

This past week I discovered this advice for men buying gifts for their wives. 1. When buying clothes for your wife, size does matter -- go small! 2. You better buy batteries. 3. One must be exceptionally cautious if purchasing a gift for your wife at Auto Zone. Lowe's is a safer bet; get it at Macy's and you're golden. 4. Gift assembly on Christmas Eve generally strains a marriage. 5. There is nothing easy about E-Z Credit. So now guys, you have this good gift giving advice.

We get ready to exchange gifts at Christmas time, but do we get ready to receive the greatest gift of all? Christmas is about more than just gifts. Christmas is the gift of God's Son.

Christmas comes on December 25th every year. We're given time to prepare. But Mary and Joseph had no warning about when the first Christmas would come or how it would totally change their lives. Of course they knew about the promise of the Savior. Everyone in Israel knew that God promised to send a great king from the line of David to rule over His people. Many of them were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Messiah and expected him to liberate the nation and restore their military and economic strength. But were they ready to receive the Messiah?

Mary was ready! She may not have been ready for the visit from the angel Gabriel. Luke tells us that after Gabriel's greeting she was confused and disturbed. (Luke 1:29 NLT). Wouldn't you be if an angel just suddenly appeared to you? Despite being caught off guard, Mary was ready to listen. Gabriel told her that she would be the mother of the promised Savior, Mary answered, **"I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."** (Luke 1:38 NLT)

Every time I read these words, I'm amazed. How could she respond so quickly and so positively to the angel's message? Didn't she know that her decision would totally change her whole life? Of course she did! But Mary also knew that the Lord was with her. She knew that the God of Israel who had promised to send the Savior was her own personal Lord. She knew God and trusted Him. So she was ready to surrender her life, her plans to the Lord.

Joseph was ready, too! Of sure, he was hurt and confused when Mary told him that she was going to have a baby and he wasn't the father. But Joseph wanted to do the right thing. Matthew describes Joseph as a "righteous" man, someone who had a right relationship with God, who relied on God's love and forgiveness. I think Joseph was a man who took these words of the Prophet Micah to heart. **"The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."** (Micah 6:8 NLT)

The angel told Joseph, **"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."** (Matthew 1:20-21 NLT) Because of his close relationship

with God, because of His faith in God's promises, Joseph was ready to do the right thing even if it meant facing public shame and ridicule. So Joseph took Mary as his wife.

After his son was born, Zechariah gave this prophecy. **“And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.”** (Luke 1:76-77 NLT) Almost 30 years later, John the Baptist was sent to get the people of Israel ready for Jesus. God's first Christmas gift had grown up and was about ready to begin His ministry. John was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. John did that in a very simple and straight forward way. He told the people, **“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”** (Matthew 3:2)

When Jesus came on the scene, John pointed Him out and said, **“Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29 NLT) After the start of Jesus' public ministry, John the Baptist said about Jesus, **“He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.”** (John 3:30 NLT) John was ready to point people to Jesus. But the people were not ready for Jesus. Some found him interesting. Others were threatened by Him. Only a handful were willing to accept His invitation to follow Him.

Jesus wants us to be ready today. He doesn't just want us to be ready to celebrate Christmas. He wants us to be ready to hear and receive His word. He wants us to be ready to take His word to heart, believe that He knows what is best, hand our plans over to Him and follow Him. He wants us to be ready when He comes again.

Matthew 25 records three parables of Jesus about His second coming. When you are anxiously waiting for someone you keep looking for them. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus tells us to keep anxiously waiting for his return. We do that by paying attention to our faith, making sure that it doesn't grow dim. We have all been given talents and abilities. In the Parable of the Talents Jesus tells us that we prepare for His return by putting them to work, by using them for His glory. Then we will be ready when He returns and greeted as his faithful servants. Jesus also teaches us the importance of loving others. In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats Jesus tells us that whatever we do for those in need, we do for Him. Helping others is another way that we prepare for the Lord's return. So we prepare for His return by keeping our faith strong, by using our talents and abilities to His glory and by helping those in need.

Are you ready? Christmas is only 18 days away! Are you ready? Jesus is coming again. No one knows when that will happen. But we do know that when Jesus returns, He wants us to be ready and waiting. Mary was ready for His first coming. So was Joseph. Advent is a time to prepare for Jesus' coming again. Advent is a time to return to God because His kingdom is near. Amen.