

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS
Devotions



*God's
Indescribable Gift*

A gift to you from
MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

*Please receive this devotion booklet as
a gift from the Martin Luther College
campus family. We pray that our Lord
would strengthen your faith through
his Word.*



Christmas



Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!
 2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV84)

Look with eyes of faith upon the indescribable scene surrounding the indescribable gift! More than the shepherds surround the feed trough. More than Mary and Joseph humbly bow their heads and hearts at the miracle before them. Look with eyes given clarity by the Spirit's omnipotence. See the people of God, countless souls from all time and place, joining you at the manger this day. Led by the Spirit through the gospel, believers in faith kneel with you before the Gift. God kept his word. His Son has come. You and all believers are eager to gaze upon his face. This day we see what for human eyes and hearts is truly indescribable.

Kneeling, you look into the manger. You gaze and stare. The Scriptures have taught you what to expect, but still the sight takes your breath away. It causes a lump in your throat. Yes, you see the Virgin-Born. He looks like any other baby. But the Scripture teaches you to see more. You see the One conceived by the Spirit and sent by the Father, and you ponder the Trinity revealed in the Christ. You see the Seed of the woman sent to crush the ancient serpent's head. You keep staring into the feed trough. There is no rush. All God's people can prayerfully linger. You see a Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In your mind echoes a startling Scripture: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. It seems unjust for that Child to be punished. Yet God's justice will be met for all sin. The Father sent his Son as Substitute. He will die that we may live. Such grace. Such infinite and profound love for sinners. Indescribable.

Look again. You see the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He has triumphed, and he is worthy to open the revelation that guarantees no surprises

for the people of God. Look again, and see the Lord God of heavenly hosts, the Creator who called forth not only the countless stars but the countless ranks of holy angels that serve him by also serving us. Look again. You see the Alpha and the Omega. Though a baby born in time, he is the infinite One who called forth the universe and created time. And joy-filled we can be that our times are in his hand. Look again. You see the Child who is the Truth. He is the Life. Indescribable for human intellect is this truth that God gives freely and fully in his Son. How strange is the reality of grace to the sinful heart that screams always for recognition. But grace cannot be fathomed unless the Spirit intervenes. Look again and see the King of kings and Lord of lords. See the Good Shepherd who guides and provides. See the Bread of life that satisfies your hunger and thirst after righteousness. See the “Amen” to all the promises God made throughout the centuries. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. See your hope, your help, your heaven—all wrapped up in swaddling clothes. Indescribable this Gift we believe through the Spirit. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. Indescribable.

Prayer: Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with you there. Amen.

Author: Pastor Mark Zarling (NWC 1976, WLS 1980) serves Martin Luther College as president.



December 26



But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.
 Titus 3:4-7 (NIV84)

The story is told of a young boy who on Christmas morning unwrapped a small 3x7-inch wooden box. As he opened the lid, he was greeted with the smiling face of Benjamin Franklin on a \$100 bill. Surprised and excited, the boy quickly grabbed the bill and gazed in amazement. Yet, no sooner had he clutched the bill in his hand, did he then notice an inscription inside the lid. It read “A new bill every day to sustain your living. Rejoice! For this magical box is a gift that keeps on giving!” Could it be? Sure enough, the very next day and every day following, the boy was welcomed with another \$100 bill each time he opened it. No matter where he went or what he did, the magical wooden box continued to give.

It’s safe to say such a gift does not exist. A magical box that produces money every day belongs in the same category as flying pigs, genies, and Snow White—fiction. Yet, for us as Christians, God really has given us a gift that keeps on giving. The apostle Paul describes this gift in his letter to Titus. This gift is not magical but miraculous. It’s not wrapped in paper but in God’s grace. It’s not made of wood but of water and the Word. It doesn’t just sustain but saves! What is this gift? Baptism.

At the moment of our baptism, the Holy Spirit did the impossible and turned an enemy of God into a child of God! Faith was created

and a relationship was restored! A broken, sinful human being was declared righteous and perfect! Oh, the blessings of baptism!

