

Christmas Stories

Glimpses of Perfect Goodness

December 19, 2021

Merry Christmas big family!

Today we're talking about Christmas stories.

But first: **Have you been more naughty or nice?**



This is the week before Christmas, when restless **shepherds** were saying, "Nothing exciting *ever* happens to us. **Why'd we settle for being shepherds?**" The week before, when a missing star left otherwise **Wise Men** lost and asking, "**Where do we go now?**" The week before, when a very pregnant and despairing **Mary**, riding a very bouncy donkey on a very bumpy road, to a very crowded tiny town, was thinking, "**This is God's big plan?!**" The week before, when a distracted **Innkeeper** was calculating, "**If business keeps up like this, I could rent out the stable!**" Well, whether you're **restless, lost, despairing, or distracted**, welcome to the week before Christmas!



Have you been good boys and girls? Compared to *Jesus*? Don't fret.

Because of your partnership in the Gospel ... [be] confident of this, that He who *began* a *good* work in *you* will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. – Philippians 1:5-6 NIV



There's only One who made it to the truly nice list on His own merit. The Alpha and Omega. A-Z. And we're His children. And in First Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul penned this Christmas classic:

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. – 1 Corinthians 13:11 NKJ

But later he clarifies that he doesn't want us to lose the innocence of childhood.

Do not be children *in your thinking*; yet *in evil* be infants, – 1 Corinthians 14:20 NAS

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be *blameless and innocent*, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom *you appear* [down here] as lights in the world, holding fast the Word of life, – Philippians 2:14-16 NAS

As a result, we are no longer to be children [in our thinking: speaking ignorantly and lashing out childishly] ... but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, – Ephesians 4:14-15 NAS

Christmas is a time for stories. The Christmas story, obviously, first and foremost, but also **each of us have our own Christmas stories – good and bad**. But, ever notice how the *good* ones capture an aspect of *the Good News*? We can't comprehend the enigmatic, eternal joy of home, so **God grants us little joys down here, not as a substitute, but a sample**. Like at Costco.



And **when I was a child, I sampled great joy each Christmas**, at a big family gathering at grandpa Ray's drafty old two-story house in Sedro Woolley, next to the railroad tracks. It had a very *mysterious* front door in a high-ceilinged, unheated foyer, by way of a six-panel door off the living room. *It was enigmatic* because nobody ever *used* it. We'd follow a dirt path to the back porch into Grandma's kitchen, a fragrant potpourri of Pres-to-Logs, Pall Malls, bacon grease, and Toni home hair perms. Pres-to-Logs are odorless now, but in the mid '60s they off-gassed an enchanting aroma of sawdust and formaldehyde. And we'd hurry to the wood stove, shivering, because we couldn't wear coats – too hard to remove the cigarette smoke, which had patinaed the snow white asbestos ceiling tiles with a comforting amber. And Grandma would sit at her chrome and Formica table, playing KBRC bingo; and I'd sit on her lap, mesmerized by the bubble lights – colorful glass tubes filled with methylene chloride, the *perfect* toxin because of its low boiling point. She strung 'em along a wood-framed kitchen window that was hermetically sealed from layers of lead-based paint. Call me sentimental, but I miss it all!



And grandma would tell me stories about the-naughty-boy-from-the-wrecking-yard, which I **LOVED** ... because, he was *so naughty*, and *coincidentally*, I lived in a wrecking yard! What are the odds? Now, the front door had a metal doorbell box *inside*, physically connected to a nonelectrical mechanical-button *outside*. And it just kind'a went, "Ding-Klung". And it *only rang* on Christmas Eve. And when it rang, it meant Santa was delivering presents!

Now, the house had settled so as to cause the six-panel door to the foyer to stick. So you *really* had to *pull* on the glass-crystal knob to get it to shudder open. Which was a problem, because when the bell rang, by the time we could get to the *front* door, we'd find a few *gifts*, but *no* Santa. This went on throughout the night. We'd be distracted by a lucky cousin's Hot Wheels, and "Ding-Klung!" And we'd jump up and: "Who keeps shutting the six-panel door?!"

Always there to help, was our soft-spoken Uncle Joe. Not so much Uncle Phil – *soft-spoken*. Phil was a tough guy. Stocky. Curly black hair. Clove gum. Peppery cologne. His shirt often generously unbuttoned to showcase gold chains against hairy tan skin. And though he *wasn't* filled with methylene chloride, he *was* colorful with a very low boiling point. Lovable Uncle Joe always called me "Brucey" – whereas Uncle Phil liked to call me: "Hey, there he is!" Now, to be fair, we only saw Uncle Phil once or twice a year; because he lived in another state: Seattle.

