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CHRISTMAS HOPE

A boy, a mother, and a tree

6 Things I Love About Christmas

What makes *your* Christmas?

A Guide to Giving

Love leads the way



PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Can you imagine being given a Christmas gift and not opening it for 20 years? Well, that's exactly what I did. Year after year I unwrapped all of my other gifts and enjoyed them for a few minutes or a few months before I lost interest or outgrew or wore out each one. I don't know why I never got around to opening that one gift. When I was small, my other gifts all looked more fun, I suppose, and as I grew older, I thought I knew what was inside and wasn't interested. Most years I didn't even notice it.

Then one July evening I bumped into an old friend on the street and he handed me, of all things, that Christmas gift I'd ignored all those years. I opened it mostly to please my friend, who was clearly quite excited about it and seemed convinced that it was just what I needed. To my astonishment, he was right! Suddenly the other Christmas gifts of 20 years paled by comparison. This gift was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It was intangible, yet more real than the ground I was standing on. I can only describe it as *love*—love in its richest, deepest, truest sense, overwhelming and boundless love, unconditional and unending. And it was mine! Definitely mine! For a moment I felt foolish for having waited so long to open it, but then I realized that no longer mattered. It was mine!

And it gets better. This gift is for everybody. If you haven't unwrapped yours yet, let this be the Christmas you do. It's the one that bears this note: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."¹

May you and yours experience the wonderful reality of a love-filled, Christ-filled Christmas.

Keith Phillips
For *Activated*

1. John 3:16

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CHRISTMAS HOPE

BY SALLY GARCÍA

TWO YEARS AGO, some friends and I took boxes of food to families who had been displaced by the February 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Constitución, Chile, and were still living in makeshift camps ten months later. Margarita, one of the volunteers, had taken a collection of Christmas decorations in her office building, so we included a few of those in each box, along with a copy of the Christmas issue of *Conéctate* (the Spanish edition of *Activated*) and a CD of Christmas music. One person in Margarita's office had also donated a Christmas tree, which we also took with us, even though we didn't know exactly what we would do with it.

While a few of us gathered all the children for a live Christmas show of songs and skits, another team fanned

out to visit the various cabins that make up the camp. At one home, two volunteers found a woman near tears. Her family had lost almost everything in the tsunami, and a recent robbery had taken the rest. She said her little boy had been watching other families put up Christmas trees, and he kept asking when she was going to get one for them. It was all he talked about.

The volunteers told her they would see what they could do, and scrambled back to our van so excited that an onlooker would have guessed they held a winning lottery ticket. "We found the perfect family for that Christmas tree!" they exclaimed.

They rushed back with the tree, and soon had it up and decorated in the one-room shack. The woman watched as her son's wish came true.

The little boy and his sister returned from the Christmas program, and their mother had them close their eyes before leading them inside. When the little boy opened his eyes and let out a shriek of delight, we knew God had led us to the right family.

Months later, another volunteer was at the same camp, meeting with some of its residents, when a woman explained how at one point she had been so discouraged that she felt she couldn't go on. But then some people had showed up at her door, out of nowhere, with the Christmas tree her son had wanted so badly. And that was the day she had decided not to give up.

SALLY GARCÍA IS AN EDUCATOR, MISSIONARY, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■



Six Things I Love About Christmas

BY MARIA FONTAINE

MOST PEOPLE HAVE A FEW THINGS that make Christmas special to them. Here are a few of mine.

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

I love the spirit of giving that permeates Christmas. It's often a time when even the least generous become more giving. It's a time when children can learn the joy of giving as they share what they have. It's also a time when everyone can give something, whether they have a little or a lot, and find reward in doing so.

Giving was always a part of Christmas for me, from the time I was small. I grew up as a pastor's daughter, and a few months before Christmas, the families in our

congregation would buy boxes of gelatin or instant pudding, one box for each member of their family. What they wanted more than the contents were the small, more-or-less uniform-size boxes, about the size of an adult's palm. We would empty the boxes of their contents, wrap them in Christmas paper, and cut a slit in the top to make a mini piggy bank. In the months leading up to Christmas, we would each save what we could—adults from their paychecks and we kids from our weekly allowances—and add that to our personal Christmas bank for Jesus' birthday.

Then during the Christmas Eve service, each person would take their little box wrapped in Christmas paper and filled with whatever money they had saved, and place it under the tree as their gift to Jesus. The money would be sent to the missionaries our church supported.

