



Open Gifts January 2010

Christmas morning. The family's tradition was to open one gift each on Christmas Eve. Then after the children were all asleep, Mom and Dad would stay up to wrap the presents and carefully place them under the tree. They were evenly distributed and intermingled so everyone shared the experience equally.

It would have been hard to measure whose anticipation was greater— the children's, imagining what would be revealed when the paper came off, or the parents as they lovingly wrapped each gift with a child's heart in mind. The tired, thankful parents looked in on the sleeping kids, bent down and gave each one a kiss on the cheek or forehead, then went to bed themselves; quickly drifting off, hearing already the happy sounds that would awaken them in too few hours.

It was always the youngest who woke his sisters, almost dragging them from bed to go down stairs and behold the glory. Once, when they had set the alarm and hidden to watch, Mom and Dad had been filled with emotion as they saw their children stand in awe at the spectacle on display before approaching the gifts.

They were an orderly bunch, for the most part. Each child had a special gift, set apart from the others, they were permitted to open and enjoy as soon as they got up. Later, when the whole family was gathered, they would find and open one at a time; taking turns as they worked their way through the pile. This established the fun of seeing others discover something given specifically to them, and they learned to enter into each other's joy. Christmas was a time to both give and receive, and not a time for selfishness.

This morning as the exhausted parents stirred in their bed, they realized the house was unusually quiet. No sounds of their kids excitedly talking as they showed each other the marvels of the special gift that had been left for them. Slipping from bed and into their robes they walked into the hallway and softly descended the stairs. To their bewilderment, no one was in the living room. They stood for a moment, looking to each other and then around the room, listening for any evidence the children were somewhere else in the house.

Then they saw it. Mom first, then Dad. As they slowly stepped forward it was evident that every present under the tree had been unwrapped and very poorly rewrapped. This was obviously not the work of an intruder, and only one realistic suspect came to mind. The girls would never have done this. And yet, in the midst of the crime was clear evidence of a good heart, gone only slightly astray. For though everyone's presents had been opened, they had also been wrapped up again with as much tender care as a five year old could muster.

The anticipation, the expectation had apparently just been too much. But it was also obvious that the utmost of honor and respect for the rest of the family had been at work, not wanting the others to miss out on the delight found in unwrapping their own gifts.

Christmas is about giving and receiving gifts. It is about the excited anticipation of opening what was specially chosen just for us, and for the thrill of seeing the people we love opening their gifts, too. Wouldn't it be sad if the happy expectation of gifts not yet revealed didn't compel us to open them? What a shame it would be for loving gifts to be left neglected and unused.

God has given us more gifts than we've had time to open yet. Don't miss any. Get busy unwrapping, and discover the joy of using them. He meant it to be that way. Many are wrapped up in His Word, waiting to be revealed and used for the benefit of all.

For Christ's sake, Pastor Kurt

The Dream February 2010

The thing about most dreams is that you don't know you're dreaming, and they're so real.

She was looking around the room, taking it all in. It wasn't anyplace she knew, but it was familiar, like she had probably been here before. It was warm and welcoming. Thick carpet was soft under her feet. Looking down she realized she had no shoes on, and wiggled her toes. It felt good.

She noticed a huge pile of presents; all wrapped ... wrapped very nicely, like things purchased in an expensive department store and picked up in Customer Service, more perfectly wrapped than you could do at home.

Suddenly a zoom lens filled her vision with the paper and ribbon. Whatever was inside these boxes didn't come from Target. Yet it was obvious these packages were meant to be opened. It was as if the contents were calling out, "Open Me! Take Me Out, please."

What was that sound? People ... lots of them ... coming closer. The voices gradually grew louder and louder, then BANG! The doors burst open like the cork from a champagne bottle. People were gushing into the room, filling it with joyful, exuberant life. And there she was, like Ebenezer Scrooge in the midst of people who could not see or hear her.

Then they were all suddenly silent, at once, like frogs around a pond on a warm summer evening. They were looking at the presents. Pretty soon a few of them began to go over and take one from the pile, walk to where they had space to sit down, and open it. Some smiled, some cried, some looked astonished and others laughed. She felt very good. Their joy made her happy.

Now some of them were going back to get another gift ... 2, even 3 more, and others hadn't gotten their first one yet. But everyone seemed happy. No one was worried, even

though there were no tags. How did they know which ones were theirs?

She was alone again. Not in the same room, but some presents were there. A sadness came over her. Something was wrong. These belonged to someone. Had the people left them behind? Looking around with a growing urgency she desperately wanted to find the people who should have these gifts. What if she couldn't find them? What would happen to the presents? Would they go to waste? Would the people's lives suffer needless loss, or sorrow or worse? This had to be made right and she would have no rest until it was.

In near panic she raced for the door ... but couldn't find one. The room was expanding faster than she could get to the walls where a door might be. Desperation had her on the verge of collapsing into a sobbing heap when ... she felt the blankets, turned and saw the night light in the bathroom. She was awake.

She breathed a sigh of relief as her heart began to calm, her pulse slowed toward normal. As the tension shrank back she realized she was in her own bed, in her own home. It had been a dream, but so real it had shaken her to the core.

Then she heard the unmistakable voice, deep in her heart... "The gifts are real, and they are yours."

What about you? Have you received your gifts? Have you opened or used them? You really should. God intended them specifically for you.