So, this one Christmas, Uncle Phil had gone out for some “fresh air” and Uncle Joe was helping in the kitchen, and the six-panel door didn’t get shut. So when that bell rang, we were there in a flash, jerked open the front door, and caught “Santa” placing the gifts. He looked at us and roared, “Ho, Ho, Ho!” and we slammed the door in terror and ran screaming into the living room ... *and he followed us!* And sat down on grandma’s Lowrey organ bench, and called us ... one by one ... by name! **That’s me making an apprehensive approach.**



But, as incredible as Uncle *Joe was*, Santa had him beat. Bigger-than-life. Red and white. Loud and jubilant! And he kneeled down and spoke with such gentleness and love, that I forgot my fears. And **he asked if I’d been a good boy,” and I nodded, yes. But I knew it wasn’t true; and I knew he knew.** ‘Cause deep down I *knew* I was the naughty boy in grandma’s stories. She made *no* effort to *hide* it. Her stories were just retellings of things I’d gotten in trouble for a few days earlier! So I stopped nodding and shook my head, no. And Santa roared with *laughter*, and took me in his arms, and held me for a perfect moment longer than expected, to put an exclamation point on his love. **And though we both knew that I deserved coal ... I got Incredible Edibles!**

And **that’s the Gospel in a nutshell.** The Good News of that first Christmas. **God desires to give you grace, not because you’re good enough, but because you’re loved enough!** When I was a child, I couldn’t grasp the significance of our *Savior’s* sacrificial death satisfying the penalty of *my* sin. Nor could I imagine the *relief* that would come from having the burden of guilt and shame lifted from my shoulders, as I’m cleansed and forgiven.

But I *knew* we were celebrating Jesus’ *birth*. And that crimson red and pure white were the two most beautiful colors together *ever*. And that I was welcome to sit right on the lap of a frightening, all-knowing, bigger-than-life personification of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness, who *desired* to give me gifts I hadn’t *earned* and deep down knew I didn’t *deserve*. And I also knew he had to be approached! **You had to draw near. Like with the Lord.** As you can see, **I want the gift – I’m just not so sure I want the giver.** Because I wasn’t sure what would happen once he got a hold of me. Like with the *Lord*. When I was a child, I thought as a child. But now I am a man, and have put *most* childish ways behind me. And *now* it is with *certainty* of *spirit* and a strong Scriptural *foundation* of *faith* that I can appreciate more fully the perfect pairing of scarlet red and holy white of the Savior who’s birth we celebrate.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” – Matthew 19:14 NIV

[For, as the prophet Isaiah was told to write] “Come now, let us *reason* together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins *are* like scarlet, they *shall* be as white as snow; though they *are* red as crimson, they *shall* be like wool. – Isaiah 1:18 NIV

Because **Jesus takes away the shameful stain of sin, and the sting of death**, by a crimson sacrifice that wraps us up in the purity of His own white-as-light holiness. (Ps 104:2)

He desires to give us forgiveness and mercy we haven't earned and don't deserve. But, we must approach Him. Must draw near. Must come *ever* closer. Maybe today is your day to put childish ways behind, and really begin to reason together with our Father Christmas. Because **one day His trumpet will call each of us by name before His throne.** And though I cannot fathom the tone, I trust it'll generate – in all who long for His appearing – the child-like emotions of that old doorbell.

Grandpa and grandma are gone now. As are Uncle Joe and Uncle Phil. That drafty old house was sold years ago. And the owners installed an evil, energy efficient front door, and threw the old one in the yard. And somebody actually stole the ol' doorbell. It must've been that naughty boy from the wrecking yard, because somehow it ended up on a shelf in my office. And to this day, to me, the noise it makes is the very sound of *Christmas*, and *gifts*, and the *fruit of God's Spirit*. I fully expect to find one just like it at the Pearly Gates!

So here's the *tragedy* of that night. The entire thing took place while Uncle Phil was out getting some "fresh air". Missed the *whole* thing! We felt *so* bad for him. 'Cause he would've *loved* Santa – they both chewed clove gum and wore peppery cologne. Who knows, Uncle Phil might've been *inspired* to act more *like* him, if he'd only been there to *see* him in *action*. He came back in just after he left. "Hey, there he is!" We're all wounded. **We all fall short, but deep down we all desire to be like our Father, because we were created in His image,** and therefore can't help but reflect *His* nature ... in *our good* stories. **Something of Him is in you.** And **that's why you're worthy of His love, and sacrifice, and salvation,** even in the midst of your sins and struggles and dysfunctional grabs at *ordinary* goodness.

Salvation has nothing to do with who's naughty or nice, and everything to do with who surrenders whatever little they have to follow the only Lamb who became a Shepherd. And *He* has a *list* of His own: the Lamb's Book of Life, (Rev 21:27) filled with those on the naughty list who *know* it, *acknowledge* it, and *give* it to *Him* as a freewill gift. What some people want for Christmas! But you know, **those who trust in their own goodness haven't yet compared their little light to the Light that came into the world.** In fact, **there is a crucial advantage to knowing you're on the naughty list.** Because that's when we're most likely to wise up, stop trusting in ourselves, and turn to our Savior. Know what the self-righteous "nice" disliked most about Christ? The awfully naughty company He kept. *But ...*

Jesus said to them, "It is not the **[nice and]** healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the *righteous*, but *sinner*s." – Mark 2:17 NIV



Merry Christmas! **Know why He only came to save sinners? 1) They're the only ones who need saving. And 2) that's all there is.** Just look at your neighbor! "There's *no one* righteous (when the standard is Jesus), not even one." (Rom 3:10) Just the One Promised Son of God and man. Turns out, **the Creator of the universe isn't about to stamp out nice, religious, cookie-cutter kids.**

He's into redeeming the Restless, the lost, the despairing, and the distracted. And then holding us in His embrace till we feel the exclamation point of His love. As the Apostle Paul said:

Thank God for His Son—a gift too wonderful for words! – 2 Corinthians 9:15 NLT