

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**December 29, 2013**

**Unopened Presents**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we do thank you for this time, we thank you for the ability to celebrate the incredible gift that you've given to us of your Son. Father, give us the ability as we open up your word to learn more about you, to understand at greater depth what it is you gave to us in the gift of your son and help us to go tell it on the mountain, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

You know, when I was a youngster, I remember the day after Christmas as being a particularly difficult day. You know, the excitement of Christmas is over and the realization that you now have to wait 364 more days for another one is just starting to sink in. One thing that always struck me in looking at our Christmas tree the day after was that there underneath the tree there were usually a few of these orphan presents. And for some reason, the gifts recipients couldn't be there or maybe they were mislabeled and nobody knew who they were really there for, so they just kind of sat there under the tree all wrapped up and begging for someone to open them. It strikes me that we can say the same thing about

some of the gifts that God sends us. See, often times they too sit begging for us to open them. *James 1:17* says: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* Some of those gifts, they wind up sitting unopened due to ignorance or due to fear or maybe even to simple neglect. And I would like to focus on three of those gifts this morning.

The first one of those gifts is the gift labeled "children." You see, outside of the gift of salvation, the ultimate gift God can give any of us is the privilege of co-creating with him an immortal soul. You see, we are creatures that are rooted in time with finite earthly life spans, yet we are given the privilege of bringing into being fellow creatures who will live forever. We give them beginnings and God gives them eternity. And together we produce creatures that are rooted in time yet completely outside of time's boundaries. God calls children a reward. That's certainly not what the world tells us. I mean, we've been told by some for decades now that children are a form of biological pollution, a financial and emotional drain that's going to cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars. God says otherwise. In *Psalms 127*, verse 3-5, he says: *Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his*

*quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.* You know, next to my Lord and my wife, by far the greatest joy in my life is my children. I mean, to see them grow and develop in their own relationship with God, to see them as adults who now challenge me to grow in Christ is a joy and a pleasure I can't adequately express. And if God hadn't brought Janice and myself together, these unique individuals would have never existed.

The reason we had a large family is actually very simple. That's because Janice and I didn't practice birth control. Those two kind of go together, don't they? Now, as a couple, you may have arrived at a very different family strategy and you know, it really is after much prayer and study and the seeking of wisdom of others that God made it clear to us that he didn't want us practicing birth control. Now, he may make that clear to you that that is an option for you. What I believe is critical here is that when it comes to the area of managing God's gift of children, that all of us live what I call examined lives. You see, the position that I believe God expects each couple to take is to take their own reproductive lives and put them on the altar and ask God what would you have us do? God has different plans for different couples, and our task is to seek God's will in this area of our lives as well as in every other area, and one size doesn't fit all. You see, I

think it's a mistake to have a knee-jerk reaction to Catholic teaching that says we don't even consider not using contraception because that's what Catholics do, and we're not Catholic. On the other hand, I have serious doubts that many people are called by God to have 19 children like the Duggars do. You know, what God makes clear in Romans 14 is that in areas where the Bible is not explicit, we all have an obligation to come to God prayerfully and to become individually convicted. *Romans 14:5* says: *Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.* So Janice and I went before God and we became individually convicted that birth control was not for us. I mean, I had it all figured out in my own mind, we would trust God and he would limit our family. I wish I could say that I was a man of such great faith and I welcomed each and every addition to our family with open arms, but that simply was not the case. I have to confess, you know, I think back to the times when I learned that God was about to gift us with another child, I often times had a deep sense of shame over my lack of faith. I mean, it was as if God was saying, "I want to give you something eternal, I want to give you something precious," and I said, "thanks God, but can't you see we're drowning here?" You know, I knew we didn't have enough room or money or resources for a large family but God knew otherwise. You see, during all the time that we were raising our kids, we never earned enough money to get above the federal poverty level, but if that was poverty, you sure could have fooled

me. You see, in the things that really matter, we never wanted for anything. God not only gifted us with children but he also gifted us with everything we needed to prove that Jesus' words are true when he said in *Luke 12:29*: *"Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* And I can testify, God gave us the kingdom. You know, there were plenty of times when things got dicey and we sure didn't live in a palace, but we wanted for nothing. And all the while that we were growing our family, God was growing in us the ability to grow our trust in Him. God was scattering abroad in our lives gifts but because we were in the thick of it, we couldn't see them. We can see them now. What I would say to every young family is that as crazy and as chaotic as things are right now, learn to savor every single moment because you're going to blink your eyes and this time of your life is going to be over. Trust me, I know. Your gifts are going to grow up and move on to present gifts of their own.

