

Twelve Gifts of Christmas

From Our Heavenly Father

Stanley Holstein



Twelve Gifts of Christmas – From Our Heavenly Father
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Introduction

As a child, Christmas was a time of wonder for me.

After many decades I still have vivid memories of this favorite holiday season, which I enjoyed as a lad. As far back as I can remember, Christmas was known in our household as a time of “peace on Earth; goodwill toward men.” Mom and Dad loved Jesus, and this time of year was all about his birth. This season was special to me for other reasons. School was in recess for the longest period of time except for summer break. There were numerous opportunities for snowball battles, building snowmen, and sledding. Going outside and then returning to the house covered with snow and half-frozen, to be warmed by a mug of hot chocolate and a sweet snack, were common activities.

Every church building was transformed during this time of year as outdoor displays presented baby Jesus in a manger with Mary, Joseph, angels, and shepherds in attendance. Houses in our neighborhood and the stores and streets downtown were decorated and lit up like, well . . . Christmas trees. Seasonal music could be heard everywhere, even on the sidewalks of the shopping district downtown. Every place, even grocery stores, would be packed with people who seemed to be more cheerful than usual.

Our house also became a much busier place. Visits with friends and relatives increased as the big day drew near. Social gatherings of every kind were commonplace. Aunt Vivian used to have Christmas parties at her house every year for family and friends. After Vivian passed away, her daughter, Susie, continued this tradition at the old train depot in Charleston, West Virginia. Susie packed that place with family. The only thing better than the food and drink was the company.

As long as I have my mind, I will remember these events with great fondness. The homes we visited were filled with the smell of pine needles, cinnamon, and baked goods. There was apple cider, candy, and other assorted goodies in abundance. At our house, bedtime curfews were loosened, and snack times became more plentiful. Best of all, I knew presents were coming soon. There was a sense of excitement and expectation in the air for me. How could it get any better? Christmas time certainly was the season to be jolly.

I can only recall one negative thing about Christmas. As a child, no presents were opened on Christmas Eve in our house. As a matter of fact, there were no gifts from Santa under the tree until after we were asleep on Christmas Eve. It was agony. Each year I would try, and fail, to stay awake to see Santa visit our house. Each year, early on Christmas morning, which I like to call “zero dark thirty,” I would awaken with a start, ready to begin this most festive day, and run into the living room to see what Santa had brought. However, the rule was, no one opened any gifts until everyone had gathered around the Christmas tree. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t search through the presents under the tree to find mine, then pick them up and shake them as I tried to imagine what was inside.

Recently, I was talking with my sister and brother, Anne and Tim, about their memories of this holiday season. Anne recalled early one Christmas morning when she and I had awakened and decided to sneak into Mom and Dad’s bedroom to get them up, so we could open presents. As

we got near their bedroom door, Dad, who had already heard us said, “Go back to bed.” Had we known the truth, Mom and Dad had probably not been in bed very long because of the time they spent assembling, wrapping, and placing gifts under the tree.

Tim also recalled getting up early one Christmas morning. He and his twin brother, Jim, snuck into Mom and Dad’s bedroom. They went to Mom’s side of the bed, whispering “Wake up,” hoping she would get Dad out of bed, so everyone could open presents. The boys weren’t about to try waking Dad themselves. That was Mom’s job.

All the Holstein kids were like-minded when it came to opening presents as early as possible on Christmas morning. Tim recalled sitting in the living room, waiting for everyone to gather around the tree. Dad would be the last person in the room. Tim said, “Waiting on him to come downstairs was agonizing. But once I heard him coming down the steps toward the living room, I knew it was ‘game on.’”

My wife, Susie, recalls two gifts in particular that she received from her Grandma Brunn. One was her first Bible with her name engraved on the cover. The other was a book, *Jesus and the Twelve*, which Susie received at Christmas when she was ten years old. That present is still in our bookcase today. Tim recalled the year that he and Jim each got a new purple bicycle. He said, “Man, it was like somebody taking me outside today and showing me a brand new pickup truck of my own.”

Anne recounted in great detail the first and second dolls, an expensive pair of shoes with a matching purse, and a television set she received as gifts on different Christmas mornings. Anne’s television was a big deal for me too, since it was the first one we ever had in our home. Anne also recalled how her Aunt Adeline made clothes for Anne’s doll, telling me how “Adeline could make anything with a needle and thread.”

