

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

The Gift of Love

Luke 2:15-19

INTRODUCTION: Well, Christmas is over.

- The packages are unwrapped,
- the stockings are empty.
- Soon the decorations will come down,
- and the twinkling lights will be extinguished for another year.

Have you ever thought about what happened when the first Christmas was over?

- The angels had flown back to heaven.
- The glow of the glory of God no longer shown in the distance over the pastures.
- Even the shepherds who had stared at the new born baby lying in a feed trough with awe in their eyes, finally left the stable.

Actually, the Bible tells us.

Luke 2:15–19 NKJV 15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

When the first Christmas was over, Mary pondered all the things about Jesus' birth in her heart.

Folks, I think that might be a good thing for us to do. Let's give the birth of the Lord Jesus just a few more minutes of careful thought before we say goodbye to Christmas for another year.

To help us do that, I want to read to you a letter. It is a letter I discovered many years ago, but have treasured. This is a letter written by a pastor as if it were from Joseph that he wrote home to his mother while he and Mary were in Bethlehem. It is called

Joseph's Letter Home a Christmas Story

by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

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Dear Mom,

We're still in Bethlehem -- Mary and I and little Jesus.

There were lots of things I couldn't talk to you about last summer. You wouldn't have believed me then, but maybe I can tell you now. I hope you can understand.

You know, Mom, I've always loved Mary. You and dad used to tease me about her when she was still a girl. She and her brothers used to play on our street. Our families got together for supper. But the hardest day of my life came scarcely a year ago when I was twenty and she only fifteen. You remember that day, don't you?

The trouble started after we were betrothed and signed the marriage agreement at our engagement. That same spring Mary had left abruptly to visit her old cousin Elizabeth in Judea. She was gone three whole months. After she got back, people started wondering out loud if she were pregnant.

It was cloudy the day when I finally confronted her with the gossip. "**Mary,**" I asked at last, "**are you going to have a baby?**"

Her clear brown eyes met mine. She nodded.

I didn't know what to say. "Who?" I finally stammered.

Mom, Mary and I had never acted improperly--even after we were betrothed.

Mary looked down. "Joseph," she said. "There's no way I can explain. You couldn't understand. But I want you to know I've never cared for anyone but you." She got up, gently took my hands in hers, kissed each of them as if it were the last time she would ever do that again, and then turned towards home. She must have been dying inside. I know I was.

The rest of the day I stumbled through my chores. It's a wonder I didn't hurt myself in the woodshop. At first I was angry and pounded out my frustrations on the doorframe I was making. My thoughts whirled so fast I could hardly keep my mind on my work. At last I decided just to end the marriage contract with a quiet divorce. I loved her too much to make a public scene.

I couldn't talk to you. Or anyone, for that matter. I went to bed early and tried to sleep. Her words came to me over and over. "I've never cared for anyone but you.... I've never cared for anyone but you...." How I wished I could believe her!

I don't know when I finally fell asleep. **Mom, I had a dream from God. An angel of the Lord came to me.** His words pulsated through my mind so intensely I can remember them as if it were yesterday.

"Joseph, son of David," he thundered, "do not fear to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

I couldn't believe my ears, Mom. This was the answer! The angel continued, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel gripped my shoulders with his huge hands. For a long moment his gaze pierced deep within me. Just as he turned to go, I think I saw a smile on his shining face.

I sat bolt upright in bed. No sleep after that! I tossed about for a while, going over the words in my mind. Then I got up and dressed quietly so I wouldn't wake you.

I must have walked for miles beneath the moonless sky. Stars pricked the blackness like a thousand tiny pinpoints. A warm breeze blew on my face.

I sang to the Lord, Mom. Yes, me, singing, if you can imagine that. I couldn't contain my joy. **I told Him that I would take Mary and care for her.** I told Him I would watch over her -- **and the child -- no matter what anyone said.**

I got back just as the sun kissed the hilltops. I don't know if you still recall that morning, Mom. I can see it in my mind's eye as if it were yesterday. You were feeding the chickens, surprised to see me out. Remember?

"Sit down," I said to you. "I've got to tell you something." I took your arm and helped you find a seat on the big rock out back. "Mom," I said, "I'm going to bring Mary home as my wife. Can you help make a place for her things?"

You were silent a long time. "You do know what they're saying, don't you, son?" you said at last, your eyes glistening.

"Yes, Mom, I know."

Your voice started to rise. "If your father were still alive, he'd have some words, I'll tell you. Going about like that before you are married. Disgracing the family and all. You... you and Mary ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

You'd never have believed me if I'd tried to explain, so I didn't. Unless the angel had spoken to you, you'd have laughed me to scorn.

"Mom, this is the right thing to do," I said.

