

It's almost impossible to imagine Christmas nowadays without decorations; **tons** of decorations! Trees loaded with twinkling lights, garland, and beautiful ornaments. Evergreen wreaths on doorways. Then there's poinsettias and peppermint, ribbons and bows, candy canes and candles, Christmas stockings and gingerbread houses. The list could go on! All of these can be beautiful and meaningful, enhancing our celebration of Christmas. But sometimes, the holiday becomes cluttered with **so many** wrappings and trappings that it's hard to figure out (or easy to forget) what Christmas is really about. It's hard to get down to the core message (the heart of the matter).

If you were to make a survey and ask a group of random people: "What do **you** think is the most important thing about Christmas?" My guess is that many would say "the presents". For lots of people, the main event of the holiday is unwrapping those packages under the Christmas tree. This may be especially true for children. For kids, opening presents is the high point of the Christmas season. I mean after all, for days and days those colorfully wrapped boxes with ribbons and bows have been sitting there under the tree, enticing them, tempting them. And finally, at Christmas it's time to tear off all the wrappings and find out what's inside those presents! I remember when I was a boy, the gifts were the number one thing on my mind for the whole month of December!

And actually, Christmas *is* about a gift. But that gift is not found under the tinsel-laden tree. The most important truth about Christmas sometimes gets lost in our attention to the glitz and glitter of the holiday season. It can get hidden behind the Santas and reindeer and snowmen and shopping malls. But the most meaningful message is to be found in something much deeper. The most important truth of Christmas is the **message** of the **most important gift**. That gift is located in a manger. That gift is a small, sleeping newborn baby who has come to save His people from their sins.

I. The gift of the Savior is the real gift.

During Advent this year, we've been looking at common decorations used for this holiday season and how they help get us ready for the coming of Christ. Three and a half days from now, we celebrate Christ's arrival. The first Christmas gift was God's Son, who was born as a baby, born to save us. And this is the real gift of Christmas!

One December there was a woman who waited until the last minute to send Christmas cards to her friends and family. She rushed to the store to buy a box of cards, but there were only a few leftovers remaining. She bought a package

of a hundred holiday cards. But in her haste, she didn't open the inside to read what they said. Still in a hurry, she addressed ninety-nine of the one hundred, signed them, stamped them, and put them in the mailbox. The next day, when things had calmed down a bit, she picked up the remaining card and finally read its content. To her shock, this was the message printed inside: "This card is just to say, a little gift is on the way." Suddenly, she realized that 99 of her friends and relatives were expecting a gift from her, a gift that would never come!

God had promised a gift to humanity. This was the gift of the Savior. God had promised this gift centuries earlier through His prophets. Unlike the lady in this story, God was faithful to His promise. And unlike that lady's 99 friends, we were not left waiting for a gift that would never come. That gift arrived more than two thousand years ago in the package of a little baby, an infant who was God in human flesh. The promised Immanuel—"God with us"—had arrived. He came to deliver us from our captivity to sin and death. He came to be our Savior.

This was the gift that the angel announced to the shepherds on that first Christmas night. He said, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11–12). We decorate our Christmas presents with colorful paper and beautiful bows affixed on top. But this gift was wrapped in swaddling cloths—strips of fabric that enveloped a newborn infant. We attach tags to our wrapped presents that identify the intended recipients. The angel identified to whom the gift of baby Jesus was given: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." We find our holiday packages under the Christmas tree. But this gift was to be found in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. We tear into our wrapped presents to discover their contents. On that first Christmas, the angel announced the content of the newly delivered package—"a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

This was the gift we needed more than any other- a Savior. We needed someone to save us from our sins. As the Christmas carol "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" says, we needed someone "to save us all from Satan's power when we had gone astray." We had gone astray from God and His commandments in our selfish desires and sinful rebellion. We had been imprisoned under Satan's power and were oppressed under his tyrannical rule. We were destined for death and eternal destruction. More than anything else, we needed a Savior to deliver us from sin and its deadly consequences.