Dad had a tape recorder that he used to capture all the babbling and squawking on Christmas morning. He also had a movie camera to record at least a portion of the activities. We would tear into the presents as fast as we could. Mom always tried to slow us down, saying only one person at a time could open a gift, so we could all watch each other. It was over all too quickly. After the presents were opened, we would clean up the wrapping paper and then play with our newest treasures while Mom and Dad prepared breakfast.

Years later as an adult, I listened to the audio and watched the video recordings Dad made years before. It was amazing how much I jabbered and cackled. It was a time of sheer delight and contentment for me. Those audio and video recordings were compelling evidence that, through my eyes, all was well with the world. But Christmas wasn’t special for me alone. Nor was it only about presents. Anne’s description of the gifts that Mom ensured she received and the hand-made doll clothes lovingly created by Aunt Adeline clearly indicate that it wasn’t just about the presents for her either. Decades after the fact, Anne still cherishes those memories created by the generosity of two women who loved her dearly.

Tim recalled, “We always had good Christmases. Mom and Dad made sure of it. As a kid, I never thought about the joy it brought them to see the sheer delight they created for their children.” To this day, Tim and his family watch the old Christmas cartoons during the holiday season just like he used to do when he was a kid. Mothers and fathers love to give good gifts to

their children. Mom and Dad did their best to ensure we would have fond memories of Christmas, not only as a time of receiving presents from our earthly parents; but also as a time of remembering the good gifts that our Heavenly Father gives us.

I understand not everyone has the same memories of Christmas that I have. There are many people who struggle financially to meet the basic needs of their family. For them, this time of giving presents can be an extraordinary monetary and emotional burden. While I was living in Louisville, our church body participated in Prison Fellowship Ministries' Project Angel Tree. This program provided gifts to children who had one or both parents in prison. These presents were given in the name of the absent parent along with information about God's love for them. I remember delivering presents to an apartment near Christmas as part of this program. The tree in the living room was undecorated, and there were no presents underneath.

Scenes like this, to varying degrees, were fairly common since we delivered gifts to the poorest sections of the city. It was heartbreaking to see so many people struggling this way. It also made me enormously grateful for parents who provided for me as best they could in every way. Mom and Dad provided food, clothing, a warm home, and sincere love. But most importantly, they provided a legacy of loving Jesus Christ. One of the reasons I was led to write this book is because Christmas was, and remains, a time of wonder for me.

Chapter 1

Christmas – Fact and Fiction

On coming to the house, they [the Magi] saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

The Origin of Christmas

How did a celebration of the earthly birth of Jesus Christ come to be? A good place to start any story is at the beginning. However, this story originated before time began or humans existed. Before God created the heavens, Earth, and everything in them, he designed the plan by which he would redeem humans; that is to buy back sinful people for himself through the blood of Jesus Christ. God did this even though the vast majority of those he chose to create would reject him.

Yet there is an earthly beginning to the story of Christmas. Sometime after God banished Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, people began to hear about a deliverer who would come to save them from their sins. These prophecies about Jesus, which can be found in the Old Testament, proclaimed his coming. Then, some two thousand years ago, the Christ arrived on Earth, stayed briefly, and fulfilled every one of these prophecies, a few of which follow.

The Bible records a conversation in the garden of Eden after Satan deceived Eve and Adam, which resulted in their sin. “So the Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel’” (Genesis 3:14–15). Satan struck Jesus’s heel by encouraging people to murder the Christ. Then Jesus crushed Satan’s head by dying on the cross in our place, for our sins, and being raised to life again, thereby defeating both sin and death.

The Lord told Abram, later renamed Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham, has blessed and continues to bless people from every tribe, tongue, and nation who accept him as Lord and Savior.

As the Israelites prepared to depart from enslavement in Egypt, Moses told them to slaughter the Passover lamb, put some of the lamb’s blood on the top and sides of the doorframe, and stay inside until morning. When the Lord saw the blood on the doorframe, no harm would come to those inside the house (Exodus 12:21–23). Thousands of years later, when Jesus shed his blood on the cross, he provided the pathway for people to be delivered from their slavery to sin by believing in him as Lord and Savior.

God told David through Samuel, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). When Jesus came to Earth and began his public ministry, he established a kingdom that will never end.

