

I'm not sure when it happened, but it seems like in recent years we've seen a surge of Christmas songs that aren't Christmas songs. The one I have in mind is "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. Which has become a Christmas song based on just one line in the song: "brown paper packages tied up with string, these are a few of my favorite things." That's it! Just one line talking about wrapped packages and suddenly we're thinking about Christmas.

And it's kind of an odd image too. I mean, I don't know about you, but I don't usually associate brown paper and string with Christmas presents. I think of brightly colored wrapping paper of red and green and silver and blue. Metallic bows and curly ribbons. Fanciful cartoon images and sparkling snowflakes.

Then again, once upon a time, my wife did actually wrap some presents in brown paper and string. She thought it had a nostalgic element. And it was certainly inexpensive. Why did we go back to traditional, colorful wrapping paper?

My daughter, mostly. When she was a toddler, a plain, brown package just didn't interest her very much. It was difficult to even get her to keep it on her lap, let alone tear into it. In her mind, Christmas presents must be wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper. Nothing good comes in simple brown paper package tied up with string. Which, of course, is wrong, but an understandable mistake for someone that young.

That's kind of a life skill, isn't it? Having the patience and wisdom and discernment to look past the packaging to find a gift. To realize that valuable things are often held within ordinary containers.

A diamond ring can be held in a cardboard box. A gourmet meal may sit inside a styrofoam carton. A gold mine can wait under a lump of dirt. And the Son of God can sleep inside a feeding trough.

St John says at the beginning of his gospel: "*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*"

In other words, when people looked at Jesus, they didn't see the Son of God. They saw the son of Mary and Joseph. They didn't see the savior of the world. They saw a poor boy from Nazareth. They didn't see the Christ, the Messiah, the gift of God to all mankind. They saw a brown paper package tied up with string. And they tossed him aside, without even realizing what they had been given.

Now, it's easy for us to judge them for this. It's easy for us to criticize the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees and all the people who stood there on Good Friday shouting, "Crucify him!" It's easy for us to think ourselves better than them. Because we recognize who he is.

And yet, even then, there's more to receiving a gift than just knowing that it's a gift. Emi knows when she's been given a gift now, even if it's in simple packaging. But there were still plenty of times this past Christmas when she opened a present, didn't see something she was particularly excited about, offered a quick 'thank you', and immediately moved on to the next gift.

And we as Christians can be guilty of the same thing. We know that Jesus is our gift from God. But we don't take the time to find out what that means. We don't dig into this gift and see all that the Father has lavished upon us. We tear off the paper. Say, "Oh... you gave us Jesus. Thanks God." And then we put him aside and move on with our lives.

St Paul understood that temptation. He understood that even the most devout Christian can at times fail to see all the blessings we have in Christ. And so he writes the letter to the Ephesians that we see before us today.

Paul's letter to the church of Ephesus is kind of a unique epistle. Because Paul so often is writing to address a serious problem in the church. There's division or sin or corruption or heresy. Something specific that must be dealt with immediately and in the strongest terms.

But that's not the case in Ephesus. The Ephesians are doing great! They are thriving as a congregation. They are everything that Paul wants to see in a Christian church.

And so his letter to the Ephesians is simply one of encouragement. It's a letter designed to point out everything they are doing right and say, "Good job! Keep up the good work." But in the process, Paul is also trying to highlight those areas that are most important to keeping the congregation healthy.

And the place he starts, right at the beginning of the letter, is this idea of recognizing the gift of God. Of embracing all of the Father's blessings poured out on you. Of knowing who you have in Jesus Christ. What you have in His birth, death, and resurrection.

And you can see that just by skimming through this passage. Look at the number of times the phrase "in Christ" or "in Him" or some variation of that appears. "In Christ." "In him." "In the Beloved." "In him." "In Christ." "In him." "In him." "In Christ." "In him." "In him." I count ten times in eleven verses.

Why all this repetition? Well, Paul spells that out in the very first verse. *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."*

That's Paul's purpose in a nutshell. He wants us to know that we are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing. And then he goes on for the rest of this passage to tell us all of those blessings that we receive through faith in Christ.

We are chosen in Christ. Chosen before the foundation of the world. Chosen before we were born. Chosen before man set foot on earth. We were predestined by God to be holy and blameless before Him.

We have grace in Christ. It is the Father's will that we obey His Law. But it is also the Father's will that we are shown grace when we break that Law. And He sent His Son to preach that grace to us. To show us the fullness not just of God's justice, but the fullness of God's mercy. In order that we too may learn to be merciful.

We have redemption in Christ. We were slaves to our sins. Destined only for death. But God has redeemed us. He has bought us back from sin, death, and the devil. Not with gold or silver, but with His Son's holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. So we are no longer owned by our sins, but we are the precious possession of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

We are united with God in Christ. Man was created to dwell with God in the Garden of Eden, but our sin separated us from God. But in the mystery of God's will, he has shown us a plan for all things to be united to him once again. Just like they once were. Through the resurrection of his Son.

We have an inheritance in Christ. God did not just save us from sin and death and then abandon us. He made us his sons and daughters. Part of his royal family over the kingdom of God. So that we inherit all the riches of His new creation and all the riches of His Kingdom.

We have hope in Christ. Hope for something more than this dying world. Hope for the glory of God and eternal life with him. Hope that makes us sing his praises.

We have the seal of the promised Holy Spirit in Christ. For at our baptism, we are buried with Jesus, resurrected with him, and anointed with the Holy Spirit. And that seal guarantees our eternal life. That seal plants faith in our hearts through the hearing of His Word. Through the gospel, the good news, of our salvation. And with that seal, we will one day take possession of all that the Father has promised for us.

We have so much in Christ. This brown paper package tied up with string – this baby in a feeding trough – this condemned criminal dying on a cross – this simple bread and wine, given to us today – is the greatest gift mankind has ever received. The greatest gift mankind ever could receive.

And this gift has been given to us. Placed under the Christmas tree. Waiting for us to unwrap it. Waiting for us to open the the box and see all the blessings that have been lavished upon us.

This gift is ours. Whether we open it or not. It has our name on it. But isn't it so much better to know what we've given? Isn't it so much better to live to the praise of God's glory, as St Paul puts it?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he has indeed blessed us with every spiritual blessing. And he wants you to know how much he has blessed you too. Amen.