

GOD'S GREATEST GIFT: THE GIFT

(Isaiah 7:14, 9:6; Matthew 1:21, 2:1-2; Luke 2:8-12)

12.13.20

INTRODUCTION

After spending the last two weeks looking at God's greatest gift in terms of the recipients and the Giver, today we look at the gift - that greatest expression of love from God, the gift that was intended to meet our greatest need - our need for somebody to save us from our sins.

As a culture, we seem to know how to give gifts. In 2019, Americans spent over \$1 trillion dollars on holiday shopping (that's a 1 with 12 zeroes). And we spent another couple billion dollars more on gift-wrapping. Think about it - what started out in a feeding trough has become really big business. But that said, as we look at the gift given by God some 2,000 years ago, we're going to look at it in terms of the incredible names that were attached to his gift.

So why do that; I mean, what's in a name? As parents, many of us followed different trains of thought concerning the names we gave our kids - names that will remain with them for life. Sometimes the names we chose just sounded right or seemed to fit. I remember when our first daughter was born. We had already settled on the name "Hayley Diane" but, before it became official, Linda wanted to look her over to see if she "looked like a Hayley."

Similarly, there are certain brand names of luxury and excellence that reflect that luxurious excellence onto their clients - for instance, in cars: Cadillac, Mercedes, Rolls Royce, Porsche and Jaguar; in watches: Longinus, Rolex, Cartier; in fashion: Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Armani, Yves St. Laurent. You own those products? You are somebody - all because those products say so.

So, what's in a name at Christmas? Everything. The names that are a part of our celebration of God's greatest gift give us some awe-inspiring, breathtaking glimpses into the "amazing grace" that permeates each and every facet of this incredible moment - our receiving of a gift that truly reflects *how wide and long and high and deep* is this Giver's love for us, in fact, a *love that surpasses knowledge - Paul, Ephesians 3:18b-19a*. So, as we begin to "unwrap" this incredible gift, we're going to do it by looking at several specific "names" that are used to describe God's greatest gift - often names talked about centuries before this gift even made its way into our lives. We're also going to take a bit of time to look at how this "greatest gift" was "wrapped" - in other words, what we find in the presentation of this gift. But before anything more, let's pause for a word of prayer.

TEXT/ANALYSIS

First Name: Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel - Isaiah 7:14. Now Matthew, in connecting this prophecy to his telling of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, also gave us the definition of the name "Immanuel" - "God with us." What an amazing thing to consider - that the God of all creation was going to come to earth to live among His creation as one of them. As John wrote: ***The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us - John 1:14a.*** And Jesus Himself confirmed this with His disciples in the Upper Room: ***"Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" - Jesus Christ, John 14:9b.*** These words convey a remarkable truth: Jesus was simultaneously God and man. And our communion and fellowship with Him will never end; as He promised: ***"[S]urely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:20b.*** And we continue to live and learn and grow within that communion and

fellowship by means of the Holy Spirit; as Paul wrote to the Ephesian church: ***[I]n Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit - Paul, Ephesians 2:22.*** And the full, complete, and final expression of that communion and fellowship with Him will be seen in heaven; as John wrote in the last book of the Bible as he watched the "new Jerusalem" coming down out of heaven: ***"God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" - Revelation 21:3.*** So what an amazing story the Scriptures lay out for us, with each successive stage being better by becoming more personal: In the OT, we see God for us, and in the gospels, we see God with us. But in the Acts and in the Epistles, not to mention for all of eternity, we see - and will continue to see - God in us! As minister and author Herbert Lockyer has so keenly observed, because of the reality of "Immanuel": ***"[Christ] is our eternal Inhabitant - the Indweller Who will never leave us - the Comforter, abiding with us forever"*** (Herbert Lockyer, *All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible*, p. 68).

Second (a Group of Names): *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 - Isaiah 9:6.* Isaiah continues to give us more names that describe this incredible gift from God. He first tells us that this child to be born will be a "counselor" but, more than that, a "wonderful counselor" - a reflection of the God who commissioned Him (and I loved the NASB's take on this): ***This also comes from the LORD of hosts, Who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great - Isaiah 28:29 (NASB1995).*** And because of the wonder of a life lived, as Peter described, as ***a lamb without blemish or defect - I Peter 1:19b***, "wonderful" is absolutely the best description for how He lived His life. He was wonderful in His teaching as people followed Him all over the country, in awe at His every word. He was wonderful in His character, living a life so pure and holy that He Himself never endured a single moment for which He had to repent. And He was wonderful in His entire life - required for a life that was going to save everybody else from their sins - paid for by His death and empowered by His resurrection. And it was that life that brought wonderful counsel to all those who sought Him out. In fact, the apostle Paul called Christ both ***the power of God and the wisdom of God - Paul, I Corinthians 1:24***, echoing the words of the prophet Jeremiah who described God as a ***great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty indeed - Jeremiah 32:18b-19a (ESV).*** Such an everlasting source of everlasting wisdom and guidance!

