

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

PART ONE:

The Gift of the Saviour, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God



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Isaiah 9:6 (English Standard Version) For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

“Family meeting! Family meeting! Hellooo!”

Seven year-old James bounced into the lounge. His sisters, Sophia, Grace and Sarah were sitting around the big, heavy, mahogany dining room table. They were busy with their home school assignments.

“Important family meeting in half an hour in the back yard! Be there or else!” shouted James importantly.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “So overly dramatic,” she sighed.

As the second youngest, nine-year-old Sarah felt that using big words raised her status in the family. She waited for someone to ask what “overly” meant. But no one did. Sighing again, Sarah petulantly pushed away the book she was studying.

“Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black,” remarked Sophia, her dark eyes twinkling.

Sarah was known for her own “drama queen” behaviour. James, who was leaping around the room, waving a sheet of paper, hopped over excitedly to his oldest sister, Sophia, and gave her a squeeze.

"You're hugging all the breath out of me, James," laughed fourteen-year-old Sophia, tousling his dark brown curls.

Sarah frowned. She didn't like to be reminded of her shortcomings. "Gracie, what do you think?" she asked, a tremble in her voice. "Don't you think James is being overly dramatic?"

"Hmm?" murmured eleven-year-old Grace. She smiled vaguely at Sarah, but her attention was held by the pictures in the art book she was enjoying.

"Oh, Grace! You haven't been listening to anything I've said!" Sarah's bottom lip quivered and she flushed.

"Come now, Sarah, don't take it personally. You know Grace is in her own little world. Aren't you, Gracie?" Sophia smiled at both her younger sisters who were so very different.

Grace raised her head and asked sweetly, "Did I miss something?" They all laughed. Even Sarah, who began to see the funny side of the situation.

Sophia asked, "Where's Daniel? He also needs to know about the meeting," As the oldest, Sophia was a bit like a mother hen making sure all the chicks were safe and in order.

"Daniel's helping Daddy in the garage," James informed them. "He knows about the meeting. He wrote out the agenda for Mommy." James waved the sheet of paper above his head in excitement.

"Not *agenda*, Jamie. Agenda," corrected Grace gently. She gave him a hug. "Let's see."

Four heads of curly hair crowded together to read the agenda for the special family meeting. Exclamations of surprise, pleasure *and* disappointment followed.

"Christmas gifts! Ooh, lovely!" smiled Grace.

"I thought we wouldn't be able to afford gifts this year," revealed Sophia. "I'm so glad Mom and Dad have come up with a plan!"

"But it says here we shall have to make our own. That's so disappointing!" grumbled Sarah.

"How do you draw names?" James asked Sophia, puzzled.

"It's when we each get a chance to pull someone's name out of an envelope," declared Sarah. She loved to be able to explain things to someone else. She put on her most grown up expression.

"Yes, that's quite right," confirmed Sophia, smiling at Sarah. "Come on everybody, let's tidy up and go to the meeting."

Out in the back yard, Mom was already setting out red plastic chairs around the patio table. She had moved the light plastic table under the spreading flamboyant tree. She smiled as the four children came out of the kitchen to join her.

"How can I help, Mom?" asked Sophia. On her way through the kitchen she had already thoughtfully collected a jug of cold water from the fridge. She had put seven glass tumblers on a tray. Thin slices of lemon and sprigs of mint floated in the iced water. Small ice blocks bobbed on the top.

"You've already helped, dear," smiled her mother looking at the tray as Sophia carefully placed it on the table. "Sit down and relax for a bit."

"I do wish we weren't so poor," complained Sarah. "Cool drink would be much nicer."

"Sugar rots your teeth," announced James. "Water's healthier." They all had to laugh, as James was known

for his sweet tooth.

Dad and Daniel came out of the garage, dusting off their hands and wiping their sweaty faces. The day was very hot and humid, although the sea breezes cooled their old house on Bluff Road, overlooking Durban Bay.

“Well, this is great,” grinned Dad. “All present and on time. Fridge water too! Who wants to take minutes?” He sank on to a chair tiredly. Then he poured himself a full glass of the refreshing water.

“Please let me Daddy!” urged Sarah.

“Thank you, Sarah, that's my big girl,” affirmed her father.

Sarah ran back into the house for the meeting book and a pen. While the family waited for her they helped themselves to the chilled water.

“Ah, that's better,” sighed little James, sounding like a junior version of his father. Sarah, coming back with the book, rolled her eyes. Mom and the other girls giggled. Dad winked at James. James chewed an ice block, his eyes sparkling.

Dad cleared his throat. “Before we start, let's thank the Lord for His blessing on our family and for everything He's done for us.”

Each of them took turns to say a personal “thank you” to God the Father. Grace looked up at the flame coloured clusters of blossom covering the flamboyant tree. She thanked the Lord for the beautiful trees He had created.

“I take it you've all seen the agenda?” asked Dad. “So you know what Mom and I have been planning to do this Christmas? It was very hard two years ago to celebrate Christmas as we wanted to. Remember that the Covid lock down in 2020 had eaten into all our savings. Mr Smith had to close his business and could no longer employ me. Last year was tough too, but the Lord provided work for me every month, so we didn't have to sell the house. There's still no money for luxuries, though. But Christmas without gifts would be rather sad. So your mom and I decided to help you all make gifts for one another. Back in the day, many people used to make their own gifts.”

“And it can be a lot of fun,” encouraged their mother. “Especially when the gifts are surprises! Also we shall take a break from home school from Friday the ninth of December. That's this Friday.”

“Do we each make seven gifts?” asked Daniel. “We don't have much time for that. There's the veggie garden to look after, the lawn to mow, and all the other things we have to do.” He frowned.

“You're right, Daniel,” confirmed his father. “Seven would be too much to do. No, each child will draw the name of one brother or sister. And then you can spend time thinking carefully about something special to make that person. We want each of you to design and create something he or she will really appreciate.”

“But how can the gifts be surprises, Dad? We don't have our own bedrooms. There aren't many places to work in private in this small house,” inquired Sophia. She traced a pattern on the frosty surface of her glass while she considered the problem.

“Ah, that's where you shall have to make a plan,” answered her father, his brown eyes twinkling. “Your mother and I shall help as much as we can.”

“What about gifts for you and Mom?” asked Grace. She swirled the cold water round in her glass, admiring the way a lemon slice shone in the water.

“Don't worry about that, Grace dear,” Mom said. “Helping you all and being involved in the process will give Dad and me much joy.”

“Okay. Why don't we draw the names now?” suggested twelve-year-old Daniel. While the others had been talking, he had been carefully writing each child's name on bits of paper. He had folded them over and put them inside a dry tumbler. Now he held out the glass for each child to pick a piece of paper. “I'll have the one that's left in the glass,” he said.

“Oh, well done, Daniel,” smiled Dad. There was some giggling and hiding the bits of paper away as each child drew a name. Daniel put his piece of paper into his pocket. Then he poured himself a full glass of water and downed it in one gulp.

“Well, now you'll all have to put on your thinking caps!” laughed Mom.

“What's a thinking cap, Mommy?” queried little James. The others giggled at his serious question.

“Mom just means that we must think hard,” explained Sarah, looking wisely at her younger brother.

“Before we start to think about the gifts, let's not forget the true reason for the Season,” reminded Dad. “Let's not forget God's great gift to us and to all mankind.”

“Yes, indeed,” nodded Mom. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. That's from Isaiah chapter 9 and verse 6.”

“I love that verse!” exclaimed Daniel.

“I love the Lord,” said Grace quietly, her eyes shining.

“Why did God give us His Son?” asked young James. He was bending down to brush away a few irritating ants that were climbing up his leg.

“Good question, James. Who can help him?” responded their father. “Sarah?”

“Um,” Sarah thought hard but she wasn't sure she had the answer. She shook her head.

“Because we needed a Saviour,” Daniel answered.

“Why do we need saving, Daddy?” asked Sarah in a small voice. “I'm sorry. I've forgotten.” She rocked back on her chair in embarrassment.

“That's okay, Sweetie. We all need reminding,” her father comforted her. “Be careful you don't fall over on that chair though! Anyone know the answer?”

“Yes, Dad. We need to be saved from the punishment we all deserve because we are all sinners,” said Sophia. “I'm not a sinner!” exclaimed Sarah.