But the blessings do not end when we leave the baptismal font. The washing of renewal and rebirth is not a onetime gift. Baptism is a gift that keeps on giving. Have you every stopped to think of the incredible blessings that God gives through this gift? Each and every day God continues to generously flood us with his kindness, love, mercy, and grace. Each and every day we have washing of sin both inside and out. Each and every day we have confidence that this world, with all its grief and sorrow, is not our home. We have the certainty of heaven!

At times, the days following Christmas can produce a sense of let-down in many hearts and minds. There is a lull that sets in and leaves many people wanting more. Not so with you and me as Christians. As we bask in the joy of the indescribable gift found in the babe of Bethlehem, we also rejoice that the blessings of the Christ Child are made ours through baptism—the gift that keeps on giving.

Prayer: Good and gracious Lord, thank you for the wonderful blessings you give through the waters of baptism. Help me to see that baptism is a gift that daily gives me the assurance of your forgiveness and grace. Amen.



Author: Pastor Stephen Koelpin (MLC 2006, WLS 2012) serves Crown of Life-Inland Empire, California.

December 27



This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:9 (NIV84)

The Christian calendar names today John's day. Apostle. Evangelist. Defender of the Incarnation. Most famously, he declared, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." To identify this *Word*, John stirred the echoes of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The Word was God."

God became flesh. John meditates on this theme also in his first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

No wonder God has to show this and make it visible. Who could imagine? God in the flesh. God assumes our nature, all of it, every part, except that one which looms so large—sin—so that, as John writes, "we might live through him," or, as Gregory of Nazianzus said, "What he did not assume, he did not save." God didn't just become like us, he became one of us to save us.

John shows more: "He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." More: "The Son of God appeared . . . to destroy the devil's work." More: "He appeared so that he might take away our sins."

Not everyone likes this. John identifies them: liars, false prophets, antichrists, and the Antichrist. They tell different stories. They "deny that Jesus is the Christ" and fail to acknowledge Jesus in the flesh.

Our sinful hearts love it. God reveals Jesus; we reveal our miraculous bootstraps. He reveals the devil's work we wallow in and around; we

live in cloud-cuckoo land, convinced we aren't that bad. He sends love down to save us; we send our love to God to save ourselves.

Those fables come from lying antichrists, culminating in the Antichrist, who, according to John in Revelation, looks like Lamb but speaks like Dragon. A lawless man at work in the Christian church, as Paul taught the Thessalonians, the Antichrist breathes out the great lie: We didn't really need Christmas or God in the flesh. We can do what's necessary—after God kick-starts us—to merit eternal life. This voids Jesus' death; if that's void, so also his incarnation.

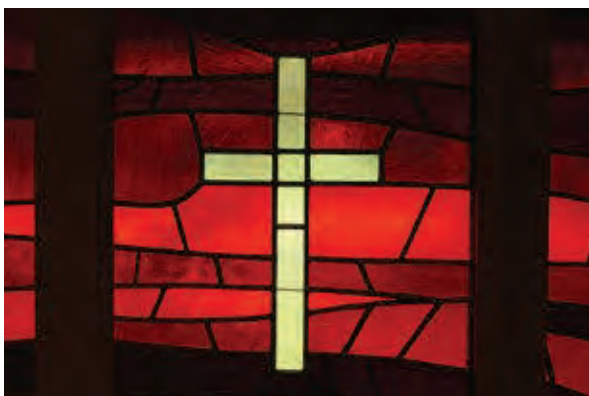
“No!” John says. Love begins not with us. Love comes from God first. God made his love visible: His Son sent so that we live through him. John touched, handled, and heard him. So do we. We hear his love in the Word: “My love came down at Christmas and still comes.” His love touches you at the font. You handle his love at his table where you hold this Word, God's love, made visible—taste-able—and you live through the Son's body and blood, eaten and drunk for your forgiveness. Love comes from God. For you.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the love that caused your incarnation and brought you down for my salvation. Amen.



