up, it impacts the lives of others. Sometimes it is only a few and sometimes many others. How many is unimportant. The concept is small things matter and make a difference.

Jesus was born and lived like us, a small gift but with a much bigger value. His life would be the source of salvation for others. Small gifts can change our lives and become the cause of wonder and joy.

He came into the world like us, and that gift is Christmas. The question is will we be like him and be the gift of Christmas to others? The small gesture, comment, or kindness, that opens the door to peace and joy and so much more.

*Day 16 - A little event - Mi 5:2*

The best gifts often come from those we think of as a source for a gift of great value.

The world wants us to believe that diamonds are the best gift to give because they are truly valuable, they last, and they have a beauty that is hidden within but clearly visible. Diamonds do not lose value. They have a permanence and durability that lasts for generations and more. Their beauty is always visible when brought into the light.

But the truth is you can destroy a diamond or alter its appearance. Also, if you never bring it into the light so people can see it then its beauty will not be seen. Actually, many of the diamonds of great value are kept in dark places because of the fear they may be stolen.

For most people it is not the permanence of the diamond that gives it its value but the context, purpose, and the memory of the gift that are its true value. The object may fade into the past, it may be lost or even destroyed, and its original beauty altered by the passage of time. But the memory of the gift, why it was given, who gave it, and when it was given will

remain. A memory grows in value, a memory is hard to destroy or alter, and its beauty can actually increase.

Think of the gift of a flower. As a bud it is beautiful. Then it opens and the beauty increases. Finally, the flower is dried and pressed as a memory. In the end its beauty is greater than when it was a bud or a full blossom. Not because it has returned to its original beauty, but the beauty of the moment has grown, deepened in the heart and mind of the one who received the gift.

This passage talks about small things that don't appear to have value but in reality, become the source of something of great value. A small town - not the great city of Jerusalem. A small child - that grows to become the eternal king promised. A small kingdom – that is changed and becomes far greater than the borders of the promised land.

For any true gift it is not the size of the gift that is critical. Its value comes from other sources and results. Other aspects that give value to a gift are:

1. Connection – It connects the past with the future. A true gift has nothing to do with size or value but everything to do with the past - the basis for the gift, and future - how it will maintain the relation that was the source of the gift.

Bethlehem was such a gift. It connected the gift to its history, the promises made to David who was born in Bethlehem. It reaffirmed the relationship that had existed and was the foundation for God's promise of a gift that would come through the line of David. The gift came in a small package to a small place and connected all of God's promises of the past with all the promises yet to come.

2. Restores – It restores relationships, from the weakest to the strongest. This is a critical purpose of a gift. The reality of the world is that every relationship must deal with doubt and struggle. During those times a gift restores what is being threatened. People look at a gift not to be reminded of how expensive or wonderful it is but to remember the purpose, the love, the joy, the hope that it brings in that moment. When doubts come, when fears threaten, the gift, even the memory of the gift, restores.

Bethlehem is such an event. A small place, a minor event, yet forever it will be a reminder of what God has done for us. At Christmas we remember the place, the baby and we are encouraged.

3. Fulfills - It provides us the status and security that every relationship needs. Evidence of the status of our relationship, security that all is well. Parents receive so many small gifts from their children that have no earthly value. But to a parent they are invaluable. And the child knows from the response of their parents that their parents love them. They gain a sense of security from the act of giving and the response.

Bethlehem does just that. The king, the true shepherd king had come. This gift clearly revealed our status before God. God gave His son. A baby who would become the source of our security, the proof of God's love, and the provision for the fulfillment of God's promise of forgiveness.

A small place, a small baby, but an eternal gift that connects us to God, restores our faith, and fulfills all our needs.

## *Day 17 - History of a gift - Mt 1*

There are a set of gifts that are unique in this world. They are passed from one generation to the next. They can take many forms; jewelry, books, furniture, etc. They are usually items that are made of durable materials that can survive for years with minimal care.

Well-made furniture can last for several generations. I have a couple of pieces from my grandparents. Books can last even longer. I have a number of these from my great-grandfather's library that are almost 250 years old. Jewelry is the most durable. I have a set of rings are family heirlooms. One of my sons will inherit them one day.

What makes these items even more valuable or of interest is when the history of the item is known. When was it made, by whom was it made (or written in the case of a book), and when, and by whom was it obtained? Along with this information is the history of how it was passed from generation to generation. I have a bible with this kind of history. It was printed in 1834 but contains genealogic information dating back to 1789. What is interesting is that the bible was passed from daughter to daughter, not son to son. That is until I received it from my grandmother who had no daughters.

The Bible is stored carefully, waiting to see which of my children will be interested in receiving it and caring for it. And that is the point.

In Matthew we have the history of a promise; a promise given to Abraham that through his genealogy the world would be blessed. A person born in his family line would be the one to fulfill this promise. What the genealogy contains is a list of names of those involved in the process of passing the promise from father to son until we reach the birth of Jesus

Yes, this genealogy is about a gift. In this case a gift of future hope. And this hope is also revealed in the names included in the list. Some are people who trusted God's promises and served faithfully. Others were wicked, but the family line continued in spite of them. We also see evidence of the blessing for all nations. In an unusual move for the culture of Matthew, he includes the names of four women. All of them were from a people or nations outside of the chosen people of Israel. These were women who married Israelites and then gave birth to the next person in the list.

Even more interesting is the fact that one of the women was a prostitute, another committed adultery, the third was a member of an idolatrous people, and the last seduced her father-in-law but was pronounced more righteous than he when she gave birth to the next person in the genealogy. These were everyday people whose faith in God opened the door to becoming part of the history of the promise.

