

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms** because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. **So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.**

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that **he will give us the inheritance he promised** and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this, so we would praise and glorify him.

Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you **spiritual wisdom and insight** so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the **confident hope** he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.

I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And the church is his body; it is **made full and complete by Christ**, who fills all things everywhere with himself.

God saved you by **his grace** when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is **a gift from God....**

Ephesians 1

All my Christmases

A letter in response...

My dearest Father,

I just took a peek into the room, the one with *the tree* in it. The one with all your gifts surrounding it. So beautifully wrapped. Not just some things you picked up at the \$2 shop. Even better than an exquisite pink diamond worth over \$100,000.

You have given me *every blessing* - and here they all are under the tree. There is absolutely nothing more you could give me. Nothing more I could want.

It's time to look under the tree and to begin unwrapping these amazing gifts. Tell me, Lord, how I have managed for so long without them. How have I hung out all these years being your daughter and yet not unwrapping these many gifts that are so wonderfully displayed beneath the tree.

Why is it I didn't get up in the middle of the night, sneak down in my pyjamas when everyone else was sleeping? Intending to peek only but, consumed by curiosity, rip open each decorated package so that your many gifts spilled out all over the floor around me. Why is that, Lord?

To be honest, I don't know. After all I have known about these gifts, these blessings, for many years. I've read about them, I've been told about them, had them explained to me, reflected on them many, many times. But why is it that I have never bothered to take them in my hands and gently pull away the outer wrapping, excitement pulsing in my veins? Why is it?

Maybe I've been distracted by the baubles and the tinsel on the tree, the pretty coloured lights have drawn me away from the gifts. Maybe I've been a Martha, stuck in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, baking the Christmas pudding, the cake, mince pies and roasting that oversized stuffed turkey. Maybe I've just got too tired of the whole Christmas thing and couldn't even be bothered to enter the room with the tree. Distracted by who's place we will eat at, which party I will go to, which store has the best bargains. Christmas, bah humbug.

After all I'm sure most of the gifts under the tree are for someone else. Why would I get anything? What have I *done* to deserve gifts from you? What have I ever given you?

Enough of this naval gazing, this backward glancing. The fact is, I'm here now, in the room, with the tree. Its pretty lights twinkling down at me. Its baubles catching the light and reflecting such glorious colours. But, tonight, it is not the tree that is attracting my attention, it's the presents under it.

Each one delicately wrapped by your own hand. How did you ever manage to colour match the paper, the ribbons, the bows so that together they shine, screaming out *unwrap me*. But then again you are the God of colour, I forgot that. You created the rainbow, an amazing spectrum of pure colour. You thought of that. You brought it into being. Out of your mind came every colour in the universe, every shade, every hue, every nuance of colour. Another gift that I so often miss.

Back to the tree, back to the gifts. Which ones are for me? All of them? Surely not. That would be too much - I don't deserve all of them. Maybe just one then? Or two? I would feel like a glutton if I took them all. How on earth could I possibly manage to play with them all? Surely many would just end up in a box in a corner, or on the top shelf, or in the attic. But, no, I've just read your letter again. You clearly say that every blessing in the heavenly places is mine for the taking in Christ. You did the wrapping, you put them under the tree for me, for *me*.

But why me? Yes, I know you told me at the beginning of your letter but so often, Father, I find it difficult, no matter how often I read the words, to really believe that you chose me before the beginning of this world. How does that work? Even Santa doesn't know who will get prezies before he checks out who's been good or bad. But it seems that whether I have been good or bad has absolutely nothing to do with it.

You chose me before the big bang, before the trumpet roll as Aslan sang the world of Narnia into existence (please excuse my reference to Narnia but C. S. Lewis so magically captures a little of what it must have been like when you created this world), before that first whisper of your Spirit over the waters. But, again, I come back to the question, of why you would choose me to be your child, to be in your family, to receive all these gifts. Quite frankly, I don't get it - I'm no Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. I don't think I could ever just give up everything and live in absolute poverty for you (unless I could take my pillow with me!). I'm no great preacher, teacher, orator. I'm just me, warts and all. Why would you want me? Why would you choose me?