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December 28



But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.
Galatians 4:4-5 (NIV84)

I'm free. I distinctly remember the feeling. My class had just completed a tour of the prison in Waupun, Wisconsin. Metal bars. Bolted doors. Barbed wire. Gloomy hallways. Armed guards. Even though I wasn't a prisoner, I felt like one. Everywhere I looked, the law pressed down with crushing force. We spent hours touring the facility and listening to the stories of a couple inmates, sentenced to spend the next 20 or 30 years of their lives in this cold, depressing place. Just the thought made me shudder. When I walked out of the gloomy prison and into the bright sunshine at the end of the day, I looked back at that foreboding structure and couldn't shake the thought. I can just walk away. I'm free. I had no desire to go back.

I think of how I would have reacted if, on my way out to the car that day, someone from the prison would have run up to me and begged me to serve a 30-year sentence in the place of one of their loved ones—if that were even possible. Of the million ways there must be to say "No!" I wonder which one I would have chosen. Never would I have placed myself under the law's punishment for someone else, especially not after witnessing what that would mean.

Good thing Jesus isn't like me. If he were, you and I would still be confined in our gloomy prison-house of sin, doomed to a life of despair and condemned to an eternity of misery. Instead, Jesus looked down from his heavenly throne, where he enjoyed perfect praise, unlimited power, and yes—absolute freedom. And at his Father's bidding, he willingly set it all aside. The infinite God confined himself to an embryo and took on every limitation that came with it.

He placed himself under the heavy demands of a law that he perfectly obeyed, only to suffer as if he were the only one ever to have broken it. All so that he could walk into our prison—not just to take a tour and leave, but to serve the sentence of every single inmate there. He walked into our prison so that we could walk out.

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Not only has Jesus unlocked the door of our prison, but he has also unlocked for us the door to his Father's house and brought us into his family. God's Son has made you a beloved son or daughter of his Father, and every one of his Father's blessings is yours, now and forever. Let that truth bring joy to your heart this Christmas.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for willingly placing yourself under the law to free me from its curse. Let me never lose the joy that is mine on account of the absolute freedom you have won for me. Amen.



Author: Pastor Michael Koepke (MLC 2008, WLS 2012) serves Salem-Ann Arbor, Michigan.

December 29



That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.
 1 John 1:1-2 (NIV84)

What do you get for the guy who has everything? Perhaps you've wrestled with this question at Christmas. The answer, invariably, is that the guy who objectively has all of his needs met would probably benefit most from something with sentimental (subjective) value. So maybe if you're the man's little child, you draw him a picture of the family. Or, if you're the man's friend, perhaps you buy him a keepsake that reminds him of a shared experience the two of you had. That's nice. That's sentimental. No one would deny, however, that a 3-year-old's artwork made from Crayolas has less objective value than a painting created by Da Vinci. Objective value. Subjective value. They're different. A truly great gift, you'd imagine, would seem to require *both* objective *and* subjective value. Right? Herein lies the "gift" God receives at Christmas. Don't misunderstand. Of course we get a gift at Christmas—God's only Son come to suffer and die in our place for our sins so that we might have eternal life. But what does God get from this arrangement?

Just imagine. God ruling triumphantly in heaven. And yet, in the midst of paradise, he looks around and thinks to himself, "Something's missing." Now what could the God who created the cosmos, the God who has everything, possibly be lacking? This gets to the heart of the "problem" of Christmas. Why in the world would God, in the person of Jesus, come to this planet to suffer and die for us?!

The only possible explanation is that God looked down from heaven and thought that the one thing he was missing, the one thing he desired above all else . . . was YOU. At Christmas, we not only gain salvation. We also gain an identity. We discover who we are, how valuable we are.