We did this every year when I was a child, and it was a tradition that became very meaningful to me. It got me thinking more about Jesus during that time. It helped me remember that when we give to others in need, we are giving to Jesus, and nothing makes Him happier.¹ It also taught me to give what I could, because that's the true spirit of Christmas. To this day, whenever I look at a Christmas tree, I'm always reminded of that annual experience that made such an impression on me as a child.

SHARING JESUS

I love the fact that Christmas is a time when talking about Jesus comes more naturally and is often more appreciated, even amid the commercial aspect of the holiday. Because most of the world celebrates Christmas in one way or another, it's an ideal opportunity to share “the

1. See Matthew 25:34–40.

2. John 14:6

3. John 10:9



reason for the season” with those who haven’t heard. It’s the perfect time to explain that Jesus is God’s gift of love, sent to bridge the gap between God and us; that He is “the way, the truth, and the life”² and “the door” to salvation.³ Christmastime and Jesus go hand in hand.

SHARING OURSELVES

I love how Christmas gifts carry a little bit of the giver with them. When I was a child, most of the Christmas gifts my parents gave me and my sisters were things that we needed, such as clothes or shoes, but they would usually also try to get each of us something that was a frill or an extra, things they knew we had been wanting and would consider special.

I think my Christmas upbringing gave me a pretty practical and pragmatic view of gift giving. When I give a gift, I try to give something

that is tailored to the recipient and will hold special meaning or value for them. It sometimes takes more thought and creativity to come up with something meaningful, but those are the gifts that seem to be the most appreciated and remembered. As Henry van Dyke said, “The finest Christmas gift is not the one that costs the most money, but the one that carries the most love.”

GET-TOGETHERS AND ACTIVITIES

I’ve always loved gatherings with family and friends at Christmastime. Also when I was growing up, all of us children participated, either in our church’s Christmas play, or by singing Christmas songs or reciting poems.

I remember when I had the mumps one Christmas, and I had to miss the Christmas program. Although I got to eat lots of ice

cream and my parents showered me with extra attention, those treats were nothing compared to missing the Christmas gathering. The Christmas program, when we would present our gifts to Jesus, was a long-anticipated event, one of the highlights of my year. So to me it was almost like the end of the world to be missing it!

It’s a precious gift to gather and do something special with those that you love at Christmas, to share spiritual fellowship of some kind, to be together in one place celebrating the One who is so worthy of celebration. It doesn’t need to be elaborate to be meaningful.

MUSIC

Another thing that I love about Christmas is the music. So many Christmas carols contain deep truths—inspired lyrics set to inspired music. I like the old religious carols,



and I like the newer ones too. Any song that brings attention to the Greatest Gift is wonderful.

I was listening to some Christmas carols when a friend who doesn't speak English well dropped by. She couldn't understand the words, but she said she recognized most of the melodies. That reminded me that many carols have been translated into several languages, so that the same songs are being sung and listened to around the world.

Many years ago, I attended a Christmas Eve candlelight Catholic Mass in Israel, celebrated in Arabic. It was beautiful to worship with the Christians there, to hear the same songs I knew and loved, even though I couldn't understand the words or sing along. It was an extremely cold

night, but enjoying the beautiful carols with those fellow Christians was heartwarming.

LIGHTS

I love Christmas lights. A lot of people like Christmas lights, but I *really* like them! I would gladly have them hanging in my home year-round—and some years I have. In the past when I've traveled around Christmastime, I've even packed a string or two of Christmas lights in case I might not find any right away in my new location. I just love the glow they give.

I like all kinds of Christmas lights. I like the white ones, the gold ones, the multicolored ones, the icicle ones, the twinkling ones, and the lights that are built into my little fiber-optic Christmas tree. I like it when the trees and bushes in people's yards and around restaurants and

other businesses are decorated with strings of Christmas lights.


Speaking of lights, I'm praying that each of you reading this will have a love-filled, light-filled Christmas, and that we will each do our part to light others' lives with the love of Jesus. This world of ours needs all the light it can get!

Now light one thousand

Christmas lights,
On dark earth here tonight;
One thousand, thousand also shine,
To make the dark sky bright.
He came to bring us love and light,
To bring us peace on earth.
So let your candles shine tonight,
And sing with joy and mirth.⁴

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■

4. Swedish traditional carol,
author unknown



a guide to giving

BY LINDA SALAZAR

“MOMMY, I think *you* like those toys more than we do,” I remember saying to my mom as we shopped at a discount store. The way she would inspect each toy, carefully read through each book, count puzzle pieces, and put together toy sets (discount items tend to miss pieces), I was sure she loved those toys every bit as much as we kids did. She was always on the lookout for sales so she and my hardworking father could put presents under the Christmas tree for us kids.