Genealogies are strange things. They have often been used to restrict who a person marries. Families want the best family lines for many reasons, (prestige, power, riches, and more) Either to maintain their status or to improve it. Alongside of this is a survival concept to produce the strongest, healthiest, and smartest children to insure the continuation of the family line, generation after generation.

Matthew's genealogy represents God's watchfulness over His promise. It represents God's heart of inclusion so that everyone is aware that there is a place in the history for those who are not normally seen as the best option for producing the next generation and maintaining a human concept of purity and correctness.

The gift was promised and step by step God guided and protected its fulfillment generation after generation until it

arrived and was brought to life in Jesus, the promised blessing for all nations.

### *Day 18 - The Other History - Lk 3*

So, the obvious question is why do we need another genealogy? A simple answer would be that Matthew and Luke had two different audiences and so a repeat of the genealogy gave both groups the same information. This makes sense except for the fact that there are significant differences in the two genealogies. Here they are:

1. Luke begins with Adam (actually ends with Adam since he goes backwards) instead of starting with Abraham.
2. Luke has more names, especially in the time frame from the fall of the kingdom to the birth of the Messiah.
3. Luke has a different list of names from Solomon to Jeconiah. The first and last names for this time period are the same but everything in between is different.

Why? There are several possibilities. The most prominent is that Matthew uses the legal line of descent. Such as king to king, not necessarily the direct descent (father to oldest son). Luke, on the other hand, represents the actual line of descent by parentage, such as King to his descendant. This is complicated but a possible explanation.

There is a better concept. While the names may have meaning or value in the context of the first century, the key idea here was to establish Jesus as being of the line of David and rightful heir. This point was not lost on the Pharisees and priests of that generation. They could have debated this point to prove that they were right, Jesus was not the Messiah. But they did

not use it because both genealogies represent a correct interpretation of the data and records that were meticulously cared for. You see the Jews were very careful about their genealogies because they affected many crucial aspects of their life. Property rights, right to serve in the temple and receive a share in the offerings, and other legal rights. So if Matthew or Luke had made an error they would have been very quick to clarify this and so have grounds to reject Jesus' claims and rights.

None of that happened. So, both represented a clear representation of the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew looked at the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham and then to David. The key difference in Luke's genealogy has to do with the first and last names, Jesus and Adam. Luke's genealogy was about connecting it all back to the first man, the garden, the sin, and the promise that through his offspring God would provide a solution to the problem of sin. It shows that from the beginning God was guiding the process in moving history towards the birth of Christ.

Now that makes this gift pretty incredible. From day one God was preparing everything related to the day the gift would arrive, be received, and put to use.

When you receive a gift don't you wonder about the whole history of the gift. Questions like:

- How did they know I wanted or needed this gift?
- How did they prepare the gift, you know put together the finances, and make the purchase?
- How long have they been thinking about giving this gift to me?
- How did they know when to give me the gift? Why today and not at some other time?

Sometimes the most significant gifts are not tied to special events like birthdays, holidays, etc. They come when we are not expecting them. But then we learn the history of the gift and of God that answers all questions. And we understand

Luke brings that all into focus. The sin, the judgment, being driven from the garden, the promise, the selection of Abraham, Judah, David and so on. This history brings it all into perspective and we see that God had prepared everything so that the gift arrived at the right time by the right method.

That was some plan! His gift of profound love changed us and gave us true hope.

### *Day 19-Dumbfounded and Speechless-Lk 1:5-23*

And the winner is.... (Long, very long, horrifically long pause) then the name. How many of us have watched a reality type shows, or contest, where during the show the winner is announced. It always takes foreeeever. They start, then delay, and then go to a commercial. When they return they repeat the intro and more talk and finally after another painfully long pause the winner is announced. The person responsible for the delay, none other than the emcee.

The scripture tells about the ultimate reality show that put God's plan in motion. This announcement has been anticipated and hoped for, for generations. It would have all the drama of a reality show and more. There had been many announcements and long pauses in the past. Finally came the time to hear the runner up, or in this case the one who would be the emcee and announce the arrival of God's gift to the world.

The Scripture tells about this event. It is the announcement that God's Christmas has arrived. It is about all that will happen and the selection of the one (John the Baptist) who will go out and tell everyone that the gift had come, to announce the one sent, the gift. In this case there is even information about what the gift is about and how to prepare for the gift that is coming.

We have a number of these types of events in life. A very well-known example is for a girl's quince años in Latin America (fifteenth birthday, [sweet sixteen or debutante event in other countries]). Everyone in the family and among friends knows it is coming. There is discussion about how it will be celebrated, where it will be, when it will be, etc. The event is well announced to be sure everyone knows all the information, so they can properly prepare and to avoid any confusion regarding expectations. Will it be simple, or grand? Will it be for everyone or only a few? Will it be in the home, at a meeting hall, or will it be a special trip for the young lady and her friends?

Another similar event is a wedding. Weddings are usually not last-minute events based on last-minute decisions. From the day of the engagement the planning begins, selection of the date, the venue, and other details. The goal is to be sure everyone's calendar is cleared for the event, finances are in place, travel is arranged, and on the list goes. The bride and groom want everyone to know. They want their friends and family to be there. They want people to have time to buy gifts and sometimes even make gift suggestions.

I can think of many events that involve sending out announcements to let all those invited know all the details: special birthdays, weddings, graduations, moving into a house, the birth of a child. Most of the time these

announcements are expected even anticipated. Anticipated with joy and hope. At times they bring on a full-blown state of shock and disbelief, the high school student that none thought would succeed graduating at the top of his university class. The young adult that no one thought would get married is engaged, the couple who believed they would never have a child are suddenly pregnant after years of disappointment.