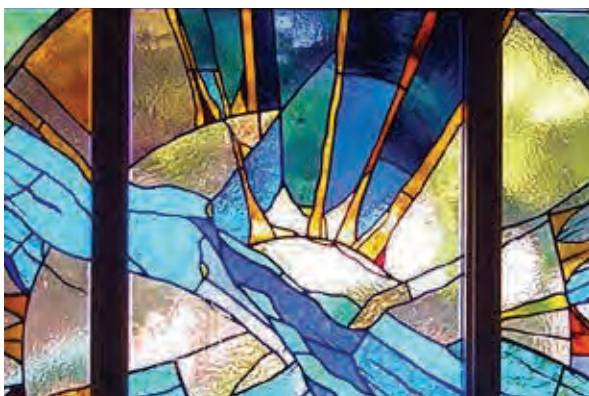
The apostle John refers to our Savior Jesus here as “That which was from the beginning” and “Word of life” and “the eternal life.” His point with this terminology is to convince his readers that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies and promises. He says, “we have seen” and “we have heard” and “our hands have touched” him. John is saying that God calculated the risk and pulled the trigger. He sent his Son to redeem us. That logically means that we were WORTH IT to God! Nothing in the universe has more objective value than the blood of its Creator, and yet God willingly spilled it to buy us back. Don’t ever believe someone who suggests you’re worthless. Don’t ever believe the lie of that voice in your head convincing you that you’re a loser. God didn’t think so. Taste and touch and see that he’s arrived . . . to buy you back. That’s what you’re objectively worth.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, what amazing love you’ve shown to me! That you would value me so highly that you brought yourself so low to rescue me—this is incredibly humbling. I have died to this world and risen with Jesus, my Savior. May I recognize my infinite worth and purpose through him and live out of such truth. Amen.



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December 30



In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV84)

Could a gift ever be more magnificent than what was wrapped up in that manger on the first Christmas night? To the uninformed eye, he looked like nothing more than a baby—seven or eight pounds of flesh and blood—shivering in the cold. So meek, so mild. So fragile, so frail. But looks can be deceiving. The baby wrapped up in that manger was so much more. The writer to the Hebrews reveals him for what he truly is—God's own Son! As the "heir of all things," he was the Owner of all things. As the one through whom God "made the universe," he was the Creator of all things. As "the radiance of God's glory," he possessed the entire array of all of God's divine attributes. As "the exact representation of God's being," this baby in the manger wasn't just like God, he was God!

When the full magnitude of the holy writer's words hits home, maybe "magnificent" isn't the right word to use. Could a gift ever be more terrifying than what was wrapped up in that manger on the first Christmas night?

There he was—the one true God who created and controls all things with his almighty power and limitless authority—taking on flesh and making his dwelling among us. But why? Why did he come? When I think about the sinner I am and how I have so often rebelled against

God, neglected his will, and disobeyed his commands, there would seem to be only one reasonable explanation. Sinful by my very nature and proving that sinfulness every day through my attitudes and my actions, could this God whom I have personally offended with my sins have come into the world for any other reason than to punish me? To condemn me? To destroy me? How terrifying! Has God finally come to give me what my sins deserve?

But there is another description of God's Son that we have yet to mention—the true reason for his coming. Stained with sin as I am, God entered our world as this baby in the manger . . . to “provide purification for sins.” This baby in the manger came not to punish me for my sins, but to bear my sins upon his shoulders. He came not to condemn me for my sins, but to wash my sins away through his blood. He came not to destroy me for my sins, but to see to it that I may now stand before my God with all the stains of my sins removed. He came to provide purification for my sins. And he has!

Could a gift ever be more unexpected, more undeserved, more filled with love and mercy and grace than what was wrapped up in that manger on the first Christmas night?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, because of the gift of your Son that you gave to me on Christmas, I now stand before you purified from all sin. Keep me always in your Word, that I may treasure this gift all the days of my life. Amen.



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December 31



*Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels, was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*
1 Timothy 3:16 (NIV84)

Today, the last day of the year, is an important day in your life. Today brings an end. Today we die to the old year. Once again, we have traveled through another year. Once again, we have made the heavenly circuit around the sun. As much as we might want to change our year, we cannot change anything. No return is possible. The past must remain in the past. Perhaps it is best that way.

