

25 JOY-FILLED DEVOTIONS
FOR ADVENT

THE
Gifts
OF
CHRISTMAS



SHEILA WALSH

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THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS— AN INTRODUCTION

My earliest Christmas memories are from my childhood in Scotland. These memories are filled with simple wonder. Cold, wintry mornings catching snowflakes on my tongue. Tangerines wrapped in red and silver foil at the bottom of my stocking. Cadbury chocolate boxes filled with all sorts of candy. Brightly colored paper chains to decorate our classrooms at school. Our little Christmas tree dusted off one more year, with a rosy-cheeked angel placed carefully on top. Fresh holly sprigs pushed behind every picture on the walls. The children's service at church late on Christmas morning. We would bring our favorite toy to show, which made for the noisiest service of the year.

But there was one Christmas morning I will never forget . . . I think it was the best Christmas of all. Can you remember yours?

I was seven years old. There was just one thing I wanted that year: a baby doll. I'd seen her in the window of our

town's only toy store. She was surrounded by other toys—robots, a bright-red fire engine, a windup monkey that played drums—all draped in gold and silver tinsel. She was beautiful, and she was all I wanted for Christmas.

Every Christmas morning was the same in our home. My brother, Stephen, and I would wake Mum at five o'clock and be sent straight back to bed. We'd try again at six and finally persuade her by seven that we simply couldn't hold on for one more moment. We'd stand at the top of the stairs with our sister, Frances, while Mum

went to *investigate*. I could hardly breathe. What if the baby doll wasn't there? What would I do?

**I invite you to
come with me
on a journey to
exchange weariness
for *wonder* and
heartache for *hope*.**

After what felt like an eternity, Mum would tell us that a miracle had happened overnight and now we could come down. There were presents everywhere. The lights on the tree were sparkling, and the

warmth of the fire took the chill off the winter air as we raced into the living room. I didn't look at my chair first. I couldn't. Frances's gifts were always piled up on the chair to the left of the fire, mine on the chair to the right, and Stephen's on the table. I looked at the table and saw Robbie the Robot, which he'd been hoping for. He was already tearing into the box. Frances had a stack of new books that would keep her busy and antisocial for months. Finally, I took a deep breath and looked at my chair. After a quick scan, I began to panic. She wasn't there. There were lots of gifts but not the one I wanted so very much.

“Aren’t you going to open your presents?” Mum asked.

I didn’t want to cry, so I gave the best smile I could as I began to peel Christmas paper off an assortment of games and puzzles.

Then she said, “What about your other gift?”

“What other gift?” I asked.

“The one at your feet,” she said with a smile.

I looked down, and there she was—my baby doll in a little cradle tucked under the chair. I was so busy unwrapping the gifts on my chair, I’d missed the one right at my feet.

I remember that story every Christmas morning because of the lesson it taught me. It’s so easy to miss the greatest gift of all, the one that was laid right at our feet, the one we so desperately need. Jesus, the Savior of the world.

It’s always been that way. On that first Christmas morning, almost everyone missed the greatest gift ever given. As the crowds poured into the cities of their birth to register, no one was looking for a gift with tiny toes and fingers.

On a night of quiet wonder,
Heaven’s greatest gift was born.

No wonder most everyone missed the gift that night. He wasn’t what they were looking for.

I wonder if we’ve changed much since then. It’s easy to become so familiar with the Christmas story that we forget it’s the gift we desperately need, the one we can’t live without.

As the years have passed, I've discovered so many beautiful images that speak profoundly of the miracle that took place that night in Bethlehem. It's the miracle that changed the world forever. Some of these images surround us every day of the Christmas season, and we might easily miss them. Others, like the angels, shepherds, and wise men, appeared so long ago but still have much to teach us today.

I invite you to come with me on a journey to exchange weariness for wonder and heartache for hope. As we look with fresh eyes at each of these gifts of Christmas in the pages that follow, it's my prayer that a flame will be lit in your heart that will last throughout the year.

You have a Savior!

You are loved!

Let's celebrate Christ, the greatest gift of all.