But my parents’ giving wasn’t limited to things. Sometimes their gifts were “hands on,” like when they took us to a park to play a favorite game together, or trekked by our sides through the woods, or took us to visit some historical site.

Looking back I can clearly see that my parents didn’t love the toys and

all the rest as much as I thought they did—they just loved *giving*. They were *always* giving. Whether it was their time and attention, help with our schoolwork or projects, or lending a listening ear, they never ceased to give from their hearts.

As Christmas approaches, I can’t help but think back and marvel at those simple, love-filled gifts. The Christmas presents themselves I hardly remember, but Mom and Dad’s enthusiastic love for giving I will never forget!

Of course, gift giving is a timeless tradition and a wonderful way of showing love. And gifts are always especially thrilling for children. Perhaps that is what our heavenly Father had in mind long ago on that first Christmas, when He gave us His love in the fashion He knew we would understand best. He gave us

the most precious and enduring gift ever given in such a simple, humble way—His love and Spirit in the form of a gentle baby. Jesus was and still is God’s great Christmas gift to us all.

Modern marketers have found so many holidays to celebrate with gift giving, and they come around so fast that it’s sometimes hard to remember which one we’re shopping for or why. But stop for a moment, won’t you, and recall the most memorable gifts you have ever received and why you still hold them dear. Were they the things you could see and hold, or the love those gifts were wrapped in?

This Christmas and always, may our heavenly Father’s example be our guide to giving.

LINDA SALAZAR IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN THE USA. ■

A Role to Play!

BY AKIO MATSUOKA

“I KNEW YOU WOULD COME!” said a frail grandmother as she gripped my hand tightly.

It was Christmastime, and my children and I had been visiting retirement homes and orphanages, as we had done each of the last few years. At orphanages we would do our best to entertain the orphans by organizing games and performing, and we would also distribute presents that our sponsors had provided. We also passed out small gifts and performed at the retirement homes, but usually my children’s presence was enough to delight the elderly residents. “What adorable children!” was a chorus that I heard often.

Over the years I’ve done this, I have accumulated many touching memories. There is one scene, however, that I will never forget. A bedridden octogenarian, mistaking me for her absentee son, grasped my hand and repeated through tears, “I knew you would come! I *knew* you would come!”

As my children performed their routine, I held her hand and smiled. I simply couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I wasn’t who she thought I was. A caregiver who had been

watching from nearby nodded her approval and motioned for me to continue comforting this dear, lonely old woman.

She was a stranger to me, but to her I was the son whom she loved with all her heart and whom she had been longing to see for what seemed a very long time. There was no way of knowing why he hadn’t visited, but whatever the reason, she needed to feel remembered and loved. I believe God had arranged our meeting because He wanted me to show her that *He* loved her and had not forgotten her.

Every person longs for a touch of God’s divine love, even those who don’t know or believe in Him. God sees that need and deeply loves each and every one, but He needs us to be His hands and feet and voice to convey His love and concern. That is the role that we who have found God’s love in Jesus are called to play. May we each be an instrument of His love this Christmas season.

AKIO MATSUOKA HAS BEEN A MISSIONARY AND VOLUNTEER WORKER FOR THE PAST 35 YEARS, BOTH IN HIS NATIVE JAPAN AND ABROAD. HE LIVES IN TOKYO. ■



Yumi and Akio Matsuoka with 10 of their 12 children and 5 of their 8 grandchildren.

GOD HAS NO HANDS

By Annie Johnson Flint

God has no hands but our hands to do his work today;
God has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way;
God has no voice but our voice to tell others how he died;
And, God has no help but our help to lead them to his side. ■



Tomoko, second row, second from left. Eiko, second row, middle.

EIKO WAS 31 KILOS (68 POUNDS) THAT CHRISTMAS.

Her skin stretched tightly across her cheekbones, and even her bulky winter clothes could not hide her extremely thin body. Only thirteen years old, she was suffering from a severe eating disorder that had begun at the age of nine. My parents and

1. www.mywonderstudio.com

A Christmas Healing

By TOMOKO MATSUOKA

we, her siblings, hadn't been fully aware of her struggles in the earlier stages, but now their impact was glaringly apparent.