Isaiah prophesied, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, ESV). Nearly eight hundred years later, this prophecy came to pass.

Throughout the history of humanity, we see people, the Jews in particular, looking forward to the one who would come to deliver them. After his arrival on Earth, the man who became known as Jesus of Nazareth would also be called by several other names or titles, including: Lord, Savior, Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God. The Christ had arrived on Earth, and Christmas began for humans.

Christmas Then

“The world was asleep, and so was the church when Christ was born,” according to Alexander Patterson in his book, *The Greater Life and Work of Christ*. Patterson, an early twentieth century American minister, continues:

Of all that city full of ecclesiastical dignitaries, but one was apprised of the great event. They might have known of its imminence. Indeed, they did know and directed Herod to the very place. But they were not watching or waiting or even ready.

We read of no exultation on the news being received, nor even a tardy reception. They were wrapped up in acquisition of property, in formal and splendid liturgical [public] worship. They were divided into bitter sects and were engaged in endless discussions, and worst of all were immersed in lives of secret or open sin, all the while looking for the establishment on earth of a state of power and glory for themselves by the coming kingdom. To a few poor shepherds was given the great honor of welcoming the Son of God in his advent [arrival] to earth.¹

Jesus was born in almost total obscurity in a town his mother was visiting. Scripture gives us very few details of Jesus’s life between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry. At the proper time, according to Mosaic law, Joseph and Mary presented Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. He was probably no older than two when the Magi came to visit at his home and present gifts. Later, Joseph and Mary moved to Egypt with Jesus for a period of time because Herod wanted to have the child killed. After returning from Egypt, Jesus, at age twelve, visited the temple in Jerusalem with his family. Then, at about thirty years of age, Jesus began his public ministry.

There is no known record regarding the exact date of Jesus’s birth. Various sources place the year of his birth from 8 BC to AD 11. However, the Bible does give us the historical setting at the time of his birth. He was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1–2) and while Herod was ruling Palestine (Matthew 2:1–2).

According to *Smith's Dictionary of the Bible*, Augustus ruled the Roman empire from 31 BC to AD 14.² *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* says, "It was the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus . . . when, according to prophetic prediction, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the same year when the first census was taken and Quirinius was governor of Syria."³ These two sources place the birth of Jesus at around AD 11. According to *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, "Herod reigned as king of Palestine from 37 BC⁴ until his death at Jericho in the spring of 4 BC. Shortly before his death the Magi had come to Judea to worship the newborn King of the Jews."⁵

Herod asked the Magi to identify the location of the baby Jesus for him. When the Magi failed to do so, Herod's subsequent order to kill all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger is a clear indication that Jesus was less than two years old at the time of that order. If the dates of Herod's reign are recorded accurately, Jesus would have been born prior to the spring of 4 BC.

Several issues contribute to the difficulty of pinpointing the date of Jesus's birth. These include the lack of records or conflicting records from this time period and the use of different calendars; such as the Jewish lunar calendar and the Roman or Julian solar calendar. However, the available evidence does allow us to reasonably determine, within a decade or so, the year of Jesus's birth.

I find no mention of Jewish birthday celebrations in Scripture. However, birthdays are mentioned at least four times in God's Word. These include Pharaoh's, Job's (mentioned generally), and King Herod's birthday, which is mentioned twice. However, the earliest followers of Christ did meet to celebrate his death, burial, and resurrection. So, back to the original question. How did the celebration of Jesus's birth come about?

According to the *Holman Bible Dictionary*,

Of the major Christian festivals, Christmas is the most recent in origin. The name, a contraction of "Christ's mass," did not come into use until the Middle Ages. In the early centuries, Christians were much more likely to celebrate the day of a person's death than the person's birthday. . . . In the early part of the fourth century, Christians in Rome began to celebrate the birth of Christ. . . . The December 25 date was chosen as much for practical reasons as for theological ones. Throughout the Roman Empire, various festivals were held in conjunction with the winter solstice. In Rome, the Feast of the Unconquerable Sun celebrated the beginning of the return of the sun . . . The winter solstice seemed an appropriate time to celebrate Christ's birth. Thus, the festival of the sun became a festival of the Son, the Light of the world.⁶

According to *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*,

By the end of the 4th century, the eastern churches had adopted special services commemorating jointly the birth of Christ, the adoration of the Magi, and Christ's baptism by John. Apparently these services were held at first on January 6, but later were divided between December 25 and January 6. . . . The Feast of Saturnalia in early Rome . . . was celebrated for seven days from the 17th to the

