

### **Longing for Presents or Presence?**

So, what do you want most for Christmas? For what are you longing? And do children and adults ever long for the same things?

In a survey done just last year, adults were asked what they wanted most for Christmas among four categories of gifts. The categories were: traditional gifts (clothes, gadgets, sports equipment) or lower debt (mortgage, credit card, etc.) or more paid time off or more quality time with family and friends. Guess which gift category came out on top? By a landslide, people chose more quality time with family and friends.<sup>1</sup>

And in a different survey done just this past August with over 2,000 young people ages 6 through 17, 73% of them said their number-one desire, not just at Christmas but any time, was to spend more time with their parents. So, then, the kids were asked if they had more time with their parents, what did they want to do? Some of their top answers were: play in the backyard, play a video game, make a meal together or play a board or card game.<sup>2</sup> So, parents, if that's what your kids really long for the most, do you want to make it happen?

This week's Scripture passages, from the Old Testament and from the New, are linked. The author of the New Testament passage is magnifying the importance of Jesus and, to prove his point, he quotes from Ps. 2. So, how do these two chapters go together? And what do they have to do with Christmas? First we see ...

#### **I. Longing for Presents Is Not Bad.**

Of course, our longing to simply "get stuff" can be simple, childish self-centeredness. I think we all get that. But there can also be other more mature levels of longing for "stuff." For example, we were not created to be self-sustaining. We weren't. We all have needs, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, which are best met by other people or by living and working in community with other people. One human cannot replicate himself alone. (You do understand that, right?) He needs a she and vice versa. This was by design.

So, to want what we need is not ungodly, but absolutely pleasing to God. God created you to long for food when you're hungry, and for medicine when you're sick, and for companionship when you're lonely. This is God's design for us and it's a good design.

Ps. 2 begins by describing authorities, kings and rulers of the earth, who are longing for something. What exactly they're longing for is not named here, but can't we all identify what it is? We long to be happy, to be satisfied, to be have a sense of well-being and meaning in our lives. That's a universal longing. But like these kings and rulers, we are easily deceived as to what will bring resolution to our longing. In fact, we often end up accusing the one who loves us most and can provide the help we long for, of being the one who is preventing us from getting what we desire. In Ps. 2, the kings and rulers blame God and God's Anointed for their lack of fulfillment. Listen again:

**The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
"Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us." (Ps. 2:2-3)**

Have you ever gotten confused about the motives of anyone with authority in your life? You were convinced that they were trying to ruin your happiness, when in reality they were your best hope of achieving it!

That's the plotline of the classic film, *Field of Dreams*. Ray Kinsella is a corn farmer in Iowa. He hears voices in his cornfield saying things like, "If you build it, he will come," and "Ease his pain." Thinking these are the voices of dead White Sox baseball players, Ray believes he's supposed to dig up part of his cornfield and build a baseball diamond. Through all the twists and turns of the story, Ray does build the field and players do come. But so does someone else: his father, John, who loved baseball and even played for a minor-league team. When Ray was 14, he had a big fight with his dad and accused him of ruining his life. Until the day his dad died, Ray never made things right with him. But now, he has that chance. Watch...

[Show *Field of Dreams* clip – 2:48-6:00]

This Christmas, what do you really need? What's the voice in your cornfield whispering to you? Jesus says that voice is His Spirit. Besides your presents to meet physical needs, He wants you to give spiritual gifts that will soothe, heal, and leave you with precious memories, not regrets. You still have time. Carefully consider what presents are most needed this year and then find the courage to give them. Secondly then, we need to examine...

## **II. Our Longing for Presence.**

The writer of Ps. 2, who is unknown, is pretty clear about who the ultimate authority is.

**He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.**

**Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,**

**"As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill." (Ps. 2:4-6)**

This may seem like strong language, but it's in response to language of insurrection – "Let us burst their bonds apart..." God is simply answering their threats with truth. And then, the very next verse is what is quoted in Hebrews 1. And what is that? It's a description of the Anointed which means "the Christ" in Greek. And with basically no introduction, the letter to the Hebrews lists Jesus' credentials:

**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1-2)**

So, this is stating that Jesus, God's Son, is the final authority on all topics. It's providing evidence that Jesus, God's Anointed, is not only the greatest power but He is also your only hope of finding real happiness and fulfillment in this life. He's not your opponent; He's your advocate! (Heb. 1:3-4)

**He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**

There are two important points that the author is trying to make here about Jesus. First, He is all powerful. He not only created the world (v.2) but He upholds the universe (v. 3); He keeps it running. Nothing is more powerful than that. Do you understand this about Jesus? At Christmas we tend to focus on the humanity of Jesus. And yes, that's central to the story but

Jesus did not lose His power when He became a man. As an adult, He used some of His power to perform His miracles. He was never without that power. He simply chose, at times, not to use it.