Then came the meeting of Zachariah and the angel. The event was more than just a conversation, it was the fulfillment of the desire of all parents to have a child, the promise of a special call to ministry for their child, and the fulfillment of God's promise about the coming of the Messiah. It was such a shock that Zechariah couldn't believe even the first part, the simplest of them all, the promise of a son in their old age. He was rewarded (sarcasm) with having to remain speechless as proof of his incredulity.

The good news is that, while his mouth remained mute, his heart did not. The announcement was clear - a son, called from birth to be a Nazarite. A son, who would prepare the people, in the power and spirit of Elijah. A son who would need to be guided and helped to understand and receive the call of God and not rebel.

There are many levels of preparation for the arrival of a key event or gift; the preparation of the parents, the preparation of the child, the preparation of the family and friends. The more wonderful the gift, the more important it is to prepare for the arrival of the day.

In this case, it was the preparation for the most incredible gift ever given; the Lamb who would die for us and save us from our sins. The preparation had to be done properly and with great care. The parents of the messenger were selected because they would understand, even though they were in

shock for some time. Zechariah was incredulous and had to live the life of a mute for nine months. Elizabeth was so overcome she went into seclusion for five months to give herself the time to understand what had happened to her husband and why she was now pregnant, when it had seemed impossible.

The announcement left them a little dumbstruck and speechless, but that was how the plan was set in motion. That is how the announcement was delivered and would continue to be delivered. It would bring wonder and amazement as is always the case when great gifts and events are coming.

Christmas is just that, or it should be - a remembering of the incredible nature of the announcement of the coming gift and the wonderful time of anticipation and preparation for receiving a truly precious gift.

Emcee – The Messiah is... long pause

Emcee – The results are in but first... cut to a commercial and wait for the birth of the prophet and a baby.

Emcee – We are back and ...(long pause) (waiting for the prophet and Messiah to become adults)

Final announcement – here He is - The one who will take away the sins of the world!

### *Day 20 - Gift Etiquette – Lk 1:26-38*

We don't know what time of day Gabriel arrived. We don't know if there was a special setting planned or a special location. We don't know if Mary was busy about her normal routine. What is clear is that she was not expecting him or what he was about to say.

This may not be totally correct. She may have been hoping like many of us, to hear from God, to experience a special moment where God revealed himself. Gabriel's comments suggest such a possibility, for she was highly favored. This meant God was aware of her and the respect and honor she displayed as one who loves God and seeks to obey from a sincere heart. And so, as Gabriel brought the news to her, Mary humbly accepted it as a gift from God.

Having said all of that, is there something we can learn from this story regarding the giving and receiving of gifts? A gift etiquette, if you will.

### Those giving

1. There is a keen awareness of a person's worth. Valuable gifts are given to those worthy of them.
2. There is a reason for the gift. The giver can explain why the gift is being given and how it will be given.
3. There is a purpose for the gift. There is so much more involved than the act of giving or the gift alone. A true gift opens doors to much more.
4. There is joy for the giver and the one who delivers the gift (the giver or the one chosen as a representative). This results in a sense of pride.

### Those receiving

1. There is wonder at being selected for the gift. This is not the pretended surprise that some try to create but a genuine amazement at being chosen to receive the gift.
2. There is a sense of awe, an awareness that great gifts open doors one never thought could be opened or even existed.

3. There is a bit of uncertainty. Can I really accept this gift and fulfill all of the expectations and hopes that come with receiving such a gift?
4. There is humility; a sense that the gift is about much more than just me.

There are several such events in life that mimic this type of giving and how it impacts our lives.

The birth of a baby is like that. Even though the parents know what is coming, until it comes that knowledge is like a spark in a vast room. The anticipation is excruciating and then comes the explosion of light. A life is born and both parents become giver and receiver at the same time.

The reward of a promotion. A person works hard to be worthy. The employer watches with hope that they will find one worthy of the position. When the moment comes to announce the decision, all that is listed above happens to them.

The giving of an engagement ring. Really, it is the question, “will you marry me?” Both parties are giver and receiver and experience all that is mentioned above. Then it is repeated one more time at the wedding ceremony to confirm all that happened the first time.

And we all wonder if the gift is real and will produce all that it promises. We wonder like Mary and then hear words of confirmation and the promise “nothing is impossible with God.”

Nothing is impossible when we believe and put our faith in the right place or person and then live according to that faith. That is the last step in the etiquette of giving. Jesus was given at the right time, for the right reason, and the right place, for all willing to receive.

## *Day 21 - Gift Denial - Mt 1:18-24*

Have you ever turned down a gift, prize, or reward?

Why would anyone even consider such a thing?

In some instances there is a fear that there will be negative consequences if it is accepted, especially in the case of some types of prizes or rewards. Accepting them means we may have to commit to a number of conditions such as:

- Those giving it may feel they have the right to use us as part of their advertising and promotion plans and we don't want to be used as publicity.
- Those giving it may have conditions that must be met before we can actually receive it and we are not interested in going, doing, or saying what they require.
- Those giving may expect something in return for what has been given and we are unwilling to commit ourselves to such an expectation.
- The gift may cause an overwhelming sense of unworthiness, so much so that we believe we do not deserve such a gift or the level of attention and responsibility the gift represents.
- The gift may cause us to be seen by others in a way we are not comfortable with. It may cause others to think of us in negative ways, creating social and emotional situations like jealousy, envy, division, etc.
- The gift may come from someone we don't like, or even consider to be an enemy. Accepting the gift suggests we are willing to overlook the reasons for our differences.
- The gift brings us pain and discomfort. Rare but it does happen and we don't want to deal with it.