24th of December. . . Gradually, early Christians replaced the pagan feast with the celebration of Christmas.⁷

Joseph F. Kelly says, in his book *The Origins of Christmas*, “By the fifth century Christmas had become a major feast in most of the ancient churches.”⁸

In her book, *Christmas*, Angie Mosteller says,

Throughout the course of the Middle Ages, Christmas was wholly supported by the church and was thus celebrated festively around the world. It survived well through the reformation and did not become a subject of controversy until the 17th century in England. At this point in history, the Christmas season had evolved into a time of excessive drinking and rioting; this disturbed many Christians, particularly the puritans. Of course, attitudes varied widely about how Christmas should be celebrated, and these conflicting views made their way to America.⁹

There were some in early America who adamantly opposed the celebration of Christmas and actively lobbied against it. Rebecca Beatrice Brooks says, in her article, “When Christmas Was Banned in Boston,”

When the puritans came to the New World, they brought with them their strict ways, their religious views and their distaste for Christmas. Although Christmas was widely celebrated in Europe as a Christian holiday marking the birth of Jesus Christ, puritans saw it as a false holiday with stronger ties to paganism than Christianity. . . . Instead of feasting and giving gifts, puritans commemorated Christmas by praying, reflecting on sin, and working instead of resting. The puritans even forced non-puritan colonists, such as the Anglicans, to work on Christmas day. . . .

On May 11, 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony legislature even went so far as to officially ban Christmas and gave anyone found celebrating it a fine of five shillings. . . . The ban remained in place for 22 years until it was repealed in 1681 after a new surge of European immigrants brought a demand for the holiday. Even though the ban was lifted, Christmas was not warmly embraced by the puritans and it remained a dull and muted holiday over two centuries later. . . .

In the early 1800s, a religious revival spurred a renewed interest in Christmas. The holiday became popular again in the South, but it was slow to catch on in New England. In 1830, Louisiana was the first state to make Christmas a holiday. Other states followed suit and Christmas soon became popular again, especially during the Civil War. In 1856 . . . the Massachusetts legislature finally made Christmas an official holiday in the state. . . . In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant made Christmas a national holiday.¹⁰

Christmas Now

As previously stated, my memories of the Christmas season include wonderful times of family gatherings, plentiful food, and ample presents. Though my childhood is long gone, those early memories remain vivid. I clearly remember the excitement and anticipation of opening presents. However, that excitement didn't last long after Christmas morning had passed. I appreciated some gifts more than others. I certainly enjoyed the toy dump truck far longer than the sweater I received. I imagine many people have had similar experiences in this regard. The simple truth is:

- Each gift is ours to accept or reject. If accepted, the gift can then be ignored, utilized, or treasured.
- Some of the presents we receive during our lifetime are appreciated very little or not at all. After we've shown them to those gathered around the Christmas tree, they may be relegated to oblivion on the closet floor or in the corner of a dresser drawer.
- Other gifts will be enjoyed for a while until they bore us, get lost, or are broken.
- We may treasure a few gifts, keeping and using them for decades or even a lifetime.

As I grew into manhood, I was expected to put childish ways behind me, though I hope the boy in me never goes away completely. Furthermore, I'm a Christian now, which means I think very differently than I used to about most things. I don't see life through my former myopic worldview. My vision has been corrected by the lens of God's Word, through which I now try to observe and analyze everything. However, my view of Christmas started to change long before I was an adult or a Christian. At some point that I cannot recall precisely, I realized Santa Claus was not a real person.

My wife, Susie, clearly remembers her discovery of this fact when she was eight or nine years old. One day in school, a few of her classmates were talking about Santa being an imaginary person. After school that day, Susie asked her mother if Santa Claus was real or not. Her response was, "Santa lives in your heart." I also discovered, at some point, that Santa, also known as Old Saint Nick or Saint Nicholas, was an imaginary figure, supposedly based on the life of a real person.