One of the greatest things about this church is the gift of children. I'm sure you've also heard people often say Grace Fellowship is Grace Fertility, because there's kids all over the

place here. And kids can be messy and noisy and frustrating but they are as much a sign of life in the church and the goodness of God's gifts as you will ever find anywhere, and the question of seeking God's will for your life with regard to children doesn't apply just to biological parents. You know whether it's by adoption or foster care or big brother or big sister type mentoring or prayer support for any of these venues, God has a place for every one of us with regard to our role in raising children. The gift is right there. It's right under the tree. It's a matter of asking God how he wants us to unwrap it. So we thank God for the gift of children.

Another gift that is often times left unopened under the tree is the gift of wisdom. Now, wisdom is not to be confused with intelligence, it's not to be confused with knowledge because it is neither. You don't receive the gift of wisdom by being born with it or by going to school for it. I've seen smart folks with precious little of it, and I've seen not so smart folks with lots of it. So just what is wisdom? Well, it's the ability to live life skillfully. It's the ability to see not just the big picture but the grand picture, the one in which the kingdom of God is central. The wise person has the ability to connect the dots between this life of temporary flesh and the real world of the spirit, and he or she has the vision to see the hand of God in the

dealings of man. *Proverbs 3:13* says: *Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold.*

You see, wisdom is a gift that bestows great blessing on its recipients. It gives one the ability to navigate all of life because it directly connects us to the giver of all life. And if you had it, no matter what it is you did, whether you're a plumber, a president, a carpenter, or a CEO, you'd be able to do it in a way that would be pleasing to God and to man. Now, the amazing thing is that this gift is so very rarely opened. It's astounding in light of what God requires before he gives the grant of wisdom.

There are three things that God requires before he will freely give us of his wisdom. Number one, we have to know that we lack it; number two, we have to ask God for it; number three, we have to believe that he'll give it to us just for asking. I almost wish that God would add some more requirements to gaining wisdom because I fear that people think this is just too easy, it can't possibly work. This is what God says in *James 1:5*, he says: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting.*

Now, if you've already opened up the gift of children and you don't open up this gift, you're going to be in a lot of trouble. You're

going to find that the first gift is almost impossible to manage. Now I know I have the gift of wisdom. I have it because I ask for it constantly, and I believe that God gives it to me. In fact, if I didn't believe that I had this gift from God, then I would have failed in one of the three requirements that God lays out in seeking wisdom. He says: *But let him ask in faith, with no doubting.* I have wisdom because I meet the qualifications. I mean, I lack it and I know it, I ask for it and I believe God when he says he'll give it. I mean, could anything be more simple? I mean, just think about it for a second. God says I have one of the most precious gifts the world could ever desire, something the world in its own way desperately seeks for constantly and I'm anxious to give it to you, but you have to ask. Janice and I have prayed together each morning for many, many years now, and our daily prayer always, it always includes a prayer for wisdom. We pray for wisdom as husbands and wives, as moms and dads, as church leaders and any other aspect of life at that moment that needs wisdom, and we simply ask God to give us the ability to do the jobs that he's given us skillfully. One of the first signs that he's answered that prayer is the wisdom that he gives us to believe that he'll give us the wisdom that we need. I can't tell you how many times that God has given me this wisdom in so palpable a way that I could sense it, and whether it was an insight into the scripture or an insight into a situation or a circumstance or a person I knew,



and I know the difference between my wisdom and God's. *James 3:17* says: *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*

You see, God wants nothing more than to pour his wisdom into you and me because we're one of the primary venues that God use to display that wisdom to the spirit world. You know Paul tells us his role in being part of that wisdom in *Ephesians 3:8*, this is what he says. He says: *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.* This is an amazing statement that Paul is making here. Paul is telling us that God designed the church to be the place where the manifold wisdom of God is demonstrated to the rulers and authorities in the spirit realm. Just allow that thought to take root for a moment. Just consider what God is saying here. God is saying that he's displaying his wisdom through the spirit world in the way that the Sunday school teachers are teaching God's word, in the way that the

worship team is singing God's word, in the way that I'm preaching God's word, and also in the way that every one of you is living out God's word. You see, there's a role for every single one of us in this body, and wisdom is the key to unwrapping the gift that is sitting right there under the tree.