“Unfortunately you are, dear. We all are. No one is good enough for God. No one can please God. God is perfectly good, holy, righteous and true. But we are born selfish and full of pride and all kinds of sinful thoughts. From these sinful thoughts come all kinds of bad behaviour.” Dad looked kindly but seriously at his two youngest children, for this was a life and death issue. He knew that Sophia, Daniel and Grace had put their complete trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour. They had trusted in Him to save them from the punishment of eternal separation from God in hell. This punishment hangs over the head of every human being and we all deserve it. But Sarah and James did not yet understand their need for God's salvation.

“Do you remember what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us all?” asked Mom gently.

“Yes, Mom, He was born a human baby and lived a perfect life. Then He died and shed His blood on the cross to take our punishment. They buried Him but He rose from the dead on the third day,” replied Grace.

"What does it mean that Jesus rose from the dead?" asked James.

"That is called the resurrection, my boy," explained his father. "He did not stay dead. He is alive forever. This shows that His sacrifice for us was one hundred percent successful. Like getting ten out of ten for a test. So those who believe in Jesus and what He did for us are saved from the punishment they deserve. We could never be saved by what we do." Dad took the jug of cold water and thoughtfully poured a glass for Mom. She was perspiring in the heat and fanning herself with the agenda.

Dad continued explaining: "You see when the Lord Jesus willingly presented Himself as the Lamb of God to take the punishment we all deserve, God's righteous wrath was poured out on Jesus Christ on the cross. The Lord Jesus became a sacrifice in our place. God loves us all so much that He was willing to undergo the mental, emotional and physical suffering this would cost Him as God the Son and God the Father. This was so that we humans would not have to spend forever in hell, paying for our own sins. We could never ever pay for our sins ourselves and go to heaven on our own."

"That's why we need the Lord Jesus," murmured Grace.

"Yes, Gracie. Only the God-man, Jesus Christ, could fully pay the sin debt we all owed God," confirmed her mother.

"Does that mean that because Jesus Christ died for the whole world that everyone is now saved?" asked Sarah.

"No, Sarah. Although everyone can be saved. A person must put his or her trust only in what Jesus Christ alone did for us. Then that person will be saved. And at that very moment he or she will receive God's gracious gift of eternal life." Mom looked seriously at Sarah and James, trying to help them understand. She went on: "As long as we trust in ourselves we can't be saved. We have to realize we are totally unable to save ourselves. Then we must trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross."

"I get it!" exclaimed James. "I understand." His face lit up. Then he looked very serious. "If I don't believe in Jesus Christ paying for all my sin – I shall have to go to hell to pay for my own sins. Is that right, Daddy?"

"That's correct, my child," agreed his father.

"But I don't want to go to hell!" exclaimed James and Sarah at the same time.

"God doesn't want you to go to hell either!" said Mom rather loudly. "That's why He gave us God the Son to die in our place."

"So what must I do to be saved, Mommy?" asked Sarah in a trembling voice.

"*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved,*" declared her mother. "That's in the Bible. Acts 16:31. Depend on what He did for you."

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. That's John 3:16, King James Version," quoted Daniel solemnly. "That's God's promise to us. Trust Him."

"Thank you, Daniel. And that's the true Christmas gift," said their father. "Sarah and James, when this meeting is finished, go and think about what we have been saying. Then put your trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of salvation and everlasting life."

The two youngest children nodded solemnly. "Yes, Daddy. We'll do that," promised Sarah. James agreed.

PART TWO:

The Gift Of Salvation and Eternal Life



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John 19:30 (English Standard Version) When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 10:28 (English Standard Version) I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

“What are you doing, Daniel?”

Daniel was concentrating hard. He had not noticed that seven-year-old James had pushed up the garage door and come inside. Now James was standing next to him but Daniel was so busy marking off sections of pine wood with a scoring tool that he did not notice James. Daniel jumped when James spoke and he poked himself with the sharp tool. “Ouch!” He sucked his thumb to ease the pain.

“Sorry, Daniel,” apologized James. But James did not look very sorry, judging by his cheeky grin.

Daniel restrained himself from telling James what he thought of him – at that moment. “It’s my surprise Christmas gift,” he admitted, finally. “And that’s all I’m going to tell you. Otherwise the secret will be out and spoil the fun.”

“Ah, please! You can trust me, Brother. Just whisper it in my ear! I promise I won’t tell.” James’s eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Nope. Definitely not! Out, out!” Daniel shooed James out of the garage and locked the door from inside.

Then he went back to the plan that he and Dad had drawn up. He was making a special pine bookcase for Sophia’s books. He had chosen golden coloured pine wood. The shelves were of varying heights and widths. This was so that all her books, stationery, pot plants and Bible could fit easily. Sophia loved books. Daniel

smiled to himself as he pictured her delight at receiving his gift. At present, Sophia's books were stacked up on a corner of the desk that all the girls shared.

After cutting the wood, he would assemble the pieces as neatly as possible. Then he would cover the bookcase with clear varnish. This was to protect it and bring out the beauty of the pine. He couldn't wait for it to be finished. However, Daniel knew from God's word that patience was a key ingredient in his success. He also knew that God is more interested in our character than in our success. And he knew that God is most pleased by our faith. This is especially true when we have to do something difficult.

He reminded himself that his namesake in the Bible, Daniel the prophet, had shown great patience in difficult situations.

In the girls' bedroom, Grace sat at the little desk. A blank page in her sketch book lay open in front of her. On a rough piece of paper she thoughtfully began a sketch. Then she crossed it out and flipped the paper over to try again on the back. She studied a picture of lions in a book she had borrowed from the Grosvenor public library. Thoughtfully, she chewed the end of her artist's pencil and sighed.

Suddenly the door popped open. "Boo!" It was James. Grace's pencil hand jerked. A dark line spoiled the sketch she had started to draw.

"Oh, James!" she scolded. "Look what you made me do! I've spoiled my sketch. Naughty boy."

"Sorreee!" said James, smiling broadly. "But it's such fun creeping up on everyone!"

The door opened again and Sarah came in, wiping her hands on a cloth. "What are you up to, Sarah?" James bounced over to nine-year-old Sarah, who looked down on him, loftily.

"That's for me to know and for you to guess," quipped Sarah. She had on an apron that Grace had outgrown. It was worn and patched. Before Grace got it, it had belonged to Sophia. Being the youngest girl meant that almost all Sarah's clothes were old. They had been worn by her older sisters before they got to her. She resented the fact that she was the youngest sister. She dreamed of having something new. Something made just for her.

"Ah, that sounds like you're making a surprise present, Sarah. Do tell me. I won't tell! I won't tell!" James hopped around his older sister making her dizzy.

"Out, you little pest!" Sarah pushed him firmly out of the girls' bedroom and locked the door behind him.

"What a naughty child!" she remarked, as if James was so much younger.

Grace had hurriedly turned to a different sketch in her drawing book. She pretended she had been working on it all the time.

Sarah looked at her normally placid sister's tense face. She smiled. "I see that James disturbed you too, Gracie. He's bouncing at everyone in the family. He's just like Tigger in Winnie-the-Pooh."

They both laughed. There was a knock at the bedroom door. "Let me in, please!" called Sophia standing outside. Sarah let her in. Sophia was hurriedly stuffing some flowered fabric into a plastic shopping bag.

"Oh, what's that?" Sarah asked curiously.

"Ask no questions and you'll get no lies," laughed Sophia.

"Who's it for, then," persisted Sarah.

"Oh, Sarah, you're as bad as James!" declared Sophia. But she was smiling.

Sarah pouted at the comparison. “James is just a little pest. I'm civilized!” Her sisters both laughed. Sarah plopped down on her bed and stretched. “What are we going to do with James?”

“He needs to start making a Christmas gift too,” suggested Grace. “That'll keep him busy and out of our hair.”

“I'll chat to Mom about it,” promised Sophia. “In fact, I need to ask her something -” she began. She blushed and said hurriedly: “Er, something about”

Grace and Sarah laughed. “Aha! What are you trying to hide, Sophia? Something about something you're making?”

“I'm out of here,” giggled Sophia, and whisked out of the room, clutching the shopping bag. Grace and Sarah looked at each other and dissolved into giggles.

“I must say this Christmas gift thing is actually fun,” admitted Sarah.

Supper was unusually late that evening. Mom was normally fussy about making healthy meals. But tonight's supper was boerewors rolls with baked beans and bottled beetroot. Sarah sensed that something was going on. Mom and Dad kept glancing at each other and grinning.