People do reject gifts. When this happens, the best scenario is to do so in a way that does not offend the giver; in a way that maintains respect for the person and their gift. But this is not always possible.

This is the situation Joseph finds himself, not excited about the gift he is to receive. He has just heard his wife-to-be is going to have a son. This is not a gift he wants to have since he knows he is not the father. Further, this child is the son of God. Again, not a gift he is interested in, more so because who wants to tell anyone that their wife is pregnant at the whim of a god? (Roman and Greek mythology were well known and were filled with such stories. None of which reflected well on the gods and their relations with man.) To believe such an event would be considered blasphemy. To announce it, death.

Even if Joseph did accept the story, no one else would, and his decision would become a source of derision and scorn. He would always be excluded and likely unable to provide the food, shelter, and other needs for himself, his wife, and this child. If he makes too big of a scene, then he risks the death of Mary and other similar socially negative results. So he tries to reject the gift as quietly and sensible as possible, in a way that will do the least damage to all involved.

That is his plan until Gabriel arrives and basically tells him that Mary is not lying and that the baby is the child of God, the creator, not some Roman or Greek demon. He is told that he should not be afraid because he will be father to God's promised gift. He is given the choice to do what is right, or risk denying God's gift.

And that is the point of receiving any gift. When we receive a gift, we have to choose. We can deny the gift and deal with the consequences, or we can accept the gift and deal with the consequences. Yes, both actions have consequences.

Denying the gift may free us from some things, but it will mean we don't benefit from the gift or open the door to other possibilities.

Accepting the gift means denying something as well. We deny our independence from others. We often deny our responsibility to others when in fact we have responsibilities and accepting the gift clarifies this. We deny the fact that our denial is an attempt to protect ourselves from the changes and potential risks a gift may

represent and so accept entering into all the commitments and changes that come with the gift.

Gabriel explained the situation. Joseph heard the explanation and accepted the gift. He then immediately acted on that decision and took Mary home as his wife. This didn't change how people may have responded but it did confirm to Mary and himself that they had heard from God.

No more excuses, no more denials. Accept the gift and all that it represents. This is Christmas, the gift has been given. It only waits to be accepted.

### *Day 22 - Leap of Joy - Lk 1:39-45*

The title probably is not what Mary was feeling most of the time. She was a young girl who had been told she was going to become pregnant without the involvement of a husband and before she was officially married. To everyone around her she was one of two things, a whore, or an adulteress. Neither of these descriptions would be a source of joy.

At first it probably wasn't a big deal. The first couple months of pregnancy often pass unnoticed, except to the woman who is pregnant. But that all changes as the cravings come, the moods change, and even more problematically (for those trying to hide the fact) the belly gets too big to hide. The secret cannot be kept any longer.

What little joy there was at being pregnant without a husband quickly faded for Mary. The comments began, and her future husband became the brunt of many snide and derogatory comments.

No, not much joy here and no reason to leap for joy.

So Mary did a wise thing. She went on a journey to visit someone who might understand. She went to visit Elizabeth, someone who had lived with the snide and rude, even hurtful comments of others. Not bearing children can be as bad as having a child without a

husband. They often yielded the same evaluation and judgment; obviously someone had sinned and so there was no baby or a baby without a father.

Joseph may have been a part of this planned trip. It may have been what he was thinking when scripture says he didn't want to disgrace her publicly (Mt 1:19), and to do this meant sending her away, to a place where his relationship to Mary was not known, and so he and she might get some relief from the stress of the whispering of people behind their backs, the unkind comments, and its impact on his business. At least that may have been his plan, until his meeting with Gabriel.

Mary still went but the focus had changed.

Now the baby was not a burden but a blessing from God. What a switch in perspective.

Then came the encounter and the leap of joy in the womb of Elizabeth. Yes, the events would bring stress and challenges. It would not be easy to deal with the comments and attitudes of those who didn't believe them. But it would give them joy to know this happened because God had chosen them. The gift would be both a source of misunderstanding and of the greatest joy.

The baby leapt, and Elizabeth proclaimed the truth. Mary's baby was a miracle from God to save the lost.

Now pause with me and think about the most useful gifts in life. Are some of those items, things we didn't think we wanted? Did some of them bring a certain amount of shame, embarrassment because of what they were and who gave them? Parents and grandparents can be really good at giving what is best for us yet leaving us uncertain as to how to respond to it.

Now think about that gift. How long did it take before you realized that the gift was in fact exactly what you needed? Before you realized that you actually enjoyed the gift? That realization was a bit of a shock, but then came the leap of joy. The awakening of the

truth that it was not just a good gift but a great gift, one that you have come to enjoy over and over.

These gifts are rare. But they are so important. When they come sometimes we need to create some space so we can think and hear the comments of others. Comments like, that was such a useful gift, that was such a thoughtful gift, and so on. This gift changed you without you even realizing what was happening. Until one day you realized the true joy of the gift and you leapt for joy.

### *Day 23 - The Song - Lk 1:46-55*

What is the focus of the song? The gift or the giver?

Think about the gifts you have received and how you responded to them. Of course, you always thank the person who has given you the gift. "Thanks" ranges from a simple, verbal thank you, to lots of hugs and kisses. But then, we stop saying thank you and get all wrapped up in the gift and the giver fades from view.

For a while we may remember who gave us the gift. But it is surprising how often we forget who gave us what and when. We become absorbed in the gift and its worth. Think about the comments

I am really going to enjoy playing with this.

This is going to make my work so much easier.

Because of this gift, now I can do what I have always wanted to do.

I am sure you can think of many such comments. They are focused on being able to accomplish a single event or a change in life and activity. And the really important gifts do just that.

