



God's Christmas List: *Gifts of the Heart*

Hey sisters, tis the season for adoring the birth of our Savior. Each of the eight devotionals below highlights a gift of the heart we can offer to our True Love, the Lord Jesus, during this sacred season. I pray our Christmas list brings Him great delight!

- Laura Wilcox, Sacred Story Ministries

The Gift of Obedience

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:39-41

We begin by looking at Mary's response upon receiving the message from the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Messiah and that her cousin Elizabeth would bear a child despite being "advanced in age" (must mean she had some gray hair). What did she do? Mary took a pregnancy test . . . no, that's not how it happened! She acted on the Word of God without hesitation by going straight to Elizabeth's house which was not around the corner but miles away.

We can give God the gift of obedience by acting on His Word without reservation. When our feelings tell us that responding to God's Word might create harm or is not that big of a deal or that our own thinking is more trustworthy, we can proclaim the truth. God is our Heavenly Father who is true and has good intentions, giving us the courage to step out in faith. As you read or listen to God's Word this Christmas season, offer to Him the gift of obedience by believing and living what He says.

The Gift of Surrender

And Mary said, "Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

As Mary traveled many miles to Elizabeth's home, many thoughts about the coming months must have crowded her mind. For one thing, she was in the middle of preparing to be married when God invaded her world with the news of her role in bearing the Messiah. This can put a serious kink in plans. How would Mary tell her fiancé Joseph she is pregnant with God's Son? What to do with the evidence in her belly before she consummated her marriage? There were severe penalties for adultery in the OT.

No doubt Mary wrestled with fears about whether her friends and family would embrace her. She laid down her agenda to be involved in God's plan for the generations to know the Savior. Mary surrendered when she would begin a family, where she would live, how people would perceive her and much of her understanding of how life would turn out.

As we go about the Christmas season, there is a tendency to reflect on what has been, question the now, or project how our lives might turn out. We may choose different timing, circumstances or interactions for our past, present or future. Will you lay down your expectations for participation in God's plans to bring the Lord to others? Open your hands to Him and offer the gift of surrender, releasing your understanding of how life ought to unfold and expressing your desire to leave a spiritual legacy.

The Gift of Belief

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord. Luke 1:45

We've bounced around the gifts of obedience and surrender as we watched Mary wholeheartedly embraces the messages from the angel Gabriel. Let's consider that alongside obedience and surrender is belief or faith. This means Mary embraced supernatural outcomes.

A quote from the Teacher's Commentary (Richards, L. and Richards, L. O, 1987) summarizes in this way, "How wonderful that our God is not restricted to the usual or bound by the merely natural. Our God is a God of the unusual, and the sooner we see God as He is, the more quickly our lives will be transformed." When Mary enters Elizabeth's doorway, her cousin praises her faith.

When we consider our lives, especially the places of struggle, do we rest in God's presence and activity, leaving room for Him to work in unusual ways? Take a few minutes to offer to God the gift of belief by acknowledging that He is working in ways you cannot see.

The Gift of Praise

Mary said, "With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior." Luke 1:46-47

As we listen to the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth, we hear Mary open her mouth to praise the Lord for the privilege of being part of His promise of redemption He gave to Abraham (1:55). Praise is a good gift to the Lord's heart when we acknowledge who He is.

As we prepare our hearts during the Advent season to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus, offer to God the gift of praise. Use the letters in the word "advent" to think of words to describe Him. For example, the letter "A" might prompt me to praise God for being Almighty. Try to find a time where you can do so aloud- in your car, the shower . . . if you're in a home or office with believers, you may want to rally them to praise with you.

The Gift of Reflection

He [God] has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever. Luke 1:55

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about 3 months. I would guess a lot of talk centered around what the angel had declared about their sons. I bet they rehearsed the circumstances and what they might mean for their lives and for the nation of Israel. Not to mention sharing in the changes which go along with a growing belly. Zacharias must have been running for his man cave!

