



From the Pastor's Heart



December 2009

Dear Friend,

One of the things I enjoy about Christmas is seeing the curiosity and excitement on children's faces. When Andy and Becky were little, they would spend the days leading up to the holiday examining their presents, reading the names on the tags, shaking the boxes, and trying to figure out what was inside. There was an awesome thrill in their hearts that lit up their eyes.

On Christmas morning, they didn't care what we were having for breakfast or what was on television. They would wake up early and rush to the tree to find out what gifts they had received. Neither of them could wait to open those packages and begin enjoying their new toys as soon as possible.

Most children are the same way. They see beautifully wrapped presents under the tree and cannot wait to see what's inside. What treasures do they hold? What joy is hidden under the colorful paper and bows? They wouldn't think of simply admiring the packages and leaving them unopened. Unfortunately, that is exactly what many people do with the greatest gift that has ever been given.

This is why some folks find Christmas to be a very difficult time of year. The absence of loved ones, loneliness, financial pressures, unfulfilled dreams, and unmet expectations understandably can dampen a person's spirit during a season when we all should be rejoicing. By keeping our eyes on the One who has given us all things, we can focus on what cannot be taken from us rather than what we don't have.

Perhaps you've had moments when pain and disappointment have overwhelmed you. Realize that the Enemy wants to steal your happiness this and every Christmas. He does so by making the season about everything *except* the birth of Jesus and the reason He came to earth (Heb. 2:14-18). So today, I want to encourage you by unwrapping the awesome gift of salvation and reminding you of all God has provided for us. Because it is only when you keep your focus on Him that you can truly enjoy the awesome blessing of Christmas.

Let's start with a verse you most likely will find familiar. In John 3:16, Jesus teaches us, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." The first thing I want you to notice is that this gift is *from our heavenly Father*—the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

(over, please)

No earthly present can compare to the Lord God Almighty, who Revelation 17:14 tells us, “Is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.” Isn’t it humbling to know we have His attention and favor? There is no higher, more wonderful gift we can receive than the one He has given because there is no one above Him (Ps. 95:3–6). He provides what nobody else can and what we need most—forgiveness of our sins. In fact, His is the only offer of salvation that is absolutely acceptable, perfect, priceless, and everlasting (John 10:27-29; Heb. 10:10–14).

Another reason you should focus on God’s gift is that it is motivated by His awesome, unconditional love for you (Rom. 5:8). The Lord did not want you to remain “dead” in your transgressions and eternally separated from Him (Eph. 2:5; Isa. 59:2). So He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, as a living sacrifice for your sins. That is why we celebrate the baby in the manger at Bethlehem. It’s not about the pageants, parties, presents, or even other people. Christmas is God’s gift of love to His children.

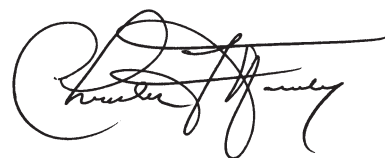
Stop and think about the depth of affection the Lord showed you—how much He sacrificed and the pain He endured on your behalf. If you’ve been looking for a love that never ends, accepts you as you are, brings out the very best in you, and perseveres regardless of the storms in life, then realize you already have it through Jesus Christ.

The Great I AM—the God of all creation, the One to which every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord—loves you. He is always thinking of you, understands you inside and out, and longs to lead you in the very best path possible (Ps. 139). He holds nothing back; rather, He gives Himself to you wholeheartedly so your joy may be absolutely complete (John 15:11; Rom. 8:31–32).

But so much more accompanies the great gift of salvation that it would take eternity to understand and appreciate it all. There is the Holy Spirit, who seals you for the day of redemption and guarantees He will never leave nor forsake you (Eph. 1:13–14; Heb. 13:5–6). There is the will, plan, and purpose for which the Father created you (Jer. 29:11–13). There is your eternal home in heaven where you will always be accepted and welcomed (John 14:1–3). And that merely scratches the surface of what He has provided. The question is: *Will you spend this Christmas enjoying the fullness of His gift to you?*

Throughout my own life, there have been times when disappointments and trials could have taken the joy out of this season of celebration. But when I focused on God, all those heartaches faded away and I could not help but rejoice in Him. And I can honestly say that His gift has only become more precious, real, and wonderful to me as time has gone by. The more I unwrap it, the more joy and satisfaction it gives because I am growing closer to Him. My prayer is that you will discover the same to be true this Christmas and every day of your life. May the Lord bless you abundantly as you seek and serve Him faithfully.

Merry Christmas,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles F. Stanley". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "S".

Charles F. Stanley

P.S. Thank you so much for partnering with In Touch Ministries. Matthew 1:23 tells us that Jesus is called “IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” There are so many people who need to hear the good news of salvation, to have their relationship with the Father restored and to know *He is with them.* So thank you for helping us proclaim the gospel around the world. I trust that the Lord will make this a truly merry Christmas for you and your loved ones.