But, the really critical gifts always bring us back to who gave them to us. They are such that we remember when we got the gift, where we were when we got it, and how it changed some aspect of our lives. In fact, some gift givers work very hard to make a critical gift, remarkable and memorable.

One that stands out is the gift of an engagement ring. So many young men try to create a unique and memorable moment when he asks the girl to marry him. The goal is to make it a surprise but in such a way that he would not be turned down and she would have no option but to say yes. If everything goes right she will sing his praise to their friends and family up to and way beyond the wedding day. In fact, at every opportunity the moment will be remembered. The focus will be on what he did, where he did it, and all the preparation involved.

The hope in all of this is that the girl's comments move beyond the event to how the gift changed her world, provided all that she had hoped for and more, and how the couple is continuing to grow in all that the gift represents. And just what does such a gift represent? What should they be celebrating?

That is what Mary's song is all about:

All that I Mary, am has been touched by the gift and has brought me joy. So much joy that I have to tell you about the wonderful person who gave me the gift.

This gift makes possible for me to have the most important things in life: I have a sense of security and belonging; I have been granted freedom to be me; I have someone who keeps their promises; I know that I am special.

God's gift to Mary opened a floodgate of joy and realization that the gift would provide a doorway to much more than the actual receiving of it, rather it would be a guide in how to live and grow in the life that lay ahead because of the gift.

It is important to rejoice in the gift. But it is so much more important to let the gift reveal the One who gave it and celebrate the relationship that the gift reveals.

## *Day 24 - Proof and Prophecy - Luke 1:68*

Have you ever been rendered speechless when someone paid you a compliment or gave you a special gift? Usually it is the surprise or exceptional nature of the event. Slowly as the shock passes the person begins to formulate a response.

What do these comments contain?

- Humility – often there is an attempt to explain why the receiver is not worthy of what was given. Whether it is true or not, it is an expected response and people in general begin in this way.
- Excessive – this response is closely linked to the first. The gift was too elaborate, too costly, too generous and so on. Somehow our worth is suddenly linked to the gift and a need to devalue ourselves to avoid appearing egotistical and proud.
- Relationship – these are comments designed to clarify and express the nature of the relationship. People talk about things like friendship, long-term relationships, mentoring, and ideas that attempt to reveal how important the giver is and often why the relationship exists.
- Appreciation – there is a desire to express how valuable the gift is in order to make the giver feel good about what was given.
- Hope – sometimes there are comments about how the gift will make a difference, how it will help fulfill a dream or open doors to new levels of relationship or activity.
- Commitment – at times there are comments designed to confirm the commitments the gift represents (engagement ring, financial grant). Words that reveal what may already exist but which can now be expressed more openly.

In this passage we hear from Zechariah. The surprise of the gift has long passed. It has been nine months since he got the news of the coming birth and its purpose. He has had nine months to reflect in silence about what he will say if and when he is able to speak again.

Before this is possible he has to write down one word. The child's name. The name given to him by Gabriel. A name he has shared with Elizabeth. A name, a gift that must be finally received in the manner and conditions in which it was given. John.

In this moment his ability to speak returns and his comments are of praise of God. There is nothing about himself. Nothing about worthiness. Nothing about relations, none of the typical comments.

Instead the focus is on what the gift means for those who will be the benefactors of the gift. He has realized that though the gift is coming to him he is not the ultimate benefactor. Yes, he will enjoy the gift for a while, but the gift is truly for many others and he is simply the media by which the gift, in its fullest sense and purpose, will be delivered.

Zechariah's words are filled with hope, possibility, and promise. He has had more than enough time to review the Scriptures and realize completely that this gift was promised by God. He has learned the true value of the gift and what his responsibility will be. His words become the proof of why the gift was given and what it will mean. His words make possible the prophetic words Isaiah, and of what will be accomplished through the gift.

The greatest gifts, the gifts that make a difference, are given to those who see God's purpose and commit themselves to caring for what has been received so that all others will benefit from the gift.

God's gift is not a private gift for just you and me. It is for us to use to touch others and bless their lives. The proof is the gift. The prophecy is seeing what must be done to use the gift in the way it was intended. This gift will prepare the people to be redeemed.

### *Day 25 - What counts - Lk 2:1-5*

Have you ever registered for a gift or received information that a couple is now registered at a store and has prepared a list of items they would like to receive as gifts? This is a popular idea that helps us know what is needed and wanted; it provides a safe environment

to consider what you can and are willing to spend, and also provides a time frame. Buy too early, before the list is ready and you may buy the wrong item. Buy too late, and what you can afford or are interested in giving may already be selected by someone else. Then you are back at the point where you may buy something they neither need nor want.

But this is not the only time that we find ourselves registering:

School – As children, we registered for school. This told us what class we would be in, grade level, teacher, and location of the class. It also allowed us to see where things were and find out what would be needed for class.

Government – This registration occurs at different stages in life. It is about paying your taxes, being properly identified for benefits, and at times being selected for jury duty, military service, or other areas.

Police – It is common to be fingerprinted and registered so that we can be tracked to be sure we are good citizens before we are hired or allowed to have access to certain resources and goods.

Events – Many people register to win money, goods, and services. There is no guarantee you will win but if you don't register, you are guaranteed not to win. Sometimes this registration has a cost tied to it.

When we register we give our data to those in charge of the process. Name, birth date, address, and more depending on what we are registering for. We register to be sure we are in the right place, have the right access to information, and so people know where to find us. Registering is about guaranteeing who we are, so we can get what we want, need, and for some, what they think they deserve. Registration then provides the means to confirm that the correct person receives what has been offered or given.

