

The Christmas Gift

Introduction

So, hello again from Hong Kong. Now, having spent the past three weeks presenting Christianity as the one true faith, it's very fitting that a key event in the Christian calendar is being celebrated around the world this week. Now, today, I want to share Christmas with you from a Christian standpoint.

Now, believe me, I am not one of those people who wants to take the joy out of the celebrations by criticizing the Santa Claus gift giving aspects of Christmas; in fact both Elaine and I love that aspect. Nevertheless, it's important to reflect on the real significance of Christmas because it has far more depth and meaning than you might have been given to believe.

Now, I've titled this message: 'The Christmas Gift' for a reason, the reason being that gift giving, which is a central feature of the Christmas celebration, says something about both the gift giver and the gift itself. However, we should start the message by reading two of the most famous passages from the Bible, familiar to Christians and many non-Christians alike, which together describe the status and birth of Jesus Christ.

Luke 1 verses 26-35 (NIV) describes the status of Jesus in the following way:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'

Now, we learn more about the birth of Jesus in Luke 2 verses 4-20 as follows:

Josephwent up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

OK, so having reminded ourselves of these central passages, let's begin with an examination of the nature of the gift giver.

The Nature of the Gift Giver

Just turning to the gift for a moment, the original Christmas gift was Jesus Christ himself, the Saviour of the world. This gift has never been surpassed in the history of the world and will never be surpassed in the future. Such an amazing gift could only be given by the Lord God himself, the all-powerful, the creator of the universe. Now, this is no small God we are talking about! John 3:16 (NIV) conveys fully the nature of God and the significance of the gift as follows:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Now, John 3:16 shows that the Lord God is by nature a 'giver' and in the natural realms we sometimes talk about people being either 'givers' or 'takers'. However, there is a special characteristic to God's giving nature that is in stark contrast to anything in human experience and this is stated in Romans 5:8 (NIV) as follows: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Now, let's think about this for a moment. God gave over his only son to be crucified not only for those that loved Him, but also for those who slandered Him. Now, we can safely attribute God's feelings for his son, Jesus, to the type of feelings those of us who are

parents, have for our own children, and I am sure those who do not have children can understand the depth of feeling involved. We learn something of God's love for his son in Matthew 3 verse 17 (NIV) where God is speaking about Jesus. *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* Now, let's imagine for a moment giving over one of our own children, or someone equally as close to us, to suffer an agonizing death. not only for those that love us, but also for those that hate us! This is what God did for the human race and the quality of this love is way beyond anything that we can comprehend in human terms. If you ever doubt that God loves you, keep in mind Romans 5:8, which I repeat: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

The passage from Luke about the birth of Jesus also tells us something else about the nature of the giver. Notice that Jesus entered this world in the humblest of circumstances and his first public appearance was to shepherds who were of low status in society. What we learn from this is that God is no respecter of position but only a respecter of persons. If He were a respecter of position, we could have expected Jesus' first public appearance to have been, for example, to the Pharisees or teachers of the law but no, He chose to have His son revealed, first, to humble shepherds.

The implication of this is that God loves all individuals in the human race equally. He has no favourites and the choice is open to us all to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and regardless of our position in life, we then become His adopted sons (and daughters). As Ephesians 1:5 (NLT) puts it: *God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*

Let's now turn our attention to the nature of the gift itself.

The Nature of the Gift

The gift is one of eternal life through Jesus Christ. The birth of Jesus heralded the means by which we need not fear death because we have a place in heaven when we pass on from this earthly existence. In John 6:40 (NIV) Jesus puts it this way: *For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*

We need to note that the condition for receiving the gift of eternal life is a belief in Jesus Christ. We also need to know that we have eternal life whether we believe in Jesus or not. The problem with eternal life without Jesus is that we spend our eternity with Satan. Jesus made the following statement about hell in Matthew 13 verses 41-42:

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We should not take the alternative eternity to that of heaven lightly because Jesus mentions hell, which is the alternative in forty-six verses. Reinforcement for the eternal nature of hell is found in Revelation 20 verse 10 (NIV) as follows:

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

However, this is certainly not the fate of Christ followers. As Jesus says to his disciples and to all mankind in John 14:2: *In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.* (KJV)

Another feature of the gift is conveyed in the term: Grace. The gift of Jesus Christ is a free gift from God resulting from His loving heart, and it is nothing to do with what we have done and all to do with what God has done. Ephesians 2 verses 8 to 9 (NIV) puts it this way: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works.....* Grace is all about the gift of Salvation freely given by God and neither deserved or earned by us. It is Grace that saves us from Hell, and it is Grace that enables us, once saved, to lead God-centred, fulfilled lives.

