

The Greatest Gift of All

By Barbara Sadler

Theme: Giving

Call to Worship: #James 1:17, or Responsive Reading #731, The Visit of the Wise Men, *SDA Hymnal*

Opening Song: #140, Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne, *SDA Hymnal*

Closing Song: #572, Give of Your Best to the Master, *SDA Hymnal*

Scripture: Varied texts about gifts, NKJV used

The Greatest Gift of All

We all love receiving gifts. Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, sometimes unexpected ones just because someone is thinking of us.

The most memorable gift I received was when I was five years old. With five children in the family we only just made ends meet and so there weren't large gifts at any time. But I was turning five and my mum knew I wanted a doll. Not just any doll but a special one. My aunt and uncle and their five sons lived about ½ km up the road from us so it was there we went for my party. I could see the box under the table as we sat down to eat and I can still remember my excitement and anticipation as I waited to be given my gift. Eventually I was given this huge box to open. There inside was "Susan" – a doll the size of a baby – the most wonderful doll I had ever laid eyes on. I was so excited She had on a beautiful yellow dress. It was the best gift I could ever receive. She even had little front teeth. My brother and I played with Susan for many years. She was left safely at home while I went to college and then went to live in New Zealand. She was my doll and I wouldn't let anyone throw her away even though her head was cracked, her teeth were "lost" and she was colouring with age.

It was 35 years later my brother told me it was too broken to be fixed and there was no use keeping it any more so threw it away.

A special gift. One I treasured. Just a doll, but to me it showed how special being five years old was and how special I was to my mum and dad.

Gifts. They can show respect, love, thoughts, care—a multitude of feelings—or they can be given grudgingly because it is expected.

The Jews once gave gifts to each other and the poor as a sign of a great celebration. It had been a troubled time for the Jews during the reign of King Xerxes until Esther had found favour with the king and was able to thwart the plans of Haman to have all the Jews exterminated. With Esther and Mordecai acting on their behalf they were given authority to protect themselves against all enemies.

To celebrate this great turn in their lives each year they assembled together to celebrate. Let's read it in Esther 9:18-22:

But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day, as well as on the fourteenth; and on the fifteenth of the month they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villages who dwelt in the unwalled towns celebrated the fourteenth day of the month of Adar with gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and for sending presents to one another. And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them, and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor.

Gift giving was established to help the Jews remember not only how God had delivered them but how they were to think of others during these celebratory times. They were not just to eat, drink and be merry and think only of themselves.

They gave gifts of celebration to show their joy.

Another great king gave gifts to show his gratitude and his thankfulness for what had been done for him.

Daniel 2:46-48:

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him. The king answered Daniel, and said, "Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret. Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon.

Why would a king lavish such gifts and prestige on a hired hand? Daniel had eased the king's mind. He had had a dream, a very disturbing dream, that he did not know the meaning of and no one could interpret the dream for him until Daniel came onto the scene.

How could he show his gratitude and relief? By lavishing Daniel with great gifts and honour.

Gifts to say thank you – I appreciate what you've done.

Some of the most known gifts in the world are those of "gold, frankincense and myrrh".

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him....When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures,

they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These were “wise men”, astrologers from a far country – come to worship the King of the Jews. And what did they do? They brought gifts; some of the most expensive of the time, to give to a tiny babe that they were shown would be a “king”. Gifts to show their respect and their worship.

When Jesus was here the people would bring their gifts into the temple but some came with very different motives. Let’s look at how Jesus viewed the giving:

Luke 21:1-4:

And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So He said, Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.

Jesus wasn’t saying the rich shouldn’t put in their gifts, but he saw beyond what they gave to their hearts, and could see this widow gave ALL she had. Her gift wasn’t given because it was “expected” or so others would think highly of her. It was given out of faith and love for her God. And she was willing to give all she had. A gift given to show love.

How do we judge what we give – by what is expected or by our love?

