

Christmas Eve: God's Greatest Gift

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[0:00] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Well, Merry Christmas everyone. Merry Christmas.

So I'm going to start tonight with a question. What is the greatest Christmas gift you've ever received? I was thinking about this question, and I have to admit, without trying to, my mind ventured back into my memories of the classic film, A Christmas Story.

Anyway, any fans of that movie? Yeah, I see a few. Yep. Yep, absolutely. So, you have little Ralphie who's set on getting his Red Ryder carbine action 200 shot range model air rifle, right? And I think I got that right. He keeps getting warned, of course, that he's going to shoot his eye out, but he still wants the BB gun, doesn't he? And what happens, he finally gets it, and sure enough, he almost shoots his eye out.

[1:24] Who would have guessed? Christmas gifts, even the best ones, never really turn out the way we expect them to. I think back on my own childhood as I think about this.

I think about the Christmas gifts that I wanted so badly. How I found myself shaking the presents under the tree or trying to peek under the wrapper. Sorry, Mother, my mom is here.

She had to deal with that. But I would shake the boxes, peek under the wrapper, hoping that one of those gifts was that Batman or G.I. Joe action figure that I wanted more than life itself.

And the incredible joy I felt when I unwrapped the gift and it turned out that it was Batman, just like I wanted, was pretty extraordinary.

And now I look at my five-year-old daughter Mia, how she reacts to her Christmas gifts, to her dolls and her play kitchen sets and all those things. And then I remember how I felt, and I realized that I'm not sure I'll ever feel more excited ever again in my life than she does on Christmas morning.

[2:34] But here's the sobering thing. I look back on the Christmas presents that I loved the most. I look at the G.I. Joes, the Super Nintendo games.

I realize that I don't know where any of those things are anymore. I grew up, and those gifts that I loved so much found themselves on that sheet of history, I guess.

They've all found their way onto the trash pile or to the dark corner of some storage space. And I realized that the things that brought me so much joy, the things that my little self thought would make my life complete, they're all gone.

My grandfather used to tell a story from his own childhood. Around Christmas time one year, his family's house burned, and all their Christmas gifts burned up with it. The best he could do that year was to find what was left of a toy car and play with it in the ashes.

But that's the way it always goes, isn't it? The gifts we look forward to the most, the things that we are so sure will make us happy, they all turn to ashes.

[3:45] They wear out, or we forget about them and we move on to that something else that this time we're sure is really going to make us happy. But does it ever make us happy?

Does it ever give us lasting joy and peace? It's not just Christmas gifts, is it? I mean, our lives are like that. We spend our time searching for that thing that if we had it, would finally give us joy and peace.

And that can take all kinds of forms. Sometimes it's tough. If I had this dream house, if I had this luxury car, if I had that fishing boat, then I would be happy.

What happens when we actually get it? Have you ever had the experience of getting something that you wanted really badly? Aren't we on to the next thing pretty shortly?

Or maybe it's more financial security. Is that where we find joy and peace? If my salary were this much higher, then finally I would be at peace. If I could afford this or that without having to worry, if I could get that raise that I'm hoping for, that would do it.

[4:56] So say we get that raise, what happens? We want more. Or maybe on a related note, it's my career. That's the thing that is going to bring me joy and peace.

If I could be recognized for all my hard work, all of my talents, if I could be known for what I've accomplished, if I could have a reputation, that would do it.

Then I'll have the recognition I've been working for all my life. Never works out that way, does it? It might not even be material things.

Maybe we're just looking for good health and a long life. If I stay in good health, if I work out every day and I watch what I eat and live a good long life, that'll make me happy, won't it?

Well, let's say that I'm on track, I'm doing that. The reality of the world that we live in is that we could lose it at any moment. Is there any peace in that, really?

[5:56] There was a time when I found a fair amount of joy in my good health and physical fitness. Out of nowhere, basically overnight, I developed rheumatoid arthritis.

I went in a short amount of time from being able to run for miles to barely being able to get off the couch. Our health is an uncertain thing.

If that's not enough, I could be in the prime of my life and die instantly after getting hit by a car while I'm walking across the street. And even if I manage to live a long and active life, what then?

How does it end? Same place it always ends. But what about good relationships, we might ask ourselves?

Won't those give me lasting peace? Now, don't get me wrong. Good relationships are one of life's greatest joys. They really are. But at the same time, don't we also have to admit that broken relationships are one of life's greatest pains?

[7:05] I've seen way too many cases of family members who have hardly spoken to one another in decades. Just as often as relationships can bring us joy, they can bring us heartache.

Nothing hurts quite like the pain of being betrayed by someone that you love. But even if our relationships are good, don't we always have to, one way or another, say goodbye to the people that we love?

There's a band that I like that released an album a few years ago entitled, All We Love, We Leave Behind. That pretty well sums it up, doesn't it? But maybe we tell ourselves, if I can find the perfect romantic relationship, that will make me happy, at least for a little while.

