

NORTHERN LIGHT

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The Greatest Gift

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One key understanding God has led me to more deeply appreciate in recent years is that God has always been love. The Bible tells us this so (1 John 4:8,16). This means that God—Father, Son and Spirit—have lived in a loving relationship from eternity. This relationship has been described as a great “gift exchange”.

This expression refers to living in mutual service to one another. Each providing for the other, and all three being enriched in both the giving and the receiving. God has determined that this is by far the best way to live, and sin is living in anyway contrary to this. Living otherwise simply doesn't work in the long run, which is why God is against sin. It simply doesn't work.

Have you ever contemplated why God created the Universe (Genesis 1:1) and put humanity, made in his image and likeness, on the earth? After all, God was content as he was and knew peace. God lived in an environment of mutual love and service. God didn't need anything to be happy, or to fulfill a particular need or lack. So why did he do it?

The answer that makes the most sense to me is that the Universe, and in particular human beings, were created out of an overflow of the love of God. When God's Spirit lives in a human heart, Jesus said an outflow of living water will occur, like a stream of water from a fountain (John 7:37,38). This living water is symbolic of course of the loving nature of God, expressed through the Spirit in the life of a believer. The life of God in a human being is intended to produce an overflow that expresses itself outwardly to others. We are the blessed recipients of this outflow from God.

Despite the early rebellion of humanity against God—no longer trusting God and as a result not remaining in relationship with him—God's love for us persisted. The story of the Bible is really a love story describing God's persistent love for us all, though humanity chose to reject God, and in many ways has been running away from him ever since. As so vividly described in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, despite the son's rebellion the father was scanning the horizon and warmly and lovingly received him back. This story illustrates the heart of God towards us, his wayward offspring.

Of course, any real love story involves coming to recognize the genuineness of the lover's heart, and then choosing to respond to



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that love. The greatest expression of God's love is described in John 3:16,17—he gave his son as the ultimate act of love for us all. Jesus himself willingly laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16). Clearly there was no separation of heart or purpose, but the Godhead was fully agreed in this incredible act of sacrifice—this magnificent expression of the love of God for his creation.

At this time of year most Christians take time to remember and celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Worship, fellowship, and food are often part of the season, as is the giving of gifts. Giving gifts to one another, especially those in need, is a good thing.

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But let's never forget or neglect the fact that in Jesus God has given us the greatest conceivable gift of all—he gave himself in the form of his son, clothed in human flesh. He came as we all come into this life, as a helpless baby and grew into adulthood as a fully human person before being sacrificed on our behalf. This gift of the incarnation, the coming of God in human flesh, is indeed the greatest gift of all, and serves as the fullest conceivable expression of God's love for us all!

Gary Moore

When The Prince Became A Pauper... And Made Everyone Rich

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The story revolves around a poor London urchin, Tom Canty, getting to exchange places with look-alike Prince Edward of England and how that affected both of them for the good. It has been a perennially successful movie and TV show across the decades and millions know the plot with its themes of upset, reversal, and the delight in the unexpected.

Now hold on! Eighteen centuries before Mark Twain, the apostle Paul used the same analogy to depict Jesus Christ's overall ministry to this world, an analogy very pertinent at this time of year. Here it is in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, *so that you through his poverty might become rich.*"

This is a very apt analogy for what Christian thinkers call, the Incarnation, i.e. Jesus as the eternal Word of God coming to this earth as a fully human mortal, a dramatic movement explained elsewhere in this newsletter. A vulnerable little baby bears the hopes of God for the human race—as the hymn says, "Out of his ivory palaces/Into a world of woe!" There's nothing more dramatic than that, upon reflection.

A Glorious Announcement

According to Mark Vincent, Director of The Giving Project, an organization stressing Biblical strategies of Christian stewardship, ministers are obligated to speak on the subject of giving and finances *because Jesus himself addressed it so often!* But, says Vincent, this subject is most a *propos* when we remember how what we call "the Christmas story" encapsulates the Good News. That message erupted into this world so long ago in Bethlehem.

Vincent also explains that the very words used in the angelic song in the skies over Bethlehem gets at the essence of God's plan. It is only a two-line refrain but it shows how Kingdom language in the gospels is all about the language of abundance:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests."

