

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Michael W. Smith, Recording Artist

The Spirit of Christmas, Worship, Sovereign

I have about a thousand great Christmas memories. It's a pretty important day around our house. It's our favorite time of the year.

The first thing that comes to my mind is when we visited a nursing home. Our family had always tried to support food banks through the church to help people who were having financial difficulty.

When our kids were younger, I'll never forget it because we had already moved to Franklin, Tennessee. We all went to the nursing home on Christmas Eve and hung out with these people. I watched it truly impact my kids. In the midst of all the parties and all these people coming over to our house for a Christmas party we have every year—that's the one that, when we left there, I remember going, "That's what it's all about, guys, what we just did. We went and loved on people. We loved on a bunch of people whose relatives don't come and see them. They've just been abandoned."

To watch these old men and women light up and just be thrilled that my little kids were around—they were like 6, 8, 10, 12 and 14—it was a game-changer for us, and we continued to do that throughout the years. But that first one was monumental to me, and I'll never forget it.

Pat Schatzline, Evangelist/Author

Why Is God So Mad at Me?, I Am Remnant

In December 2003, our home and ministry was located in

Fayetteville, North Carolina, and it seemed to me to be more beautiful than ever. Why? Because a gift had arrived at our home from heaven.

In the previous years, Christmas was a wonderful time of growing as a family and opening presents, and a time to catch our breath. But this year was different. Christmas changed in the Schatzline home.

It had been just two months since my wife (Karen), our 11-year-old son (Nate) and I had traveled all the way to China to bring our daughter, Abby, home from an orphanage. Abby was nine months old when we got her. The adoption was long and arduous, but finally she was at home. There was now a miracle living in our home!

She was full of wonder at the new sights and sounds. No longer did she share a bed with three other children. No longer would her future be in question. She had come home! Now she was experiencing the lights, the tree, the toys, Santa's lap (which really scared her) and the Christmas spirit—but most of all a home full of love! A home where Jesus was King and safety was the norm.

Abby was too young to remember that Christmas, but for our family, it was the year that Christmas was no longer about us but the gift God had given us. Abby is 11 years old now and she can't sleep on Christmas Eve because of the excitement! She takes after her dad!

Martha Rogers, Author

Best Laid Plans, Love Stays True

One Christmas memory that really stands out in my mind is the Christmas our second son was born. Robert Allen Rogers was due on Feb. 6, but at my doctor's appointment on Dec. 5, the doctor became concerned. He told me to rest, stay off my feet as much as possible and not do any heavy physical labor until

the next appointment, which was in two weeks.

With Christmas drawing near and a toddler at home, I tried to do as instructed. On Dec. 10, I decided to go downtown for an hour of shopping before picking up my husband. I felt fine until we were on the way home and stopped at the grocery store.

While there, I began hemorrhaging, and we rushed to the emergency room. An emergency C-section saved my life, but the baby was in trouble because his lungs hadn't fully developed. Prayer requests went out to our church family, and many came to pray with us.

Robert was born on Monday, with little hope of survival at less than 4 pounds, but on Thursday his lungs miraculously inflated and he began breathing on his own. Later we learned that a group of women had been on their knees for several hours Wednesday night praying for his lungs to work on their own.

God answered our prayers, and a few days before Christmas, we were able to take him home. What a joyous Christmas that was! He is a strong healthy man now with two sons of his own.

Kirk Cameron, Actor/Author/Speaker

Unstoppable, Saving Christmas, Fireproof

I love Christmas. I love everything about it. It's my favorite time of year. I'm a sucker for every bit of Christmastime. I love the cookies. I love the stockings, the music, the carols. I love the cold weather. I love the sweaters. I love getting around a fire with your kids. I love the Christmas stories. I love St. Nick. I love Christmas trees, and I love the birth of Christ.

I have so many great memories growing up as a kid—when I was little, putting carrots and a glass of milk with chocolate

chip cookies out for Santa and the reindeer. I remember the first time I learned that Christmas was really about the birth of Christ. I didn't grow up in a Christian home, so I didn't know what a Nativity was. I had no idea that Jesus Christ had anything to do with Christmas, so I remember when I turned 18 years old, someone explained to me who these three wise men were and the baby in the manger. I didn't understand any of that. That was a profound Christmas memory for me.

I also remember the first Christmas with my girlfriend, Chelsea. It was that Christmas that I had the ring in my pocket I was going to give her on Christmas Eve, but I got cold feet and I waited until New Year's Eve to ask her to marry me. I was going to do it right there with my family and everybody. We were celebrating Christmas together in New York. I chickened out on Christmas Eve. On New Year's Eve, I finally gave her the Christmas present, which was an engagement ring.

Lena Nelson Dooley, Author

Maggie's Journey, Mary's Blessing

When I first read it in high school, *The Gift of the Magi* became my favorite short story. Then, about four years into our marriage, my husband and I experienced something similar.