Another gift that sits unopened under the tree is the gift of power. In the Greek the word for that is "dunamis," and it's the word from which we get the word "dynamite." "Dunamis" is power. Now if I remember my old physics course, power is by definition "the ability to do work." Well, the same can be said of this gift on the spiritual level, I mean, this gift really is the batteries that power all the other gifts. God delights in giving his people the power to do the work of his kingdom; but the key to opening this gift, well, it's not like the others. You see, the key to the gift of children is trust; the key to the gift of wisdom is simply asking for it; but the key to the gift of power is powerlessness. It's weakness. One of the most popular verses never to be found in the Bible is the statement: "God helps those who help themselves." I think we all know that. In fact, the exact opposite is true, God does not help those who help themselves; he helps those who cannot help themselves. *1 Corinthians 1:27* says: *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.* God told Paul

in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:7: But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. I've seen that power. I've seen the power of God in my life and never has it been at those times when I thought I could help myself. It has always been in times of desperate weakness, times when there would be no confusion whatsoever as to whose power was being exercised. You see, God moves from theory to practice when you see his power displayed in your life.

I've spoken many times before about the importance of having your own personal history of encounters that you've had with God where he demonstrates that power in your life. God demonstrates his presence and his power in our lives, and that provides us with an historical framework of his faithfulness. It's the way God's been dealing with his saints from the very beginning. The very pattern of prayer in the Old Testament was often a recitation of God's past deliverances, and that was followed by a plea for help. And whether it was David or Moses or Abraham or Joseph, the pattern was all very similar. God, they would cry, you've rescued me from this situation or that calamity, you provided this escape, you've given me this miracle before, therefore I'm trusting you now. It's an historical framework that I often refer to as a celestial bank

account, and it applies to us just as well. You see, every miraculous deed that God does in your life, it's a deposit in that account. It's something that you get to draw on for the rest of your life. If you have never been in the position of absolute powerlessness, if you've never been in a place where you know that if God doesn't come through for you right now, you are in deep stuff, then it's possible that you've never seen God actually at work in your life. I've seen God work mightily in my life. But it was always because of dire circumstances that I had no control over. If your life and your health and your spirit and your finances have all lined up so that's never been the case, then maybe you need to create a circumstance in which God's miraculous help is critical. You know, if you've always had money, give a bunch of it away. If you've always had safety, try taking a significant risk. Try taking the risk of sharing the gospel with someone who might pose a threat to you. You just might find that God has been waiting right then and there to give you wisdom and power. You see, it is no secret that God is most real when we are most dependent on him. And so the question I would ask each of us is do you have this celestial bank account? You know, I have entries in my account. I have entries that I've labeled "the house," "the septic tank," "the car," -- see, some of you remember that. These are times when God intervened in my life in a miraculous display of power. These were exercises of power by God

that were unmistakable markers of his presence, and they all happened at times of desperate need and absolute weakness. Now, I could go on for hours and hours about the miracles that God's done in my life, and many of you have heard them before, but I want to share a couple of them with you right now. As David said in *Psalm 26*, he said: *I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds.* See, each of these incidents I'm going to share with you involve God's miraculous intervention, his dunamis, his power expressed in my life. And perhaps my favorite is the septic tank. What a great name, what a great miracle. You see, it shows that God is the God of everything in our lives and that he can be glorified in something as prosaic as sewage.

Many of you know this story, but for those of you who don't, 33 years ago, my twin boys Dan and Ben were born and they were born eight weeks premature. They had the thrill of their very first day on earth getting a helicopter ride to Cornell Medical Center in New York City where they stayed for what was it eight weeks or so building up a bill of a thousand dollars a day. At that time we were a family of seven with two very sick kids and very little money, and it was late fall going into the winter when we learned that our septic system had failed. Actually the County was testing the water in the area and there was four of the five houses on our

