

Surprise Gifts of God

Good morning! Merry Christmas! Maligayang Pasko! Malipayong Pasko! Naimbag a Pascua! Feliz Navidad! Krismasko shubhakaamana! The last one you probably don't recognize. But our two friends here understood that unless I pronounced it incorrectly. That's Nepalese.

So, this is Christmas and what have you done? Another year over, a new one just begun. Seriously, no doubt Christmas is the most anticipated event of the year by many people, especially children, and most especially, by businesses. It is a holiday that rakes in a lot of money for retailers. In fact, according to one study, retail sales in November and December 2025 are projected to grow between \$1.01-\$1.02 trillion, marking the first time in history exceeding \$1 trillion. Last year it was under a trillion like \$994 billion. And this is because people in America spend an average of \$1000 on Christmas gifts and seasonal items. That's astounding.

Speaking of gifts, we are going through our message series on Christmas I'm calling, "God's Christmas Gifts" which started last week. I talked about the fact that the gifts that are important and hold real significance are not temporal items but items that have lasting value, gifts that lift you up and inspire you and encourage you. We learned about God's Exchange Gift Program, when you exchange your worries to God's peace, you exchange your hurts to his healing, and you exchange your grief and despair to his joy.

Today, I'd like to talk about "Surprise Gifts of God". I'm going to talk about gifts that you receive unexpectedly. Exchange gifts are not surprise gifts or birthday gifts because you expect them. Sometimes you are not even surprised by what's inside them because you like tell your husband, "Honey, I would like to receive a diamond ring as your gift this Christmas. Please surprise me."

I remember a story about this woman who told her husband over breakfast, “Sweetheart, I dreamt that I was wearing this beautiful diamond ring on my finger. I wonder what it means. The husband just smiled and left for work. That evening, he came home and gave his wife a small, gift-wrapped package with a ribbon on top. She was so excited and hugged her husband. She opened it and surprise! The gift was a little book titled “How to Interpret Your Dreams”.

Now, I’m not going to talk about gifts that disappoint but gifts that help you in your life. Many of us need these gifts. We need a surprise gift from God. The thing is we don’t know when God will give it to us. God doesn’t tell us. Because he wants us to just trust him, to believe him, to put our faith in him. But he is faithful and he loves, and he surprises us with a gift or gifts to tell us how much he cares for us.

Two weeks ago, on Thursday, I discovered that our washing machine broke down and died. I asked Kuya July to take a look but even with all the power at his disposal, he couldn’t resurrect the machine. I had no choice but to replace it. It has served us well for years and I guess it was time to say goodbye to it. The thing is they’re not cheap, right? I just thought, God will provide.

On Saturday the same week, I visited a friend and when I was leaving, my friend gave me a small envelope who didn’t tell me what it was for. I thought maybe it was just a greeting card. But when I opened it later, it contained \$100 cash. The next day Sunday, my wife Bel after church said that someone gave me a love gift of \$100. The person gave it through my wife and so I just have to say to my wife, “Okay, you can keep it.” The next day, Monday, another friend messaged me and said he was sending me a check for \$100 for a reimbursement I already forgot about and didn’t expect. So, three surprise gifts in three days. \$300 dollars in three days! Well, \$200 actually because my wife has the other \$100. But these series of events, isn’t that so like God? Boom! Boom! Boom! God is good. But the

greatest surprise is that my wife was the one who bought the washing machine. She added the extra money to get a new one. And, frankly, I'm not surprised because she needs it.

Anyway, that's the kind of surprise gifts I'm talking about. God is a surprising God, Amen? So, don't be surprised if he surprises you.

So, let's talk about the **surprise gifts of God at Christmas**. The first surprise gift is

1. The Gift of His Presence

The birth of the Lord Jesus on earth was prophesied by Isaiah 400 hundred years before it happened. This is what he says in Isaiah 7:14, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."*

Now, it was prophesied. No surprise there. The Jews expected him to come. But what really surprised them was the fact that the Messiah they had been waiting for was different from what they thought he would be. They thought that Immanuel would be the Messiah who would fight for them literally against their Roman captors. Instead, Immanuel turned out to be a peace-loving, kind, and compassionate Messiah. And they crucified Jesus because they thought he was an impostor. Jesus was with them but they didn't and wouldn't recognize him.

Now, Immanuel is Hebrew which means "God with us". Immanuel is also spelled with the letter E and some versions of the Bible use that spelling. What's the difference? Immanuel with an I is a literal translation from the Hebrew in the Old Testament while Emmanuel with an E is a literal translation from the Greek in Matthew 1:23 which says, *"Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."* (KJV) That's from the KJV. RJ knows this.

So, the prophecy by Isaiah was made hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, and Matthew quotes it in his gospel in Matthew 1:23 to confirm that Mary's child is the Messiah.

