

The Gift from the Heart of God

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, give Me a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water" (John 4:10).

Christmas is celebrated practically worldwide. Many cities decorate their streets, homes are brightly lit and draped with garland for Christmas and merchants have specials. In Europe, people look forward to delightful Christmas markets where food and local wares give a festive atmosphere to the end of winter.

For many years in the United States, the day after Thanksgiving has been the biggest shopping day of the year. This year, there was even a "Black Friday 2010" website for online specials. Some major retailers were also open on Thanksgiving Day. News commentators believe this will be a new trend. In fact, practically all "news" right now deals with Christmas: where to get the best bargains; how retailers are faring; jobs that have been created because of Christmas; challenges of traveling during the busy holidays; recipes for holiday entertaining and how to cope with the stress of it all.

Christmas is so commercialized that few could tell the real significance of it. Christmas has become a "season," a holiday time to have family gatherings at the end of the year. Each year, much thought and expense goes into the purchase of gifts for family and loved ones. Often people will plan all year long for Christmas, putting money aside to buy gifts or making purchases throughout the year and saving gifts for the big day.

Today's Christmas is nothing like the first Christmas. On that day, because *God so loved the world . . . He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3:16). The only other gifts on that occasion were given to the Christ Child: worship by those who had eagerly anticipated His arrival and gold, frankincense and myrrh given to Him by the wise men.

God planned the birth of the Christ Child before time began. *Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began* (2 Timothy 1:9). God, the Father, *sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him* (1 John 4:9). The angel Gabriel told Mary: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God* (Luke 1:35). Jesus, the Son, chose to be born in order to save us from our sins. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). *So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'* (Matthew 1:23).

This plan of Almighty God was not put in place without pain on His part. Since the creation of man, God had revealed Himself, but the world did not know Him. Many chose to ignore His presence and His claim on their lives. What father deliberately plans for his son to suffer? Almighty God agreed within Himself because He *so loved the world that* Jesus would take on man's skin, submit Himself to the hardships and temptations of man, demonstrate a victorious sinless life and would die a sacrificial death on man's behalf. Jesus, God in the flesh, *is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation . . . for it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross* (Colossians 1:15, 19-20). The everlasting love of God was demonstrated through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!* (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Jesus is the Divine Gift from the heart of God. *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8). When we accept the gift of salvation Jesus extends to us, we are then called children of God. *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are* (1 John 3:1).

Christmas should be celebrated. Family gatherings, gifts exchanged between loved ones, enjoying good food together are all ways to appropriately commemorate that unique event. God is all about family. He invited us to be part of His. He wants us to express love for one another. However, if Christ is left out of Christmas, it is nothing more than a pagan holiday.

Christmas gives true Christians a wonderful witnessing opportunity. More people attend church during Christmas and Easter than at any other time of year. Although many go simply as a part of the season's festivities, receptivity to the gospel may be greatest during these times.

Christians can and should use this time as an opportunity to remind people that *every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights* (James 1:17). Jesus revealed the nature of God and His love to the world - *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him* (John 1:18) – and that is indeed cause for celebration.

In Jesus, God stepped down from Heaven to show us His heart of love. At His birth, the shepherds looked up and saw the angels who told of His arrival. The wise men looked up and followed the star to where the Christ Child was. After Jesus' resurrection, *He was lifted up while they were looking on* (Acts 1:9). As Stephen was being stoned, he looked up and saw *Jesus standing at the right hand of God* (Acts 7:55-56). When we look up, we can see Jesus, worship Him, and give Him our heart of love and gratitude. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and 'your neighbor as yourself'* (Luke 10:27).