block all failed, and so we were told by the County that we had to replace our septic system. Well, at that time we had a savings account with \$1500 in it and the work was going to cost \$2500. So we were about a thousand dollars short. I contacted the County and again, it was in the fall and the County said as long as we made a good faith effort, they wouldn't demand completion until the following spring. So I gathered all of our kids around, and I told them that God was going to provide. I told them he was going to provide because a septic tank is not a want, it's a need, and God is faithful and he will give us everything that we need. Well, what followed was a particularly lean winter in which we barely had the money for food and heat, let alone building up a thousand dollar savings. Just to back up a little, we had moved east only two years prior from having lived in California, and we were out in California, we were part of a very vibrant bible study but like many of us, we gradually lost touch with our friends from California and certainly none of them knew of the lean times that we had fallen on and our crisis with our septic system. So we had gone through the winter, and spring was rapidly approaching and the idea of coming up with a thousand dollars cash was absolutely out of the question. Frankly I had lost hope. And what's worse, I had felt that I was misrepresenting God to my kids. I was kicking myself over and over again for telling them that God would miraculously intervene. In short, my faith had reached rock

bottom. One day I went out to the mailbox just to get the mail, and there in the pile of mail was a very thin envelope from one Peter Borromeo, a good friend from an old Bible study, our old Bible study in California. And I opened up the letter and it was inside the letter a single piece of paper around a check, and I opened up the piece of paper and it said this. It said, "Dear Tom, God told me to send this to you. I know he will bless you as he has blessed me." And with that piece of paper was a check for a thousand dollars. I still get goose bumps even talking about this. So I started to weep. Now understand, my faith at this point was at rock bottom. My power at this point was completely nonexistent. But God says: *"My strength is made perfect in weakness."* I went home and I talked to Janice and I -- immediately I called up Peter and I said -- we reconnected and I said, "How in the world did this happen?" Well, he told me that he had just been let go from his job and that a few nights previously he was sleeping and he was awoken by this overwhelming urgency to write me a check. He said he was literally awoken from his sleep and compelled to act, and after he decided to write me a check, he said the figure was overwhelmingly placed before him of a thousand dollars. He said to me, "Now, brother, I had just lost my job and you know, I love you, brother, but I don't love you a thousand dollars." He said, "I wrote that check because God made me write it, and I didn't even know why. I just wrote the check, wrote the

little note, stuck it in the envelope and put it in the mail." Now what was that all about? It's about dunamis. It's about God's power in your life. You see, you can't make this stuff up.

A couple of years later we were in another terrible straight, our twin boys had not only survived, they had grown and prospered, we were a family of nine and we had a Ford Pinto station wagon. Picture that. It's not pretty. Again, I promised my kids that God would provide. Again, months and months went by and my faith failed and yet I got another letter, and this time it was from someone out of state, someone who had no idea what our circumstance was, we got a very large check in the mail, and along with it a note that said, "The Lord told us to send this to you for a car." That's God's dunamis. The same thing happened when we were up to a family of ten. We just couldn't fit into our three-bedroom farmhouse, and so we prayed about it and prayed about it, and trusted God for the outcome. One day we got a phone call from some folks who said they had been praying, they told us the Lord told them to help us expand our house. They sent us a check for \$18,000. With that we raised the roof and we added three more bedrooms. Now you could say -- and I wouldn't blame you for thinking that -- well, you guys just happen to be very good beggars. The fact is we never asked anybody for anything, ever. We always asked God directly, and he has shown us his power usually



when I was at the very end of my rope. You see, he has blessed us through his people and his gifts have never been limited to just giving us money. At one point when our family had grown to ten, I was convinced it was time to give up the idea that we were going to forego birth control. And again I want to stress this is not for everyone. And God had convicted us that he did not want us practicing birth control but I thought eight kids was my limit. And so I'd been praying over it and agonizing it over it for days and I got a phone call from a dear friend who was living in Texas who is now in heaven, he was the father of eight daughters, and he picked -- I picked up the phone, started talking, he didn't beat around the bush, he said, "I was praying and I felt led of the Lord to call you," and he said, "Are you by any chance struggling with birth control?" We talked it through, and I hung up the phone and Jan said to me, "Who was that on the phone?" I said, "God." And I meant it. Lydia and Abby, our two youngest are here today on this planet in part because of that phone call. See, that too was a gift sent by God to me. It was the power that demonstrated that God was not just a set of religious propositions. It was the power that proved that God is real, that he is personal, that he hears and he answers prayer, and if you want that gift, if you want that dunamis, all you need is to be completely and utterly powerless. I certainly can't guarantee that God will answer your prayers the way he's answered mine, but I can guarantee that God is good and that

he's faithful and that he will answer your prayer in his own way.

