

THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS GIFTS

I don't suppose we'll ever have a Christmas without talking about gifts. I mean **that's what Christmas is all about**_ isn't it? Now, I know it's all about Jesus, but hear me out. Though it should be all about Jesus, even then, it would still be about gifts. You can't even begin to tell the story of Christmas without mentioning gifts.

God gave us His son, right? (**John 3:16**) He's a gift. The wise men brought Jesus gold and frankincense and myrrh, right? (**Matthew 2**) I think those were also gifts! So, Christmas is about gifts_ both the giving and the receiving of them.

In the opening video with kids answering questions about Christmas gifts was cute. The kid in all of us can relate. I also found it pretty enlightening. The **#1** answer to the greatest gift God had ever given to the world was "*Life.*" Certainly, that is a gift of God that is often overlooked. Paul reminded the great scholars in Athens that God gives life and breath to each of us. (**Acts 17**)

My personal perspective about Christmas gifts changed over the years. When I was **5-8** I thought the "*greatest gift*" ever would be found in a Christmas catalogue. We called the Montgomery Wards or Sears catalogues "*Wish Books.*" They didn't have **ToysRus** back then. Maybe toy soldiers (*GI Joe*) or an electric train or **Rock'em Sock'em Robots** game_ or maybe even a **Ryder B-B gun** would've been at the top of your Christmas list. Or for little girls_ a doll or tea set or **Playdough**, or an **Easy Bake Oven** (*I had little sisters*). My older brother Stan and I got up about midnight one Christmas Eve and asked to go downstairs on the pretense of needing to use the bathroom. Mom said okay but we were not under any circumstances to go into the living room. We promised we wouldn't_ but peeking around the corner, I was so overjoyed to see that Santa had brought exactly what I'd asked for that I crossed the threshold, opened the boxes, and played for about an hour before carefully replacing everything under the tree and tiptoeing back up to bed. Santa must've been too busy delivering presents that night to see I was awake_ for as far as I could tell, I hadn't moved to the naughty list.

As a teenager, the "*greatest gift*" would've been a new sporty convertible_ you know sitting in the drive with a big bow on it like in the commercials. By that time, I'd learned that you don't get everything you ask for_ for even Santa had a budget. As it turned out, I was pretty tickled to get a **4 track tape player** (*yep, they came first*) to play in my **1960 Rambler**, and some new clothes. Yes, boys, believe it or not, one day you'll actually ask for those clothes grandma gets you.

A few days before my **20th Christmas**, one of my best friends, a coworker, and former schoolmate was killed in a car accident. He was also the older brother of the girl I was dating at the time. His funeral was on Christmas Eve and there was such a cloud over the holidays that year I honestly can't remember any of the gifts I received_ or that I gave. I handed money to my family to buy their gifts from me that Christmas. For me, the "*greatest gift*" would've been to turn back the clock somehow and stop the tragedy. Shortly thereafter, the young lady and I parted company_ and I slipped into what seemed to be a long and deep depression.

I realize now it may have been an attempt to climb out of that pit which moved me to purchase a brand new **1972 MG**. It brightened my days for awhile, until I was broadsided by a Buick. The car was completely totaled and it was nothing short of a miracle that I wasn't killed in that crash. The "*greatest gift*" that year may have been that I was still alive to celebrate Christmas.

Those couple of Christmases helped me to realize that you can't buy happiness_ or find lasting joy in material things. So, the next few Christmases, **I found joy in making others happy.** I bought extravagant gifts for family and friends. I gave money to strangers who were down on their luck. In so doing, I discovered the truth of Jesus' statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive. One of the *"greatest Christmas gifts"* is bringing joy to others. Many miss that truth_ thinking the joy is in the getting rather than the giving. Yet, still_ even that gift loses its glimmer when you're not in a position to do for others like you wish you could.

The 1st Christmas after Nina and I were married, we moved into a 1 bedroom efficiency apartment on Christmas Eve. We went shopping that evening for a tree and a few decorations_ but with very limited time and a pretty small budget we ended up with a *"Charlie Brown"* artificial tree from a local discount store. It was the last one they had. It had a branch missing, but if we turned it just right... you could hardly notice. After we decorated it, we walked in the snow to the nearest phone booth to call her parents who were spending the holidays with her grandparents in Kentucky_ as they had done nearly every year since she was born. It was our first together as husband and wife, but her first Christmas away from family. I confess that I was very insensitive to the sadness she was feeling_ but for me, *"the greatest gift"* I could have asked for that year was being with her. I didn't realize then I still had a pretty selfish perception when it came to Christmas gifts. It took awhile for me to get it through my head that I needed to be more concerned about her happiness than my own. **Nearly 40 Christmases later,** I've still got a lot to learn. But, *"one of the greatest gifts"* is learning to place others wishes before your own_ even if you don't understand them. There's a joy that comes in so doing that can't be explained. It has to be experienced. And together we've celebrated the gift God gave not just in the manger_ but on the tree of Calvary's Hill.

In my **63** years, **I have received many Christmas gifts.** Everything from toys to tools. One year I got hunting gear; a rifle and a hunting jacket. Another I got a target pistol, a holster and ammo. Mostly, it's been clothes and books; computer software and accessories; books and videos; cologne and ties; hats and gloves; etc. But, as much as I appreciated the thought behind each gift, they only confirmed that it was all just stuff_ and stuff doesn't last. That's why *"the greatest gifts"* weren't merely things that came from the store_ but the gifts that came from the heart. Because even when the gifts are long gone_ broken, faded, lost, or worn out_ the memories remain.

Of course, *"the greatest gift"* of all came from the heart of God. Returning to **John 3:16. "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."** Take note. **The gift God gave was His son_ And receiving that gift brings life.** The kids in the video weren't far off, after all, were they? Of course their perception of life may be pretty shallow. Ours may be as well. If we see this life and even something in this life as *"the greatest gift"* God has given, we'll one day find ourselves much as I did on that Christmas when I lost my dear friend. Wondering where the wonder went_ we'll have Christmases when we won't be able to see the glory for the darkness.

And we'll be so saddened and weary from trying to hold onto good gifts_ maybe even great gifts_ only to miss out on the greatest **the LIFE that Jesus offers_ which is the greatest gift of all!** In time we find that **Christmas isn't about what we get_ or even what we give.** It's about what **we have already received.** It's about the gift of everlasting life that we receive through faith in Jesus.