I can only imagine how much strength these two women who were experiencing unusual pregnancies drew from each other. It does our heart good to reflect on what God has promised. Here's the challenging part since it's the season for much to do's and multiple festivities. Carve out time, preferably in a place outside of your home, to reflect on Luke 1:26-38. Ask God to open your eyes to fresh perspective of the coming of our Savior. If possible, bring a journal and invite a friend or spouse. Write down what comes to mind as you reflect. Share

with each other how the passage applies to your current circumstances.

The Gift of Anticipation

And Mary stayed with her [Elizabeth] for about three months, and then returned home. Luke 1:56

As Mary left the safety of Elizabeth's house and traveled over the dusty roads back to Nazareth, there must have been a million and one thoughts running through her mind. . . Ok, so. . . how did I decide to break the news to Joseph? My parents? They've always wanted grandchildren. I'm going to need bigger clothes. What will my friends think about giving me a baby shower before a wedding celebration? Who will be there when I give birth and how much is that going to hurt?!

I've obviously taken some liberty in speculating what might have been on her mind. However, we do know that Mary had many needs as she returned to her hometown. I wish we had a record of her prayer journal to hear all the answers God had already set in motion to provide for her. I love that God is so powerful and personal that He anticipates the needs of His children. Expecting God's voice and activity in our lives reflects a heart of anticipation. As you think about the areas where you need guidance, tell God you are expecting His wisdom and provision, thanking Him for how He will come through for you.

The Gift of a Heart for Others

And her [Elizabeth's] neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. Luke 1:58

For now, we'll leave Mary in Nazareth to prepare for the birth of God's Son. Back in the hill country of Judah, Elizabeth's due date arrived, and she gave birth to John. The Scripture says, "And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her." Elizabeth must have marveled at bearing a son in her seasoned age. As a friend of mine says: you know you're a seasoned mother of a newborn when you are looking down at your baby through reading glasses. I feel sure that Elizabeth was filled with hope because of the words about John, that he would clear the way for the Savior and "turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God."

Elizabeth had many opportunities to plant seeds in peoples' hearts through her

words about her son's destiny. Just as in Biblical times, God is all about using people to reach people in our current day. Sharing God's love and forgiveness with others through our actions and words is a great privilege. Think of family members, coworkers or friends who do not know the Lord. Offer to God the gift of a heart for others by praying for the person to be drawn into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Brainstorm how you can show your care in a tangible way that points to the true meaning and message of Christmas.

The Gift of Gratitude

Zacharias said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people." Luke 1:68

After Elizabeth gave birth to John, the day of circumcision arrived when the new parents' were asked about the name of the child. Friends and family assumed the baby's name would be Zacharias since the tradition was to name children after family members. Zacharias had been mute during Elizabeth's entire pregnancy because of his unbelief when the angel Gabriel pronounced the upcoming birth so Elizabeth explained on behalf of the couple that the baby's name is John. The friends and family in attendance were perplexed and looked to Zacharias to confirm. He wrote out the name "John" on a tablet and all were astonished. At that moment, he regained his ability to speak.

The first words out of Zacharias' mouth were praise and thanksgiving. I bet he had a whole new appreciation for the ability to speak after many months of frustration about being unable to utter a word! Let's consider the words that come out of our mouths today. To focus on thanksgiving and praise, think about good gifts God has poured out in your life. Some circumstances do not seem good in and of themselves, but the hard times help you experience Him on a deeper level. Giving thanks by faith even when it's difficult to make sense of your story is a gift because it reveals your trust. Offer to God today the gift of gratitude for the good gifts He has given you.

SACRED STORY

Laura Wilcox is the founder and president of Sacred Story Ministries. Sacred Story is a women's ministry sharing Christ centered stories of hope which impart the Gospel and impact lives around the world. To learn more about resources Laura has written and stories from women, visit the website.

www.sacredstoryministries.org