On such an important day—a day that so vividly reminds us of the past year—how can we not reflect? We must reflect. Out of the 365 days this year, did we live even one day according to God’s will? Was there even one day when we heard God’s call to perfect holiness and obedience? Was there even one day when we could proudly say, “Today we did all that the Lord required?” Was there even one day—one hour—when we kept ourselves pure? Was there even one day when we lived out our calling as Christians as God wills? As we reflect, with deep shame and guilt we must say, “Lord, there was not even one day. We could not put together even 24 consecutive hours for you.”

“... was vindicated by the Spirit . . .” If that phrase were about us, it wouldn’t be as surprising. We need to be vindicated. We need to be forgiven, but does Jesus? Why did the early Christians sing and confess that Jesus was vindicated by the Spirit? Why did he need forgiveness? What crime had he committed? You already know the answer. He is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. He is

the one who became sin for us. He is the one who became our substitute, accepted our sin, and in the process assured himself of an ugly death on the cross. Yet, Jesus, who was the sin-bearer of all sin, was vindicated in his powerful resurrection. This one, Jesus, was forgiven. Therefore, you are too.

This is an important day in your life. Today brings an end, but not just to the year. Today brings an end to guilt and shame. Jesus, who took your sins, is forgiven. If the Spirit of God vindicated Jesus by raising him powerfully from the dead, what does that say about your guilt and shame? Your guilt, shame, and sins are gone as far as the east is from the west. The past remains in the past because in the present we are forgiven. It is best that way.

Prayer: Oh, help us to forsake all sin,
A new and holier course begin!
Forgive the old year's sins, and bless
The new year with true happiness. Amen. (CW 71)



Author: Pastor Timothy Bourman (MLC 2004, WLS 2008) serves
Sure Foundation-New York City.

January 1



For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.
1 Timothy 2:5–6 (NIV84)

“That must have cost a king’s ransom.” Although we understand what those words mean (a statement of awe, scorn, or jealousy at extravagant expenditures), we rarely consider the source of the idiom. In ancient warfare, the goal wasn’t just to kill as many of the opposition as you could, but to overwhelm them to the point that they would surrender and you could take slaves and hostages. Common soldiers were worth nothing. No one would try to get them back. They were slaves. Nobles and generals were worth much more. They were hostages, and the ransom price depended on their position and what the losing side could offer. No price would be too high for a king. The piles of gold, silver, jewels and slaves used to set him free were literally the king’s ransom.

We have a problem. When Adam sinned, a great battle was lost, the battle against sin, death, and the devil. We, too, are incapable of overcoming sin and turning aside our old evil foe. Worst of all, who of us can say that we are important enough for someone to pay a ransom for us? We can’t even call ourselves hostages. We are slaves. “Everyone who sins, is a slave to sin” (John 8:34).

However, there is one who decided you were worth it. There is one who refused to leave you as a slave. There is one who was willing to become the mediator between God and man, to intercede, to speak on our behalf, to plead our case, the man Jesus Christ. Seven days ago we celebrated the depth of his love. He is the king, but he set his throne aside. He is true God, but he became a child, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. He became fully human for you and for

your salvation, and then he paid the ransom price. He gave himself as a ransom for all people. He gave his life to pay the price to free you from your slavery to sin. As we begin this new year, we also remember the new life Christ paid the price to give us, a new life as free men and women. Finally he rose from the grave, the testimony that his payment was accepted in full.

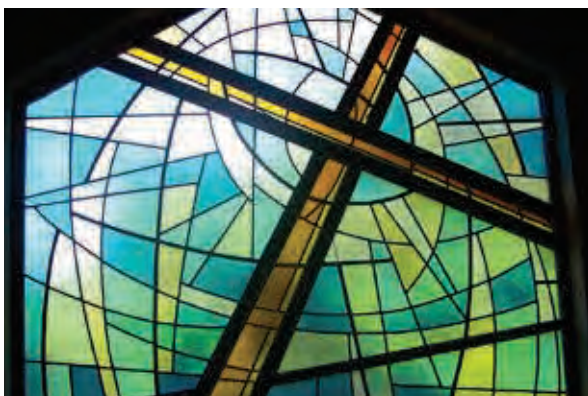
Your freedom was bought at a high price, a king's ransom, the most precious price ever paid. You never need to wonder how much you are worth. Jesus demonstrates how much you mean to him. Because of him, you are free. God's own Son became a man to give his life as a ransom for you. To God be the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, you saw our lost condition, slaves to sin and death, and you became a man. You paid the ransom price to set us free. We thank and praise you for this wonderful gift. Continue to be with us. Forgive us for the sins we continue to commit and give us strength to use our freedom to serve and glorify you. Fill our hearts with joy as we remember that you loved us enough to live, die, and rise again for our salvation. Amen.



