



What was the best gift you've ever received for Christmas? Mine was my Dynastar snow skis and Solomon ski boots. When I was in middle school, finances were tight for my family. With the ups and downs that come with work, my dad's job wasn't consistently providing much extra. And the economy was struggling, affecting everyone.

I desperately wanted my own skis. Not a real need, I understand. But as a young boy trying to find my identity, I wanted to stand out in the crowd.

I remember going to the ski shop with my parents. I tried on ski boots and longingly looked at the different brands of skis. It was a bittersweet experience: Sweet because my heart was filled with hope; bitter because I saw the price tags. My parents secretly bought those boots and skis. And on Christmas Eve, I went on a scavenger hunt through the house and eventually found them under my parent's bed.

What about you? Was your best gift unexpected as well? The best gifts usually involve thoughtfulness—something you really need or want. The best gifts usually involve sacrifice—the giver has given something special of themselves in the giving: money, time to make it or design it or research it.

Thoughtful and sacrificial gifts are the fabulous gifts we remember. And usually they are unexpected. If they aren't unexpected, I call it a shopping list. When you receive it, you think: I wasn't expecting this at all. It's too amazing. It's too much. I had expectations here and you have blown me away. Wow!

These descriptions match the gift of salvation that is given through Jesus Christ, don't they? He was thoughtful and sacrificial in giving us salvation. He gave us a wonderful Unexpected Gift. That's what Mark and I will be focusing our sermons on this week and next—The Unexpected Gift Jesus gives us.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9–10).

The Unexpected Gift is God's love, mercy and grace.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (v. 10).

The way this is written, Peter is identifying that his readers have repetitively attempted in the past to attain mercy in their own efforts. But they have come up short. The people who originally received this letter from Peter were Christians, both of Gentile and Jewish heritage. If they were Gentiles, they had a lifetime of idol worship in their past; if they were Jewish, they had a lifetime of animal sacrifices and offerings in their past. Tons of money was spent over the years, all in their attempts to experience mercy. Yet they still lacked what their souls longed for: internal peace, love without striving, and performance. Only with God's unconditional, unexpected love do they now experience mercy. All of this was given through Jesus. *"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests'"* (Luke 2:13–14). *"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).

God's love, mercy and grace was given through Jesus Christ. No one expected the Savior of the world to come as the child of an unknown peasant teenager, and no one expected salvation to come through His sacrificial death on the cross. But that's what God did. A wonderful, unexpected gift.

The Unexpected Gift changes us.

But you are a *chosen people*, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession... (v. 9).

Chosen people

The book of 1 Peter was written to people who are scattered throughout Asia. *"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,..."* (1 Peter 1:1). These Christians did not feel chosen or special. They often felt forgotten and alone, outnumbered by non-believers, disconnected from the strongest concentration of Christians, which was Jerusalem, suffering heavy persecution and cruelty because they were followers of Jesus Christ.

Peter's words of encouragement come to them with a piercing truth—each and every one of you is a member of God's family by His choosing. He adopts us. No one is part of His family by their ancestry. No one is part of His family by earning their way in. No one is part of His family because a friend connected you. God chose. God initiated. God thoughtfully looked at you, and you, and you, and you, and me . . . and said, "I choose you."

Royal priesthood

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession... (v. 9).

The priesthood performed duties specifically for God, in order to reveal God to people. The descriptive word **Royal** adds the dimension of Kingship. We are brought into royal status, into connection with the King. We have a king-like dignity that has been given to us. So not only has God chosen us, He adopts us, which makes us His son or daughter. God doesn't just look at each of us and say, "I choose you, and you and you and you." He adds this, "I choose you to be my son, and you to be my daughter." We are granted royal status because our dad is the King.

Think of the appropriate heights of dignity, confidence, purpose and power that come with this status. Sit up a bit straighter. Stand up a bit taller. You are someone special because you've been adopted into royalty.

I know many Christians whose core identity has been transformed by this truth. Some struggled with insecurity their whole lives. Some struggled with self-loathing their whole lives. They felt worthless. They couldn't do anything right. They weren't good at anything. They wondered about their purpose in life. Then this truth of being a royal priest embedded itself deeply into their heart and they were changed.

Holy nation

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession... (v. 9).

The nation in mind here is the Kingdom of God. When God chooses us out of the ordinary and out of the common, He includes us into His holy nation. It is a nation described as holy, meaning that it is pure and separate from the impurities of sin. It is a nation that is larger and more important than any earthly nation.