After supper they had their usual family devotions and Bible reading before bed. They were reading through Genesis in the Old Testament and Ephesians in the New Testament. They each read a verse or two.

“Let's talk some more about God's wonderful gifts to us,” began Dad. “We have just finished chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. Did anyone notice the reference to a gift?”

“Oh, yes, Dad,” said Grace eagerly. “It's in the same verse that talks about the grace of God. One of my favourite verses. Ephesians 2, verse 8.”

“Well done, Gracie,” encouraged her father. “Well, who would like to read it?” Dad's face creased into a big grin as he saw Sarah's hand shoot up quickly. “Go for it, Sarah.”

“Ephesians 2, verse 8. New American Standard Bible. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and [1]this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God,” read Sarah in her clear voice. “There's a footnote '1' in front of the word 'this'.

“That's good,” praised Dad. “What does the footnote '1' say?”

“Footnote 1. [Ephesians 2:8](#) I.e., this salvation.” Sarah looked at her father and frowned slightly. “I don't understand.”

“Well, can someone explain this to Sarah?” Dad asked.

“Yes, I think so,” offered Daniel. “I.e. is an abbreviation that means “that is.” So, “it is the gift of God” means that this salvation is the gift of God.”

“Absolutely. Thank you, Daniel. Do you all understand that?” Dad looked at each of his children in turn. He noticed that his wife was keen to say something. “Mom?”

“Thanks, dear. Yes, I just wanted to say that some people think this means that faith is the gift of God. But when you carefully examine the Greek, it's clear that Paul means that salvation is God's gift.”

“Was the Bible written in Greek first, Mom?” Grace was surprised.

“Yes, Grace. English wasn't even a language at that time in history. Most people in the Roman Empire understood Greek.” Mom loved history. She was about to plunge into a lesson about Alexander the Great. But then Dad guided them back to the book of Ephesians.

“Let's read verses 8 to 10. Sophia will you read them this time?” suggested their father.

Sophia positioned her Bible so that she could see the passage clearly. “Right, reading verses 8 to 10 from Ephesians chapter 2, New American Standard Bible: For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

“Dad,” observed Daniel, who loved working with his hands, “it says we are God's workmanship. Like a master carpenter creating a piece of furniture. Wow!”

“Or an artist painting a beautiful work of art,” added Grace.

“What about a chef making a delicious Black Forest cake?” contributed Sarah.

“You're making me hungry,” chuckled James. Sophia poked his stomach and he doubled up with laughter.

“Yes, indeed, like all of those lovely things, but much, much better!” Mom smiled at them. “Who better than our Creator to make us sinful human beings into something beautiful!”

James frowned. “But how does He do that, Mommy? Sin makes us so ugly.”

“Good point, James,” agreed Daniel, before Mom could respond. “But He is a miracle working God, after all!”

“Sarah, do you remember how a person can get saved?” gently questioned her father.

“Yes, Daddy,” she responded confidently. “By putting your faith in Jesus Christ who died for each one of us, was buried and rose again.”

“Good answer!” confirmed Dad enthusiastically. “That's what verse 8 tells: For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Now, verse 9 tells us why this gift of salvation has to be through faith by the grace of God. Who can help us understand?”

“I can Dad!” Sophia was bursting to give the answer. “It's so that no one can boast! That means that God gets the glory He alone deserves. He gave His Son. God the Son gave His life. We get this gift of salvation purely because of what God has done.”

“Correct, my child. Remember, the only way we can be saved is to believe in what Jesus Christ has done. And to believe that God counted His work on the cross enough to save anyone who trusts in what God has done.”

“What if I *try* to be good enough for God? Like if I promise I'll never disobey Mom and Dad again. And I'll never lie or steal?” asked James.

“You forgot to say lie or steal *again*,” put in Sarah, who just had to remind James.

The family laughed. James wriggled uncomfortably. “Okay, you're right,” he admitted. “So doesn't God look at that and see I'm trying to be good?”

“Well, then, if those things could save you from the punishment you deserve,” Dad said seriously, “then you could boast. But Ephesians tells us plainly that no one can boast. Only God deserves the glory for salvation.”

“And Dad,” burst in Daniel, “if we could do anything to earn heaven, then it wouldn't be a gift!”

“I was thinking,” added Sophia, “that if anything we could do or promise or say was good enough for God,

then the Lord Jesus didn't have to die on the cross! But God knew we were hopeless sinners who could never be good enough for heaven. So He gave us His beloved, perfect, righteous Son. So that we might live forever with Him in glory.”

“And Jesus Christ took our sin on Himself. Then God gives us His righteousness when we believe on His Son. Wow! What amazing grace!” declared Grace.

“You know what?” shared Sarah, shyly.

“What, dear?” asked Mom.

“I understand. I know I'm never going to be good enough for God. I know I need His righteousness. I understand that He alone can save me because He died for me and rose again. I know that if I choose to trust in myself I shall go to hell,” she confided.

“So what now, Sweetie?” asked Dad gently.

“So right now I am trusting in Jesus Christ alone to save me.” Sarah smiled and it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. The family erupted in expressions of joy: Daniel clapped, Dad "high fived" her, and Mom and her sisters gave her big hugs. Just little James sat still in his chair looking thoughtful.

“Why did God make hell?” James asked.

“James, that's a really deep question. God made hell not for humans but for the devil and the angels who followed him and rebelled against God,” Mom explained.

“So why do humans get sent to hell?” James continued.

“Actually, only people who choose not to believe God's way of salvation go to hell,” corrected Mom. “Only the sin of unbelief sends someone to hell. Jesus Christ told His disciples this in John chapter 16, verses 8 to 11. He also said that we need *His righteousness* to get to heaven. When He rose again, because He was completely righteous, He went back to heaven to sit down at the Father's right hand. All who trust in Christ to save them are put into Christ spiritually. God sees them through Christ the righteous One. The book of Ephesians tells us who we are in Christ.”

Dad had opened his Bible to John 16 verse 11. He explained: “When someone chooses to not believe God for salvation, that person stays under the devil's control. Remember, only God gets the glory. Satan wants God's glory. He deceives humans into thinking they don't need God and that they deserve glory themselves. Now, God has judged the devil. That's what the Lord says in John 16:11. Jesus Christ defeated Satan through His work on the cross. So if someone resists God and rejects His offer of eternal life, that person receives the same judgment as the devil.”

“I think this illustration might help,” offered Mom. “At about the time of World War 1 -”

“History lesson alert!” chuckled young James, who could never be serious for long.

“Shoo, cheeky child,” scolded Sophia. But she smiled at him.

“As I was saying, near the time of World War 1, a huge ship was built. It was called the Titanic. Some people said it was unsinkable. It looked very safe. But on its first voyage, the ship sank. Over a thousand people were drowned. Apparently, the captain went down with the ship,” Mom continued.

“That's interesting, Mommy, but I don't see what it has to do with the devil,” complained young James.

“Patience, little Brother!” urged Daniel. “Let Mom finish.”

“Thanks, Daniel,” smiled Mom. “Well, this world is like the Titanic. Most people think it will go on forever. But the captain of this world, that is -”

“That's Satan, isn't it?” suggested Sarah, who was starting to get the picture.

“That's right, Sarah. Most people don't realize that the devil is behind most of the things they believe,” Mom went on. “Well, because Satan is going down with this world, those who trust his lies are going down too. Like the people in the Titanic.”

“And only Jesus Christ is the life boat!” cried Sarah.

“Exactly so!” grinned Dad. “So, James, are you getting in the life boat too?”

James smiled his naughty smile. “I'll think about it,” he promised.

“Please do, my son,” said Mom very seriously. She got up from the table and gave him a big hug.

PART THREE:

The Gift Of The Love Of God



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John 3:16-18 (English Standard Version) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Sophia sat under the flamboyant tree in the back yard. The early morning sun shone through the orangey-red flowers so that they looked like they were on fire. A few tiny leaves drifted down and settled on Sophia's Bible. She blew them off and went on, reading and talking to the Lord.

A small figure crept out of the back door and came up behind Sophia. “Boo!” It was James of course. Sophia pressed her hand over her thumping heart. “Oh, James! You gave me such a fright!”

“Sorrreee, Sophee,” sniggered James. “But that was such fun!”