Thankfully, **blessedly**, God delivered the gift of a Savior in the baby of Bethlehem. This is why the child was named Jesus, which means “the Lord saves,” for it was announced that “He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). God entered our world as a human to rescue humanity. He substituted for humans as a human- living a righteous life and dying a sacrificial death on account of our unrighteousness. As true God, He saved the entire human race- conquering Satan and destroying death for us. Jesus Christ, the Savior, is the real gift!

II. The reason for the real gift is God’s love.

Why did God send us this real gift of a Savior? Why did He enter human flesh to be born as a baby in Bethlehem? The apostle Paul provides us the answer, writing in Titus 3:4–5, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness but according to His own mercy.” God saved us out of loving kindness. He was motivated by mercy.

This passage says it plainly that our salvation was “not because of works done by us in righteousness.” Unlike Santa Claus, who gives gifts only to good little boys and girls, God’s gift of salvation is not dependent on our good works or behavior. Instead, He gives the gift of the Savior purely out of His unmerited mercy and grace which stems from His unconditional loving kindness.

A mother was busy wrapping presents a few days before Christmas. She asked her young son to shine her shoes for the Christmas Day service. Soon, with the smile that only an eight-year-old can muster, the boy presented the shoes for his mother’s inspection. She was so pleased that she gave him a dollar coin. On Christmas morning, as she put on the shoes to go to church, she felt a lump in one shoe. She removed the shoe and discovered the dollar coin wrapped in paper. On that paper, in her son’s handwriting, were these words: “I done it for love.”

As we look to the manger, we see a message wadded up- wrapped in swaddling cloths- which explains God’s real gift to us. He says, “I done it for love,” but with much better grammar! In the gift of Jesus Christ, God has given us His greatest gift because He has given us Himself. It was because of love that the infinite Creator of the universe took on a created body, and a helpless infant one at that! It was for love that He grew up to offer His life as a ransom for sinners. As Paul says, “The goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared.” Because of His life, death, and resurrection, you are forgiven. You are delivered from eternal death. What an amazing gift!

III. The gift of the Savior brings resultant gifts.

But there's more! This real gift of a Savior given by God's love brings *resultant gifts*- **additional** gifts that result from the coming of Christ.

Jesus truly *is* the gift that keeps on giving... forever! Today's Epistle identifies some of those gifts that result from the coming of the Savior. Titus 3:4-7 states, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us... by the **washing** of **regeneration** and **renewal** of the **Holy Spirit**, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being **justified** by His grace we might become **heirs** according to the hope **of eternal life**."

Do you hear how Paul lists one gift after another, piling them on top of one another? By receiving the gift of the Savior, we also receive the washing of regeneration, the cleansing from sin delivered through the new birth of Baptism. We receive the renewal of the Holy Spirit; God's Spirit dwells within us and renews our lives day by day. We receive the gift of justification: God's declaration that we are right with Him through Christ's righteousness revealed and given to us by grace. And we receive an inheritance, named to be heirs of eternal life. In giving us the *real* gift, Jesus Christ, the Savior, God piles on a treasury of *resultant* gifts: regeneration, renewal, justification, and eternal life. This truly *is* the gift that keeps on giving, even into eternity!

CONCLUSION

The tradition of unwrapping gifts at Christmas is an endearing one in American homes. Indeed, the total sales of gifts purchased for Christmas approaches one trillion dollars each holiday season. Yet the value of all those gifts pales in comparison to the one gift that is the real reason for the Christmas season—the gift of the newborn baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Jesus Christ is the gift beyond comparison because He is the Savior from sin whose gracious presence brings us the never-ending gifts of regeneration, renewal, justification, and eternal life.

This Christmas, we joyfully receive that supreme gift announced by the angel: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." 2000 years later that is still the best news anyone has ever heard, and it is **for you!** Amen!