It is a nation with one eternal King. It is a nation with laws. It is a nation with no geographic boundaries. It is a nation with no favoritism. It is a nation that accepts the weakest, yet opposes the proud. It is a nation that will never ever end. It is a spiritual nation, that at times, becomes very visible. And we represent this nation as God's Royal Priesthood and we are part of this holy nation because the Holy Spirit lives within us.

God's special possession

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession... (v. 9).

God claims here that His chosen children and priests are **His** special possession. He says this because He bought each and every one of us with the blood of Jesus Christ. **"Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood"** (Acts 20:28).

Just in case you chaff against this a bit, remember what verse 10 said, **"once you were not a people, but now you are the people**

of God." There's no reason for people that are messed up, lost, confused and described as "not a people" to resist becoming the special possession of the King of the universe. He chose us; He loves us; He saves us; He bought us with the blood of Jesus Christ. Because of all of this, we are His special possession. We belong to Him.

Consider how these four truths have shaped your identity. As you look back on your life, do you see the influence these truths have had on you? The truth contained in this one verse could completely change your opinion of yourself and other people.

I remember meditating on this verse as an insecure 25-year-old. I'd go on morning jogs through my Duluth, Georgia neighborhood quoting and thinking about this verse of scripture. I was an intern when many of my friends were 2–3 years into their careers. I was partially through my graduate degree, with no clear plans of finishing it. And internally, I was unsettled; wondering who I was, scared and uncertain. During those early morning jogs, the truth of this scripture changed me.

How about you? Do you see the impact of these truths in your life? That's something to identify and celebrate and share with other people.

The Unexpected Gift naturally compels us to share it.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

In Greek the phrase "declare the praises" is *arête*, which often means virtue or moral excellence. When *arête* is applied to deity it indicates glory, manifestations of divine power or mighty acts. So when we apply these definitions the verses' meaning expands and gives clearer insight to its meaning. It could read "... that you have the great honor to declare or publish abroad the mighty works of your virtuous and glorious God: His creation; His miracle of redemption; His unexpected gift of grace in Jesus; His ongoing miracles." We are expected to declare His praises!

Years ago I decided to add a bit of excitement to a white elephant gift exchange I was attending at work. No one wanted to go to the company party. People actually tried to hide out in their offices instead of attending. The dollar limit for the exchange was \$5 and most people weren't even spending that. They were simply recycling junk items from previous years.

Here was my plan: include a \$20 Starbucks gift card to the mix. I thought it would make someone really happy. But more than that I wanted to infuse a spark of excitement to the group. So my

gift was a bobble head doll, recycled from the previous year, and a \$20 Starbucks card.

The guy who opened my present walked to the center of the room, pulled out the bobble head, showed it to everyone and got the appropriate laugh. Then he saw the Starbucks card, said nothing and discreetly slipped it into his pocket.

I couldn't believe it! He wasn't allowing the rest of the group to share in the excitement. And he didn't even know it was more valuable than the \$5 limit.

As it would happen, he was sitting right next to me. I leaned over and whispered, "I think there's more to that gift. You should tell people what else came with it." He whispered back, "No way. I'm not telling."

I was troubled and disappointed. He was violating the intention of the gift. So I decided that I would make an announcement to the group. I said, "Hey, I think there might be more to that gift than a bobble head." Still the guy downplayed it.

He and I went back and forth in front of the group of about 40 people. I was saying, "I think there's more to that gift, isn't there?" and he continued to say, "No." Then he flippantly pulled the gift card out and said, "Well, there was this card with it, but I don't even think it's loaded. I think it's a gag."

People became confused, not excited, and it ended with people concluding that the gift card was probably a gag. Who would go to the extravagance to put money on it in such a low budget gift

exchange? Urg! So frustrating. The gift was stolen a couple of times because of the bobble head and the gift card trailed along as a second thought.

I was writing about this experience in my journal. After I described what happened and my disappointment, this thought to my mind: "How do you feel, God, when we hide the gift you have given to us? You give such an incredible gift to your children: you give us Jesus and completely change us, with the intention of us declaring your praises. And often I behave like that guy in the gift exchange."

I didn't feel like the Lord was scolding me. And I hope you don't feel scolded. Instead I felt a renewed appreciation of the gift the Lord had given me and a spark of motivation to declare His praises.

In the next six days, each of us has a window of opportunity to personally experience the Unexpected Gift of God's love. Talk about Jesus' birth with your family, friends and acquaintances. Invite people to our Christmas Eve or Christmas Day worship services. Carve out some time to read your Bible in the mornings; express your thankfulness to Him in prayer.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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