



CHRISTMAS

The Greatest Gift

PAUL WILLIAMS



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Contents

Introduction: Christmas Wrapping	1
1. Surprise	5
2. Lights.....	13
3. Food	19
4. Christmas Ruined.....	25
5. Christmas with Love	33
6. Unwanted Presents	39
7. Taking God's Gift.....	43



INTRODUCTION:

Christmas Wrapping

I love Christmas. I love the food, the presents, time with the family, decorating the tree, singing carols – I love it all; well, almost all.

Almost, because there are some things about getting ready for Christmas for which I really don't care. I get frustrated when I can't find just the right present. I'm frustrated by the crowds in the shops. And I'm frustrated by sellotape! Yes, sellotape. It's essential for wrapping gifts. Arguably, it's difficult to get through Christmas without it. But sellotape is so utterly and annoyingly frustrating that it's enough to make you want to pull your hair out.

I reckon that, over the years, I must have wasted hours of my life looking for the end of the sellotape. When I do eventually find the end

and think I can finally start wrapping presents, I peel back the sellotape only to find it rips diagonally towards the edge of the roll, leaving me with a small piece that is good for nothing. And I'm back searching for the end again.

With perseverance, I do eventually overcome the curse of the sellotape ... until Christmas morning. Just when I think my annual battle with this sticky adversary is over, it turns out that an overzealous relative has used an entire roll of the stuff to wrap my gift, leaving me with the nigh on impossible task of getting into my present. At first, it's mildly amusing. Then annoying. And finally, it's embarrassing. The rest of the family are killing themselves laughing as they watch me struggle. I can't get into my present. I'm a grown man – I'm 55 years old – and I can't get through the sellotape.

Now I tell you about my struggles with sellotape for two reasons. First, it's cathartic to share it with you – I feel better already. But the second and main reason I share with you my seasonal frustration with sellotape is because, for many, the Christmas message feels a bit like that. You can't get into it.

Perhaps, over the years, you've met Christians who become very excited as they talk about the real meaning of Christmas and about a message of hope, joy and peace. You may even have heard some say that Christmas contains the most important message in the world, and you're intrigued. Maybe that's why you picked up this book. You may have a sneaking suspicion that, like sellotape, Christmas just might hold everything together. But you can't find your way into it.

In the pages that follow, I want to try to identify the sticking points and take off all the wrapping that surrounds Christmas, so you can get to the gift inside.



1

Surprise

I become very excited when I find the right Christmas present for the right person, especially when I know it's going to be a complete surprise. I've always loved surprises. The bigger, the better. When I was a kid, I used to get very excited when the biggest present under the tree had my name on it. Yet now that I'm a bit older – who am I kidding, I'm a lot older! – I've come to appreciate that it's sometimes the smallest presents that are the most surprising ... and expensive!

When a teenager unwraps their gift to discover there's a new smartphone inside, it's perhaps not the biggest present they'll receive, but it's probably the best and most costly. The smallest gifts often turn out to be the most valuable and the most thrilling of all.

5

And that's certainly true of Christmas, once we get the wrapping off and begin to see what it's really all about. The Christmas story is focused on the arrival of a very small 'package', a tiny, newborn baby:

[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7).

That's how Luke, one of the Bible writers, records the events of the first Christmas. Even if you have never read Luke's account of Jesus' life, I imagine you might well have seen the story acted out at a school nativity play. You might even have been one of the main characters and worn a tea towel on your head!

As with small presents under the Christmas tree, it turns out that there is much more to that tiny, human 'package' in the manger than you and I might first imagine. What we discover is very surprising indeed.

Another Bible writer, John, takes us right back to the beginning of time to help us grasp the

amazing surprise hidden in the arrival of Mary's baby. John begins his account of Jesus by telling us some extraordinary facts about the person who would be born in Bethlehem. Referring to Jesus as 'the Word', John writes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:1–3).

And John, who knew Jesus personally, adds a bit later:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

John is telling us two remarkable facts here. First, that this one he calls 'the Word' is actually God himself, the Creator of the universe. Second, that this person 'became flesh' – he became real flesh and blood. He was a human being. And

he lived among us, here on planet Earth. So the great surprise of Christmas is that when you peep into the manger and look at the baby, you are looking at God.

Some years back, I heard about a primary school teacher who went into school towards the end of term feeling tired, lacking inspiration and without a lesson plan. 'This morning, class, we're going to do some painting,' she said. 'So get your aprons on and the paints out and begin painting. You can paint anything,' she continued, 'anything at all.'

So the class began. After a while, the teacher walked around the classroom, looking at their creations. There were pictures of Mum and Dad and the dog in the park. Others painted scenes on the beach. But the teacher was surprised when she came to six-year-old Scott's effort. The paper was just a mass of colours.

'That's very nice, Scott' said the teacher. 'What is it?'

'Oh, that's God,' replied Scott.

'But no-one's ever seen God,' said the teacher. To this Scott replied, 'They have now.'

No-one's ever seen God ... they have now:

that's the big surprise of Christmas. It's mind-blowing. And it's exactly what the Bible writer John says:

No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (John 1:18).

Do you want to know what God is like? John says that, from the first Christmas onwards, you can know God like never before because he has come to earth in the person of Jesus. Incredibly, Christmas tells us that God can be known.

This is a huge claim. So how do we know it's true? Where's the proof? Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. We find such proof in the historical accounts of Jesus' life recorded in the Bible.

The Christmas story itself is full of 'out of the ordinary' events: a miraculous pregnancy; angels announcing Jesus' birth; a star guiding wise men to worship Jesus. This was no normal birth.

But there's more – much more – because the baby grew up. As Jesus walked this planet, he did

amazing things, astonishing things, things that only God could do.

In the rest of his book, John records some of Jesus' miracles. Jesus turned water into wine; he healed a boy who was close to death; he enabled a cripple to walk again; he fed more than 5000 people with a little boy's sandwiches; he walked on water; he gave sight to a blind man. Jesus even raised a man from the dead. Jesus did things that are out of this world to prove that he was from out of this world.

Recently, I talked to a man called Jim who was very sceptical about the miracles of Jesus. So I asked him, 'If someone were to walk into the room right now and say, "I'm God!" what would you say?'

Quick as a flash, Jim replied, 'I'd say: prove it.'

I responded, 'That's exactly the point, Jim. If someone claimed to be God but couldn't do anything extraordinary, you wouldn't believe they were God and nor would I.'

The miracles of Jesus are exactly the reason to believe that he is God. They are precisely what we'd expect God to do while walking this planet.

Bertrand Russell, the atheistic philosopher, was once asked what he would do if, when he died, he discovered that God was there after all. He said, 'I would ask God why he hadn't given more evidence for his existence.' Bertrand Russell laid the blame for his unbelief firmly at God's door.

Many people feel the same. They state, 'It's not my fault that I don't believe. If God is really that clever, that big and that powerful, why doesn't he show himself to me?'

Yet the great surprise of Christmas is this: that is exactly what God did in the extraordinary events that began in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. He made himself known.

At Christmas we see a baby who is God. We discover a very small 'package' containing the Creator of the world. That is a surprise! But it's more than that – it's wonderful news. It means that we can know for certain that God exists. So when it comes to knowing God, we're not left in the dark any more.