You know, if you say I've never experienced God that way, I would have to ask you, have you ever been spiritually desperate? And if you've never been that powerless, have you ever chosen to become so? Have you ever been out there in your spiritual walk with God? We have been out there not by choice, and we found out something that can only be learned by choosing weakness over strength and that God is out there too. In a very special way he shows himself to those who cannot help themselves, and so if God isn't real enough, maybe it's because we're not yet weak enough. You see, it's only when you can do absolutely nothing that you realize what Paul meant when he said in *Philippians 4:13*: *I can do all things through him who strengthens me*. And that's not just for Paul. All of God's unopened presents are there waiting for us, whether it's trusting God for children, asking God for his wisdom, or relying on God's power when we know that we have none. God has gifts just waiting for you and me and he delights when we decide to open them.

Now, the last unopened gift we find under the tree, it's the greatest gift of all. It's the gift of salvation. Now it's appropriate that it's found under a tree because it was on a tree that it was purchased. This past week we celebrated the fact that

God took on flesh and walked among us. We say peace on earth, goodwill towards men. The fact is Christmas is about war. There was no peace between God and his creatures since Adam, our earthly father, rebelled and embraced death. God and his creation were separated by sin and folks think well, if God's so powerful, he can deal with our sin by simply forgiving and forgetting. Christmas destroys that notion. Think about it for a second. Do you think God really would want become one of us if there was any other way? If you think that, you have a vastly inflated view of how lofty humanity really is. As Mike Cosper puts it, he says this, he said: "Christmas is also a time for us to stop and think. Remember the whole story of Christmas, not just the easily marketed warm-and-fuzzy side. Remember that all of it -- Jesus' condescension as a baby, his birth in a filthy stable, his sleep in a manger -- reminds us of the muck he found us in. The nativity, so often depicted as cute and kitsch, is actually a painful depiction of our sin and fallenness. As Jerome once put it, Jesus was born in a dung heap because that's where he knew he'd find us."

Jesus entered into human flesh with one great purpose in mind, that was to glorify his father by ransoming and rescuing his sheep. And to do that, God himself lived out the life we were all supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die, offering

his perfect life as a substitute for our fallen and sinful lives. It was the perfect gift. It was the perfect gift for two reasons. Number one, it was so costly a gift that no one who understood its cost would ever be tempted to think of it as a wage or in payment in return for something that we could do. God even said so in *Ephesians 2:8*, he said: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

And number two, it was the perfect gift because literally it was the gift of perfection. God gave to us through Jesus his son perfection. Now if you are one of his own, you stand before God today perfect, not because you and I are sinless but because Christ has given us the gift of his righteousness and he's given it to us by imputation. Let me explain what that fifty-cent word is all about. The simplest way of explaining "imputation" is this: It is receiving the credit or the blame for something someone else did. You see, by faith we received the credit of Christ's righteousness. *Romans 4:23* says: *It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.* What God is telling us is that Jesus' righteousness will be imputed to anyone who puts their faith in him. Jesus did the work by offering up his perfect life on the cross; we get the credit of his sacrificed life by believing in him. That's what imputation is,

and it works both ways. You see, by imputation, we are all guilty of the fall of Adam. I know I didn't eat the forbidden fruit, I know none of you ate that fruit, but by imputation we are all guilty of his disobedience. Imputation works this way in the spirit world and it works this way in our world as well. One example, if you woke up tomorrow, God forbid, in a Taliban war camp, the folks there wouldn't care very much what you thought about war or peace. They would just recognize you as guilty and worthy of death because you are an American citizen. Not because of anything that you did but just because of the group that you were born in by imputation, you would be considered guilty. By imputation, we are all guilty of Adam's sin because we've all been born into Adam's race. He did the sinning, by imputation we get the blame. That's why we say in Adam's fall, we sinned all. But the good news is that the opposite is also true. Jesus did the dying on our behalf and by faith and by imputation, we get the credit. That's why Paul can say in *Galatians 2:20*: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Paul wasn't crucified; we know that he was beheaded. But Paul recognized that by imputation, Christ's death was his death as well. The gift Christ had given him and us was the gift of his own life laid down for the sheep. It's the greatest gift of all time

and yet it remains the single most unopened present God has ever given.