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January 2



What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?
Romans 8:31–32 (NIV84)

“This is what a loving God gave to you this Christmas? Here are the gifts to which God has attached your name? One more year of declining health? A broken furnace the week after you were laid off? Another horrific news story of Christian persecution? Your own child’s funeral?” The devil tugs at our souls with his crafty lies: “Just look at your life! That’s the best God could give you?” Our sinful flesh desires to join in the ancient chorus of mistrust—“God’s holding out on you!”—a chorus composed by the slippery tongue of the serpent in Eden and believed by the hearts of our first parents. How often do you latch onto this lie during tragedy?

The apostle Paul was no stranger to tragedy, and neither were the Christians in Rome. Trouble, hardship, persecution, nakedness, famine, and sword were a few things to which their names were attached. What were they to do? What are we to do? How can we reconcile the troubles in our lives if God loves us and wants what is best for us? Paul leads our questioning hearts to silent repentance with a few questions of his own. The first: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Wrapped in this question is a challenge: “Find one instance in history where his plan and purpose failed. Find one foe or force greater than the great I AM. Who can be against us?” Paul doesn’t wait for our response, because the answer is painfully obvious. And just in case our stubborn hearts persist—“How can we be sure this omnipotent God is on our side?”—he poses the second question: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

This is what a loving God gave to you this Christmas: his own Son! Here are the gifts to which God has attached your name: complete payment for all sin, freedom from shame and guilt, and certain hope of eternal life. The Father bankrupted heaven of his greatest treasure for you; will he hold out on you now? The Son already gave his last breath of life on the cross for you; will he lose track of your life? The Spirit's deposit was sealed at your baptism; will he not return to collect it?

God spared nothing that first Christmas as he gave you his everything. May this greatest gift, which we already possess, teach us to trust our generous God through every trial. May our confidence increase in him, who is able to use even trouble and tragedy for our good. How will he not grant us this and more?

Prayer: Gracious Father, lift our eyes of faith during every trial to the manger, where we see the greatest gift already given, your own Son. Accept our lives as an expression of gratitude for this precious gift. Continue to perfect our faith through earthly trials until we reach the last gift, our home in heaven. Amen.



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January 3



For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.
2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV84)

It's a true story. Two brothers living just outside of Budapest, Hungary, were very poor. They had no job except finding scrap metal in the streets and selling it to junkyards. They had no home except a small, dirty cave in the woods. They struggled just to survive. Then one day a charity worker came looking for them with news that would change their lives forever. As it turned out, their wealthy grandmother—who they didn't even know existed—had just passed away and left them a fortune of 7 billion dollars. The two homeless brothers were suddenly richer than they could ever have possibly imagined.

The story made headlines and captured the interest of people all around the world. It's an incredible story! It's a true story. And it's very similar to your story.

Ever since the fall into sin, people like you and me have been born into this world spiritually homeless, impoverished, and unable to provide for ourselves. On our own, we have no shot at eternal life. But on that special night above the fields in Bethlehem, a choir of angels came looking for us with news that changed our lives forever. "Today, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."

Our eyes well up and our hearts melt once again as we realize what the angels are saying. True God, with all the power and majesty and wealth of heaven, has set it aside so he can live in poverty on earth. The Son of Man has been born in a humble manger. He will wander through this life with no place to lay his head. He will be hungry,

thirsty, lonely, and exhausted. He will sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, be arrested, beaten, and tortured. Finally he will die a disgraceful death on a cross outside the city gate—naked, alone, and with nothing.