We had two children, and money was tight. I saved a little bit out of my grocery money each week planning to buy a power saw for James. He had loved woodwork in school. I wanted to get him something that he would enjoy. It was going to be *his* Christmas.

Imagine my surprise when he had a large wrapped package under our tree for me. When I ripped off the paper, I was amazed. He had saved all year to make it *my* Christmas. He'd bought me a record player with large speakers so I could use the records I'd collected during college.

Each of us had focused on the needs of the other person, and

each of us was doubly blessed. First, because we had focused on the one we loved all year, knowing in our hearts that we were going to surprise the other. Second, because we felt the love poured out on ourselves, setting the tone for the rest of our almost-50-year-long marriage.

Paul Baloché, Worship Leader

“Open the Eyes of My Heart,” “Above All,” “Your Name”

My favorite recollections of Christmas begin with an appreciation for the fact that my parents created memories for us year after year, memories that I will always cherish.

Growing up in South Jersey, across the bridge from Philadelphia, we were part of a blue-collar Catholic community, where much of life was centered on the church. In those days, we dressed up in our finest to attend midnight mass. I remember being up past my bedtime, dressed in my tie and wingtips. I felt like a little man ascending the church steps.

We would all attend mass as a family with parishioners from all over our little town crushed into pews, shoulder-to-shoulder, singing loudly the familiar songs of the season. The magic, mystery, the wonder of the candles, decorations, poinsettias, hay and the crèche and Nativity statues displayed carefully around the altar – all evoked a sense of wonder.

After returning home, it was hard to go to sleep knowing that, in a few hours, we’d all wake up to presents under the tree. That morning, my Aunt Elise and Uncle Harry would arrive, and my dad would break out his old 16-millimeter camera with the blinding lights.

I have tried to create similar traditions with my own family over the years, and I hope that my children carry the same joyful memories in their hearts.

Cherie Calbom, Author

The Juice Lady's Turbo Diet, The Juice Lady's Living Food Revolution

I have always loved Christmas. It's my favorite time of the year. But there was one Christmas in my early 20s when I was very down and couldn't find the joy of Christmas—no boyfriend, no immediate family in Southern California, nothing special going on.

I couldn't shake the dark cloud of loneliness as I sat staring at my tree. What could I do to get out of this blue mood? *Help a family in need!* That was an interesting, out-of-the-blue thought.

I made some calls and learned about a single father with a couple of children who had nothing for Christmas, not even a tree. It was only a few days until Christmas, so I sprang into action. Though I didn't have a lot of money, I took all I had and bought presents, a tree and anything else I could think of to make a great Christmas dinner. What fun it was!

I drove up to their house with the tree tied to my car's roof. I packed up presents and made my way to their door. The whole family was excited, but the little girl was especially thrilled to have Christmas come to her home. After everything was unloaded and wishes and goodbyes were said, I drove away with a completely different outlook on the holiday season. It truly was more blessed to give than receive. My heart was filled with joy.

I've had decades of Christmases with my husband, surrounded by extended family, dogs barking, people laughing and the warmth of family and friends. Yet there's one Christmas that always stands out in my mind—that Christmas long ago when I gave nearly all I had to help a family in need. That's the spirit of the season, when we celebrate the one who gave everything He had to save a world in need.

Beth Shriver, Author

Rumspringa's Hope, Annie's Truth

I was very close to both my grandmothers as I grew up and later when we all lived in the Denver metro area for many years. My children loved going to their homes every Christmas because they were filled with things they weren't familiar with, things of the past, heirlooms and black-and-white pictures of unsmiling faces who were their ancestors. It piqued their curiosity and opened a new world for them to see Grandma Maurine darn a sock or crochet a blanket for them, instead of throw it away or buy one. She was a master storyteller, so I told her to write down these stories. She did and had them published to give to each of her seven children. They later returned the favor and gathered their memories together and had the book published for her Christmas present. I use some of their stories in my books. This grandma was a prankster who loved a good joke. She played five instruments and was runner-up in the Miss Senior Colorado Contest.

In her younger years, my Grandma Isal taught in a one-room schoolhouse and was able to tell the story of baby Jesus born in a manger. Later, she lived on a ranch and made the best Christmas dinner ever!

Remembering all of this made me realize all over again why I like writing about the Amish. It takes me back to my grandparents' ranch and to the farm my dad grew up on. Riding horses and pretending we were cowgirls or cowboys if my cousins were there—winters riding in the sleigh and summers swimming in the river. And there's no better place to play hide-and-seek than a farm. We worked hard and played hard.

I can still hear my grandmothers talk about the land and how they joined together as a family every day to do chores. It's a lifestyle I'm glad I was able to experience. If I hadn't, I

wouldn't be able to create that world in my writing.

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Baloche and others at