Our sister, who had once been the joy of our family, could barely smile. Instead she wore a tightly controlled look of isolation. The more we encouraged her to eat, the more she rebuffed us. My parents watched, helpless, as the pounds dropped from her already rail-thin frame. Hours were spent in prayer and long talks into the night, trying to help Eiko see the reality of the situation: if she didn't start eating, she would fade away.

Our parents and we grown children were full-time Christian volunteers. Previous Christmases had always been filled with excitement as we prepared shows and performed at orphanages, retirement homes, and other institutions. This Christmas was different. Preparations dragged along, and tension replaced the usual festive atmosphere. We were desperate. Time was running out for Eiko.

Then it came, the seed of change, in the form of an idea my father had while he was praying. *Go to Niigata for Christmas, and do relief work. Invite Eiko to come along.*


There was clearly a need, as Niigata had recently experienced a severe earthquake and many families were still living in evacuation centers, but would Eiko have the stamina for such a mission?

However, when we asked Eiko if she would like to go, for the first time in a long while, a spark of interest shone in her eyes.

During the five-day trip, we visited three high school gyms that were being used as shelters, each housing hundreds of people. We performed, made balloon sculptures for children and grandparents alike, and passed out inspirational booklets to all. As we gave to others, the spirit of Christmas was awakened. Eiko felt it too. The healing had begun.

Within a week Eiko was eating more than she had in a long, long time. In Niigata we had all rediscovered the secret of happy Christmases and happy everyday living: through giving we are renewed.

TOMOKO MATSUOKA IS A CONTENT DEVELOPER FOR MY WONDER STUDIO,¹ A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER-BUILDING WEBSITE FOR CHILDREN, AND LIVES IN CHIBA, JAPAN. ■



MY FIRST NOEL

BY NYX MARTINEZ

WE ALL KNOW THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH. We've also seen it depicted on Christmas cards and in Nativity scenes—Mary in her flowing gown, the tidy surroundings, the Christ Child wrapped in spotless white or baby blue swaddling clothes. But what was the first Christmas *really* like? I've often wondered about that. Now I think I know.

It was almost Christmas 2004, and a few of us had made the long trip from Kampala, Uganda, to a remote mountainous region in the north. We were taking medicine, school materials, and radios to an agrarian and goat-herding people known as the Ik. It was the furthest from modern civilization that I had ever been.

The people's dress couldn't have been simpler—colorful beads and unfinished swaths of fabric that they draped over their shoulders or wrapped around themselves. Their homes were mud huts. We pitched our tents inside the stick-fence borders of their villages.

Each day we trekked along goat trails to another village, where people gathered for prayer meetings and to exchange stories.

In the third village we visited, a mother had just given birth. I knocked on the door of the “medical center,” which was no more than four mud walls.

Stepping inside, I was met by the smell of stale air. There, on the hay-strewn floor, beside a few hot coals, sat a thin woman who was trying to nurse a tiny baby wrapped in a towel. The mother looked up at me, her eyes filled with anxiety. “My breasts are dry,” she said in her own language, gesturing to the small bundle that suckled hopelessly.

A little light streamed in through a slit in the wall that served as the only window. As I looked around the room, trying to imagine what it would be like to give birth under such circumstances, village sounds drifted in—bleats from the goats, the laughter of little children as they played, and faint, scratchy music from one of the hand-cranked radios.

I stepped back outside and called Katerina, a Czech linguist and journalist who had come to produce a documentary about the Ik. We decided to give the mother what was left of our milk rations.

As Katerina went for the milk, I asked the mother if I could hold the baby. She smiled and handed him to me. His towel fell open and I could see that he was still unwashed, the umbilical cord still hanging from his navel.

A breeze swept through the tiny window. The mother shivered and pulled her wrap tightly around her shoulders.



Then a thought from my childhood came back. If I could have seen the newborn Jesus, what would I have given Him?

Similarities between this situation and the first Christmas cried out to me.

No, I told myself, the parallel was absurd. This was no Christ Child, and this wasn't Bethlehem 2,000 years ago!

That inner voice spoke even louder. Did it matter that this baby was no one special? Did it matter that his mother was a lowly tribeswoman who few in this world knew or cared about? But every detail of this new birth did matter to God. And this was probably a more accurate picture of the world into which Jesus was born than the idealized one depicted in most Christmas cards, Nativity scenes, and paintings.