For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6 NKJV

Expectancy





THE GIFTS

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16 NIV

*I*t was Christmas Eve and we'd managed to get our excited three-year-old son, Christian, to bed and finally to sleep. I had made three mugs of hot cocoa, and my husband, Barry, my father-in-law, William, and I began to wrap gifts by the fire. William had been living with us since my mother-in-law, Eleanor, had died, and he and Christian were the best of buddies. He allowed Christian to do things we would never allow. It was the perfect arrangement!

We wrapped a train set, a LEGO pirate ship, and all sorts of boy presents. The gift that William was particularly excited about was one of the most sought-after toys that year. It was a Tickle Me Elmo that played the guitar.

We'd searched the town to no avail, but William wouldn't give up. He'd discovered that a certain store would be getting a few last-minute units in on December 23, but as it was first come, first served, we had to be in line by seven a.m. At that time, they would hand out numbered tickets before the store opened at eight.

We were in line by six thirty that morning.

"When the doors open, run," William said. "You're faster than me."

"We don't have to run, Dad," I replied. "We have a ticket. We're number six, and they're getting twenty-five units in."

"Just run. Run as fast as you can!"

**Would you run
to receive the
greatest gift
of all?**

He is here!

So I ran, and we were able to purchase the furry musician and bring him home. William stored Elmo under his bed, wrapped in a blanket, obscured on all sides by suitcases and boxes, waiting for the big Christmas morning reveal.

After everything else was placed under the tree that evening, William brought Elmo out to be wrapped. He held him up with pride as if introducing a new family member.

"Here he is!" he announced.

Should we clap? I wondered.

"Do you want me to wrap him?" I asked.

"No, we need to put batteries in it first," he said. "There's nothing worse than a child getting a toy with no batteries in it on Christmas morning."

"I think it comes with batteries," I said. "The box said that you just squeeze his feet."

So William squeezed his feet, and the rest is a bit of a blur. Elmo began to play the guitar and laugh so loudly, it was deafening. William panicked, convinced Christian was going to wake up and the surprise would be ruined. So he ran out of the room with the furry offender stuffed under his sweater.

He returned about five minutes later, a desolate look on his face.

“What happened?” I asked.

“He’s in there,” William replied, pointing to the powder room.

“Well, he stopped playing the guitar, so that’s good,” I said.

“See if you can help him,” he whispered.

At first, I couldn’t see Elmo, which was surprising, as the powder room is not very big. But then . . . I spotted his red head sticking out of the toilet bowl. There was no helping him. RIP, Elmo.

William was so upset, but the following morning, when Christian opened his gifts and saw the pirate ship, he was ecstatic.

“This is the best gift ever!” he cried.

There is something so lovely about the joy that children experience at Christmastime. They love to count down the days, make their Christmas lists, and eat their body weight in Christmas cookies. It’s hard to keep that innocence and joy as we get older. When we’ve lived more life, we are acquainted with heartache and disappointment. We worry about paying bills, the health of our loved ones, or what’s going on in our world. Everything seems to be changing

so fast that we struggle not to worry. But one thing hasn't changed. Let me remind you of this truth:

God hasn't changed.

His love for you hasn't changed.

His ability to give you the grace to face anything hasn't changed.

His offer of peace hasn't changed.

His greatest gift of all, eternal life, hasn't changed.

Don't you think it would be wonderful if this Christmas we moved from living with expectations to living with expectancy?

They're different. When we live with expectations, we've decided what we think the outcome of a situation should be. We've decided what we think God should do, how He should answer our prayers. When we live like that and those prayers are not answered in a way that makes sense to us, then we're tempted to believe the lie that God doesn't love us. When you and I live like that, we're going to face disappointment and heartache. We forget that God is sovereign and that He is good and that He is in control.

But when we live with expectancy, we live with our arms and our hearts wide open. We're saying to God, "I trust You. I don't always understand everything You do, but I trust You."

That would be such a wonderful gift to give to God our Father this year.

Would you run to Him?

Would you run to receive the greatest gift of all?

He is here!

That's what it means to live by faith. That's what it means to worship.

Expectations can leave us feeling empty this Christmas, but living with expectancy will not. Whether you are surrounded by family and friends this season or facing the first Christmas without a loved one, I invite you to pray this prayer with the psalmist, David:

Listen to my voice in the morning, LORD.

Each morning I bring my requests to you and
wait expectantly.

