

So how is the Christmas shopping going? Are you waiting until the last minute, looking for the best bargains possible? You can't wait much longer. Or do you have all of your Christmas shopping done? Some people are really hard to shop for. First, there are the people that you don't know very well, but have to buy for anyway. It may be someone's name you drew at work or the latest "friend" of one of your siblings. Some people tell you they don't need anything for Christmas, either because they already have everything or they just are not very materialistic. Then there are the people who don't want anything at all. Getting presents for these people can be a real challenge.

Joseph faced a real challenge, too, before the first Christmas. He is one of the most maligned and misunderstood "good guys" in the Christmas story. We think of him as the guy who almost dumped Mary before the angel appeared to him. Or he is the quiet guy leading a donkey on the Christmas card or the young boy dressed in a bath robe at the Children's Christmas pageant. But Joseph is much more than this. Joseph played a very important role in the first Christmas and gave some very real and significant gifts to Mary.

First of all, Joseph gave Mary his name. He could have divorced her because she was pregnant and he wasn't the father. He could have walked away from her, but he didn't. Joseph brought Mary into his family and gave her his name. That is why Mary made the journey to Bethlehem with him for the census, so that she would be included in his family record. He didn't want to have Mary left off the official document.

Joseph also gave Mary his home. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, there was no room for them in the Inn. As Westerners we think that the Holiday Inn or the Best Western were full. But that may not have been the case. Hospitality was so important at the time of Mary and Joseph that most people build a guest room in their houses. Since other people were coming to Bethlehem for the Census, the "guest room Inn" at the home of Joseph's relative must have been full. So they couldn't stay there. The family may have made room for Mary and Joseph in their house, which could have been built over their stable. After his birth the baby Jesus could have been moved to the warmth and quiet of lower level and placed in the manger to sleep.

Joseph loved and respected Mary. He listened to the angel and respected God's plan. So Mary remained a virgin until after Jesus was born. He gave Mary the first Christmas gifts from one person to another.

But the real first Christmas gift is God's gift to us. God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows every move that we make, every thought that comes into our heads. He even knows how many hairs we have on our heads. (I'm just glad that I still have hair on my head.) Because He knows us, he gives us what we need. The one thing that we need more than anything else is God's love and forgiveness. That gift was given the first Christmas, wrapped up in the form of the baby Jesus who came to save us from sin and death. Even though we don't always recognize it, God gives us what we really want because we all want God to love us. We all want to be part of God's family and to know that our lives have meaning and purpose. Those are the gifts God gave to us the first Christmas.

When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, he used two words to describe Mary's child. First the angel said, ***"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*** (Matthew 1:21) Jesus is the one who saves people from their sins. He is the one promised by God through the prophets. The name Joshua is the Hebrew version of Jesus. Just as Joshua lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, Jesus leads God's people into the Kingdom of God. God used Joshua to defeat the Canaanites. Jesus defeated sin and death.

Jesus has the power to save because of who He is. The angel told Joseph, ***"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'"*** (Matthew 1:22-23) Jesus has the power to save us because He is God with us. God entered the world in the form of Jesus who is both true God and true man. God came into our world the first Christmas to do for us the one thing that we could never do for ourselves, to pay the price for our sin. Jesus came to give us the one thing that we could never earn, deserve or purchase, God's love. Christmas is the God's gift of Himself to forgive us and restore us to His family.

The big question is what do we do with this gift? Some gifts are consumed right away; others are set aside and forgotten about. Some gifts are broken or even returned to the store. Other gifts are "re-gifted." What are you doing with God's gift to you? Let me suggest that like Mary, you treasure God's gift, like Joseph you welcome Jesus into your family, like the Wise Men you worship the Lord Jesus Christ and like the Shepherds you "re-gift" Jesus, you tell everyone about what you have seen and believe. Christmas is indeed God's gift, the greatest gift of all. Amen.