But Jesus chose this life of poverty and death, having nothing, so that he could give you and me everything. Jesus' perfect life has made us spotless and holy in God's sight, warm and welcomed as his own dear children. Jesus' perfect death has washed away every one of our sins. Jesus' resurrection from the grave guarantees us eternal life in heaven.

The little baby in the manger at Christmas is not just a warm, fuzzy reminder of happiness, or a cute centerpiece for a Nativity scene. That little baby in the manger has all the wealth of the eternal kingdom of heaven, and he has come to give it to you. He is your ticket to “an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4).

God's true love has made you rich beyond your wildest dreams.

Prayer: Thank you, dear God, for sending your Son to give us his colossal fortune. Because of Jesus our poverty is gone and eternal riches are ours forever. Help us to share our incredible story with everyone we can. Amen.



Author: Pastor Lucas Bitter (MLC 2009, WLS 2013) serves Beautiful Savior-Marietta, Georgia.

January 4



How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 1 John 3:1 (NIV84)

The commercials always come out right around Christmas. Someone opens a tiny present under the tree and finds a key inside. They head out the front door to the driveway, where the luxury car of their dreams is sitting, with a bright red bow on top. Their eyes light up . . . their jaw drops open wide . . . they're blown away by such a lavish gift.

I doubt any of us got a luxury car for Christmas this year. Even if you did, it's a puny present when compared to the lavish gift of love God gave to each of us in making us members of his family. Can you picture John's eyes lighting up, his jaw dropping open wide, as he writes it? "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" Children of God—what a gift!

Are you blown away too? If not, just take a closer look at John's words here. Start with "we." We should be called children of God? No, we really shouldn't. It certainly isn't a title we've earned. It wasn't ours by nature. Dead, blind, disobedient, foolish, enemies of God, children of the devil: that's how we come into this world.

And God looked at a whole world full of people like that . . . and, for reasons all his own, he loved. When we were giving God our worst, God loved us and chose to give us his best—his one and only Son. The only one who had the right to call God "Father" made himself your brother. He took on flesh and blood so that you could call God "Father" too, and so that God could call you his dear sons and

daughters. And he does. Jesus removed the sin that kept you out of God's family. He beat the devil, who held you captive. He paid the price for who you were by nature. When the Father brought you to faith, he brought you into the family for Jesus' sake—adopted sons and daughters of the Heavenly King.

And even though you're adopted, you're certainly not second-class kids. You have the full rights of sons. You have 24-hour open and unobstructed access to your Father's throne. You have his constant love and protection. And you are coheirs with Christ: The glory that is his in heaven is your inheritance already now, and you'll enjoy it in its fullness someday soon.

Forget the luxury car. In giving you his Son, God gave you sonship. What lavish love! And what a lavish gift.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, what a blessing that I can call you that! Thank you for giving me your Son to make me a part of your family. Remind me every day that I am your dear child, and keep me as your dear child until you call me home to heaven. Through your Son and my brother, Jesus Christ, Amen.



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January 5



For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.
 Titus 2:11-14 (NIV84)

Every year as Christmas Day approached, our family tree was always a spectacular sight near our staircase. It was adorned with colorful lights and ornaments collected through the years, either homemade keepsakes, gifts from friends, or mementos. My dad always liked to put tinsel on the tree, and he did so with painstaking care, just three strands on each branch. It always looked beautiful when it was decorated, but as it stood it just wasn't complete. Because underneath the tree was empty. The gifts weren't there yet.

Even though it stayed that way until my brother and I went to bed after the Christmas Eve service, we never went to bed worried, because every year the same thing happened. When we woke up, our parents had put the wrapped presents under the tree so that we could give each other gifts.

In Titus, Paul says that God's grace teaches us to live self-controlled lives. Perhaps I needed that when I was younger and was anxious to see what was beneath the wrapping. We would wait. We would guess. We would hope it was what we wanted. But in the end, what was inside didn't really matter. It was the anticipation, the excitement, the hope of what was contained inside that made it so special.