I want us to look at one of my favourite people in the Bible —Mary Magdalene—she gave Jesus one of his most precious gifts. Let’s read of it in John 12:1-3:

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

Not only was the spikenard worth a year’s wage and therefore a very expensive gift – Mary gave herself. She didn’t care what those there thought of her. She didn’t care that she would be ridiculed – embarrassed – thought of as “common” — her past thrown in her face. All she wanted to do was give the gift of anointing to her beloved Jesus, he who had turned her life completely around. She not only poured the perfume on his feet, but let down her hair and wiped them—mingled with her tears of gratitude—to show her love to the one person who understood and loved her as she was – a sinner.

What greater gift could she have given? She gave not only a physical gift but she gave her heart. She gave her all to Christ. A gift of gratitude and love.

What are the gifts God gives to us? In the words of Max Lucado:

He could have given us a world flat and grey.
We wouldn’t have known any difference. But, he didn’t.
He splashed orange in the sunrise
And cast the sky in blue

And if you love to see geese as they gather
Chances are you'll see that too.
Did he have to make the squirrel's tail furry?
Was he obliged to make the birds sing?
And the funny way that chickens scurry
Or the majesty of thunder when it rings?
Why give a flower fragrance?
Why give food its taste?
Could it be
He loves to see
That look upon your face?

If we love giving gifts how much more does a God, who is pure and perfect, enjoy giving gifts to us?

Jesus asks in Matthew 7:9,11:

Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?...If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

We can only give gifts that will decay or wear out but God gives us something that will never be destroyed:

James 1:17:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame. All He gives is perfect, but I want us to look at the most precious gift he gave and what it cost—the gift of the tiny baby whose birth we are celebrating today.

John 1:1-3:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

Here was Jesus—one with God and Creator of the world—living in heaven, a perfect world with grandeur we cannot even imagine. But because we had sinned and our connection with God had been severed, God sent him down here but not even as a king, not into a great city, not into an upstanding family where he wouldn't want for anything where he could at least have a little comfort. Let's see who he was sent to –

Matthew 1:18:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

A young girl about 14 years old, a mere child herself, to bear the king of the Universe. A girl living in a town of Nazareth, not exactly the “north shore” of the area, a place that it was said “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth”. A carpenter to raise and train the Saviour of the world.

No clean hospital room for him to be born in, only a smelly stable:

Luke 2:6,7:

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

He couldn't even find a room for them. God had to look down and see his Son—the King of the Universe, creator—become a vulnerable baby, born in a trough where the cattle feed with only his parents and some shepherds to welcome Him to the sin ravaged world.

Imagine if Jesus were your son and you had to watch him be delivered with only the animals to watch. And then to welcome him, the local shepherds from the fields who weren't probably the most genteel of people, but they were the ones who could recognise Him for who he was, their Saviour.

But God couldn't just keep quiet and he sent a throng of angels to herald the birth, singing songs of praise. How God must have ached to lift that baby up and hold him safe to his breast. How he must have broken his heart when he looked at everything he would go through and how the ones he came to save would treat Him.

Yes, God gave us the greatest gift of all in the baby whose birth we are celebrating today because He gave His most precious possession—his own Son.

I would like to parallel what God has done for us with the examples of gift-giving we looked at this morning:

Thoughts from Esther: A celebration of deliverance from sin through the gift of Jesus.
Thoughts from Daniel : God honoured us when he lavished the gift of Jesus on us.
Thoughts from the Widow: When God sent Jesus, He gave the best He had.
Thoughts from Mary: The love that poured from Mary's heart, is a glimpse of the love God poured out upon us in the gift of His Son.

As we remember the Baby at this time let us unwrap that gift that God so graciously gave us. The gift of salvation in the form of a tiny baby. Let us listen to God as we contemplate this gift and we will hear Him say, “Yes, I did this just for you.”

What is our Gift to God? What can we give to match this gift God so graciously gave in the form of His son? The only thing we can give is ourselves, our selfishness, our loyalty, our hearts.

What you are is God's gift to you. What you make of yourself is your gift to God.

About the Sermon Writer: Barbara Sadler lives on a small farm in coastal New South Wales and works full time at the local Council as a personal assistant to a departmental director. She is an area co-ordinator for Women's Ministries for the mid-north coast and western regions of NSW and preaches and speaks at church programs and women's events. She enjoys travelling, reading, public speaker, making inspirational PowerPoint's, women's ministries events, and being a volunteer to teach secretarial and computer skills for her church.