So, the Christ child would be called "Immanuel, God with us." And though Jesus was to be called this, it wasn't given to Him as a personal name. No one ever said to Jesus, "Hey, Immanuel, how's it going today?" Immanuel as it applies to Jesus was a title and described who Jesus was and what He would accomplish. He was God who came to dwell with humankind as a man like us. And in His arrival, **He met the very deepest needs of our hearts.**

One of these deepest needs is

A. TO KNOW GOD AND BE KNOWN BY GOD

Since time immemorial, man has been searching for God. They like to know who God really is. Many people say, "I don't believe in God. I don't think there is a God." But deep inside there is a longing, a yearning, a desire to know their creator. Blaise Pascal said, ***"There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ."*** Pascal, a brilliant mathematician and philosopher, recognized Jesus was the creator who every person needed to know.

Now, what we celebrate in this Christmas season is the fact that the yearning of the Old Testament people, Israel, has been fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah. God has, by the power of His Holy Spirit, broken into human history. God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

J. B. Phillips wrote, ***"We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet."***

The God of all creation has come to recreate His creation, to redeem His creation, to make possible our wholeness of life through Jesus Christ. And I've got

to believe that at the deepest level of every one of us there is a yearning to know this God who came to this planet in a personal way. I've got to believe that at the heart of every one of us is a desire to experience the reality of Immanuel—God with us!

A freelance reporter from the New York Times once interviewed Marilyn Monroe. She was aware of Marilyn's past and the fact that during her early years Marilyn had been shuffled from one foster home to another. The reporter asked, "Did you ever feel loved by any of the foster families with whom you lived?"

"Once," Marilyn replied, "when I was about seven or eight. The woman I was living with was putting on makeup, and I was watching her. She was in a happy mood, so she reached over and patted my cheeks with her rouge puff...For that moment, I felt loved by her."

As sad as that story is, it demonstrates the need we all have to be touched, to be acknowledged, and to be cared for by someone greater than ourselves. And that need is no greater demonstrated than in the need each of us have, to know God and to be known by Him. Fortunately, through the arrival of Jesus, Immanuel, that need has been met.

The Bible says, *"We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."* (1 John 5:20)

Another of our deepest needs that Jesus met is

B. TO HAVE GOD AS OUR CONSTANT COMPANION

Truth be told, God is missing in some of our lives. There are various reasons. One could be because of too much focus on our career, our business, our education, our relationships, what-have-you. And when we face a crisis, we feel as

if God is not there. If that's the case, it isn't because God doesn't want to be with us, but because we have chosen to walk away from Him.

Immanuel, God with us, isn't a temporary reality – it is a permanent and consistent truth. As God has said: *“I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”*– 2 Corinthians 6:16b (NIV)

While there are times in our lives when it might feel as if God has abandoned us, that is never the case. The truth is, that no matter what you are dealing with right now, God will never leave you nor forsake you. Jesus says, *“...And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*– Matthew 28:20b

Randy Kilgore is one of the writers of the Our Daily Bread devotional. In one of his devotions, he remembers the time he was in seminary. Let me read his words from Our Daily Bread:

(Quote) “After my first semester in seminary, my family was given airline tickets to fly home for Christmas. The night before our flight, we realized we had less than \$20 for the trip. Parking, transportation, and other incidentals were certain to cost more than \$20. Heartsick, we resolved to pray about it. Though our children were small (6 and 2), we included them in the prayer time.

“As we were praying, we heard footsteps in the hallway of the apartment building, and then “whisk”—the sound of an envelope sliding under the door. Inside the envelope was an anonymous gift of \$50.

“The wonder reflected on our 6-year-old daughter's face matched the wonder in our own hearts. Here was a mighty God writing His name on a little girl's heart by hearing and answering our prayer in the same instant. And so we, like the psalmist David, could *“talk of all His wondrous works!”* (1 Chron. 16:9).”
(end of quote)

Isn't that amazing? God hearing and responding to his children's prayer at the very moment of their need? As Jesus came to this planet to meet our needs, He

continues with us for time eternal – there will never be a time in your life, whether on this earth, or in the life to come, where Jesus will not be your ever-present companion.

Another surprise gift of God at Christmas is

2. The Gift of His Peace

The Bible tells us that Jesus was born of a virgin, Mary. God sent his angel, Gabriel, to tell her that she would become the mother of Jesus. This is what angel Gabriel said to her, *“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*

‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’

The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’” (Luke 2:30-35)

At the time, Mary was betrothed to Joseph. In Jewish culture, that means they can regard themselves as husband and wife although they are not married yet. They were engaged to be married but that engagement is like a seal that cannot be broken unless one proves to be unfaithful.

So, guess what? Mary told Joseph about the fact that she was pregnant. I’m sure she struggled with that. Perhaps, it took her a long while before she mustered enough courage to tell him. I’m sure she was anxious, she was nervous. But she obeyed and told her soon-to-be-husband Joseph. The Bible tells us that Joseph didn’t believe her. Which is understandable. It is impossible. A virgin cannot become pregnant. He must have thought Mary was unfaithful or worse was crazy.

I'm sure he struggled with that, too. He loved Mary but this was too much. So, as the Bible tells us, *"Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."* (Matt. 2:19) He decided to break their engagement. I mean, any rightminded man would do the same thing. That was very troubling.