Psalm 5:3

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

Christina Rossetti, "In the Bleak
Midwinter"



day two

THE CHRISTMAS TREES

I am the one who answers your prayers and
cares for you.

I am like a tree that is always green;
all your fruit comes from me.

Hosea 14:8

As I write this, it's a ridiculously hot August day in Dallas, Texas. We've had more than forty days in a row over 100 degrees, several as high as 110. It's miserable. Our poor little dogs haven't been outside for a walk in weeks, as the sidewalk is so hot it would burn their paws. Having said that, as I glance over the top of my computer, my eyes are immediately drawn to the eight-foot Christmas tree in the corner of our den. It's been up since Christmas 2020—almost three years now. I'd love to tell you that it's the only one we have up in our house, but

it's not. We have a tree in our bedroom and one downstairs as well. It was a little embarrassing when friends came over for the first time since the pandemic and saw it still up, but now I love it. I get up every morning, put the coffee on, and switch on the tree lights. It makes me so happy.

I think part of the initial reason we left the trees up after Christmas 2020 was that life was so hard, so colorless. With countless others, I found myself struggling with depression and anxiety as we felt the impact of a global pandemic. Somehow the trees' sparkling lights speak of hope, reminding me of better days. But it is much more than that. The trees remind me daily of that moment that changed the world forever—the coming of our Savior, the place where hope began.

There is a lot of debate over the origin of the Christmas tree. Some scholars find its roots in pagan tradition. In the seventeenth century, English military leader and politician Oliver Cromwell said he stood against “the heathen traditions” of Christmas carols, decorated trees, and any joyful expression that desecrated “that sacred event.”¹ I'm pretty sure Christmas in his home wasn't very much fun.

In her children's book, *Luther's Children Celebrate Christmas*, Dorothy Haskins says that Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, was walking through the woods near his house at night. Snow had fallen on the branches of the trees, and they sparkled in the moonlight. He was so taken by their quiet, brilliant beauty. Haskins writes, “The little trees stood there bravely, keeping green while everything else around them went dry and drab and lifeless.” So Luther

cut down a tree, carried it home, and decorated it with candles. According to Haskins, “He explained to his children that the tree is green in the winter like our faith in Christ. It stays fresh even in a time of trouble. Our faith in Christ stays green even in sorrow. It stays alive even in the midst of despair.”²

At the top of our tree in the den is a cross, not a star. It speaks to me of redemption, of the depths to which Christ was willing to go to redeem you and me. If you think about it, the beginning of our story started with a tree. When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He told them they could eat freely from every tree except one. They were forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they would die.

When the serpent entered the garden, his first act was to make them question God: “Did God really say . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1).

His second act was to call God a liar: “You won’t die!” (3:4).

His third was to insinuate that God was holding out on them: “God knows that your eyes will be opened” (3:5).

When they listened to his lies and picked fruit from the forbidden tree, the whole earth shuddered. Everything changed. Suddenly, Adam and Eve felt shame and hid from God. In His mercy, God clothed them in the skins of animals and sent them out of the garden. He posted mighty cherubim to the east of the garden of Eden with a flaming

**When you feel
anxious or afraid,
remember that the
evergreen mercy
of God is with you.**

sword to guard the way to the tree of life. If they had stayed, they could have eaten the fruit from the tree of life and lived forever as broken people. God loved them too much for that, and He loves you too much for that as well.

So, just as our desolation came from a tree, so also our redemption would come on a tree. A better wardrobe was on the way for you and me. When we have placed our trust in Christ, we are now clothed in His righteousness. Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, was willing to become a curse in the eyes of God and man to bridge the great divide between a holy God and sinners such as you and me. It's hard to take in the weight of that kind of love. In reality, where we should expect judgment, we receive overwhelming, unexpected grace. We get what we don't deserve.

But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Galatians 3:13

In the book of Hosea, God describes Himself this way: "I am like a tree that is always green" (14:8). When I think of that image during this season, I'm captivated by the thought that as we worship and celebrate, as we let the light of Christ shine through our lives to those around us in a dark and broken world, we can be like the ornaments on God's tree. We can be those who draw others to Christ by reflecting His love and mercy.