Now as Christians, we wait again. Only the gift is so much greater. It's indescribable. We wait for a hope, a hope that is blessed because of who gives us that hope and what it is founded on. That hope, which is yours, comes to you from our great God and Savior, who has redeemed you and saved you from all wickedness through his death on the cross.

So as you wait, live in that hope. I never went to bed on Christmas Eve worried about whether there would be presents there, because they were there every year. In the same way, your hope in God's appearance is certain because Jesus already came. He appeared on this earth to visibly show you his grace and the unending love he has for you. He will come again in glory. And when he appears again, it will be to take the people that are his very own to be with him forever.

Until that day comes, live in that eager anticipation of the appearing of God's indescribable gift. Say no to ungodliness. Live in self-control. Be as eager to do what is good as you are eager to see the appearing of God's Son with your very own eyes. And live in hope. Live in the hope that your glorious Savior is your gift—wrapped and waiting. And when you see his glory, that gift will be indescribable.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, we praise and thank you for giving us the gracious gift of your Son, who has redeemed us from all wickedness. As we live in anticipation of his reappearing, we confess that we often grow anxious in our waiting. Give us the strength to say no to sin and ungodliness and to be eager to do what is good. Help keep our eyes on that indescribable gift of our sure salvation, won for us in Jesus' blood. Amen.



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Epiphany



And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.
2 Corinthians 4:3-6 (NIV84)

Are you beginning to regret the time, effort, and money it took to purchase the gifts you gave away to friends and family just 12 days ago? Is standing in the return line making you contemplate skipping gift-giving next year? Is your idea of the 'perfect' gift sitting under the tree gathering pine needles? Does a glance at the latest credit card statement remind you that your heart is bigger than your bank account?

From a human standpoint, we might think that on the first Epiphany God would have had some regrets about sending his only Son into the world to rescue sinners from the eternity in hell they deserved. After all, the angelic hymn "Glory to God in the highest" was already a fading echo, King Herod had begun his manhunt for the Christ Child, and only Simeon and Anna fully realized that the baby presented at the temple was the long-awaited Messiah.

But on Epiphany, Magi from the East arrived to present the Christ Child with their worship and gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Even though Satan, "the god of this age," had blinded the minds of many Israelites to the light of God's Christmas miracle, God made his

light shine in the hearts of these Gentiles to see Jesus as the “image of God.” No, God had no regrets about putting his plan of salvation into action, because he knew that Baby Jesus was the Light of the world, able to open eyes blinded by sin to the truth of the gospel.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul is addressing the disappointment that follows many attempts to share God’s Christmas gift with the world. Disappointments like rejected Christmas invitations, half-empty churches, and friends and family who no longer see Christ as the true light and joy of Christmas. Should we feel any regret over apparently failed attempts to reflect the light of Christmas to a world blinded by Satan?

If converting unbelieving hearts and producing spiritual was our job, we would have given up a long time ago. But Paul reminds us this Epiphany that it is not within our power to enlighten darkened hearts. Our job is simply to preach “Christ Jesus as Lord”—a job we carry out with joy because God has made his light shine in our hearts and we have experienced the blessings of peace, forgiveness, and new life God’s Christmas gift brings.

So whether you are a student slogging through second semester homework, a pastor feeling down after the spiritual exhilaration of Christmas, or a lay person wondering if you have the courage to share this good news with a sin-darkened world—have no regrets! Trust that God can work through the gift he has given to shine the light of Christ into even the darkest of hearts.

Prayer: Lord of the nations, you sent the gift of your Son to be a light in this dark world. Thank you for opening our hearts to see your glory in the face of Baby Jesus. Grant your servants the courage to share this Christmas gift even when it is met with resistance. We ask this as servants who do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. Amen.

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*God's
Indescribable Gift*



*It is our prayer that the devotions in this booklet
will assist you in focusing on the incarnation
of our Lord Jesus Christ.*



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