“Just don't do that to Grandpa and Grandma, okay? It's bad for your heart.”

James grew serious. “Really? I don't want to hurt anyone. I didn't think it could make you sick.”

“You are forgiven, little Brother. Come sit with me.” Sophia put her arm out and James slipped on to a chair next to her.

“Whatcha reading?” he asked. He liked trying to talk like cartoon characters.

“I'm reading about the Lord Jesus Christ telling Nicodemus that he must be born again.”

“How can you be born again?” James was puzzled. “You can't go back into your mother's body can you?”

Sophia threw back her head and laughed. “You, know, James, that's exactly what Nicodemus said!”

“So what did Jesus Christ tell him?” asked James.

“He said that being born again is something the Holy Spirit does to believers. Look at this verse.” Sophia pointed to verse 16 of John, chapter 3. “I'll read it, Jamie.”

“Thanks, Sophy,” said James.

Sophia read slowly, hoping James could take it in: “John chapter 3, verse 16. New American Standard Version. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.”

“I didn't know God loved the whole world?” queries James.

“Well, that's what the Bible says. And because He loves the whole world He gave His Son. Remember, we were talking about gifts?” reminded Sophia.

James nodded eagerly. “You know,” he admitted, “I just don't know what gift I'm going to make. Please help me.”

“Of course I will,” promised Sophia. “Who are you making it for?”

“Grace,” whispered James. He looked around in case someone was listening to him. “I thought we weren't supposed to tell.”

“Well I need to know so I can help you with ideas. Grace is easy, James. Just draw her a picture. She'll love it!”

“But that's boring,” complained James. “A picture is a good idea. But something different.”

“Hmm,” Sophia spent a few minutes praying and thinking. “I've got it! You remember those hand prints we all made when we were little? Well, why not ask Mom for some paint and then dip a leaf in the paint and make a pattern?”

James's face brightened. “I like that! I'll ask Mom for all different colours. I'll make it look like a tree.”

“There you go, little Brother! Beautiful idea!” encouraged Sophia.

“Wow! Thanks, Sophy.” James rushed off to ask his mother for paint and cardboard. Sophia smiled. She loved all her brothers and sisters, but James had a special place in her heart. She had helped her mother care for him as a baby.

At the breakfast table there was a sense of excitement and anticipation. It was Grace and Sarah's turn to cook. The delicious smell of French toast frying in the pan filled the small room.

“Mmm, looks yummy, thank you girls,” praised Dad, accepting a plate from Sarah.

“Sugar or salt, Dad?” asked Sophia, holding out both.

“Salt, please Sophy. I'm sweet enough!” The family laughed delightedly.

“Today, your mother and I have something to do away from home. We shall be away all morning. We are trusting that you will occupy yourselves with the chores you have, the gifts you are making and to continue with your holiday reading. Please listen to Sophia and Daniel. Phone us if you have any problems. We trust

you will all be responsible and not get up to any mischief.” Dad looked pointedly at James.

There was a chorus of “Yes, Dad,” “Sure, Dad,” and “You can trust us!” from the children. James squirmed a bit in his seat but gave his father a thumbs up as he munched his crisp French toast.

It was Sophia and James's turn to clear the table and wash and dry the breakfast dishes. Daniel set about mopping the floors in the kitchen and bathroom. Grace and Sarah tidied and dusted the lounge.

“Something's going on with Mom and Dad,” Sarah guessed, as she lovingly dusted Mom's small display cabinet.

“Why do you say that, Sarah?” asked Grace. She picked up a pot plant to dust underneath it.

“They winked at each other at breakfast after Dad told us they were going out,” replied Sarah.

“That's not much to go on,” disagreed Grace.

“I just know they are up to something! I think it's got to do with Christmas,” declared Sarah. She rubbed hard at the cabinet's short legs.

“Sounds like wishful thinking,” laughed her sister. “Don't get your hopes up!”

After the kitchen was cleaned, Sophia and James went outside again. On the patio table they spread out the art supplies Mom had given James. Sophia patiently showed James how to coat a few leaves with paint. She made him practise before working on the picture he would give Grace. Garden birds chirped. The hot sun moved higher overhead but the breeze from Durban bay cooled them down.

“Please tell me more about God's love,” asked James.

Sophia smiled. “Well, let me run inside and get my Bible. I won't be long.”

Going inside through the kitchen door, she discovered Sarah poring over a recipe book. Sarah started when she saw Sophia and quickly turned to another page. They both laughed.

“Relax,” said Sophia. “I promise I won't look and I won't tell!” Giggling Sophia ran to the door to get her Bible from their bedroom. “Be careful, little Sister and don't burn yourself. Call me if you need help.” Sarah nodded.

Opening the bedroom door hurriedly, Sophia surprised Grace, sitting at their desk, sketching. Quickly Grace tried to cover her sketch.

“Oh, boy! This household is so funny! You can't go anywhere without disturbing someone making a surprise gift!” laughed Sophia, as she quickly took her New American Standard Bible from the desk and turned to go.

Grace smiled back. “Well, at least James has stopped bouncing everyone! Now it's you!” They both chuckled.

Back in the garden with James, Sophia turned to 1 John 1. She read the first part of verse 3: “See how great a love the Father has given us, that we would be called children of God; and in fact we are. John is talking about the special love God gives us when we are born again. He becomes our Father. We become His children.”

James frowned. “But I thought we were all God's children anyway.”

“That's what a lot of people say, James,” answered Sophia. “But it's not what the Bible teaches.”

“So why do people say that, then?” queried James. He carefully placed a wet, red leaf on the cardboard Mom

had given him.

“That's looking good, little Brother,” complimented Sophia. “To answer your question; people don't take the time to read the Bible and just make up their own ideas about God.”

“Oh, okay. So, tell me again how I can get born into God's family.” James placed a yellow leaf next to the red one.

“It all goes back to trusting in the Lord Jesus' death for us on the cross. Remember, as humans, we are born sinners. We all deserve God's punishment because of our sins and rebellion against Him. But, God loves the whole world, as John 3:16 tells us. So God the Father gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to take our punishment. Then God the Son shed His blood for us, to pay for all our sins. And God raised Him from the dead. So anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ and what He did is forgiven by God. Then He places those who believe into Christ. And He gives them Christ's own righteousness. And He gives them eternal life. Believers will never be judged by God for their sins because Jesus Christ was judged in their place,” explained Sophia.

James frowned, trying to take it all in. “I don't really understand,” he admitted.

“No worries, little Brother. I'll keep praying for you to understand,” said Sophia gently, giving him a hug.

“Thanks, Sis. You're the best!” James wriggled out of her hug and “high fived” her instead. They both laughed.

“That picture is going to look really good, James. I'm going to leave you to work on it by yourself now. There's something I have to do.” Sophia winked at James and went back inside.

Sophia peeped into the kitchen. At the kitchen table Sarah was measuring out sugar into a mixing bowl. Sophia softly knocked at the door. “Hi, Sister. It's just me,” Sophia said, trying not to disturb Sarah.

Sarah went on measuring sugar into the bowl, counting as she did so. “Thanks, Sophia. Thoughtful of you to not give me a fright. Where's James?”

“He's outside working away on his present,” revealed Sophia. “Um, please don't let Grace go outside if you can help it.”

“Ah, that's giving secrets away!” Sarah chuckled. “Okay. Maybe I'll go bounce James myself.”

“Please don't,” begged Sophia. “He's trying so hard to be good!” Sophia turned to go. “By the way, that's an awful lot of sugar. Must be for a little boy who loves sweets!”

“I'm busted,” groaned Sarah, pretending to be sad. Then she smiled. “Good guess. How much longer do I have before he comes inside?”

Sophia looked back out of the door. James was deep in concentration, carefully placing clusters of coloured leaves on the cardboard. “Probably an hour, I'd say. Where is Daniel, by the way?”

Sarah checked the recipe book and added half a teaspoon of salt to the bowl. “Um, Daniel. Actually, I don't know. He's disappeared again. He's probably in the garage.”

Sophia frowned. “What do you mean, 'disappeared'?”

“Oh, he hides away in the garage for hours at a time. Supposedly helping Dad. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” Sarah grinned at Sophia who smiled back.

“Definitely, Sister,” agreed Sophia. “He's got to be working on a -”

“Surprise Christmas gift!” they both laughed at the same time.