Not only is this gift left unopened, it is deeply resented. To accept this gift is to accept that our resources, that is our goodness, is not nearly good enough. To accept this gift is to acknowledge our moral inability to do anything to make ourselves morally acceptable to God. We hate the fact that we must come to God on his terms and not our own. In fact, our reluctance, our unwillingness to open this gift brought Christ himself to tears. In *Matthew 23:37*, Jesus said: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* See, Jesus presented the world with the greatest gift it could ever receive. Not only was it unwilling to receive the gift, it deeply resented the offer. *John 3:19* says: *"And this is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."* See, the gift wasn't just met with polite indifference, you know, oh, just put it there under the tree, and it wasn't just met with quiet resistance. It was met with a murderous rage, and that rage is what really defines what a gift it was. God offered us his perfect life through his son. Jesus left heaven itself and veiled his omnipotence in human

flesh to live the life that we all had to live, and so we responded by having him arrested, then we mocked and beat him. *Matthew 26:67* says: *Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"* Now we may not have been the ones hitting, slapping, and spitting on him but he was there because of our sin, and those soldiers represented every one of us.

We have been studying these last few months the prophetic songs of Isaiah, the servant songs. These are songs that had been written hundreds of years before Christ was even born, and they detailed the nature of the gift that Jesus has given us. The gift was his willingness to offer himself to a world that saw kindness as weakness, mercy as foolishness, and grace as something insulting enough to be worthy of killing him. That's the world that Jesus offered himself to, and that's what makes his gift beyond measure. In Jesus Christ, the infinite power that created and sustains the universe was shrouded and veiled so that he could coexist with mere humans. But he didn't just coexist with us, he *made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* What we learned in the songs of Isaiah is that 800 years before he was born, the one who hung the stars in the sky told us how he

would gift us. Speaking about the future like it was already in the past, Jesus says in *Isaiah 56*: *I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.* Jesus gave us the unthinkable. See, when God touched Mt. Sinai, the whole mountain began to tremble because all the power of the universe was being squeezed in one small space and if any human got near enough, he would instantly die. God told Moses in that *Exodus 33:20* that his glory was fatal to fallen man, he said, "*You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.*"

During Jesus's time on earth, part of his great power was spent keeping that glory under wraps, under control. We saw a glimpse of his glory break out at the mount of transfiguration. In *Matthew 17:2*, it says: *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.* Peter, James, and John accompanied him up there and they literally almost lost their minds because they were in the presence of Christ as he began to assume a tiny fraction of the glory that belonged to him. *Mark 9* says of Peter: *He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.* See, Jesus even in his partial glory is terrifying. But Jesus for our sake went from terrifying to trampled on. He went from being the object of the angels' worship to the brunt of the soldiers' entertainment. You don't touch the King of the



universe unless he allows it. And that was his gift. *I gave my back to those who strike. And my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.* His gift was to give his back to the leather whips that beat it raw, to give his cheeks to those who would spit in his face and beat him just for the fun of it. He embraced the disgrace of the cross in order to rescue his sheep. This is love unfathomable. This is love unmeasurable. It is the gift of life itself given to a world ruled by hatred and death. Jesus said: *How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were not willing!* So profound is our hatred for the gift and the gift giver that outside of the sovereign work of God, there would not be one of us on this entire planet willing to accept it. The vast majority of the world still remains unwilling to open that gift that God has given us. And the most important question you will ever ask yourself is this: Am I willing? Are you willing to accept the life of perfect righteousness that Christ is offering to lay down for you? Ask him today to be your Lord and sovereign. If you've made that decision, talk to me, talk to the elders, talk to anyone. Accept the gift that he's freely offering. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* Let's pray.

Father God, as we think about the gifts of Christmas, I ask that our minds would go to the gift that you gave. What a unique gift, to give your back to those who would whip it, to give your cheeks to those who would pluck out the beard. Father, I just, I stand in awe of your willingness to humble yourself to that level, of your desire to do that in order to bring glory to your Father by rescuing us. Lord, give us the ability to grasp anew and at a deeper level what it is you gifted us with when you gave us the gift of your Son, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.