So, we have two individuals experiencing inner turmoil. Their world was turned upside down. Until God intervened and put their world right again. The Bible tells us, *"But after he had considered this (divorcing Mary), an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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... When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."* (Matt. 2:20-24)

That was a huge sigh of relief for Joseph. God gave him assurance. God let him know that he was in control. Suddenly, all his worries, all his doubts, all his anxieties went away. Peace came to him in an unexpected way. Mary experienced the same thing, too. She must have been filled with unease and anxieties because Joseph did not respond excitedly to the news she delivered to him. And to her great surprise, one morning, Joseph said, "Let's get married!"

God can surprise you when you think that all is hopeless. He already has the solution in mind. He will take you out of a crisis or chaos in your life that you thought would be hard to get out of. In fact, at times you may feel like your life is a big giant puzzle that you can't figure out. But, you know, God is watching over you. He has a reason for not coming beside you right away and solving it for you. One of the reasons is that perhaps he's teaching you to be more dependent on him than on your own abilities. He wants you to let go and commit everything to him.

Because the truth is we are good at pretending we have it all together until one day it comes down crashing on us. But even during those times, God is faithful and will pull you out and help you to rise up and continue on your journey. He will give you his peace. One of the titles of Jesus is “Prince of Peace”. In Isaiah 9:6, we read, *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

Now, it is not always the case that God will fix your problem. He can but sometimes he won't. You may not get married, you may not get well, you may not get that promotion, your marriage may go south, but God is always with you in your journey. He says, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”*. (Hebrews 13:5) And in the midst of your troubles, you just *“present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 4:6c-7)

God's surprise gifts to you include the gift of his presence, the gift of his peace, and thirdly,

3. The Gift of His Salvation

The Bible tells us that on the night Jesus was born, *“there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”*

(Luke 2:8-14)

The shepherds were surprised. They must have been shocked actually by the appearance of an angel. They were terrified in fact. But why would they be terrified? Because the shepherds around that time were considered lowly. It was a common occupation, yes, but they were treated like second-class citizens. So, when the angel showed up they were afraid that they were going to be punished for whatever wrongdoing they have done, perhaps, or would be berated and be told things they didn't want to hear. But to their greater surprise, the angel told them good news. The news of the birth of the Savior.

So, we see that the surprisig good news of salvation was given to the shepherds by the angels. In response, the shepherds hurried off to see the new-born baby. There was no hesitation on their part. They did what the Lord told them to do. Right away they obeyed and what a great joy they must have felt to see with their own eyes the Messiah, the Savior who they've been waiting for a long, long time. This was the culmination of their dreams and hopes. Now, in flesh, the Messiah was there. Probably, they touched him, even gently stroked him. Maybe, their eyes filled with tears as the excitement of seeing the Savior welled up within their beings. Oh, how a glorious sight it must have been that night. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, celebrating the birth of the Savior. Surely, they didn't mind the foul smell of the stable, surely they were oblivious to the sounds of the animals. At that point, time seemed to stop. God was on earth.

Then, immediately, the shepherds left and also hurried off to spread the good news about the child. They wanted to share the joy and excitement they felt with people all around. These shepherds were the first evangelists. And they had a good harvest of souls for we read that **“all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”**

Brothers and sisters, friends, in this time of celebration, let us not forget that God wants us to share the excitement of having Jesus in our hearts with others.

God wants us to spread the word concerning what had been told us about Jesus. For the world today needs Jesus. A lot of people are fearful. A lot of people live with uncertainty. A lot of people don't have direction in their lives. A lot of people need to be told about the sin in their lives.

Years ago, I attended a conference and there I heard the testimony of a Christian Jew or a Messianic Jew. He testified that before he became a Christian, he was in the army and in the army, someone invited him to church. Out of curiosity, he went but he wasn't impressed. This someone became his friend. He noticed that his friend's lifestyle was different from the others in the army. His friend also talked to him about Jesus. But still he wasn't impressed. During that time, however, his life had no direction. He was a Jew who observed all their religious holidays and who tried to obey all the commandments, but he had no peace. He was supposed to be feeling privileged because he was a part of the chosen people of God, but he felt terrible inside. Then, one day, while having a shower, he realized that he was a sinner who needed a Savior. He bowed his head and then accepted Jesus in his heart.

Who would have known that a Jew like him would become a believer in Jesus? All it took was sharing Jesus with him and letting God take care of the rest. As God declares in Isaiah,

"So is my word that goes out of my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is. 55:11).

This Christmas, know that God loves you and he has your best interest at heart. That's why he sent Jesus his own Son to be with you and save you. He wants to give you the gift of his presence. The Bible says, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16) He also wants to give you the gift of his peace.

Because that's what you need today in this world of uncertainty and chaos. And lastly, but most importantly, he wants to give you his gift of salvation.

If you haven't received yet Jesus as your Lord and Savior, why don't you do that today? The Bible says *"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Cor. 6:2)