Back in the girls' bedroom, Grace was really into her pencil sketch of Daniel in the lions' den. She was so deep in concentration that she didn't notice when Sophia came in. Quietly, Sophia took a plastic shopping bag from her place in the built-in cupboard. Just as quietly, she left the room.

Downstairs, Sophia made herself comfortable in front of Mom's old sewing machine. Reaching into the shopping bag, she took out the pretty, flowered fabric. The main colours were pink and mauve. Mom had given her permission to use whatever she needed to sew up her gift.

Sophia had found a free pattern online for a girl's frilly apron with a halter neck. She could just picture Sarah wearing it. Now it was her chance to work hard while Sarah was busy in the kitchen.

Delicious smells drifted through the open kitchen door into the back garden. James straightened up and rubbed his back. For about an hour he had been very busy placing leaves without splashing the paint. Now the smell of something nice made his tummy rumble.

"Biscuits?" he wondered aloud. He thought it was about time he had a break. The idea of a sweet treat was very tempting.

But, as he turned to go, the hadeda that lived in the flamboyant tree let fall a sloppy dropping right in the middle of James's artwork.

Hadedas are African ibises that are common in Durban, although they are wild birds. They are big, mostly grey and make very loud, raucous noises. They often roost in trees in suburban gardens.

Horried and angry, James yelled a very rude word at the big bird. The hadeda wasn't afraid of James and simply cawed back. It cocked its head to one side and looked at James out of one beady eye.

Sarah had heard the commotion from the kitchen. "O-oh," she thought to herself. "I'd better hurry before James comes inside looking for a cloth or something." Sarah poured her very hot, cooked toffee mixture into a flat, greased oven tray. Then she whisked it to the kitchen door to find a safe place in the girls' bedroom for it to cool down. But on her way through the kitchen door she nearly bumped into Grace.

"Wow! That was close! I nearly burned you, Gracie! Thank the Lord for His mercy," Sarah exclaimed. She sounded like a junior version of their mother.

"That's okay, Sis, don't worry," reassured Grace. "I suppose that's your Christmas present?"

"How did you guess! Yes, of course. I thought I'd find somewhere in the bedroom to let it cool down. What do you think?" asked Sarah.

"Mmm," said Grace, thoughtfully. "I guess that's for James."

Sarah had to smile. "Of course. The young child with the sweet tooth. He's in the garden swearing at the hadeda. I've got to get the gift somewhere safe before he sees it."

"Swearing at the hadeda? Whatever for?" Grace peered out of the back door. "Oh, he was making something and the bird must have pooped on it!" She giggled. "Shame, I'll go and help him."

"No, no!" Sarah stopped Grace going outside. Grace looked puzzled. "No, please Grace, won't you find a safe spot for the toffee in our bedroom? I still have to clean up the kitchen."

"That's true," agreed Grace. Toffee mixture had slopped on to the top of the stove. The sugar packet was open on the kitchen table. The mixing bowl and various utensils cluttered the table. The kitchen was a mess.

Sarah sighed with relief as her kind sister removed the tray of toffee and went back upstairs. "Whew! That was close!" she thought to herself, "and that was killing two birds with one stone." She smiled happily as she

realized she had just kept her and James's gifts secret. And she had used a proverb. She felt quite grown up.

Outside, James had angrily scrunched up his ruined artwork. He was collecting together all the paint, the rest of the cardboard and the leftover leaves. He piled it all up in his arms. Then he stomped over to the kitchen door.

“Hi, James!” It was Daniel peering out from under the garage door. “Did I hear you yelling just now? What's wrong?” Daniel pulled the garage door down and walked towards his little brother.

“It's that horrid hadeda! It made a big poop right on my Christmas gift!”

“Oh that's such a shame,” commiserated his older brother. “Come to the garage. It's the safest place to work without being disturbed. Is it very bad, little Brother? Can you save it?”

“Nah, I'll just have to start again,” sighed James. But he felt much better that Daniel had checked up on him. He liked the idea of the two of them working together in the garage. It was a man's place to work. He straightened up and gave Daniel a big grin. “Thanks, Bru.”

Daniel playfully patted James's curly head. “No problem. Come. There are no irritating birds in the garage. And no sisters either.” He winked at James.

PART FOUR:

The Gift Of God The Holy Spirit



https://media.freebibleimages.org/stories/FB_Pentecost/overview-thumbnails/001-pentecost.jpg?1635949421

Ephesians 1:13-14 (English Standard Version) In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

A few days' later, from the girls' bedroom window, Grace saw Daniel and James go into the garage and shut the door. She heaved a sigh of relief. Finally Daniel would be out of the house!

For some reason, Daniel had been in and out of the girls' bedroom, gazing at the desk and looking through Sophia's books and plants. Grace guessed he was making a gift for Sophia that had something to do with her things. Maybe it was a cupboard.

Anyway, Grace was grateful that both the boys had now shut themselves into the garage. Now she could try to finish her painting of Daniel in the den of lions. She opened the drawer in the desk where she kept her art supplies. Out came her watercolour paints and a sheet of special watercolour paper. She fished under her mattress and carefully removed her pencil sketch. She examined it critically, looking for mistakes. Grace's dream was to become a full time artist one day.

Grace put another CD of praise music into the little CD player the girls had been given in 2018. Soon, relaxed, she was carefully copying her sketch onto the special paper. Later, she would bring out the drama of the scene with her watercolour paints.

In the garage, the two brothers were working hard at getting their presents ready on time. Christmas Day was next week and so all the children were feeling under pressure.

“So won't Sophia's bookcase fit into the girls' room, Dan?” asked James, anxiously. Working together on their gifts had brought them closer. James was almost as proud of his brother's woodwork as he was of his

own leafy picture.

“No, it will fit, James. But the girls will have to agree to move some things around a bit,” Daniel reassured his young brother. “Hey, don't look so down. It'll be okay!” They both laughed.

“How's your masterpiece coming along, little Brother?” Daniel inquired.

James held up his bright, leafy, tree picture. He looked worried. “I'm not sure she'll like it,” he sighed.

“She'll definitely like it,” beamed Daniel. “It just needs a firm base and frame. The wet paint has warped the cardboard a bit. You need to let it dry and then flatten it under something heavy that won't damage it. Let's see what we can find to make a nice frame. Dad's got a lot of off cuts of wood that he lets me use.”

James's face brightened. Then it fell again. “But, Dan, if you make it, it won't be *my* gift anymore.”

“No worries, little Brother, I won't make it. I'll just show you what to do. You'll enjoy it.”

At the sewing machine in her parents' bedroom, Sophia was near to tears. The apron she had chosen had turned out to be much more difficult than she had thought. For example, she had had to learn how to make and attach frills neatly. She also had had to make a halter to go around Sarah's neck. Getting the curve of the halter just right had been a nightmare for Sophia. She had had to undo it and try again three times before she got it right. Learning new skills was valuable, but it slowed her down.

Mom came in with some dry laundry. She noticed Sophia's flushed face and quivering lip. “What's the matter, dear?” asked Mom tenderly, massaging Sophia's tense neck muscles.

“I'll never finish this in time, Mommy! I should have chosen something less complicated!” wailed Sophia, giving in to all her pent up worry and frustration. Her mother held her until she had cried it all out.

“Come, let's pray and ask our heavenly Father for His grace and peace and joy,” comforted Mom.

All Sophia's crying had given her hiccoughs. “And, hic! And wisdom, hic!”

“Absolutely, dearest,” smiled Mom.

Together they prayed and were filled with the peace of the Lord that passes human understanding. “Wow! I feel so much better, Mom. How does God do that?” exclaimed Sophia.

“Do what, Sophy?” asked Mom. She had picked up the unfinished apron and was looking at it thoughtfully.

“Give me peace like that? I was so upset but now I feel calm and happy.” Sophia threw a handful of soggy tissues into the little bin under Mom's sewing table.

“It's the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.” Suddenly Mom's face broke into a smile. “Let me teach you about another of God's amazing gifts to His children, Sophy. But before I do that, I think I can help you make a couple of changes that will speed up your sewing. You see this edge over here?”

And Mom took some time to help Sophia understand how to complete the apron more easily. Sophia moved closer to Mom on the bed so she could understand what to do.

Dad came into the bedroom a little while later. He smiled to see his wife and his oldest daughter with their heads together, poring over the apron. Silver hairs had begun to highlight his wife's beautiful head of hair. Sophia's curly hair was dark and glossy. He went out quietly, not wanting to disturb them.

