

Adventuring with God

By Jeanne Hedrick

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Gifts of the Season

One of the highlights of Christmas, in North America anyway, is shopping. It's an excuse to hit the malls and see what bargains we can bring home, all the while feeling good about the progressive rise in our credit card balance because we're doing it *for others*. We love to show our love and appreciation to our friends, neighbors, and family—maybe even our coworkers and vendors—by the carefully selected gifts we purchase or make for them. This is the time of year when we test out Jesus' words in Acts 20:35: **"It is more blessed to give than to receive."** He likely didn't have shopping in mind when He said this, of course, but we like the application.

As I'm watching the mound of presents grow under our tree, I'm trying to keep things in perspective. Yes, it's a little excessive, but it's only once a year. Soon enough we can return to everyday life, when we watch our pennies and try to be good stewards of our resources. Now is the time to exhibit a little extravagance and to lavish on those we love the best we can offer them.

Obviously, God felt the same way. At this time of year we remember and celebrate His most expensive, lavish, over-the-top gift to all of us: His Son coming in human flesh. It was such a unique and costly gift that our words fail us in trying to describe it. Heaven was depleted for a time in order to lavish us with this costly treasure. It was held back until just the right time (Galatians 4:4). Then those of us who were sold under bondage, slaves of sin and all its effects, were redeemed so that we could receive "the full rights of sons" (v. 5) through our relationship with Christ.

The apostle Paul called the Lord Jesus' incarnation God's "unspeakable gift" to us (2 Corinthians 9:15, KJV). In another translation it's rendered **"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"** (NIV). And truly it is. But if we attend church at all over the Christmas season, we will be reminded again and again of this particular gift. Here, I'd like to explore another gift of the Father's that we sometimes overlook.

This gift is just as tremendous, just as amazing, and just as helpful to us as Jesus' incarnation. In fact, this gift is the key that unlocks all the treasures of the Incarnation. Without the second gift, we would be clueless about how to access and enjoy all that's contained in the first gift.

What am I talking about? The gift of the Holy Spirit residing in our hearts. In John 14, 15, and 16, Jesus tries to convey to His first disciples the magnitude of this gift of the Father, but like us, they had a hard time grasping it. At that point, they couldn't see beyond the sadness of losing Jesus' physical presence with them. Jesus assures them, however, that it is actually *better* for them to lose His physical presence in order to secure the gift of the Holy Spirit.

"Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. ... When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. ... He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (John 16:6-7, 13-14).

When children open Christmas packages, they get most excited about the ones that offer immediate satisfaction and are easy to use. The more

complicated or thoughtful gifts are set aside at first, to be revisited only when the flashier gifts become boring or quit working. In many ways, we are the same with God's gifts to us. We enjoy the more immediate benefits that accompany salvation and often overlook or undervalue the quiet gift of the indwelling Spirit.

God has given us tremendous gifts through the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son—salvation, reconciliation, sonship, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, to name just a few. But without the Holy Spirit's revelation, we aren't able to understand or benefit from any of them. A.W. Tozer wrote in *The Divine Conquest*, *"The Holy Spirit is not a luxury, not something added now and again to produce a deluxe type of Christian once in a generation. No, He is for every child of God a vital necessity, and that He fill and indwell His people is more than a languid hope. It is rather an inescapable imperative."*

It's through the power and inspiration of the Spirit that we take on the divine nature. Without Him, we would be trying to emulate in the flesh what is utterly unattainable: to become more like Jesus. Whatever the Father commanded would be impossible to live out without the help of the Spirit. In fact, we would have no means of even understanding His will or ways, since **"my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways' declares the Lord"** (Isaiah 55:8). But thank God, **"The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God ... that we may understand what God has freely given us"** (1 Corinthians 2:10, 12).

It is through the Holy Spirit we see our sin, repent, and believe the Good News. He enables us to see the beauty and glory of Christ Jesus, and draws us to Him before salvation. Once we invite Him to be our Savior and Lord, the Spirit baptizes us into Christ's body through new birth (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27). **"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior"** (Titus 3:5-6).

Following conversion, we continue to be dependent upon the counsel, instruction, and empowerment of

the Holy Spirit. He gives the spiritual gifts that determine how we will bless and encourage other believers and reach out to the lost. He continues to bring conviction of sin to our hearts so we can enjoy unbroken fellowship with God.

As we yield to His guidance and direction, we "walk in the light" and do those things that please the Father. And through developing the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—we prove we belong to Christ and help others to see His glory. Even knowing that we belong to God comes through the witness of the Spirit. **"This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us"** (1 John 3:24).

I could go on and on. There's virtually no area of the Christian life not directly tied to the Holy Spirit's involvement. In times of great trial and heartbreak, we welcome the Holy Spirit's comfort and peace. In times of rejoicing and spiritual victory, we experience His special kind of joy and companionship. No wonder Jesus spoke of this gift so highly. **"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"** (Luke 11:13).

Everything we know and enjoy about God is found in the Holy Spirit ... so why don't we value Him as we should? Perhaps we need a reminder from time to time. Or maybe we need to take our eyes off of the more superficial benefits we are always seeking—better health, financial blessing, new relationships, career advancement, etc.—so we can find all the treasures available in Him.

Seeing someone receive with joy and excitement something we have picked out for him is the great reward of giving. When they turn to thank us for it with sincere and enthusiastic praise, that makes our joy even sweeter. Yet, the highest compliment we can receive from the recipient is for him to use the gift. If it is returned to its box and never opened again, we know the recipient may have admired our gift, but he found little value in making it a part of his life.

Our Father has given us—the world’s rebels and ingrates—some pretty incredible gifts, and He waits to see how we will respond to them. In the Incarnation, He gave the gift of His Son who would at the proper time die for our sins. Then, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, He provided all we would need to live out our commitment to the Son. He is pleased when we take the time to acknowledge His

generosity and thank Him for His love expressed in these wonderful gifts. But the greatest joy for our Father will be for us to incorporate into our lives all the benefits resident in the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In 1890 a hymn writer captured some of the joyous awe and wonder we should all feel about this gift. I’ll end with his lyrics.

“O spread the tidings ’round, wherever man is found,
Wherever human hearts and human woes abound;
Let ev’ry Christian tongue proclaim the joyful sound:
The Comforter has come!

*The Comforter has come, the Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from Heav’n, the Father’s promise giv’n;
O spread the tidings ’round, wherever man is found—The Comforter has come!*

The long, long night is past, the morning breaks at last,
And hushed the dreadful wail and fury of the blast,
As o’er the golden hills the day advances fast!
The Comforter has come!

Lo, the great King of kings, with healing in His wings,
To ev’ry captive soul a full deliverance brings;
And through the vacant cells the song of triumph rings;
The Comforter has come!

O boundless love divine! How shall this tongue of mine
To wond’ring mortals tell the matchless grace divine—
That I, a child of hell, should in His image shine!
The Comforter has come!”

“The Comforter has Come” by Frank Bottome, 1890