And then I started talking to you as if I were the head of the house. "When she comes I don't want one word to her about it," I sputtered. "She's your daughter-in-law, you'll respect her. She'll need your help if she's to bear the neighbors' wagging tongues!"

I'm sorry, Mom. You didn't deserve that. You started to get up in a huff.

"Mom," I murmured, "I need you." You took my hand and got to your feet, but the fire was gone from your eyes.

"You can count on me, Joseph," you told me with a long hug. And you meant it. I never heard another word. No bride could hope for a better mother-in-law than you those next few months.

Mom, after I left you I went up the road to Mary's house and knocked. Her mother glared at me as she opened the door. Loudly, harshly she called into the house, "It's Joseph!" almost spitting out my name as she said it.

My little Mary came out cringing, as if she expected me give her the back of my hand, I suppose. Her eyes were red and puffy. I can just imagine what her parents had said.

We walked a few steps from the house. She looked so young and afraid. "Pack your things, Mary," I told her gently. "I'm taking you home to be my wife."

"Joseph!" She hugged me as tight as she could. Mom, I didn't realize she was so strong.

I told her what I'd been planning. "We'll go to Rabbi Ben-Ezer's house this week and have him perform the ceremony."

I know it was awfully sudden, Mom, but I figured the sooner we got married the better it would be for her, and me, and the baby.

"Mary, even if our friends don't come, at least you and I can pledge our love before God." I paused. "I think my Mom will be there. And maybe your friend Rebecca would come if her dad will let her. How about your parents?"

I could feel Mary's tiny frame shuddering as she sobbed quietly.

"Mary," I said. I could feel myself speaking more boldly. "No matter what anyone says about you, I'm proud you're going to be my wife. **I'm going to take good care of you. I've promised God that."**

She looked up.

I lowered my voice. **"I had a dream last night, Mary. I saw an angel. I know."**

The anguish which had gripped her face vanished. She was radiant as we turned away from the house and began to walk up the hill together.

Just then her mother ran out into the yard. "Wait," she called. She must have been listening from behind the door. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"I'll get your father," she called, almost giddy with emotion. "We," she cried as she gathered up her skirts. "We," she shouted as she began to run to find her husband. "We ... are going to have a wedding!"

That's how it was, Mom. Thanks for being there for us. I'll write again soon.

Love, Joseph

I am glad that St. Andrew Baptist Church has a tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper around Christmas time.

Admittedly, some find it strange to have the Lord's Supper at a time when our attention is upon the coming of Christ. The Supper focuses on the death of our Lord. Christmas focuses on His birth.

However, I must tell you, I do not find it strange at all. As we prepare ourselves to remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread and partaking of the cup, let me tell you why by talking for a few minutes about the manger and the table.

What does the baby in the manger have to do with the Lord's Supper? Both are a witness to:

THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE LOVE OF GOD

Romans 5:8 NKJV **But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

- Perhaps some noble men and women would give their own life for someone they love or some exceedingly worthy cause.
- But who would give the life of his own son or daughter?
- Only God.

John 3:16 NKJV For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

- Words are insufficient to explain this great love God has for us.
- Words cannot even describe it adequately.
- This love of God for us is the greatest of the gifts of Christmas.

But in this moment, we should also ponder

THE SINLESS LIFE OF JESUS

- The virgin birth prevented Jesus from inheriting Adam's original sin.
 - Sins of the fathers passed to their children.

Exodus 34:7 NKJV keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

- Jesus had no human father; therefore, no iniquity was passed to Him.
- The worship of the wise men was an acknowledgment of the perfection of Jesus.
- Satan at his worst could not lead the Savior into sin.
- **The unleavened bread of the Lord's Supper pictures the sinless body of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

THE ATONEMENT THROUGH JESUS' BLOOD

- **The substitutionary death of Jesus was a certainty even before He was born.**

- Isaiah told us about the coming Messiah Child.

Isaiah 9:6-7 NKJV For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace....

- But that same prophet also foretold Jesus' death as our substitute, dying to pay the penalty for our sin.

Isaiah 53:4-8 NKJV Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, *He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.* All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

- **The approaching death of Christ was made clear while our Savior was still an infant.**
 - Swaddling cloths usually used to wrap a dead body and prepare it for burial.
 - Simeon told Mary that her child would bring the long awaited salvation but that by doing so her own heart would be pierced, a reference to her grief at Jesus' death.
 - The gift of myrrh by the wise men to the toddler Jesus. Used to anoint the body prior to burial.
- **The cup at the Lord's table pictures for us the blood of the Savior,** poured out upon Calvary's cross for the remission of our sins, and opening the doors of the new covenant to all who believe.