Lunch time seemed to come too soon as far as the family, except Dad, were concerned. In fact they had all forgotten the time. Daniel and James were working busily in the garage. Grace was absorbed in her painting, Sophia in her sewing and Sarah was hunting everywhere for a suitable container for her toffee. Mom was

quietly finishing the chores the others had neglected so as to get on with their gifts.

So Dad decided that lunch would be a do-it-yourself occasion out in the yard. He carried iced rooibos tea with lemon and sugar, pears, apples, bread, butter, peanut butter and jam, out to the patio table. Having chased away the irritated hadeda, he set it all out under the tree. Then he called the family.

As they tucked into their simple lunch, Mom brought up the subject of the gift of the Holy Spirit. "James, please run and fetch my Bible from the lounge," she said. Off sprinted James, his mouth full of a big bite from his peanut butter and jam sandwich.

"Sophia and I were talking about another of God's gifts," explained Mom. "The Holy Spirit helps us as believers to walk by faith. Then we can experience God's peace and joy even when things aren't going well. Oh, thank you, James." She took her study Bible from James and wiped off a bit of jam from the cover. Mom didn't scold him though.

James grinned a peanut buttery grin at his mother and dived into the rest of his sandwich.

"Look what the Bible says here," continued Mom. "John 7:38-39. New American Standard Bible. The one who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' But this He said in reference to the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

"What does that mean, Mom?" asked Sarah while she cut a juicy pear into quarters.

"It means that first Jesus Christ had to die on the cross for our sins, be buried and rise from the dead on the third day. Then, after His ascension back to Father God in glory, He would send God the Holy Spirit to live inside those who believed in Him."

"That looks like God is three gods?" frowned James.

"To us humans it is hard to understand, James," answered Dad. "But God is one God, yet at the same time He is three distinct persons. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. I must admit I can't understand it. But I also can't understand how the human eye works, I don't understand quantum physics, I don't understand how babies form in their mothers' wombs from just one cell. But that doesn't mean that these things aren't true, just because *I* have limited understanding."

"Mmm," murmured James, his mouth full of sandwich. He nodded his head in agreement.

While they were eating, Sophia told the others about how the peace of God had comforted her earlier when she had thought she wouldn't be able to finish her Christmas gift. "Mom said that the peace came from God the Holy Spirit. Before we prayed I was so upset but afterwards I felt so content," shared Sophia.

"Isn't the Holy Spirit called the Comforter, Mom?" asked Grace. "And He comforted Sophy just now?"

Mom paged through the Bible. "Yes, Gracie, that's here in John 16:7."

Mom flipped back a couple of pages. "And if we go to John 14:7, the Lord Jesus calls Him the Spirit of truth. He promises there that the Holy Spirit would be in His disciples."

Mom ran her finger down the page. "And in verse 16 of chapter 14, the Lord promised to ask Father God to give the disciples "another Helper" to live with them forever. You know, I prayed for wisdom to help Sophy with her present and He helped me to help her!"

"So who is the other Helper, then? If there's *another* Helper," asked Sarah, puzzled.

"Good question, Sarah," praised Dad. "That shows you are paying attention."

Dad explained further: "While He was on earth, the Lord Jesus, Himself, helped His disciples. But when He went back to the Father, He wouldn't be with them physically. So He said He would send the Spirit of God to be with them to help them. The Helper is one of the names for the Holy Spirit. The Bible gives us many names for God. Each name tells us something about who God is and what He does."

"But, Dad, isn't the Holy Spirit in all believers, not just those eleven disciples?" questioned Daniel.

"Absolutely, Daniel! Yes, He is. As soon as a person puts his or her trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, the Holy Spirit seals them and guarantees that they will live forever with God. That's in Ephesians chapter 1."

"How do I know that happened to me when I believed?" asked Sarah, brushing bread crumbs off her lap. "I didn't feel Him do anything to me."

"That's an excellent question," smiled her mother. "Our faith is in what God's word tells us. We can't trust our feelings. If God's word says in Ephesians 1:13-14 that the Holy Spirit seals us when we believe, until God takes us home to be with Him forever, then we believe that that is true. God does not lie. His word is true."

An eruption of barking disturbed their conversation. Hunter, their feisty little Jack Russell cross Bull Terrier flashed across the back yard like a white streak. He was in hot pursuit of a family of monkeys that had come into their yard from the neighbours.

"Oh – oh, monkey business!" laughed Dad.

The grey vervet monkeys, like the hadedas, were part of the natural wildlife of the Bluff. Most people tolerated them although almost everyone complained of the damage they could do if a property was left unguarded.

Hunter was a great little guard dog and chased them religiously every time they dared to enter the family's yard, let alone the house.

The monkeys were swinging over the neighbours' concrete fence and into the family's big avocado tree. The tree bore early fruit and the baby avocados, though too hard and bitter for humans, were a snack for the monkeys.

Hunter, his pink tongue lolling, was jumping up and down under the avocado tree, growling ferociously. The male monkeys barked back while the animals filled up on the baby avocados. A couple of the female monkeys had babies clutching on to their backs, hanging on for dear life, as their mothers launched themselves into the tree from the fence. One mother missed the branch she had aimed for, but grabbed on to a lower branch – and safety.

"Oh, I pray for those monkeys every time they come in!" exclaimed Sophia. "I couldn't bear it if Hunter actually got hold of one of them, especially the babies."

"Their mothers don't seem to care," commented Sarah. "Look how they have to hang on."

The monkeys tired of the avocado tree and swung nimbly across to the row of banana trees near the fence. Hunter was insensed by their cheeky behaviour and raced back and forth under the banana trees, barking his head off. The bananas weren't fruiting, so, after grubbing along the trunks and the fronds for insects, the troop leaped away into the lemon tree owned by the neighbours on the other side of the property.

After yapping out insults and warnings, the little dog trotted up to the family and lay down panting, under the table. Grace took the last apples out of the bowl and poured in some water for Hunter. The little dog lapped thirstily, then rubbed his head against her legs.

"He's saying "thank you" to you Grace," smiled Daniel. He bent down and scratched behind Hunter's ears. "Good doggy!"

Dad looked thoughtful. "I've heard a wonderful illustration of the way God keeps us eternally secure, from the moment we believe," he said. "Before the monkeys disturbed us, we were talking about the Holy Spirit sealing us until the Lord takes us home to heaven to be with Him forever. In John 10:38-39 the Lord explains that believers are kept by both God the Father and God the Son. Some people call this the double grip of grace. So it is impossible for believers to be lost once they put their faith in Jesus Christ."

"What has that to do with monkeys, Dad?" asked Daniel, puzzled.

"Well, you saw the way those baby monkeys had to hang on to their mothers?" reminded Dad. They all nodded.

Dad went on: "This illustration compares that to the way baby kangaroos are kept safe in their mothers' tummy pouches. Baby monkeys have to hang on so they don't fall off and -"

"And get killed by dogs!" interrupted Sophia.

"Yes, exactly, Sophy," agreed Dad. "But kangaroo babies are kept safely in their mothers' pouches. Actually inside their mothers' bodies. And it's like that for us as believers. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit all keep us safe. We don't have to hang on to them, like the poor monkey babies, we are placed by the Holy Spirit into Christ, the moment we believe. And there we are kept by the power of God until we reach heaven."

"I don't understand," said James. "You all believe, but you are all here. It doesn't look like you are in Jesus Christ."

"Good point, Jamie," encouraged his mother. "It's a spiritual position. It is true but we can't see it through the eyes of our bodies. God's word tells us that the Holy Spirit places believers into Christ. So we take Him at His word, even though we can't see it and it sounds strange to us."

"God said it, so I believe it and that settles it," quoted Daniel grinning. The family laughed happily.

Grace sang: "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, Just to take Him at His Word; Just to rest upon His promise, And to know, 'Thus saith the Lord!'"

The family joined in the chorus: "Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him! How I've proved Him o'er and o'er; Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus! Oh, for grace to trust Him more!"

"I love that beautiful old song! Thanks, Grace," exclaimed Sophia, her eyes shining.

Lunch was over. The family quickly cleared the table, the hadeda flapped back into the flamboyant tree and the backyard was left to doze in the hot afternoon sun.

In the main bedroom the children's parents were disturbed in a quiet discussion by Sophia knocking at the door.