What would I have given Him? The thought came again, followed by words from the Gospels, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none."¹

I had two shirts on because of the cold, and plenty more at home. I didn't need both of these. Meanwhile, in my arms, I held a representation of that wonderful birth celebrated by billions. Here

was my chance to give the Lord something real at Christmas!

I took off one shirt and gently wrapped the baby boy in it. How handsome he looked now, and how proud his mother seemed, the smile on her face reflecting the gratitude in her heart.

The music from the radio outside came through stronger now—Christmas music! "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!"

He had truly come. This wasn't a stage reenactment with actors in costume. This was real—as real and as close as I had ever come to knowing what the first Christmas might have been like.

The song on the radio finished and another began. "The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay. ..."

There, far away from civilization and the usual glitter of Christmas, with humble goat herders in the remote mountains of Uganda, I experienced my own "First Noel."

(As published in Chicken Soup for the Soul: Christmas Magic, 2010)

NYX MARTINEZ IS A TRAVEL WRITER AND TV HOST FOR LIVING ASIA CHANNEL. FOLLOW HER JOURNEYS ON WWW.NYXMARTINEZ.COM. ■

1. Luke 3:11 NIV

The Gift of Life

BY MICHAEL PALACE

EVERY YEAR, A MONTH OR SO BEFORE CHRISTMAS, I used to go to the same office to renew my visa. My visit there was usually made easy by the help of Judy, one of the office staff.

One year, after several minutes of small talk, Judy burst into tears. Her husband's cancer had returned—he had already had one tumor removed from his liver—and his doctor said he didn't have long to live. "Thomas is only 42," said a tearful Judy, "and our two sons are so young!"

I prayed with her for her own peace of mind and for Thomas to be healed, if that was God's will.

Judy smiled through her tears and thanked me.

When I phoned Judy the next day, she told me Thomas was scheduled for another examination a couple of weeks later, at which time they would have a better idea how much longer he had to live. We arranged to talk more when I returned to finish my paperwork before the New Year.

Christmas had come and gone but strains of "O Come All Ye Faithful" were still running through my mind as I gathered some things for Judy and Thomas to read, including a book of comforting thoughts for the dying and bereaved, *Glimpses of Heaven*. They were going to need lots of encouragement, I figured.

When I arrived at the office, Judy was not at her desk. I supposed she was with her husband. Surely she was more needed at his side than in the office at this time.

Then suddenly Judy entered the room, and when she saw me, she lit up like a light bulb! She explained that at Thomas's last checkup, the same doctor who had shown him a clear image of the cancerous tumor on the ultrasound screen before we prayed for his healing couldn't find any trace of it now. It had completely disappeared, and the doctor was baffled.

Judy and Thomas were ecstatic. They had wanted to phone me to share the wonderful news, but hadn't been able to find my number. Judy and I rejoiced together, right there in the office.

As I looked down at the *Glimpses of Heaven* book still in my hand, I realized how little faith I had had that God would answer our prayers. I felt a little embarrassed about that, but very happy that God had given Judy and Thomas a most wonderful Christmas gift—the gift of life.

MICHAEL PALACE IS A TEACHER AND WORKS AMONG THE MOUNTAIN TRIBAL PEOPLE OF TAIWAN. ■



Double Shot of Spirit What Actually Woke Me Up at Starbucks

BY SCOTTY CROWE

I WAS STAYING WITH MY GRANDMOTHER JUST OUTSIDE OF ATLANTA, Georgia. It was wonderful in every way except when I needed to get some work done online. One morning shortly before Christmas, I needed to answer some important emails, so I decided to head for the nearest WiFi spot and take care of that before running a few other errands and grabbing some coffee.

I arrived at the first location and was unable to get online. I went to a second and was unable to send email over their network. Frustrated, I headed to Starbucks.

I had trouble finding a parking space, but after a few minutes, one became available. Running late, I decided to open my laptop in the car, connect with Starbucks' WiFi, and take care of those emails from there.

I finished up and decided to hit the Starbucks drive-thru to avoid the congestion inside the coffee shop. I could see a line 10 people deep in the shop and only one car in the drive-thru.

I pulled up and ordered a Venti Redeye—a large coffee with a shot of espresso added. The girl on the other end gave me my total and I drove around. When I got to the window, the girl asked, “So how many shots do you want in your coffee?”

Agitated and confused, I asked her, “What do you mean? Doesn't it always come with one?”

She replied, “Yes, but sometimes people want more than one. And the car in front of you paid for your drink. They said to tell you Merry Christmas.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes sir. They said to tell you

Merry Christmas and to add whatever you would like to your order.”

