

# Heavenly Gifts

By Elder Kevin R. Duncan

Of the Seventy

## Young Boy

No little boy looked forward to Christmas more than I did. I loved it! And my parents were masters at turning our home into a cozy little winter wonderland. There were the decorations, the music, the lights, the goodies, and of course the presents. Oh, how I looked forward to the presents. Every year I faithfully made a wish list of my heart's greatest desires.

Because we lived on a farm, each Christmas morning before we opened our gifts, we bundled up warm to brave the freezing winter weather and attend to our farm animals. Nothing was better than finishing our work and hurrying back inside to delve into the magic of the morning.

I was just beginning to learn about this man, Jesus Christ, whose birthday we were celebrating. But it seemed like a pretty good deal. It was His birthday, but we got all the presents. What child didn't love that! Christmas was everything good.

Thankfully, with the passage of time, my understanding of the Savior increased—His birth *and* birthday, His life and miracles, His power and sacrifices, His Atonement and Resurrection, but mostly His majesty and His incomprehensible love. Yes, Christmas was everything good, but that was simply because Jesus Christ was everything good. Or better said, Jesus Christ was everything wonderful!

## Missionary Service

Like many young people, I looked forward to serving a mission with great anticipation, but my first Christmas away from home was a bit of a shock. In the months leading up to my 19th birthday, practically all I could think about was getting on my mission. I was younger than most of my classmates and friends, and many of them had already left on their missions, leaving me behind. I felt like I was ready to be a missionary too. The only thing standing in my way was my birthday.

After what seemed like forever, my time finally arrived and I entered the MTC. In early December, I found myself on an airplane flying to my mission in Santiago, Chile. I was on my way at last, and what was even better, Christmas was right around the corner. I was confident that I was ready for the most glorious experience of my life.

But as I stepped off the plane, I quickly discovered that things were very different than they had been back home in Utah. Yes, Christmas was right around the corner, but it felt like the middle of summer. Where was the snow? Where were the boots and the coats?

I was quickly swept up in the challenges of the work. I was suffering from jet lag and sometimes found myself falling asleep during our teaching appointments. The culture was different, the language was a mystery—it certainly didn't sound like anything I had learned in the MTC—and the food was unique. And speaking of the food, my companion and I must have eaten something bad, because both of us became terribly ill. Then, on top of everything else, during one of my first nights in Chile, we experienced an earthquake.

It was my first Christmas away from home, and I was extremely sick. I was lying in a bed in an unfamiliar country, trying to understand a language I could hardly decipher, living with another person I still barely knew. Was this what missionary work was all about, and why had I been in such a hurry?

Yet despite all of these challenges, I was beginning to love the people of Chile with all my heart. They were so wonderful and so easy to love—and many of them were hungry for the message of the Savior. In the raw, real world, where people were desperate for the message of a Savior, somehow Christmas trees and stuffed stockings weren't nearly as important as they had been before. If Christ had left His heavenly home and come to earth to suffer and die for us, I could certainly leave my home and put up with a few little discomforts to share His wonderful message.

That Christmas taught me the pure joy of helping people obtain Heavenly Father's greatest gift of all, His glorious plan of happiness—and happiness, I discovered, was the one thing that everyone wants most, not just at Christmastime, but always.

## Young Widower and Marriage

A few years after my mission, I found myself facing a new challenge. I was depressed, tired, and lonely. Several months earlier, my wife of less than two years had been unexpectedly killed in an automobile accident, leaving me and our 7-month-old daughter alone.

I was a student at the university, studying, working, and struggling to learn how to be a single parent. Christmas was approaching, and while others were leaving to return to their homes to be with family and loved ones during the holidays, because of work commitments, I had to stay at school. I felt lonely and very sad. Christmas came and went, and time continued to march on.

Almost one year later, as Christmas was again approaching, I found myself still single. Now, the scriptures say it is not good for man to be alone (see Genesis 2:18), and I wholeheartedly agreed. I needed a companion, and my baby daughter needed a mother.

I reasoned, "I might not be much of a catch, but what woman wouldn't want a real live baby girl for Christmas? Not just a doll—but the real thing?" And thankfully, if someone wanted the baby, well, I would be part of the package.