"Oh, so sorry to disturb you both," she apologized when Dad opened the door. "I just wondered whether I could work on my Christmas gift?"

"Of course you can," laughed Dad. "Do you need the sewing machine?"

"Yes, please," nodded Sophia. "I want to try to finish the frills today."

Her parents smiled at her and left her alone to get on with her work. "Let's see if we can discuss this in private in the garage," suggested Dad.

However, the garage door seemed to be locked from the inside. "What?" exclaimed Dad. Then he laughed.

"Knock, knock!"

"Who's there?" came Daniel's muffled voice through the door.

Dad winked at Mom and replied, "Boo."

They heard James say to Daniel: "That's supposed to be what I say!"

Mom giggled. Dad tried again: "Knock, knock?"

Daniel joined in the game: "Who's there?"

"Boo," answered Dad.

"Boo who?" responded Daniel.

"Ah shame, don't cry," laughed Dad.

They heard a scrabbling sound where the inside lock was. Then James's flushed face appeared below the garage door as he heaved it up. "Thanks, Jamie," smiled Mom.

She and Dad walked over to the almost completed bookcase. "That's impressive, Daniel," praised his father. "It just needs a couple of coats of varnish and it'll be perfect! You're a good carpenter."

Daniel beamed with pleasure. James brought over his picture and the frame he was working on for his parents' approval. "That's beautiful, James!" exclaimed Mom, sincerely proud of his artwork.

"I see you are being trained by a skillful carpenter," grinned Dad. "Well done, boys!"

After hearing how the frame was to be completed, Mom and Dad withdrew to leave their sons to work on their own.

"Well," sighed Mom, "it seems we have no private place to discuss *our* Christmas gift project."

Dad put his arm around her. "So we'll just have to hang out in the back yard with the hadeda." His eyes twinkled merrily.

They sat down close together under the flamboyant tree.

"Hah, hah, hah!" screeched the hadeda. With a beating of its big, greyish wings it flapped away to perch on the roof of their house. "Hah!" it croaked loudly, turning an accusing eye on them.

"Oh, dear," chuckled Mom. "Now we've disturbed the hadeda too!" Dad threw his head back and laughed.

"Anyway," said Mom, "have I told you what my mother suggested about a special family treat?"

"No, darling, but does she realize how cash strapped we are?" asked Dad. He leant forward, with his elbows on the patio table. He looked troubled.

"Yes, she asked me outright. I couldn't lie to her, could I?" confessed Mom.

"No, of course not! So what did she propose?" Dad wanted to know.

"Well, she thought uShaka Marine World would be perfect and -" began Mom.

"You must be joking! That will cost an arm and a leg! She -" spluttered Dad. He threw his hands in the air to express his frustration.

"Shh! The children will hear. Calm down, dear. I haven't finished," Mom cautioned.

Dad sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of. Anyway, let's hear your mother's idea."

"She's being so kind. She knows we are struggling and she's going to see what she and my father can do themselves and at church to make this possible. Shh! Let me finish, dear." Mom laughed as Dad began to splutter again.

"I just don't like the idea of charity," objected Dad.

"That sounds like a bit of pride talking!" Mom said, wagging her finger at Dad. He made a face.

She went on, "Remember how we were saying that the Lord allows or puts us in difficult situations to humble us and make us more like His Son?"

"Okay. I get it," agreed Dad. "Ouch!" Then he laughed, relaxed and put his arm tenderly around Mom. "You're the best wife a man could have, my darling." He smiled down at her as she sat close to him.

"And you are a man after God's own heart," praised Mom.

Grace happened to look out of her bedroom window right then and smiled to see her mother and father having a quiet moment together under the beautiful flamboyant tree.

PART FIVE:

The Gifts Of The Wise Men



https://media.freebibleimages.org/stories/FB_ED_Wise_Men/overview-thumbnails/007-ed-wise-men.jpg?1613597086

Matthew 2:10-11 (English Standard Version) When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

There was a pounding on the girls' bedroom door. Sarah snuggled down and pulled the sheet over her head. Sophia groaned and peered at her alarm clock. It was only five o'clock. Being summer in Durban, the sun was already shining. A brilliant shaft of sunlight spilled into the bedroom through a gap in the curtains.

Grace smiled knowingly and called, "Is that you, James?"

"Yebo!" yelled James through the keyhole. "It's Christmas morning in case you ladies have forgotten! Time for gifts!"

Sarah muttered something about irritating little brothers and tried to go back to sleep. Sophia and Grace laughed.

"Come in Jamie," invited Grace, kindly. "The door's not locked. Thanks for knocking first."

"Knocking?" commented Sarah sarcastically. "I thought he was going to break the door down!" The others laughed.

James bounced in, fairly bursting with excitement. "It's here at last! Christmas morning and time for gifts!"

In the kitchen Mom was cooking up a storm. As the children crowded into the kitchen they could smell bacon sizzling and bread toasting. Dad had all the coffee mugs out in a row and was filling them. "Merry

Christmas!" he greeted them.

"We thought we'd have an early breakfast before the special Christmas church service," explained Mom.

"Somehow we knew that you all would be up really early today," teased Dad, winking at them. "So we thought we would have devotions after breakfast and open the gifts before church."

Although bacon and eggs was a rare breakfast treat, the children, James especially, gobbled it down as fast as they could.

"The presents aren't going anywhere, kids!" Dad laughed. "Relax and enjoy your food."

After the breakfast was finished and the kitchen cleaned, the family gathered around the big dining room table in the lounge. The Nativity Scene that the family had made a couple of years earlier, took up a third of the table. Looking at it reminded them that Christmas was about the greatest gift of all: the gift of the Son of God in human form. Come to earth as our Saviour.

They opened their Bibles to continue reading Matthew's record of the birth of the Messiah Y'shua, called in English, Jesus the Christ. In chapter two they had read about the arrival in Jerusalem of the wise men from the East. Now they continued the account from verse 11. They read about the wise men worshipping the Son of God and presenting to Him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

"Does anyone know what these gifts signified? Why they were given? Why these three things?" asked Dad. "Yes, Sarah."

"Gold sounds like it is for someone special," guessed Sarah.

"Yes, that's part of it," agreed Dad. "But how special?"

"Doesn't gold speak of royalty and glory, Dad?" asked Daniel.

"Yes, I would agree with that, Daniel. Only very rich and powerful people could afford gold. Truly that is a fitting gift for the King of kings, the One born to rule not just Israel but the whole earth one day."

"What is frankincense?" asked James.

"That's a special substance used by the Jewish priesthood to make incense to burn before the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem," explained Mom.

"So the wise men were saying that Jesus Christ would be a priest?" asked Sophia. "But I thought that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. And only men from the tribe of Levi could be priests?"

"Excellent point, Sophy," praised her father. "But we know that Jesus Christ is no ordinary priest. The book of Hebrews explains this. Unfortunately, we don't have time to study that now. Jesus Christ is the ultimate great High Priest according to a different order." Dad smiled at the puzzled faces around him. "Next year we shall study the book of Hebrews and help you understand."

"Does anyone know what special offering Jesus Christ made?" questioned Mom.

Grace's hand shot up. "I know! He offered Himself as a sacrifice. By dying for our sins."

"Correct, Grace. And why would He do that?" asked Mom, hoping that James would really understand what Jesus Christ had done for him. To Mom's great delight, James answered.

"He died in our place to save us from paying for our sins forever in hell," declared James.

"Absolutely! Thank you, James," affirmed Dad. "This is God's great free gift of salvation. He died for each

one of us, for all the world. Then He was buried and then He rose again! And those who believe on Him will also be raised from the dead."

"And we'll live with Him forever and ever and ever!" James was bursting with excitement at the thought. He jumped off his chair and rushed over to his mother. Giving her a big hug, his face beaming, he declared, "I believe in Jesus! I believe He died for me!"

Mom and Sophia cried tears of joy. The others all crowded around Mom and James, hugging James and giving him "high fives".

Dad blew his nose loudly and wiped his eyes. "This is a wonderful Christmas gift. Thank You, Lord for answered prayer."

Once the family had settled down again, they discussed the gift of myrrh. Myrrh was used to prepare a dead body for burial. It spoke of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and burial.

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"How did the wise men know all this, Dad?" puzzled Daniel.

"Well, they came from the East. Maybe Babylon, maybe Persia. And what great prophet lived in Babylon and served under the Persian king?" He winked at Daniel.