The next phrase used is ***Mighty God*** - a phrase that shows a direct fulfillment in the writings of John and Paul. From John we read in the opening lines of his gospel: ***Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made - John 1:3.*** Similarly, in Paul's words: ***"[I]n Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form... He is the head over every power and authority - Paul, Colossians 2:9, 10b.***

The next phrase? ***Everlasting Father.*** What amazing truths tie into this name! For all said about the eternity of the Father can be likewise said about the son. As Moses declared in his psalm: ***Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God - Moses, Psalm 90:2.*** As God Himself declared through the prophet Malachi: ***"I the Lord do not change"- God speaking, Malachi 3:6a.*** Jesus Himself would lay claim to that title, telling His opponents in the Jewish leadership:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" - Jesus Christ, John 8:58 (ESV). And, as the writer of Hebrews affirmed: **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever - Hebrews 13:8.** What's really cool about all this is that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT made some 200 years before the life of Christ, translates "everlasting Father" as "the Father of the age to come." This phrase was how ancient Jews referred to the future messianic age - declaring how Jesus as "everlasting Father" would be the ruler of all ages.

The last phrase mentioned in this amazing verse? **Prince of Peace.** Because of Jesus' intention to restore the peace to our lives that sin had taken away, the OT prophecies concerning His coming included multiple references to the peace He would bring. The prophet Micah promised: **He will stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will live securely, for then His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And He will be our peace - Micah 5:4-5a.** And the prophet Zechariah similarly foretold: **He will proclaim peace to the nations - Zechariah 9:10b.** In fact, the whole purpose of His coming was to restore peace to the relationship between God and man; as God said through Isaiah: **"[L]et him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me" - God speaking, Isaiah 27:5 (NKJV).** And certainly "peace" was declared to be found in Christ during His ministry. As He told His disciples in the Upper Room: **"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. . . I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" - Jesus Christ, John 14:27, 16:33.** And Paul confirmed the centrality of that message, telling the believers in Ephesus: **"For He Himself is our peace...He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near - Paul, Ephesians 2:14a, 17.**

The next name: "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" - an angel, speaking to Joseph, Matthew 1:21.

"Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Yeshua" (Joshua), meaning, "the Lord saves." Another way of translating that is that Jesus means "Jehovah Salvation." This makes salvation not a something but a Someone. A Hebrew scholar (and a Messianic Jew) by the name of Arthur Glass, in responding to many of the Jewish faith that questioned that, if Jesus was somebody as important as the Messiah, why is He never mentioned in the OT, answered their question as follows in a study called Yeshua In The Tenach (the name Jesus in the OT). He pointed out that the name Jesus is actually hiding in plain sight approximately 100 times from Genesis to Habakkuk. As he puts it: "Every time the OT uses the word SALVATION (especially with the Hebrew suffix meaning "my," "thy," or "his,") with very few exceptions ... it is identically the same word as YESHUA (Jesus). *This is actually what the angel said to Joseph - Thou shalt call His name YESHUA (salvation).*"

He goes on to show how this works in a couple of well-known OT passages:

- 1) When David writes: **I will rejoice in thy salvation - David, Psalm 9:14b (KJV),** he is actually saying, "I will rejoice in thy YESHUA (Jesus).
- 2) Isaiah in a similar way declares that Jesus was the fulfillment, embodiment, and personification of salvation - the plan of salvation authored by God Himself and

brought to reality by Jesus - by an understanding of these verses: ***Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation - Isaiah 12:2-3 (KJV).*** Now look again at this verse with the word YESHUA understood as "salvation": ***Behold, God is my YESHUA*** [references Christ's preincarnate, eternal existence - John 1:1]; ***I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my YESHUA*** [references Jesus, the "Word," becoming flesh - John 1:14]. ***Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of YESHUA*** [references Jesus crucified, with the waters of salvation flowing from the cross - John 7:37-39] ***-Isaiah 12:2-3 (KJV).***

The Next Name: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him" - Matthew 2:1-2.

While the Jews of Jesus' day had come to understand the Messiah in terms of an earthly king who would restore Israel's physical, political power and prestige, the OT nevertheless saw the coming Messiah as one who would rule. In fact, the idea of a coming king goes all the way back to Jacob, to the moments when he is blessing his sons just prior to his death. When it came to his fourth son Judah, Jacob said: ***"The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until He to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be His"- Jacob, Genesis 49:10.*** And as God declared through the prophet Jeremiah: ***"I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety"- God speaking, Jeremiah 23:5-6a.*** And, of course, when King Herod heard the disturbing news upon the arrival of the wise men, their mission led him to ask his counselors where the Messiah was to be born; their reply quoted from the OT prophet Micah: ***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" - God speaking, Micah 5:2.*** To request the location for one born "king of the Jews" was completely accurate, for a king was exactly who He was going to be.

And the last name we look at is "Messiah," which is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word "Christ" - meaning "anointed One."

And 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" - Luke 2:8-11. By the angels declaring the subject of their song of praise being the "messiah," it declared that this child who's coming was being announced to the shepherds was coming under the plans and divine authority of God Himself. Without those credentials in place, Jesus could never be seen as the One God had been promising since the Garden of Eden.