I had had my eye on a young lady named Nancy in my biology class, but it was nearing the end of the semester and I still had not mustered up enough courage to talk to her. Heaven must have been on my side because one day, purely by chance, we happened to be exiting the testing center at the same time. This was my opportunity. I struck up a conversation, and then later that night I called Nancy and asked her on a date. We went on one date and then another, and then another. However, I knew Christmas was approaching, and Nancy would be going home. What could I do to keep this little spark alive and growing that was just beginning to develop between us?

I came up with a plan. With the help of Nancy's sister and her boyfriend, I would secretly surprise Nancy with a gift on each of the 12 days leading up to Christmas.

My plan worked. Nancy was receiving gifts, but she had absolutely no idea where they were coming from. It became a mystery her whole family was trying to solve. Nancy's sister and her boyfriend promised they would not disclose their involvement. It was truly a secret combination—only one with good motives.

However, one night the family hit on a clue. The doorbell rang, the family rushed to the door, and they caught sight of a car speeding away. They took down the license plate number, and the next day they called the driver's license bureau to find out who owned the car. They discovered it belonged to a family member of the sister's boyfriend. The cat was out of the bag. Nancy's sister and her boyfriend came forward and admitted their involvement in my scheme. Secretly, I was happy that I had been discovered, because Nancy and I were able to spend Christmas day together, and from there we continued our courtship.

And just as I had hoped, Nancy did want a real live baby girl for Christmas. She loved my daughter as though she were her own. And fortunately, I was part of the package. We were married the following summer. It was one of the best gifts I ever received.

I was experiencing Heavenly Father's great plan of happiness. I had an eternal family, and we were sealed together forever. The gift of eternal marriage and family is a gift that *all* the faithful will receive, either in this life or in the next. What greater gift could there be?

As I reflected back upon my days of loneliness and sorrow, I realized that Jesus Christ had at one time felt abandoned and alone as well. He, more than anyone else, knew my pain. Even during my times of greatest loneliness, I had never felt abandoned by Him. He was not only my Savior; He was my brother and my best friend.

## Young Father

Our little family began to grow, and a few years later I was again confronted with yet another great anxiety. As Christmas was approaching, Nancy and I looked at each other and realized we did not have one spare penny to spend on Christmas presents for our young children that year.

I had recently graduated from college, and we were still trying to get on our feet. Although I had good employment, it soon became obvious that the high cost of living was beyond our budget. The only thing going for us was that we were full-tithe payers. Although no one else knew of our plight, Heavenly Father and the Savior did, and They began to send little Christmas miracles.

One day the doorbell rang. It was a neighbor holding a box of toys. She said, "We have been cleaning out our house, and we came across these toys that our children no longer want. We were wondering if your children might like them." Would they ever!

Another day the doorbell rang again. This time it was some members from our ward. They were standing there with a little girl's bicycle. They said, "We do not need this bicycle anymore and we thought of your family. Do you think your daughter could use this?" We were overjoyed!

A few weeks earlier our son had entered a coloring contest at a local store. We received a phone call one day with the exciting news that he was the contest winner. He had won a popular children's video. We were stunned!

All of these little miracles—our children would have a few Christmas gifts after all. We had paid our tithing, and Heavenly Father and the Savior had opened the windows of heaven and poured out Their blessings—right down the chimney.

I reflected that the Christ child was born in very humble circumstances, yet others found Him and offered precious gifts as well. As an earthly father, I wanted so desperately to give my children all that I could.

Our Heavenly Father feels the same. Yet His love is perfect; He desires to give us *all* that He has. It is an incomprehensible gift.

## Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, all of us at one time or another have or will feel lonely, sick, depressed, poor, or far from home. Thankfully, we have an Eternal Father and a Savior who understand us. As we go to Them, They will take us by the hand and help us through every challenge.

And brothers and sisters, at one time or another we will all know someone else who is lonely, sick, depressed, poor, or far from home. Our Father and the Savior may direct us to help others, and it will be our privilege to do so.

As a child, I thought Christmas came just one day a year. As an adult, I now realize it is Christmas every day. Because of the benevolence of a loving Heavenly Father and a beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, we are the recipients of a continuous flow of heavenly gifts—every day. Heavenly gifts too numerous to mention.

My gratitude for the Father and the Son is so immense and so profound that, like Ammon of old, “I cannot say the smallest part [that] I feel” (Alma 26:16).

Yes, it is Jesus Christ’s birthday that we celebrate each Christmas season, but because of the goodness of the Father and the Son, we still get all the presents. Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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