



December 2016

Dear brothers and sisters,

Thanksgiving is just over, and Christmas will be upon us soon. Every Christmas, I experience three emotions: (1) thanksgiving. God loves us so much that His only begotten Son is born in the manger.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2: 10-12).

(2) I'm astounded at how fast time flies, at the twinkling of an eye, a year is almost gone. When young, it seemed that everything would last forever, and I complained that life moved too slowly. Not sure when my thick black hair started to recede and became bald in places, and when the brothers and sisters in church matter of factly told their children to call me "Grandpa," my heart knew then that I've passed my prime. Sunset is good, but I'm near dusk, end of year is fast approaching, how many more years/days are ahead? "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12). (3) began to feel stressed about buying gifts, and if by mid-December, not all of the gifts have been purchased, my heart will start to panic.

You may have noticed that, not sure when it started, Christmas has been associated with gifts, and the commercial establishment, replacing the Church, is the first to proclaim "Christmas is here!". Isn't it? On Thanksgiving Day, the annual Macy Thanksgiving Day Parade always included a procession of marching bands, floats, and costumed participants, and never fails it always end with Santa Clause waving at the Parade watchers. Even before Thanksgiving is over, in all the stores/malls, Christmas music would be played as merchants tried wholeheartedly to create the joyous Christmas holiday atmosphere and continually tried to remind people how many more "shopping days" are remaining.

When we first came to the United States, with four bare walls, our home contained nothing; thus, celebrating Christmas was quite easy and also joyous. With a little saving, a trip to the store, just buy anything: hair dryer, handbag, hair cutting scissors, or simply a slow cooker, etc. will make my wife and daughter smile and feel all happy. Later, our finances improved, everything needed for a home we have acquired and possess even all those we don't need, purchasing Christmas gifts for family members became a major panicky headache. Every trip to the mall, looking to the right or touching left, in less than ten minutes, I felt like my head was swelling, became dizzy, like ants on sizzling wok, heartsick about not much time left and anxious about still had not found the perfect gift. In any case, gifts must be purchased! What to buy though? If too expensive, wife will admonish; something general, it seems she already has it; something random, definitely will be viewed as lack of judgment, be forced to return the merchandise afterwards, labor upon labor.

Fortunately, for this Christmas, daughter suggested early on, no need to buy her anything, all she wants for Christmas gift, is just a recording. She would like us parents to record the paths we all traveled in the past as well as the environments we all grew up in. She wants to remember how her parents struggled out of poverty, how during the war torn years, her parents supported one another through danger, despair, and survived the dark days after South Vietnam fell into the hands of communists. She wants to remember, also in the hope that her children will remember, freedom is not free, it is exchanged with lives. Of course, my wife and I will never forget the experience of our family of three enduring the angry waves of the sea, the suffering of the "black warehouse" refugee camp in Hong Kong, the trial of faith hoping and waiting for resettlement, and the hardships of the first several years in the United States, the good and the bad, sweet and bitter experiences, lest she forget, how we used to grit our teeth to claw our way out of hardships. She wants to remember how our Heavenly Father led us through severe times. This narrative gift of past years will remind her about the grace of God and her parents, the precious lessons learned through those difficult days, make her gain better appreciation for life and be grateful and content. We were surprised to find that our daughter did not forget the blessings from Heavenly Father, and remained intact amidst subsequent wealth.

Dear brothers and sisters, what gifts will you buy for your family this Christmas? Christmas time is a great opportunity for us to review God's grace. Jesus Christ became flesh into the world, suffered through life for the world, and completed plan of salvation on the cross. Brothers and Sisters, give it a try, during this Christmas season, gather your family in the living room one evening, count the blessings from God, you'll find the time spent being beautiful, warm, and meaningful, better than any abundant feast. Remember what God told Joshua? As recorded in Joshua chapter 4, and summarized here "2Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, 3and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.... 6to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' 7tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." Brothers and Sisters, where are your twelve stones?" Would you take time this Christmas, gather up your family, and set up the 12 stones as a memorial by counting your blessings from God?

Your family member in Christ,

Pastor Calvin Tran