

# The Most Surprising Gift

Thomas Robinson, *The Great Gift Exchange 5*, December 23, 2012

## Luke 1:26-37

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel **Gabriel** was sent from God to a town of Galilee named **Nazareth**, <sup>27</sup> to a **virgin betrothed** to a man whose name was **Joseph**, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was **Mary**.

<sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*" <sup>29</sup> But she was **greatly troubled** at the saying, and tried to **discern** what sort of greeting this might be.

<sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor (grace, charis) with God.* <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and **bear a son**, and you shall call his name **Jesus**. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the **Son of the Most High**. And the Lord God will give to him the **throne of his father David**, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of **his kingdom** there will be no end."

<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*"

<sup>35</sup> And the angel answered her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> **For nothing will be impossible with God.**"

## Luke 2:6-14 Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem

<sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She **wrapped him in cloths** and placed him in a **manger** (feed trough), because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were **shepherds** living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a **Savior has been born to you**; he is the **Messiah, the Lord**. <sup>12</sup> This will be a **sign** to you: You will find a **baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.**"

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*"

## John 1:1-5, 11-14, 16-18

<sup>1</sup> **In the beginning was the Word**, and the **Word was with God**, and the **Word was God**. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> **All things were made through him**, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup> **In him was life**, and the life was the **light** of men. <sup>5</sup> The **light shines in the darkness**, and the darkness has not overcome it. ...

<sup>11</sup> He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to **become children of God**, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup> And **the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**, and we have seen **his glory**, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of **grace and truth**. ...

<sup>16</sup> For from his fullness **we have all received, grace upon grace**. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God; **the only God**, who is at the Father's side, he **has made him known**.

## **We Love / Hate Surprises**

We all love the idea of a wonderful surprise. That Christmas gift that we never expected but is just perfect! We never thought we'd receive such a gift, but here it is. We embrace it.

But we also know that surprise can mean disappointment (the pink bunny pajamas from Aunt Clara). We've convinced ourselves that some wonderful something is going to happen, but then it's something else. It's hard to understand. Hard to accept. Hard to believe that anything different from our expectation could be as good or better.

The Old Testament is open-ended, full of expectations. Various, vivid. Son of David, Messiah, Kingdom of God, end of subservience, triumph of God, Servant of the Lord, all things new! Most are in a language of victory, renewal, glory, and life that we all think we understand.

The NT breaks in with the assertion of that the expectations and promises have been truly fulfilled. But the fulfillments are an almost complete surprise, not only from the view of Israel but the world. The events seem vastly weaker! The meaning given them, greater. This is the paradox of the Gift, of God. He fulfills his promises but transforms us.

## **The Angel Gabriel Went Where!?**

This is the story of the coming of the great king, anointed Messiah, the world's savior.

Gabriel's words echo a whole series of scriptures (Isa 9:6-7; 2Sam 7:16; Dan 7:14, etc.). God's messenger appears, not above the temple, but in a tiny village in far-off Galilee.

He comes not to the High Priest or king or emperor, but to an obscure girl. Yes, we're used to it by now, but it never becomes a cliché. We live in the aftermath of that event, that God chooses to break into his world in totally unexpected places to pour out his grace.

The revelation is given to shepherds and magi. One group despised, the other foreign. Kings and scholarly interpreters stand on the sidelines as the most important event unfolds.

## **They Laid the Baby in What!?**

So much of our imagination of the scene of Jesus' birth comes from a few words: "*She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger (feed trough).*" There could hardly be more unexpected words. A manger? That means a stable or the house of a poor herder.

What is going on here? Is this the beginning of the story of God's glorious coming into his world to establish his kingdom? Is this really supposed to be incarnation? Yes! Yes!

Every element is chosen! Every element is meaningful, part of the revelation. That manger is the next step down from Abraham to the slaves in Egypt to the exiles in Babylon to .... God knows what he is doing. He wants to capture our imaginations, our hearts. He wants us to see all our world, its triumphs and glories over the edge of that trough.

## **God Gave Him What!?**

Gabriel says the baby receives "*the throne of his father David*" and "*his kingdom*" will never end. But he dies on a cross! Yes! That's how the kingdom comes, God's glory revealed. God does things the hard way. He knows our hearts full of clichés and platitudes, and he changes every one of them. Not a single one of our expectations was really right.

God gives a gift of himself in this baby in the trough. The gift changes us – our knowledge of God, ourselves, the world. The gift is astonishing. The greatest surprise of all.