Now, of course, there is one more component to a gift - the wrapping. For some people I know, the wrapping is as equal in value as the gift itself, so to ignore the beauty of the

wrapping paper is seen as rather insulting. Not exactly the reason for the season, but that sentiment is out there. So how did God "wrap" His greatest gift? Well let's see.

He didn't gift the world in an era at the top of its game in technology, health care, housing or any other measure. He placed Him in the world approximately 5 BC. And He didn't place Him in a political powerhouse like Rome, a cultural powerhouse like Athens or Alexandria, Egypt, or even in a regional power like Damascus. He didn't even place Him in an iconically holy place like Jerusalem. Instead, He was born in Bethlehem, a small village about five miles southeast of Jerusalem - a place known as the birthplace of the great king David, but not for pretty much anything else since then.

Well, did He at least have some high-end, influential parents? Hardly. His earthly father Joseph was a craftsman, working predominately in wood and stone. His mother Mary was learning the skills necessary to be a mother. Nobody outside of their immediate families even knew who they were. On top of that, they were going to barely be newlyweds when all this happened. Rabbis at the time considered 18 to be a prime marrying age for young men. Women were actually not much more than girls; it was generally thought that, upon physical maturity, women were ready to be given in marriage - meaning that they may have been as young as 13. And contrary to our views, love and romance and attraction had very little to do with the arrangements for marriage that were made. Marriage was about survival and continuing a family.

In addition, infant mortality at the time was horrific. In ancient Rome fully one-third of newborns did not survive their first year; half of all kids didn't make past age 10. However, once surviving the first decade of life, it was not uncommon for there to be many decades of life remaining for most people. A NT picture of this is when the Pharisees are disputing with Christ in John 8; at one-point Jesus points out: ***"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 8:56***. His audience can't believe their ears, so they say to Christ: ***"You are not yet fifty years old and You have seen Abraham!"*** - ***John 8:57***. They mention "50 years old" like it was nothing unusual - because it wasn't.

And the gift itself did not come with anything that would have matched the great expectations that the prophets had communicated about the Messiah. Jesus did not come as a ready-made conqueror or scholar. He came into this world as a baby. Meaning, in human terms, He came into the world about as helpless as any being could be - totally dependent on a couple of very young people to take care of Him in any and all circumstances.

He didn't even show up in fancy clothes or some top-of-the-line birthing center. As Luke so clearly tells us: ***[Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn - Luke 2:7 (NKJV)***. Nothing fancy about that.

Even His first visitors were unexpected: Some shepherds out in the fields, guys about as far down on the social ladder as possible, were the first to hear the news, and dutifully found where He was born - and came to see this infant that had caused an angelic choir to bring the news. And while they're looking at this baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in an animals' feeding trough,

they keep replaying the words they heard that night - Savior, Messiah, Lord. How could somebody heralded as being so great be found in a place like this?

Some many months later, a crew of Persian astrologers - possibly from modern-day Iran - traveled hundreds of miles because a star they had seen compelled them. They brought riches, but they were also pagans, Gentiles - not even God's own people.

And as for God's people, what about them? Well, they certainly heard about this possible divine royal birth from the wise men. Their boss the king even asked them where a "messiah" was to be born - and he got his answer when they gave him the prophecy from Micah, specifically identifying Bethlehem. But nobody from God's people moved. Nobody was interested or curious. The closest investment in the news was King Herod, who only saw a threat to be quickly destroyed. And in fact, when he figured out that the wise men had left town without letting him know where this brat of a kid was, he brought his murderous intentions to Bethlehem, killing the innocents and making God's Son a refugee, as the family fled for their lives (under God's direction and care) to Egypt.

None of that would win "welcome of the year" honors but, in God's economy, everything was perfect. As Paul wrote to the Galatian believers: *[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son - Paul, Galatians 4:4a (ESV)*. God's greatest gift was in the perfect time, the perfect place, the perfect circumstances - all for the offering of a perfect outcome: salvation.

APPLICATION

God's greatest gift was completely perfect - and all the names that were shared with us underscore all that Jesus was going to be - to allow us the chance to become all that God had always wanted us to be. That's the reason for the season.

And in the poverty of His birth, and everything that was to follow, we see a Savior that was given in such a way that nobody could feel left out, that somehow God's greatest gift didn't include them. And that's the great message of inclusion that is ours to proclaim to everybody around us - that Jesus came for everybody: not only for the best or the brightest or the richest or the most educated, but also for everybody who wasn't any of those things - including the poor, the illiterate, the dirty, the diseased, the dismissed, the outcasts. He literally placed Himself beneath everybody so that He could bring life to everybody. When we look into that manger, how many of us see somebody born in better circumstances than us? In fact, after looking at the manger, how can any of us ever look down on anybody or even think negative of anybody ever again? How many of us have been without a decent place to spend the night? How many of us have ever had to flee for our lives? Jesus covers everybody's circumstances because Jesus came to give salvation to everybody's circumstances - to lift them up from the poverty of sin into the glorious riches of God's forgiveness. It doesn't get any better than that.

CONCLUSION

When you think about Christmas, and thank God for sending His Son, thank Him through the filter of these names, for it's in these names that we truly see how much God gave us when His Son arrived to give life to all those dead in sin. Let's pray!