Then secondly, in Hebrews 1 we are urged to recognize the relational presence of Jesus. The gods of the other major religions of the world have basically NO INTEREST in a relationship with us. Allah, the god of the Muslims, is so transcendent that he's unknowable. You can't have a talk with him. He's not interested in the challenges or difficulties of your life. The Hindus' ultimate god is Brahman, which in its highest form is "without attributes or qualities." How do you relate to that? And Buddhists are basically atheistic. They don't believe there is a god. Their goal in life is not to know or live with God, but to enter Nirvana which supposedly is a sphere of nothingness where your self is extinguished.<sup>3</sup>

Ps. 2 says of Jesus that He's the "*radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature ...*," which means He's intensely personal. Immediately after God created Adam and Eve, what did He do? He spoke to them! They had a conversation! Isn't that exactly what we do when our children are born? Don't we speak to them even though we know they can't understand us? "Oh, you're so cute." Or "You are such a big boy!" Jesus, like His Father, is unlike any of the gods of other religions. So, in just this passage we see that ...

- God spoke to us regularly through prophets, through the written Word and now through His Son.
- God loved us by sending His Son to offer a sacrifice to purify us from our sin.
- Jesus continually shows His care for us by 'upholding the universe.'

And, of course, in so many other passages we know that Jesus hears us, empathizes with us, works on our behalf, and right now is preparing a place for us that will be absent of all evil and filled with all that is good. This is why, after the resurrection, Jesus was seated at the "right hand of the Majesty on high," the seat of ultimate power and authority.

So, why would anyone in their right mind NOT want to have a personal relationship with this God of the Bible? Why would anyone rebel against such love and want to "cast away the cords" that bind us to Him? Unless, of course, we are deeply deceived about who this God is.

Have you ever been deceived about who someone really is? Isn't that the plot line of many romance stories and films, not the least of which being *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen? It's about Lizzie, the second oldest of five sisters in a Georgian English family, and her relationship with an eligible bachelor named Mr. Darcy. Through various complicated circumstances (which, I admit I have to rely on Liz to explain to me), Lizzie comes to believe that Mr. Darcy is the last person on earth she would ever want to marry. She believes he is arrogant, heartless, and mean. But this is because she's been lied to by the dashing Mr. Wickham.

Well, the story goes on (and on and on and on) with Lizzie's other sisters having budding relationships (a younger one even getting married!) but nothing but frustration for Lizzie. Until it is discovered that Mr. Darcy, who Lizzie thought was an arrogant cad, actually turns out to be a generous, loyal, chivalrous man, who (surprise, surprise!) is secretly smitten with Lizzie! In the end, Lizzie learns the truth and she and Mr. Darcy fall in love and have a double wedding with her sister Jane (Or was it Kitty? Ask Liz about it because I can't keep all the sisters straight).

Why did Jane Austen give this story the title, *Pride and Prejudice*? Because that's what kept these two lovers from seeing the truth about each other. All that Lizzie longed for was in Mr. Darcy. When she laid aside her pride and prejudice, she finally saw the truth and her deepest desires were fulfilled.

Great theologians and Christian philosophers have described the hidden object of our soul's longing this way:

Augustine – “Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.”

Blaise Pascal – There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.

C.S. Lewis – “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists ... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

Which brings us to our last lesson which is...

### **III. How to Satisfy This Longing for Presence.**

Ps. 2 gives cogent advice here...

**Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.**

Remember, these are the ones who are brazenly taunting God.

**Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.**

**Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.**

**Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2:10-12)**

The longing within you is satisfied in only one way. It's not by negotiating with Jesus. His principles are not up for debate. Many Americans are not used to this kind of thinking, because in our culture almost everything is open to negotiation. So, some people think they can negotiate with Jesus!

“Okay let's talk about these Ten Commandments. How about if we say that I won't bear false witness UNLESS by telling the truth it's gonna cost me more than \$10,000? Can we make that little adjustment?”

No, it's all or nothing. Jesus isn't saying, “You serve me five out of seven days and I'll give you 75% of a blessing.” No. It's...

**Serve the LORD with fear,  
And rejoice with trembling.**

**Kiss the Son,  
Lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
For his wrath is quickly kindled.**

**BUT ...**

**Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2:11-12)**

You see, why would we even want to negotiate with Jesus? I'll tell you why. Because we actually think we have a better plan than He does to get to happiness and satisfaction and peace. When we're young, we think, “I shouldn't have to obey my parents. They're so out of touch.” Or we think, “I shouldn't have to give ten percent of my income to God's work. I mean, who can afford that these days?”

Friends, here's the deal. God's not going to force you to obey His rules, His plan for living. But the reality is simply this: you're not going to find what you're looking for with your plan. Everything your soul has ever desired will be fulfilled only if you remain faithful to Jesus. No one knew this from experience better than King David. He lived at times being faithful to

God and at other times being unfaithful. He summed up what he learned in Ps. 16:11, where he prayed ...

**You make known to me the path of life;  
in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**

The deepest longings of your heart are fulfilled in only one place: in the presence of Jesus. Get there and stay there this Christmas. It's where your heart has always longed to be. Let's pray...

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<sup>1</sup> [www.finance.yahoo.com/news/Americans-really-want-Christmas-survey-172345496.html](http://www.finance.yahoo.com/news/Americans-really-want-Christmas-survey-172345496.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.goodnewsnetwork.org/73-kids-want-more-time-with-their-parents-and-here-are-twenty-things-they-want-to-do/](http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/73-kids-want-more-time-with-their-parents-and-here-are-twenty-things-they-want-to-do/)

<sup>3</sup> Various religion's definitions taken from T-Net Training Course 4, "Evangelism and Disciplemaking Training" Bob Gilliam author, (Aurora: T-Net International, 2007)p. 40, 48, 57