The census was a type of registering. It forced Joseph and Mary to be in the right place when the gift arrived. It was not a pleasant process. They were forced to travel at a difficult time in her

pregnancy. It meant that they would be identifiable to the government when it was time to pay taxes. But it also meant that when people checked the register they would see that, in fact, the parents of Jesus were of the line of David. They were registered, and God responded with the gift.

In this case the registry was as unique as the gift. God had registered the plan for the gift from the beginning. He had clearly defined the gift as well as the who, the what, the when, and the where. It was very specific registry for a very special gift.

1. To whom: Line of David
2. Where: Town of Bethlehem
3. When: Fullness of time as defined by God and explained to Daniel
4. What: the promised gift – a child born of a virgin
5. In the name of the perfect giver – God

So what does your registry look like this year? What are you hoping people will give you? Are you looking for a lot of stuff or is your gift list as focused as God's; one that draws people into God's plan and into a relationship that really counts?

### *Day 26 - What would you do? – Lk 2:1-7*

A wrapped gift has arrived, but no one wants it. Is this even possible? Have you ever seen a gift refused before it was even opened? Or maybe was is not opened because it was not seen and so the person didn't realize there was a gift to open. How sad when the giver watches and sees what looks like a lack of interest in the gift.

Or perhaps the recipient didn't want the gift and so ignored its presence. This is truly sad. Someone took the time and used their resources to give a gift and it was ignored. Why would this happen? It could be the nature of the relationship and what is happening between those involved. It could be that the

person already knows what the gift is and doesn't want it. To make this clear - the gift is ignored.

There is one more option. The gift is supposed to be a surprise. The giver has kept it secret until the right moment comes and then...surprise!! When it works, it is a great experience. Everyone enjoys the results, the glee, the emotion. But, a surprise gift can backfire. This happens when the secret results in the receiver believing they have been forgotten, or perhaps they are in a less-than-festive mood when the surprise is revealed.

The best surprise gifts come when the right people are there. When it is the right moment, and everything is ready. The best surprise gifts come out of sharing in the event. But sometimes no one is there to share the moment and celebrate with you or those present are not interested in celebrating with you.

And so it was with God's gift. While the baby brought joy to Joseph and Mary. He may have caused awkwardness for some and was totally ignored by others. There was even one, Herod the Great, who was not happy about the arrival of the gift and reacted with violence to any potential threat to his throne.

Imagine the innkeeper when he learned what has happened in the night. Imagine the people who had denied Mary and Joseph a place and how they felt when they learned that a young woman had to give birth in the stable. What did they do when they heard? Did they have any idea of what God had just done? And what they were to receive in a few years? Did the care? Was there a lack of interest? A less-than-festive mood? We know how Herod responded, he ordered the death of all children under two years of age. He definitely didn't want the gift.

The night before, the innkeepers didn't want to deal with the gift, the birth of a child. The night before, the people who already had a room probably heard the pleas of Joseph, but they weren't interested in the gift, and the possible birth of a baby in the night. Door after door was shut. No room, until the one innkeeper said, I suppose you could stay in the stable. The surprise gift was not wanted, rejected.

What would you do?

You know as well as I do that not all gifts are what a person desires. Sometimes they are what is needed; what is essential. Gifts can change a life, but at the moment they are given, they are barely acknowledged.

What would you do?

Would you close the door, turn away, ignore the gift and the giver? Profound gifts often cause such responses and it is only after years that we see the real value of what was given. Think about the love of our parents and their sacrifices. We don't see them, we sometimes reject them, we even ignore them, until one day we ... see.

What would you do with such a gift?

### *Day 27 - Disturbing the Peace Lk 2:8-20*

It does not take long in Latin America to recognize when someone is having a birthday, when someone is graduating or celebrating another other special event in the life of a neighbor. This is because it is never a secret. When there is a birthday or special event there is a fiesta. Usually with a lot of people and a lot of music. And it often lasts until the early hours of the morning. The only time when things become quiet is when it is time for the speeches and cutting the cake.

The interesting fact in all of this is no one seems to be disturbed by the noise. There is an expectation that there will be celebrations. There is an awareness that when it is time to celebrate, to give gifts, to recognize what has happened in a person's life, there will be a celebration and it will go public. Public in such a way that everyone, and I do mean everyone in the neighborhood knows what is happening.

There is also the awareness that it is not an every night activity. My day to celebrate will come and everyone will know that I am a year older or that someone in the family has reached a significant milestone in their life.

And if you, the neighbor, expect to have a quiet night of sleep, you will not. (Unless your room is soundproof, or you have earplugs). But everyone in the community knows fiestas will happen and even though they may not be part of the group celebrating they still celebrate, because that is what the culture does.

That is how life is in Latin America. The peace will be disturbed but no one is upset because they know it will happen. They know that it is important to celebrate the life of a person. This celebration brings people together and identifies the fact that others want to celebrate with us, that we belong to a special group, and they want to let the world know that the most important gift of the night is the life of the one who is the reason for the celebration. The person was given to the group and the group celebrates and gladly disturbs the peace to let everyone know how much they appreciate what has been received.

So on this night the angels come and disturb the peace.

They celebrate a gift that has existed for all eternity. But on this night, they will do so publicly so that others will know

and be able to celebrate with them. They announce to a group of people nearby the reason for the celebration. They disturb the peace for a moment. This was a rare event when heaven went public and Let the world have a glimpse how to celebrate in a heavenly manner.

Unlike Latin America, the neighborhood was not expecting the celebration. They didn't expect to become the audience to the celebration. Yes, a prophetic announcement had been made but few had any history or experience with such an outburst from heaven. They were caught off guard. At first angel's presence caused no small amount of fear. Bright lights, loud noises, and unexpected visitors in the night can do that.