Associated with Grace is forgiveness which is a further feature of the gift that entered the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Quite simply, the Grace that is available to every human being means that no matter how sinful our lives have been, when we repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord, the slate is wiped clean and we are fully forgiven. No matter how far we have fallen into any kind of sin, God can lift us from the depths of despair, remove our filthy rags and clothe us with clothes appropriate to our new status as His adopted sons or daughters. Our part in all this is to simply repent for past sins, put Jesus in the 'driving seat' of our lives and resolve to live in obedience to His will and direction, and as His plans for our lives are far better than anything we can imagine, this makes far better sense than **going** (doing) it alone!

Another aspect of the gift of Jesus Christ is the personal nature of the Christian faith which is a feature that no other major faith system has. The birth of Jesus was the beginning of the process by which God took on human form and lived His life amongst us as fully man and fully God. This is described in the notion of the Trinity, which will be the subject of a future message, but what this process means is that Christians have a personal Saviour who can relate to all the pressures and temptations that we humans face and is also in constant prayer to the Lord on our behalf. The book of Hebrews puts it this way in chapter 4 verse 15 (NIV): *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet he did not sin.*

Now, there are many aspects of the Christmas gift that could be mentioned, and I am just touching on what I consider to be the central features of this gift, given our time together today. However, I cannot leave this message without mentioning the gift of overcoming. The birth of Jesus, his life and ultimate death paved the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit as a comforter, guide and friend to each Christian. Christians who are 'tuned in' to the spiritual dimension of existence will rapidly come to a realization that this world, to echo the theme of some previous messages, is a 'battleground not a playground'. We are all in a spiritual battle whether we are aware of it or not, and

ultimately all will be victims without the gift of spiritual discernment that is granted by the Holy Spirit. The Christmas gift of Jesus actually leads to a second gift being given, namely the Holy Spirit, and it's through the work of this Spirit that those Christ calls His ouchildren become able to discern and so overcome the wiles and tactics of Satan. This comes with a guarantee of ultimate victory in the spiritual battle.

Summary

In an earlier message, it was noted that many people in this world live lives of 'quiet desperation' to quote Thoreau. Despite the masks that people choose to display in this world, I believe there are many more in the quiet desperation category than we might think. To put it another way, this is an increasingly confused and complex world, where many lead a life of 'quick kicks' followed by a sense of hopelessness. More than ever before, people need to take hold of the Christmas gift. However, this very expensive gift remains, in the case of many, unclaimed. If you are one of those who has yet to claim this gift, I urge you this Christmas to treat yourself to the most precious gift you could ever claim, the gift of Jesus. If you have no-one to talk to or to help you take the next step, please email admin@thelittlechurchworld.org. We have someone ready and waiting to help you claim your gift of peace, hope and eternal life. However, if you've already made your claim, now is the time to remind those you know just how important it is that they claim their gift!

Now, I hope this message has been a Christmas gift for you, but as it's Christmas, I've invited a special guest along to wish you a merry Christmas along with me, and here she is. So, we both want to wish you a Merry Christmas, but I'll let Elaine say her Christmas wishes too.

Elaine: I just want to say, have a wonderful Christmas; it is a fantastic time of year, but more so because of Jesus. God bless you.

Jim: And have a wonderful sharing in your groups. God bless and a merry Christmas once again.

Elaine: Merry Christmas.

Discussion Questions

1. The following comes from an article in the 'Washington Times' entitled 'Jesus Christ's nativity story is probably false, experts say'. The article goes on to state the following: "One man who has written much about the times and legacy of Jesus is Dr. Richard Carrier, a freethinker who authored, among other works, Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus. Dr. Carrier has unorthodox views about Jesus — specifically that the man did not exist and is a religiously-inspired myth."¹ How can we respond to these kinds of arguments?

¹ <http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/conscience-realist/2013/dec/17/jesus-christs-nativity-story-probably-fake-experts/>

2. There are frequent assertions that the Bible is full of contradictions. Often this is the result of different accounts of the same event. For example, the Gospels of Luke and Matthew give very different accounts of the birth of Jesus. Does this mean that the Bible is not accurate?
3. The message mentions the alternative eternal life spent with the enemy i.e., in Hell. How can a loving God send people there?
4. One of the greatest Christmas gifts is God's forgiveness but sometimes we just can't forgive ourselves. What is wrong with this?
5. One of the final statements in this week's message is to go and share the Christmas gift with others you know who have not yet claimed their gift. The question for everyone is: who will this be for you?

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