In his article, "Who Was St. Nicholas?" Mark Wilson says,

The legend of jolly old St. Nicholas evolved into Santa Claus in Christmas tradition, but who was St. Nicholas? . . . According to tradition, Nicholas was born in Patara, the capital of Lycia . . . around [AD] 260. . . He was the only son of wealthy Christian merchants when this new faith was still illegal in the Roman Empire . . . Nicholas was perhaps in his twenties when the story occurs that made him a legend. Near him lived a father and his three daughters who had fallen on hard times. Because the father was unable to supply a dowry for their marriages, he was considering an appalling alternative: to send them into prostitution for survival.

Nicholas somehow learned what was happening and one night threw a bag of gold coins through his neighbor's window. The father thanked God for this mysterious provision and arranged for the marriage of his eldest daughter. . . However, the father was so moved by this young man's generosity that he told everyone in town. And so, the legend started about the generosity of Nicholas.

Sometime later Nicholas was ordained bishop of Myra, another major Lycian city east of Patara.¹¹

Over the years the Christmas celebration has changed significantly. The real “reason for the season,” a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, has faded into the background as ever-increasing commercialization has come to the forefront. The unofficial start of the Christmas shopping season used to be Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. Now some department stores are open on the afternoon or evening of Thanksgiving Day. Some retail outlets offer Christmas specials before Thanksgiving while, in other places, the Christmas shopping season begins the day after Halloween.

In his article, “11 Black Friday and Cyber Monday Online Retail Stats,” Graham Charlton summarizes Black Friday and Cyber Monday online sales reports from 2013 to 2019. These statistics suggest Black Friday online sales in the US increased every year, from \$1.9 billion in 2013 to \$7.4 billion in 2019; while Cyber Monday online sales, the Monday after Thanksgiving, increased each year from \$2.29 billion in 2013 to \$9.2 billion in 2019.¹² That’s a lot of presents!

Another change I see in this season of giving is that the aura of “peace on Earth, goodwill toward men” is lessening, being replaced by increasing contention. In recent years this season has fostered conversation in the Christian community regarding a number of issues related to secularism, such as the use of “Xmas” instead of “Christmas” and substituting “Happy Holidays” for “Merry Christmas,” just to name two. One reason given by Christians for concern about these actions is because they believe some people are attempting to take “Christ” out of Christmas.

I am certain there are many people in America who would love to see Christ taken out of the public arena completely, not just on Christmas but on every day of the year. When I see a business that uses “Xmas” instead of Christmas or hear a person who uses a greeting of “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” I don’t know their motive unless they specifically inform me. Their reason may be nefarious, benign, or simple indifference to either language or faith. By the way, would you believe it if you were told that members of the body of Christ have used “X” in place of “Christ” for centuries?

In his article, “The Origin of Xmas,” Dennis Bratcher says,

Its origin is thoroughly rooted in the heritage of the Church. It is simply another way to say Christmas, drawing on a long history of symbolic abbreviations used in the Church. . . . The first two letters of the Greek word “Christ” are the letters chi (X) and rho (P). These letters were used in the early church to create the chi-rho (XP) monogram, a symbol that by the fourth century became part of the official battle standard of the emperor Constantine. . . . The exact origin of the single letter X for Christ cannot be pinpointed with certainty. . . .

By the fifteenth century Xmas emerged as a widely used symbol for Christmas. In 1436 Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press with movable type. In the early days of printing, typesetting was done by hand and was very tedious and expensive. As a result, abbreviations were common. In religious publications, the church began to use the abbreviation C, or simply X, for the word “Christ” to

cut down on the cost of the books and pamphlets. From there, the abbreviation moved into general use in newspapers and other publications, and “Xmas,” . . . became an accepted way of printing “Christmas.”¹³

These changes we see in the Christmas season, moving away from Christ, are only symptoms of an underlying problem. A survey by Pew Research Center in November and December 2017 indicates:

- Nine-in-ten Americans (90%) . . . say they celebrate Christmas. . . . While these figures have generally held steady in recent years, the role of religion in Christmas celebrations appears to be declining. Today, 46% of Americans say they celebrate Christmas as primarily a religious (rather than cultural) holiday, down from 51% who said this in 2013.
- About half of Americans (52%) now say it doesn't matter how stores greet their customers over the holidays, up from 46% in 2012.
- A growing share says religious displays should not be allowed on government property under any circumstances (26%, up from 20% three years ago).
- Most Americans believe that elements of the biblical Christmas story reflect actual historical events, although the percentage expressing this view has dropped noticeably in recent years.¹⁴

All of these aforementioned changes tell me that the number of Americans who believe in the inerrancy of God's Word is diminishing. However, the increasing contention we see regarding the Christmas season, or any public celebration of Jesus Christ, for that matter, should not surprise Christians. Scripture tells us:

- For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3); and
- In the last days people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Timothy 3:1–4).