But that doesn't last forever either. Now, sometimes it ends badly, or it ends, as all human relationships end, in death.

But let's say we have good relationships, have a good relationship, a good marriage, it lasts the whole of my natural life.

[8:15] Even then, that's not going to bring lasting joy and peace. Now, I've been married for seven years, which I know is a drop in the bucket to some of you. But I happen to think that I am married to the most amazing wife in the entire world.

But still, she can't bring me perfect joy, because she is not perfect, and neither am I. So, you're probably wondering why I'm being such a Debbie Downer on Christmas Eve.

Here I go, pointing out how the greatest gifts aren't going to bring us lasting joy, pointing out how our greatest Christmas gifts have so often turned out to be colossal disappointments.

Sorry about that. I promise you, I'm not trying to be a mean Mr. Grinch. Just hang in there with me. It gets better. Here's what I want us to think about.

Why do we keep seeking after things that won't give us lasting joy and peace? Why do we find ourselves losing the things that we love most?

[9:27] And what might be the most important question? Where do we find lasting joy and peace? Is there a great gift that could make us happy? Because the reality is that we can spend our lives seeking after things that won't make us happy and then die.

Why is that? It's really all due to the problem that the Bible calls sin. That problem in our hearts. We aren't right with God.

We do things that aren't right. Which often means that our relationships with other people are often broken. And ultimately, death is the terrible consequence of our sin.

That we are not right with God is our most basic problem. The French philosopher Pascal once said, basically, that every human heart has a God-shaped hole.

A God-shaped vacuum, if you will. Our hearts were created to know God, to love God, to be loved by Him. But because of this problem of sin, our hearts have this great emptiness.

[10:50] And that's why we're always chasing after things that will never bring us joy. We're trying to fill that void in our hearts that was made for God and can only be satisfied by Him.

We try and try. We think that stuff, more stuff, will fill it. We think that other people will fill it. And we end up disappointed every time, don't we? And death, that horrible consequence of sin, will take from us every single one of those things that we hold so dear.

You can't take it with you, as the saying goes. So what's the answer? Well, before we get to the good news, we have to realize the bad news.

We're in a bind. We have sinned. We've rebelled against the God we were created to know and to love. And the ugly truth is not only that we are going to die, but that we deserve to die.

And that's a real mess. But that's where the greatest gift of all comes in. The Anglican teacher and preacher, J.I. Packer, put it this way.

[12:05] Packer writes, the Christian message, and I guess for our purposes tonight, we might say the Christmas message, is that there is hope for a ruined humanity.

Hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory. Because of the Father's will, Jesus became poor and was born in a stable so that 30 years later he might hang on a cross.

There's the gift. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life, have eternal life.

That is the greatest gift that anyone could receive. This Jesus who was born for us, whose birth that we remember this night, came to save us from our sins and to give us joy that will never end, will never wear out, and can never be taken from us.

The Son of God became a man so that men could have peace with God. He went to the cross. He went there to take the punishment that our sins deserve so that we will never have to if we only put our trust in him.

[13:25] He rose again from the grave three days later, defeating death for us so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life with God so that everyone who calls on his name will stand with him in victory over the grave.

Forgiveness of sin, peace with God, relationship with God as his beloved sons and daughters, victory over death. This is what we call salvation.

That's the great gift that we have in Jesus Christ. Now, I might have really loved my Batman action figures, and who am I kidding, I still love Batman.

But, that cannot compare to the gift that is offered to us in Christ Jesus whose birth we celebrate tonight. tonight, we celebrate Jesus, we celebrate the salvation that he offers, because to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

My friends, I do not want us to miss the greatest gift of all, the gift of salvation. In our gospel reading for tonight, we see that some people refuse to receive the gift, some people reject him.

[14:54] So I say, do not let this greatest gift of all which is offered to you pass you by. I pray that you will receive this gift.

The thing that you're looking for, the thing that will finally give you joy and peace, you will find it in Jesus Christ. And you will never find it in anything else.

receive it. Put your trust in Jesus. Like every gift, it is free.

The Bible says, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. It says, everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.

And it says that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Do you want to know the greatest gift of all?

[15:55] The gift of salvation? Call on Jesus. Ask him to save you and he will and it will change your life. you will have peace with God.

You will know God is your loving Father. Your sins will be forgiven and you will have eternal life. It will be not just the greatest Christmas gift you've ever received, but the greatest gift you will ever receive.

We can get so caught up in the trappings of Christmas. The Christmas trees are nice. The celebrations, the delicious food, they're pretty nice.

The presents under the tree are nice. And you might disagree with me on this one, but I think eggnog is nice. Don't judge me. But, at the end of the day, Christmas is all about Jesus and the salvation that is found in him.