When you feel anxious or afraid, remember that the evergreen mercy of God is with you. The world has become such a cold and lonely place for so many people, but just as those trees captivated Martin Luther's heart and brought joy to his children with the candlelight, you and I can be that light to the world—not just at Christmastime but throughout the year.

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree
How lovely are thy branches
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree
How lovely are thy branches
Their pillars all please faithfully
Our trust in God unchangedly
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree
How lovely are thy branches
“O Christmas Tree”



day three

THE STAR

I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.

John 8:12

*I*t was an unexpected gift at the end of a very long day and a twenty-one-hour flight. I and my team from Life Outreach Ministries had landed the previous evening in Luanda, the capital of Angola in Central Africa. We were there on a mission to meet with elders in various villages and talk with them about their most immediate needs. Due to an extended period of drought, food supplies had all but dried up, and many of the children were victims of severe malnutrition. Our partners in Southern Africa had produced an oatmeal-like soup that contained vital nutrients and vitamins that children in that part of

the world so desperately needed, and we would be able to bring it to their villages. It was the best news to share. Literally, life in a bowl.

The following morning, we were up and on the road by five a.m. I'm pretty sure the shock absorbers on our jeep may have worked well in the 1950s, but they were struggling to work for us. After several hours of banging my head on the roof of the jeep as we drove deeper and deeper into the dry, arid land, we came to our first village. Through our interpreter, we asked the village chief for permission to camp there that night. Knowing that we were there to help support the children, he graciously said yes.

I'd never spent the night in a one-person tent before. It is quite an adventure as long as you don't need to stand up too often. We were each assigned an army cot, a sleeping bag, and a headband with a light attached. I wasn't sure why we'd need a headlamp, but then the sun went down and the darkness came. When you are hundreds of miles from the nearest town or city and there is no electricity, nighttime is a black backdrop for the stars. I took my sleeping bag outside, lay down, and gazed up at the night sky. It was breathtaking. I saw what Abram must have seen.

Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him,
"Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can.
That's how many descendants you will have!"

Genesis 15:5

As I gazed up at the stars that night, I was in awe of this unexpected gift. So far away from home yet so aware of the presence of God my Father, I found myself worshipping. I thought about the ancient visitors who were guided by a star and brought their gifts to the Christ child. The Greek word *magoi* used in Matthew 3 is translated as Magi or wise men. These men came from the east, probably from Babylon or Persia, a journey of more than five hundred or six hundred miles. They were not Jews waiting for the Messiah; they were men of science who studied the stars. So what was this star? Some experts believe it was a supernova or a comet, but only God knows for sure.

In his fascinating book *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View*, Mark Kidger points to something that occurred in 7 BC, two years before the year most scholars agree Christ was born. The planets Jupiter and Saturn passed each other three times that year. That December, when they passed each other for the third time, they met then parted slowly. Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system, was considered a sign of royalty. Saturn, the second largest, was seen as a sign of protection. There is an ancient Jewish saying that God created Saturn to protect and watch over Israel.¹ To those who studied the stars, the message was clear: a King is coming to protect God's people.

In 5 BC a brilliant star shone for seventy days, and it is thought that this is likely the time when the Magi began their journey to Jerusalem. In most nativity scenes, they are depicted at the stable with the baby Jesus, but that's

not what happened. By the time they arrived in Bethlehem at the home of Joseph and Mary, Jesus was no longer an infant. The Greek word used to describe Jesus in Matthew 2 is not the word that means “baby” but rather the word for a child or toddler.

Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.

Matthew 2:2

In summarizing all the events that took place in the heavens, Mark Kidger writes, “We find a series of events so unique that they can happen together only once in every several thousands of years.”²

**Even in the darkest
of times, when we
can't see His hand,
the brilliant
light of Christ shines
with hope and
guides us onward.**

These men of science took great risks, traveled a great distance, and gave extravagant gifts. In the presence of this tiny King, they bowed down and worshiped.

How can we do less? Even in the darkest of times, when we can't see His hand, the brilliant light of Christ shines with hope and guides us onward. Perhaps tonight, if the sky is clear, you might step outside and gaze up at the stars and remember who our soon returning King is and worship Him.

I am the bright morning star.

Revelation 22:16

The Star

Star of wonder, star of light,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect Light.

“We Three Kings of Orient Are”