In his spiritual war against God Almighty, Satan is urging every human to protest and suppress the mention of Jesus's name at any time, in any venue. Nonetheless, we who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will continue to celebrate his birth, earthly life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension; regardless of the world's opinion on this matter. When I was a child, Christmas was all about receiving gifts. As an adult, this holiday became about giving presents. Now I ask you, “For a Christian, is Christmas really about gifts?” My response is, “Yes, absolutely.”

Chapter 2

Is Christmas Really About Gifts?

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:16–17)

I love to receive presents. In fact, so does almost everyone I know. The custom of giving gifts has been practiced around the world, probably since people began interacting with each other. “The Iliad” by Homer is an ancient Greek poem believed to have been written around the eighth century BC. The “Epic of Gilgamesh,” a compilation of Sumerian poems and tales, is believed to have been written by the Babylonians around the twelfth century BC.

Both of these ancient pieces of literature refer to presents given or received. Gifts have been used to appease gods or a human who has been offended, to secure a bride, to influence rulers and other powerful people, or to gain favor with others who have something the giver wants or needs. We also see gifts given in Scripture. A few early examples include:

- Cain and Abel, the first two children born to Adam and Eve, presented gifts, in the form of offerings, to the Lord.
- After the great flood, Noah presented gifts in the same manner to God.
- Later, about 2,000 years before Jesus walked on Earth, we see the first specific mention of gifts in the Bible given from one human to another. When Abraham’s servant was searching for a wife for Isaac, he presented gifts to Rebekah, her brother, and her mother.
- When the Queen of Sheba visited with King Solomon, she brought an extravagant number of gifts to him. King Solomon also gave gifts to the queen when she departed to return home.
- The Magi presented gifts to baby Jesus when they visited him.

According to *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “The Feast of Saturnalia in early Rome was celebrated for seven days from the 17th to the 24th of December and was marked by a spirit of merriment, giving gifts to children, and other forms of entertainment.”¹ This custom of giving gifts carried over to the celebration of Christmas and has continued to the present day.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Many years ago I learned a popular song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” which I heard often during the Christmas season. However, I never knew its origin. In his article, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” Dennis Bratcher says,

The Twelve Days of Christmas is probably the most misunderstood part of the church year among Christians who are not part of liturgical [public] worship

church traditions. Contrary to much popular belief, these are not the twelve days before Christmas, but in most of the Western Church are the twelve days from Christmas until the beginning of Epiphany . . . on January 6 . . . the time the Wise Men, or Magi, arrived to present gifts to the young Jesus.²

In his book, *The Origins of Christmas*, Joseph F. Kelly states, “In the sixth century, the French church, which used January 6 as the date for baptism, found another way to emphasize the importance of the day by proclaiming the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany to be both a sacred and a festive period. Thus arose the notion of the Twelve Days of Christmas.”³

In his article, “The True Meaning of the Christmas Carol the Twelve Days of Christmas,” Michael E. Hunt says,

On December 25th we celebrated the birth of Christ the Savior and the beginning of the twelve days of Christmas that is the countdown to the Feast of Epiphany. The Christmas season, however, doesn’t end officially until after the Feast of the Epiphany on the following Sunday when we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. . . . During the twelve day period between Christmas and Epiphany, a popular Christmas carol is “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” a song written in 16th century England during a time of intense religious persecution of Catholics.

The persecution began when the government of England ordered the church in England to separate from the Roman Catholic Church, forming its own apostate church. The reason for the separation was because Pope Clement VII refused to grant King Henry the VIII an annulment from his twenty-year marriage to Queen Catherine so he could marry his pregnant mistress, Anne Boleyn.

During this time, and under the reigns of Henry's two Protestant children Edward VI and Elizabeth I, many Catholics, including priests, were burned alive as martyrs of the faith. Each line of the song was written for the purpose of using symbols that were catechetical devices [relating to religious instruction] to secretly teach children about the Catholic faith, a crime in England at that time.