“Oh. Okay then. Two shots. Really?”

“Yes sir. It will be just a minute.”

When she brought my drink to the window, I asked her, “What did the car behind me order?”

“A large coffee and a donut.”

“Well, I'd like to pay for his order. Please tell him Merry Christmas.”

“Yes sir. I will.”

“And you have a happy holiday too!”

Then I headed back to my grandmother's house relaxed, a smile on my face, and my little world put into perspective.

SCOTTY CROWE IS AN ACTOR AND LIVES IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA. ■



POINTS TO PONDER

Christmas thoughts

It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you. Yes, it is Christmas every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand.—*Mother Teresa (1910–1997)*

It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child Himself.—*Charles Dickens (1812–1870)*

Christ did not come to do away with suffering; He did not come to explain it; He came to fill it with His presence.—*Paul Claudel (1868–1955)*

The joy of brightening other lives, bearing each others' burdens, easing other's loads and supplanting empty hearts and lives with generous gifts becomes for us the magic of Christmas.—*W. C. Jones*

The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.—*W. S. Sacman, 19th-century clergyman*

Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most.—*Ruth Carter Stapleton (1929–1983)*

Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love.—*Hamilton Wright Mabie (1846–1916)*

Christmas is not a date. It is a state of mind.—*Mary Ellen Chase (1887–1973)*

My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?—*Bob Hope (1903–2003)*

Christmas living is the best kind of Christmas giving.—*Richard Van Dyke (b. 1925)*

It is Christmas in the heart that puts Christmas in the air.—*W. T. Ellis (1845–1925)*

The only real blind person at Christmas-time is he who has not Christmas in his heart.—*Helen Keller (1880–1968)*

Peace on earth will come to stay, When we live Christmas every day.—*Helen Steiner Rice (1900–1981)*

Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.—*Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993)*

This is the message of Christmas: We are never alone.—*Taylor Caldwell (1900–1985)* ■

OPENING THE DOOR

A Spiritual Exercise

BY ABI F. MAY

THE VISUAL FOCUS OF THIS SPIRITUAL EXERCISE IS BRITISH PAINTER WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S (1827–1910) most famous work, “The Light of the World.”

The lone figure in this picture is Jesus. It is the risen Jesus we see, dressed in a white robe, crowned with thorns, and bathed in light. Jesus was so much more than a good man or a wise teacher; He was God in the flesh.

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”¹

Now look closer to see the darkness and desolation behind and around Jesus. There is a door that is overgrown with brambles and weeds.

“[The seeds] that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard [the Gospel], go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”²

Examine the door upon which Jesus is knocking. There is no handle. It symbolizes the door of your heart, which can only be opened from the inside. Have you opened your life to Jesus? He will not force His way in. You must open the door yourself.

1. John 3:16
2. Luke 8:14
3. Revelation 3:20



“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”³

Finally, we move to the last part of our exercise. If you have invited Jesus into your life, how welcome do you make Him feel? What place do you give Him now?

To help you answer this question, think about the other members of your household. (Or if you live alone, think back to your childhood.) You greet them in the morning. You are considerate of their happiness and comfort. You don't repaint the walls without first asking for their opinion. When friends visit, you introduce them. If they bring home the shopping or help with the housework, you thank them. You sit together and talk. You eat at the same table. How rude it would be to ignore them or to forget their presence.

As you remember Jesus' birth this month, think about the place that Jesus has in the house of your life.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

Gift Exchange

The first Christmas was all for you. It was My Father's gift of love to the world, but it was also His gift to you specifically. And it was a "gift that keeps on giving."

For those who witnessed it firsthand—the star, the choir of angels, the baby in the manger—it was an unexpected and overwhelming spiritual experience. For the blessed few who recognized that baby as their Messiah, it was a dream come true. For them and the many millions since who have likewise believed, it has been the door to eternal life. And it's the same today. If you celebrate Christmas in spirit and truth, the same wonder, the same promise, and the same unspeakable joy can all be yours.

But now Christmas is more than that. It's more than a gift from My Father's heart to yours—it's a gift exchange. It's a special time for you as you soak in My love and relive the wonder of the first Christmas, but it's also special for Me in that you take more time to love and thank and praise Me for all I've done for you. This may be hard for you to understand and believe, but I want and appreciate your love too. So if you're still wondering what to give Me this Christmas, that's it. Let's make this Christmas extra special by giving each other the best of all gifts—our love.