A brief explanation by an angel calmed their fears and then the full celebration began. We have no idea how long it lasted. It doesn't matter. It was long enough to cause the neighbors to seek out the reason for the celebration, the baby; the gift worth celebrating.

Then the shepherds created a little disturbance of the peace themselves. They went all through the town telling everybody what had happened. Celebrations are like that. They are about the person, the true gift that causes people to celebrate.

Do people celebrate your gift or do they celebrate you? Why do we give gifts and celebrate?

The truth is, too often we get caught up in giving an object and forget that the real reason for the gift is the person being celebrated. And the real gift that should be given is ourselves. This is worth disturbing the peace and celebrating.

## *Day 28 - Angels Testifying - Lk 2:10-14*

Before any great celebration there are always announcements; there are always invitations and people telling others what the celebration is about, who we are celebrating, and who is invited to the celebration.

There is an interesting custom in Guyana related to the announcement of a wedding. The upcoming marriage is announced three times in the church before the day of the wedding. This it is both an announcement and a challenge. It goes like this: date of the wedding, name of the people getting married, and a challenge – “if anyone objects to this marriage let them speak now. This is the first time I am asking.”

A week later the announcement is repeated, and the closing phrase is – “this is the second time I am asking.” Then a week later and the week of the wedding it is repeated and closed with the phrase – “this is the last time I am asking.” After this point no one will be allowed to object to the people being married, especially during the wedding.

The point of this announcement is to be sure everyone knows the date of the wedding, who is getting married, and in this case, the fact that it will be at the church and everyone is invited. There are no restrictions as to who can come and observe the wedding but attending the reception afterwards may require a specific invitation. Actually, many people don't attend the ceremony but only come to the celebration afterwards. It is more important to celebrate with people than to be present for the actual ceremony.

In the Christmas story we have something similar:

Announcement #1 – Zechariah, there is a great event coming. You and Elizabeth will be part of this event by giving birth to the promised prophet who will prepare the way for the

Messiah. Since you weren't ready to believe, you will be silent. If there is no further objection this is the first time I am speaking.

Announcement #2 – Mary, you have been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. You have been found honorable and true in your faith. Yes, you are a virgin, but the Holy Spirit will create in you a new life who will be the Messiah. If there are no further objections this is the second time I am speaking.

Announcement #3 – Joseph, you need to listen carefully. Mary is telling the truth. The baby growing in her is a miracle of God. She has not violated her vows to you. You will be her husband and father to the child. If there are no further objections this is the last time I am speaking.

Then comes the event:

The final ceremony – An angel speaks. God's promised Savior has been born as promised and announced. The ceremony is over, and the child has come. You are invited to go and see Him and rejoice in the peace that God has promised.

What we need to keep in mind is the focus is on the people involved. In the wedding announcement it is about the two people and celebrating with them. The announcements are to avoid conflict on the day of celebration. The focus is to be on the couple not on other issues.

At Christmas the focus is to be on Jesus, not other issues. The focus is the child, God Incarnate. This is what the celebration is about. The true gift is not the presents we bring but the Person we celebrate and honor.

*Day 29 - The truth behind it all - Lk 2:25-35*

A truly great gift causes changes.

Think about it. Why do some parents give their children the gift of a car? It is because there has been a change. The child is enough to drive. With this gift comes a list of responsibilities and the commitment to obey the rules so as not to place themselves and others at risk.

Why do couples exchange the gifts of rings and vows? It is because there is about to be a significant change in their lives. They will no longer live separately. They will have to learn to be responsible for each other, and at some point in their lives learn to be responsible for children.

For children the changes are constant. Many children's gifts are given with the hope that the gift will help them develop in a way that will improve their learning skills and growth mentally.

Some gifts to young people are given to encourage them be more independent (a phone, a house key, a credit card). A strange idea but it is true. At the same time the hope is they will learn to appreciate their parents more and maybe listen to their advice.

We could look at many gifts and in almost all cases we will see this truth. Good gifts cause changes. The most common change gained is an improvement in the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Sometimes the changes are what were desired. And sometimes the changes are unexpected. And sometimes they can cause a negative change.

So here comes Simeon.

He knows there is a gift coming. He has received a promise. He has been waiting for this day. He already knows one

change that is coming, his life will soon be over. The promise received was that he would live to see the arrival of the gift. We do not know how old he was, but it is clear from his comment, “as promised, you dismiss your servant in peace,” (Lk 2:29) that he was older, nearing the end of his life. He was ready for the change that the coming of this gift signaled.

This is a lesson for us. Are we prepared for the changes that a gift will bring into our lives? Every gift brings change. Some more than others. Great gifts bring great change. Are we ready like Simeon for these changes?

Then Simeon takes this concept another step. Not only does the gift affect the one receiving it but through that person it will have an impact on others.

Let's go back to the car illustration. The teenager receives the gift of a car. Yes, their life will be changed, but every time they drive the car it will affect other persons as well. Sometimes they will help another person get to another place because they are willing to use the gift to help others. Sometimes they will make mistakes while driving and that could have a negative, even serious impact on others.

This is the content of Simeon's comments.

The gift has come: It will be a source of peace and salvation (vs 29-30). The truth is gifts often bring peace and tranquility between people. The salvation part is a little harder to see from a human standpoint, but just think about it. Gifts save us from boredom, save us from impact of climate, save relationships, save us time, and so on.

The gift has come: it will bring light and honor (vs 32). Every gift opens the door to more understanding and insight. It changes how we relate to each other. It changes our

perspective of the giver. People benefit from what we learn and gain, and the giver is honored because of it.