Hunt continues by explaining the symbolism of the gifts as follows:

- “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree”: “My true love’ refers to God . . . The “partridge” is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the “pear tree” is the Cross upon which Jesus offered up the gift of His life for the salvation of the world.
- “Two turtle doves” symbolize the two natures of Jesus who is fully human and fully divine, and the two Testaments, the Old and New that together comprise the Christian canon of Sacred Scripture.
- “Three French hens” are the three gifts the Wise Men gave the Christ child (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), and the Three Persons of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
- “Four calling birds” are the Four Gospels of . . . Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that record the accounts of Jesus’s ministry.

- “Five golden rings” are the first five books of the Old Testament which tell the history of the beginning of God’s relationship with mankind.
- “Six geese a laying” are the six days of creation and the . . . six commandments of the Catholic Church, the “Catechism of Christian Doctrine.”
- “Seven swans a swimming” are symbols for the Seven Sacraments of faith given to us by Christ Himself to sustain the faithful on their journey to salvation and the seven petitions of the “Our Father” prayer Jesus taught His disciples.
- “Eight maids a milking” represent Jesus’s spiritual teaching on a transformed life that provides the pathway to heaven in the New Covenant Law of the Beatitudes.
- “Nine ladies dancing” are the nine orders of angels that serve God in the heavenly Sanctuary.
- “Ten lords a-leaping” are the Ten Commandments.
- “Eleven pipers piping” are the eleven Apostles who remained faithful after the treachery of Judas Iscariot.
- “Twelve lords a-leaping” are the twelve fundamental beliefs of the Catholic Church presented in the Apostles Creed.
- So, the next time you sing the song, remember it is not about twelve unusual gifts during the twelve days of Christmas. It is instead twelve gifts of love from God the Son to the people of His Kingdom.⁴

There are others who disagree with the religious origin of the words for this Christmas carol. In her book, *Christmas*, Angie Mosteller says,

There are two common misconceptions about the 12 days of Christmas—one is . . . a popular myth about the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas” . . . Though the importance of the actual twelve days of Christmas has been lost, the carol has been infused with significant spiritual meaning that did not originally exist. The myth teaches that the “true love” of the song was intended to represent God and that the partridge in the pear tree was Jesus . . . The remaining symbols are . . . tenets of faith shared in all Christendom; it would be difficult to argue that Catholics would have been persecuted for them in a Christian country like England.⁵

Angie Mosteller continues, speaking of the importance of both Christmas and Epiphany saying,

“Truly, the greatest gift ever given to man was that of Jesus who came to earth on Christmas day. Yet Epiphany is significant as well. For it was on this day that Jesus was first revealed to Gentiles, a confirmation that he had come for ALL men.”⁶

My True Love Gave to Me

True love is the stuff of which many movies, poems, plays, songs, and books are made. It has been discussed, defined, and analyzed by many; earnestly sought by most; and likely found by relatively few. I believe the Bible is the greatest love story ever told, and it reveals the purest love in existence.

I don't know if the message of the carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," is religious or not. However, I do apply a religious meaning to some of these words. I agree with Mr. Hunt regarding the symbolism of the "true love" in these lyrics, which to me is God Almighty, our Heavenly Father, who is the giver of every good and perfect gift. Jesus said, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11).

A father or mother giving good gifts to their children is a basic concept that we can all understand. Every parent I know wants to provide the basic care that their children need to survive. But their desire goes much further than that. They also want their children to succeed in life in every possible way. Parents want to give their children every good gift that will benefit them. Our Heavenly Father has the same desire. He and his Son have proven that in many ways. Notice that God is not only the giver of every good and perfect gift; he is also portrayed as our Heavenly Father. He is presented in this manner many times in the New Testament. God's nature is familial and intimate. The desire of his heart is to be our father and for us to be his children, his family. That is one reason why he created us.

Earlier I mentioned waking on Christmas morning, filled with excitement. I would scurry down the steps into the living room to behold the tree, with lights ablaze and presents stuffed underneath. It was with great anticipation, and no small amount of frustration, that I waited for the rest of the family to arrive, so we could tear into the presents. Today, let's envision a slightly different kind of early Christmas morning, infused with that same childlike exuberance. However, this time, let's view the presents with spiritual eyes and envision the giver as our Heavenly Father. In keeping with the spirit of the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," let's relish each precious present as we open the *Twelve Gifts of Christmas from our Heavenly Father*.