"Oh, of course, Dad!" Daniel laughed at himself. "Daniel lived there and studied the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible. That would have included the prophecies about the birth and death of the coming Messiah."

"Yes," agreed Dad, "like Numbers 24:17 and Psalm 22."

Mom added, "And most of the Jewish people didn't come back to Israel when the exile ended. They went on living in the East. They would have looked after the scrolls. That would have included those written by Daniel and the later prophets. So the wise men could have studied copies of Daniel's scrolls hundreds of years after his death. In fact, God told Daniel in advance the time when the Messiah would be born. That's in Daniel 9:25."

"History lesson alert!" warned the irrepressible James. The family all laughed.

"I agree with Daniel and Mom," affirmed Dad. "That explains why they had come to worship the One who was born to be the King of the Jews. They would have also read that one day He will rule the whole earth."

"When will that be, Dad?" asked Grace.

Their father explained: "That will be after He has defeated the Antichrist and rescued the believing Jewish people from destruction. That will be at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And those who believe in Him will come back to earth with Him, riding on white horses. How exciting that will be!"

"So will that include us, Dad?" asked Sarah, hopefully.

"You believe on Him for salvation, don't you, Sarah?" She nodded eagerly. "Yes, of course you will be there too!" Dad grinned at her.

"And me!" piped up James.

He was sitting next to Sophia who gave him a hug. She said, "All of us, little Brother. How wonderful!"

After devotions it was time to bring out their surprise gifts. Each child rushed off to collect his or her gift from where they had hidden them.

Soon Sarah was back, grinning, with a large, flat box tied up with a shiny red ribbon. Grace was next, with her sketch in a large envelope she had made. James bounced in with a flattish object covered with layers of newspaper. Sophia had something in a pretty gift bag Mom had helped her make.

But where was Daniel? Dad was about to see if Daniel needed help, when in he came. He puffed as he carried a long, rectangular object covered by an old sheet, into the lounge. Then he sat down, smiling.

"Right," said Mom, taking charge of the gift giving. "Youngest first."

"Merry Christmas, Grace!" exclaimed James, rushing over to her to give her his gift. After hugging him, she carefully peeled off the sheets of newspaper, folding each one and putting them neatly at her feet. James nearly jumped out of his skin while he waited for her to get to his picture. As Sophia had expected, Grace was delighted with James's bright, leafy, tree picture in its varnished frame. He had drawn and coloured in the trunk and branches of a tree. Then he had filled in the rest of the tree with blue, purple, orange, red and green leaves.

"Sophia showed me how to use real leaves dipped in paint," he explained.

"That's beautiful, Jamie. Oh, thank you so much! That's going above my bed," bubbled Grace, enthusiastically.

"James made the frame, too," explained Daniel. He was proud of his little brother.

"Daniel taught me how to!" laughed James and "high fived" Daniel. Grace passed the picture around the lounge for everyone to admire.

Next, Sarah stood up rather shyly and presented the big box with the shiny, red ribbon to James. James of course had to feel it, shake it and smell it before opening it. After smelling it, his eyes twinkled and he tore off the ribbon.

"Toffee! Lots of yummy toffee! Sarah you're a star!" He hugged her delightedly. Then, much to the family's surprise, he offered them all a piece of toffee. Sarah basked in all the compliments she was getting for her toffee.

Then Grace gave her gift to Daniel, and waited expectantly to see his reaction.

"My hero!" Daniel exclaimed. "Daniel in the den of lions with the angel of the Lord closing their mouths! Those are terrifying lions! But they are no match for the angel of God! And old Daniel just sitting down calmly.... It's a wonderful painting, Grace! Many many thanks. I'll make a special frame for it. That's going in the boys' bedroom. It will remind us to be true and courageous, trusting in God just like Daniel." Daniel walked around the lounge letting the family enjoy Grace's watercolour painting.

"It's amazing that Grace got it done in time," laughed Sophia. "Because we all kept disturbing her."

"The girls' bedroom feels like a shopping centre sometimes, with everyone coming and going!" announced Sarah. Everyone laughed.

"Now it's my turn," said Daniel. "Sophia, would you mind coming over here to unwrap your present? It's a bit big to carry to you over there!"

The family laughed joyfully as Sophia took the sheet off her present and exclaimed, "Oh, Daniel, how did you know that's exactly what I wanted! A bookcase for all my books! It's so nicely made too. I love the colour of the wood. And the different shelf sizes. How thoughtful and clever of you!" She gave him a big hug. "So that's why you were forever in the garage!"

"It's for your pot plants too, and your stationery and stuff," chimed in James, who admired his big brother's

woodwork. The family crowded around to examine and appreciate the special pine bookcase.

"It's really fun doing carpentry," grinned Daniel. "I'll have to think of another project. For Mom this time."

His mother smiled affectionately at her older son. "That's sweet of you, Daniel. I'll give it some thought."

Sophia stood up. "Now for Sarah's gift! You've been so patient, little Sister," smiled Sophia. She gave Sarah the pretty gift bag and a big hug.

Sarah's face lit up as she carefully lifted out the flowered, frilly apron. She slipped the halter over her head. The apron fitted her perfectly. "Oh, Sophy! You're the best! I just knew you were making something for me! My own apron! Not a hand-me-down! Wow! It's so pretty!" Sarah tied on the apron and twirled around, watching the frills flutter. She swooped down to where Sophia was sitting and gave her a squeeze. "But how did you get it to fit without measuring me?"

Sophia and Mom chuckled. "Well, you do have other clothes, you know, so we used one of your dresses and guesstimated," answered Sophia.

"And the Lord gave Sophia much grace," added Mom, looking pleased. "Well, that's all the surprise gifts given then. Did you all enjoy the Christmas gift project?"

"Definitely!" declared Sarah.

"I think I understand now what the Lord meant when He said it's more blessed to give than to receive," said Grace, thoughtfully.

"It seems to me that you have all been growing emotionally and spiritually in the process," said Dad. "I see more patience and kindness and thoughtfulness -"

"And Grace," added Daniel.

"How come Gracie always gets mentioned?" joked James. The family laughed and Grace blushed.

Then the children looked expectantly at their parents. Mom was clutching an envelope and both she and Dad were wearing big, silly grins.

"Something's up, parents!" Sarah guessed.

"Bright girl," said her father, with a twinkle in his eye. "Mom, don't you want to break the news?"

The children sat forward expectantly. "Well," began Mom, "your grandparents, as well as some of our church family, decided we all needed a special treat. So they clubbed together, did some crowd funding and this is what they have given us!" Mom held up the envelope, enjoying the suspense.

"Open it, please, Mom!" begged James. Opening the envelope, Mom fished out seven tickets to uShaka Marine World on Durban's beachfront.

There were amazed cries of delight.

"uShaka! Wow! Wow!"

"Wet 'n Wild, here we come!"

"The aquarium, that's the best! We *must* go to the aquarium."

"And the dolphin show!"

"What a wonderful surprise!"

"Well, these tickets give us all a whole day to enjoy uShaka Marine World. The rides, the shows, all the venues. And these amazing, dear people have included money for us to have a meal together at one of the restaurants, as well as ice cream, cool drink and snacks during the day. I can hardly believe it myself," explained Mom, shaking her head in amazement.

"God's grace. He is so good to His children," said Dad reverently. "He knows us intimately and loves to lavish His gifts on us. What a wonderful heavenly Father!"

James looked puzzled. "Did God give us this Christmas surprise or was it Grandpa and Grandma, and all the others?"

Dad smiled. "Good question, James. It was both, I think. God prompts His people to love one another and try to take care of each other's needs."

Mom fetched her well used Bible from the table. "In verse 17 of James, chapter 1, it says: *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or [p]shifting shadow.*"

"So is the Father of lights God?" asked Sarah.

"Yes, Sarah. Our heavenly Father. Your heavenly Father," explained Sophia, smiling.

"And now He's my heavenly Father too!" burst out James, grinning from ear to ear.

Dad put his arm around Mom. "Seriously, kids, the best Christmas gift your mother and I could have, is knowing that you *all* have come to know and trust and love the Father like we do. And that is God's special gift to Mom and me this Christmas. Thank You, Lord!"

THE END

In Conclusion

Dear Reader

This link takes you to a short video presentation of the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

<https://duluthbible.org/the-gospel>

My prayer is that it will bless you.

Julia Reynolds

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