

“He Will Rejoice Over You with Gladness”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

There are many wonderful things about opening gifts at Christmas. It is a time for creating so many memories. The funny thing is that, when I look back on the Christmas Eve’s and Christmas mornings of my youth, my memories are not of the gifts I received. I remember the days leading up to that event. I remember the preparation and anticipation for the day.

My job was to crawl around and pick up all the needles that had fallen off the tree. It was an ongoing task. Our artificial tree shed constantly. Mom and dad were good about buying some gifts early and placing the wrapped gifts under the tree. This meant, for me, it was my task to conduct detailed analysis of the Christmas gifts that had my name on them. I think I took a peak at my sister’s also.

I looked at the size and weight. Gave them a gentle shake. I spent many hours preparing myself for what was coming. And then, it seemed, it was over in an instant. Nothing left other than the wrapping paper which we were encouraged to save for some reason, but I don’t ever remember anyone reusing it.

It is universally understood that gathering with the family and opening the gifts is something that brings children so much excitement and joy. As a child, as I said, I would spend days analyzing what could possibly be wrapped up in that gift, and it was rarely what I thought it would be. My parents would put other items in the package that would rattle or hide the true weight of the gift. It was never obvious exactly what the gift would be. There was joy in the anticipation, and there was great joy in being surprised.

As a child, I thought that the greatest joy of Christmas was experienced by the children. After all, every Christmas story or Christmas poem is about the dreams of or the reality of the gifts that children receive – from the dreams of sugar plum fairies to Red Rider BB guns. The stories are always about the children and the joy they have as the gifts are revealed.

Now, as a father, I have experienced the other side of Christmas morning – seeing the joy in my children as they receive the gifts brought to them by the man whose waistline shows that he obviously enjoys eating cookies.

Having observed the microcosm of giving gifts at Christmas, I now have a little different perspective on the greater celebration to come when Christ returns. A father giving gifts to his children at Christmas is often

compared to our heavenly Father sending His Son as the ultimate gift to this world – as He came to be the Lamb of God on the altar of the cross to take away the sin of the world.

However, I like to look at this in the spirit of the season of Advent. Throughout this Advent season, we have turned our attention to the dual nature of the season with the emphasis being on preparing for Christ to come on the Last Day (just as we are preparing for the celebration of His coming as the child in Bethlehem).

As we prepare for Christ ultimately to come, as we prepare for the joy of God's eternal kingdom – the new heaven and the new earth – our focus tends to be on the overwhelming euphoria of seeing the fullness of the glory of God. And we tend to focus on the joy of the children of God who receive the greatest gift – eternal life.

We have analyzed and pondered for a long time what that gift of eternal life will be like. I am quite sure that none of us can imagine the joy we will know. This is not because God our Father is conniving or deceiving like my parents were when it came to hiding what the true gift will be.

The reality is that there just aren't the words to describe the fullness of what is to come. All that we know is this sinful, fallen world. The very fact that we will never again have to worry about anything – that, in and of itself, seems too good to be true. No fears; no doubts; no broken

relationships; no one will ever speak to you with unkind words. And all of this as we join with the choirs of angels and bask in the glow of the glory of God. Who can describe that?

There is good reason for us to focus attention on the tremendous joy that the children of God will know when that day comes. It will be beyond your expectation. However, the ultimate joy will not be yours. The greatest joy will be God's. Listen to the words of Zephaniah, "He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing."

When Christ comes on the Last Day and all the children of God are gathered and we are raised in our bodies; body and soul joined together in perfection for all eternity. It will be more joyous than any Christmas celebration. It will be beyond your expectation. And like Christmas, it will seem that the greatest joy is with the children who are experiencing the newness of the gift of eternal life.

But the greatest joy, the ultimate joy, the greatest satisfaction will be that of God our Father. He will have the joy and satisfaction of having provided gifts beyond your expectation. And He will rejoice over you with gladness. Amen.