

Presents Or The Presence

CHRISTMAS GIFTS CAN'T BRING US LASTING JOY, BUT CELEBRATING THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS CAN.

Here come those sleigh bells again! They're like an alarm clock that goes off, telling you it's time to get up and get going.

Evergreen trees fill parking lots while festive parties and holiday musicals fill our date books. Red and green packages appear, along with multicolored lights, decorative ornaments, a host of new movies and, of course, newspaper circulars, all declaring that it's Christmas.

And there's that guy again—Santa. He is absolutely invisible most of the year. Then he comes out of hiding, puts that red suit on his plump, round body, and people make a big fuss over him.

Songs are sung about him, and his pictures are prominently placed throughout the town. Schools, libraries and courthouses all celebrate this white-bearded old man whose presence reminds us of the Christmas season.

Santa's beautifully wrapped packages supposedly arrive mysteriously all over the entire planet on the night of December 24th. Rumor has it that all you have to do is ask for what you want, then get to bed early and wait for your wishes to be granted.

His gifts are things that are meant to satisfy but don't. They become old and outdated, and they lose their luster after a short while. I guess that's why our lists are made and he returns year after year.

Don't get me wrong, I love getting presents. I've been known

to drop a few hints to the “Santas” around my house in hopes of unwrapping desired tokens of their love and affection.

But the older I get, the more I want real love and affection and fewer tokens. I want fewer Christmas presents and more Christmas presence.

CELEBRATING CHRIST

There’s another side of Christmas that means so much more, and it also involves a man. But this man came first as a child—to a manger.

Some think He is invisible, but I can see Him in the lives of many people. He never hides. In fact, in the book written about Him, it says “His invisible attributes are clearly seen” (Rom. 1:20, NKJV).

The best thing about Him is, He doesn’t come and go just one time a year. He came once, and now He is Immanuel—“God with us”—forever! He is Jesus Christ, for whom Christmas was named.

History records His life, death and resurrection. Evidence supports His existence and the reality of those who have followed Him from the beginning of time until now.

Today, songs are sung about Him (if no one objects), but many prominent places no longer allow any displays of His picture or likeness. You’re not likely to find His presence celebrated in most public schools, community libraries or courthouses.

Yet, His presence is still there. It is free to all who ask for it, and not only at Christmastime. He is available 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year.

He has never missed a house where He has been invited. And His presence never becomes old or outdated. It is passed on from one generation to the next, and it is the best hand-me-down a child could ever hope to receive.

His presence doesn’t come wrapped in decorative paper with

ribbons and bows, but for us He was wrapped in swaddling later, in graveclothes. His presence is guaranteed to satisfy because He is all-knowing, all-powerful and everywhere all the time.

His presence is wherever you are. It is meant to be cherished. And once you've known it, nothing else will do. "In [His] presence there is fullness of joy!" (Ps. 16:11.)

No matter how awesome they are, our presents will never compare to His presence. Unlike the monetary value we assign to earthly things, His presence is absolutely priceless.

HONORING HIS PRESENCE

For more than 20 years now, our family has shared a tradition that demonstrates the value we place on the Lord's presence. We celebrate this special occasion on Christmas Eve.

We begin the evening with a fine dinner that I prepare. I take the time to make it special, praying over my family as I stir the gravy and check the rolls. Then we pray a prayer of thanksgiving and enjoy the feast.

Later we retire to the family room, where my husband reads the Christmas story from the book of Matthew. I never tire of hearing the story of Jesus, whose life's calling was to be the Savior of the world.

The account of Jesus' birth and life is more than a story to our family. It is the reason our family is still together.

With thankful hearts, we take communion, and what happens next is something we look forward to each year. It has become known to us as "Love Stories."

We go around the room, and from the youngest to the oldest, each of us shares his or her love for each family member, recalling special memories of the last year and expressing the things we love about one another. It is a heart-warming, tear-

filled time of deep and memorable communication between us.

Then, we close out the evening with presents—the wrapped kind. But we don't spend huge amounts of money on gifts for one another during Christmas because it's not about us. It's His birthday not ours.

On my birthday, I don't expect people to celebrate my birth by giving gifts to one another. So on this day, we celebrate Christ's birthday and enjoy His presence in our lives and in the life of our family.

Christmas presents come in all shapes and sizes. They arrive with bows and ribbons and in decorative gift bags.

Santa's gifts cannot bring joy or make an unhappy home happy. But Christ's presence can.

Jesus is the reason for this season. And Christmas comes once a year, as a memorial to declare His birth and celebrate His life. Without the manger, there would be no presents and no presence.

Do you know the Christ of Christmas? Have you experienced His Presence? If not, I have a very special gift for you, for God's presence will be found in every home that invites Him in, during this season and throughout the year.

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