We don't use the words "glory" or "glorious" very often in our more emotionally flattened age. But the word encompasses so much of God's lavish generosity in working with humanity. God's glory



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appeared to Moses at the burning bush and went before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud and fire. The glory of God overwhelmed the temple dedication under Solomon and appeared on occasions when Israel needed physical deliverance (Isaiah 12:5).

Now, in Bethlehem in First Century Judaea, God's glory dwelled in an infant about to embark on a perilous life's journey of teaching, healing, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. That journey results in deep-seated peace for those who understand and believe. It is a peace and a spirit of giving that moves a recipient out of "self" with a desire to extend blessings to other people. The Prince of the heavenly realms, Jesus the eternal Word and begotten son of the Father, had taken upon himself human flesh and joined himself to us lost sinners ensuring our redemption and the deep-down abundant well-being described Biblically as peace (Romans 5:1).

What a story. It immensely out-draws even Mark Twain's!

God emphatically and for all time moved towards us for our good in the Incarnation. Now he expects us to reciprocate with the overwhelming generosity with which he began the relationship: the divine Son entering our human mess, working out our salvation and qualifying us to be adopted as his brother/sister and ushered into the family of God (Colossians 1:12). It's not that God is a family but he certainly has a family and that generous, all-embracing act of grace makes us all princesses/princes of the heavenly realm (Romans 5:10).

The Great Reversal

Jesus' mother Mary sang a suitable hymn of praise after the angelic announcement of her call to bear the Deliverer. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53).

Through his poverty we have become rich in at least three ways:

First by gaining access to full sonship in God's plan through spiritual adoption (Romans 8:15).

Next, by receiving the full assurance of salvation because of God's actions in Jesus (Romans 5:1-2). This redemptive imperative includes *the potential* for reconciliation of the whole human family. All humans now have that potential to become the sons of God (John 1:12; Ephesians 1:10).

Thirdly, by having a friend in heaven "an ever present help in trouble," as the old hymn puts it, enabling us to live our daily lives successfully.

This was illustrated by Jesus in his parable of Lazarus the beggar and the haughty rich man. Lazarus was accepted into a favored relationship at his death while the rich man's fate was not to be envied (Luke 16:23).

But the good news is that those who respond to the angel's "singing telegram" over Bethlehem do indeed move on out to change their world. It includes St Patrick, a Welsh captive who returned to

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might be the habit of taking an elderly acquaintance to a grocery store. If one truly knows the abundant grace of the Lord Jesus, *this grace spills over into the lives of other people*. If you truly know the song you can't help but sing it."

Many of you reading this are involved in congregations that reach out to needy Christians around the world. The record is there for all to see. You already know the Bethlehem Song and the value of the "cup of cold water principle." If we have not experienced this blessing of giving, of sharing the rich fruits of becoming brothers of our heavenly Crown Prince, this is a good time of year to start. Every Christian responding to God's Spirit in their lives has been richly endowed with the things that really matter. Thus, in the wisdom of God, we the paupers—the spiritually desperate and needy—become princes after all.

Great peace to those on whom his favor rests!

Neil Earle

spread the gospel to those who had once enslaved him. It includes the ten Boom family who harbored Jews during World War II Holland. It comes on down to today to people we know how to encourage latch-key children in after school programs, who staff food banks, who enter seniors' homes to spread some holiday music, or volunteer to teach French or English to new immigrants.

The Gospel changes people and when rightly understood it motivates the spirit of service, of out-flowing concern, of generosity.

At Work in the World

St. Paul argued very logically that if the church passes on to us the gospel message of ultimate deliverance from humanity's worst fears and snares, it is no strange thing for the body of Christ to expect to be financially supported in doing this kind of Kingdom work (1 Corinthians 9:11). This work of God in us doesn't have to be dramatic. Jesus talked of giving many times and when he did he talked of cups of cold water and widow's mites. Mark Vincent summarizes it like this: "People who embrace this song (over Bethlehem) look for ways to extend the reign of God's kingdom by offering the message of salvation, and by seeking to meet material needs for oppressed people. It might be as simple as taking a troubled friend out to lunch. It might be helping a neighbor with a maintenance project without expecting them to reciprocate. It