The gift has come: it will cause growth and struggle (vs 34). A good gift allows us to grow and through that helps us to help others grow. But making use of a good gift can bring struggle as we learn to use it properly (think of older adults and new technology). At the same time it can bring trouble. Not everyone is always happy with what another person receives. Even good gifts given the right way can result in others being jealous, envious, and even spiteful of the one who received the gift.

The gift has come: it will reveal the thoughts of many (vs 35). A good gift has this ability. It reveals the thoughts of the giver and receiver, that is expected. But it also reveals the true nature of the people around us. Good gifts sometimes cause people around us to struggle because of the who, what, and why of a gift. Good gifts help us see and understand the heart of others. Most of the time we sense their love and happiness for us. At other times it reveals hate and anger. This is the sword that pierces the soul vs (35).

The truth of God's gift is just this. It will do all of this and more. From the beginning the gift has always had this truth within. It will change the world. It will bring salvation. It will bring growth and struggle. It will reveal the truth about everyone.

That is why it is the greatest gift.

*Day 30 - Worth the wait - Lk 2:36-38*

How often do you check for the age level of a gift? So many games or books have a label that suggests the appropriate age for the gift. Under 3, ages 3-5, 12 and over, and all ages.

The reality is that many gifts are age specific, or time related. You have to reach a certain age or certain time in your life, before the gift is appropriate. If we think about it, such things as driver's licenses, drinking age, and voting age all represent gifts. Society will only give these privileges to people who have reached a specific age. Young people anxiously await these moments, so they can enjoy the gift that comes with the age.

There are other such milestones that are age sensitive, like the age to receive one's inheritance. A young adult may receive a promised cash amount when they reach a specific age, graduate, or get married. Finally, they can enjoy the benefits of all that a parent, friend, or person has set aside for them when they reach that point in life.

The last group of age appropriate gifts comes later in life; the age of retirement and collecting the benefits of years of work. Those beneficiaries receive various benefits from the government, such as social security and medical assistance. There is another gift that only happens as one grows older; the joy (gift) of having grandchildren.

What is common to all of these is the need to wait. Actually, it is more than a need, it is a requirement. And you cannot rush it. Life moves at its own pace and you cannot make the days, hours, minutes move any faster. So, you just have to wait until the date for receiving the benefit or gift finally arrives.

Along -side of the requirement of waiting for time to pass, there is also the concept of waiting until we are qualified to

receive a gift, award, or reward. We spend years in preparation so that we will be permitted access to the benefits of such preparation. When we are careful and committed we are rewarded. We celebrate these events in much the same ways that we celebrate receiving a gift.

The longer the wait, the more work involved in the process, the greater the celebration. Often arriving at one of these unique points in life comes quickly but other times it is a slow and challenging process. We work hard, we focus on the goal, we deal with frustration, discouragement, a lack of support, and even people who criticize us as we work towards these special gifts.

Enter Anna. A widow formerly married to a member of the family of Levi. Listening day by day to Scriptures about the promised gift. Watching the changes as the temple is rebuilt as promised. Living in the temple, praying, fasting, and studying day after day. Seeing the pieces come together. Seeing the approach of the day the gift is given.

She shares the hope with others. She waits. Years pass, and she keeps waiting.

She has no children that she can enjoy and sing with. Instead she hears the daily singing of the psalms and begins to hear the theme of the gift in them. This music lifts her heart and encourages her as the days pass. She watches as Jerusalem is once more under the control of a foreign power but is amazed as a false king rebuilds the temple around her. It is majestic, but it is not the gift.

Then comes the day. It arrives without announcement, without heralds, or trumpets. One minute it was not visible and the next it is. Just like the day of a key age. One day you are too young and the next you are old enough. Like a goal gained.

One day you are working towards the goal and then you finally reach it and you receive the recognition deserved.

The day came! Jesus, the gift appeared! Anna announced it! She celebrated! She had done the work! She had waited, studied, prayed, and waited. Now it was time to celebrate and let everyone know that the gift had arrived.

We do the same in our lives. We work, we wait, and then we tell everyone that the day has come, and we have received what we had waited for. God made sure there were people ready to announce Jesus' presence. That day, the world heard from Anna about the gift God had promised. She made sure they knew that it was worth the wait.

*Day 31 - What Lies Ahead was Behind - Lk 2:40*

All that Christmas means, and all that Christmas will become, is what it has always been.

Lk 2:40 states that Jesus, the Messiah “grew and became strong, he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him.”

All that had already existed entered the life of Jesus. All God's wisdom, all God's love, all the grace and mercy that made the gift possible became visible. There is nothing new or different here. It all existed from the beginning of Christmas.

The only thing different is our ability to perceive these truths.

From the beginning God has been working to reveal Christmas to us. From the beginning He has been revealing to us His wisdom and His grace. He has always loved us, always been preparing for the day we would allow the gift to fill our lives. To allow it to grow and become strong in us. To allow

all its wisdom to change how we think. To allow its grace to fill and overflow to others.

The gift has always been there, waiting for the day we are ready to receive it.

Now that we have received it, it makes it possible for us to be the gift bearer, so others will receive that same gift.

What lies ahead is what was behind. God's love prepared a gift, explained clearly the purpose of the gift, and then waited for the right time to present the gift. That is what we are called to do; to be waiting to tell everyone we meet about the gift, to explain the gift, and to be prepared to deliver the gift.

What lies ahead is what was behind. There has always been Christmas, Christmas made its presence known, so that there will always be Christmas on into eternity.

What has existed from the beginning, and is now revealed, will be for eternity and is calling us to be Christmas to all who have not seen, heard, or touched the source of Christmas.