Hang on, I think I might be beginning to get it. You say in your letter that you did it because you love me. Now it begins to make sense. After all, they say that love is blind - it doesn't see the warts, the bits that are far from perfect - it just loves. Yes, love loves. I think that might be it.

In another of your letters to me you talk about how you are love - it's the one you got John to write down for you, the first one. Does that mean that instead of calling you God I could call you Love? They are one and the same - you and love, co-existent, together. You are love. Outside of you love doesn't exist.

And you chose me because you are love and therefore you must love me. You have always loved me from before I even existed, before the world began. Your child, David, wrote about that in one of his songs, I think it was the 139th one. You loved me when I was just a teeny, weeny twinkle in your eye.

And, as I have already established that love is blind, it doesn't matter what I've been, what I've done, or even what I will be or do - the fact is that you love me and that is why there's a huge pile of prezies under the tree just for me. I'm glad I've got all that worked out because I'm busting to start unwrapping. Okay - here goes...

Gift number one. Wow, it's so gorgeously wrapped I almost don't want to spoil it. I did say *almost* - somehow, I think what is inside might just be even better than the wrapping. Wait. There's a tag. I suppose I should read it before I rip into the paper. Mum always made me do that first so I knew who has given me what and so I can write those dreaded thank you notes: *Dear Auntie Glad, thank you so much for the pretty handkerchiefs. I shall think of you every time I blow my nose...*

So, what does this tag say? Who's this gift from? Who will I need to send a thank you note to? *For my daughter...* That's what the gift tag says ...*for my daughter with love beyond all love from your heavenly Father.*

I carefully undo the ribbon that holds the tag to the gift. I turn the tag over and over in my hands, hold it close to my heart. Can it be, can it really be that you are calling me your daughter? Yes, it's true, I remember now you told me that in your letter - I am adopted as your daughter in Jesus Christ.

This gift is from you, to me, your daughter with *love beyond all love*. I am finding it hard to think, to feel, what love beyond all love can be like. Love with no strings attached. Love that

asks nothing in return. Love that goes beyond insult and injury. Love that is absolutely unconditional.

So, what could be in this gift that demonstrates that kind of love to your daughter?

It's time - time to unwrap this amazing gift that I now hold in my hands. Exquisitely wrapped yet simply beautiful. Not gawdy or overdone. Blood red handmade paper held together by a simple black ribbon. Not the biggest or brightest gift under the tree but this is the one that caught my eye and drew me to it.

As I gently undo the ribbon, I am reminded by its blackness of the darkness that has often enveloped my soul - those *long, dark nights of the soul*. The times when I have put self before you. When I have denied you as Peter did in that courtyard so long ago. When I have not spoken my faith out to others. There is something deep and spiritual in this untying and casting aside of the black ribbon. There, it is gone. Left behind revealing the red of the paper. The blood of your Son shed for me, for my salvation.

And, as the paper falls away, a golden box is revealed. A single sheet of paper lies inside the box. My adoption paper signed by you, paid for by your Son, by his blood.

But there is more in this gift... as I lift the signed paper from the box there is something else there... Something intangible, silent but, oh so sweet. Its perfume wafts up to me, surrounds me, encompasses my whole self, fills me.

What is this thing, Father, that has me swooning on my knees? *Amazing grace how sweet the sound*. Oh, dear Lord, this is your gift of grace, of forgiveness, redemption, spreading over and through me.

Your letter spoke of this thing but now, as I sit here, overwhelmed by its flow, I think I begin to understand after all these years what it means to me.

For only by this gift of grace can I be your daughter. There was, and is, and will be, no other way.

As I sit here with my adoption paper in my hands and your grace wafting around and through me, I am stirred to a desire to cry out, run from this place waving this small but, oh so significant piece of paper so that all can see that I am your daughter.

I want to sing, to shout, to praise and extol you, giver of the most precious gift that could ever be given. Yet I have only unwrapped the first gift and there are so many more waiting for me. But, for now, this one gift is enough...

Your daughter, Anita