For Christ's sake, Pastor Kurt

Real Life
March 2010

Revell and I were having lunch with our daughter, Laura, recently to celebrate a significant event in our past. We've enjoyed this celebration for many years. It's become an annual tradition. Since Laura's children are both teenagers now, we get to share most of what it takes to be parents.

During lunch I asked her to recall some of her favorite memories of growing up in our family, and thought of a few uncommon occasions that might be on her list. She smiled while scanning the catalogue in her mind, and as she began to tell her story I found myself both pleased and surprised.

First she told us about a time when she was 12 years old. As it turns out, everyday family life was a little dull from her perspective at that time. She told us things would be more enjoyable if we had a Monopoly game, and played it regularly. We got the game, and played it often. But looking back, part of what meant the most was that she had input. What was important to her was important to us because it was important to her.

Maybe it would be helpful to mention that she had lived with us less than a year at the time. We are an adopted family. We are so thankful to have each other, and our daughter acknowledges how pleased she is with the progress she's made with us over the years. She was pretty good at being a kid, but Revell and I had a lot to learn about being parents.

The next thing she talked about was a humorous – to us at least – set of nicknames we took for each other. It had to do with our spending habits. It may have sounded like silly nonsense to an uninitiated listener, but we found much pleasure in using them when appropriate. The whole shared identity was filled out when our son, Jason joined the family. The improvised names have long been left behind, but to this day we can all get a good laugh when remembering how we came up with them and what gave them meaning. I think they were testimony that we belonged to each other in something that was ours alone. It identified us as a family.

A couple of months ago I was impressed to read the book of Ecclesiastes for the first time in a long time. There were certainly some spectacular things to recall in that writer's life. Yet what he seems to value most, looking back over his life, are the everyday things ... the simple, uncomplicated things. Love, honor and enjoy God. Enjoy your family and friends. Enjoy your work. Enjoy your food. Enjoy the enjoyable and don't allow yourself to be robbed of it because of unpleasant things in life you cannot avoid or control. And as you enjoy enjoying them, don't forget them.

Try to not let life be a series of events, but rather, an ongoing flow of real life with real people as it unfolds from day to day. Luke 12:22-34

For Christ's sake, Pastor Kurt



The Payoff
April 2010

He sat quietly in the dark, not alone but left alone. The others may well have been churning with uncertainty and anticipation; too many unknowns to consider all at once. He was almost glowing with the embers of contentment ... deeper than anything he could recall. He had waited for this satisfaction so long it had consumed him. Not the satisfaction, but the object of his purpose that now produced it. The others would not dare disturb him.

As he slowly closed his eyes the pleasure soaked through him, head to toes, like slipping into a hot tub — the water the perfect temperature for soothing aching bones. He exhaled a long, slow, silent emptying. No pressure. Just nothing left in place to hold it back. How long had it been?

What would happen next? No need to rush that. Enjoy the moment. Nothing was required of his mind. Complete relaxation. When he did rouse himself, it would be with the freedom of knowing he was now unhindered from accomplishing all he had ever hoped to do. If this were not the pinnacle of his existence, it was surely the place from which he would begin his ascent. Bliss. He was starting to drift in the boundlessness.

“Tick.” One eye popped open. What was that? Faint, but obvious. Now nothing. His hearing was ramping up to heightened intensity as he slid the other eye open. He rolled them side to side but saw no movement. He could not see the others. They were frozen in fear, not wanting to open their eyes or move a muscle lest they be seen. He waited.

“Tick.” There it was again. Though only his eyes opened, he was now on full alert. They all sat in stone-still silence. It felt like an agonizing eternity as they waited. Then it came again, “Tick” — only this time louder. It seemed to be closer, too. “Tick.”

“**What the HELL is that!?**” he roared as he shot to his feet. Every particle of his being was fully charged and ready to explode into action as he searched with all his senses for what unplanned intrusion had dared to invade his space. The others were too terrified of him to move, or even breathe. “Tick.”

His mind was filling like an overfired boiler nearing the explosion stage when, “Tick,” the next one came. All of a sudden it seemed as though the pace had quickened; “Tick, Tick, Tick, Tick, Tick, the volume growing and the source drawing nearer. His head flashed back

and forth, up and down in every direction as his limbs moved into the trained, prepared positions of a battle-hardened warrior, ready to launch himself at any opponent as soon as he saw one. "Tick."

It sounded as if it were in his very head, and now as relentless as a metronome, not only in him but all around him. His whole being shifted with lightning speed, one way and another until he would systematically face every point of the compass. Without thinking he raged, **"Where are you!?"** The others scurried away like rats when a basement light turns on; just wanting to move out of range, no longer worried about being seen, but only avoiding the wrath they knew was sure to explode any instant.

Then just when the next tick should have sounded EVERYTHING stood still in a blinding burst of light they could not have imagined or prepared for. They weren't sure if there was sound too. It didn't matter. It could not have been worse. **"NOOOooooooooo!"** he bellowed. **"NO!"** but even he knew it was too late.

"Yes," said the Son of God. "It is over, just as you knew it would be." And with that, the Lord Jesus Christ, life Himself, rose up, threw off the garment of death like an old blanket, and walked back into the realm of men and women to give them the freedom and power He had just secured for all eternity.

For Christ's sake,

Kurt



The Payoff June 2010

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For Christ’s sake,

Kurt

A Mule Named Spirit

July 2010

He was a big mule, a really big mule... bigger than many horses. As far as he was concerned, the huge pasture he lived in was his personal space. Twelve to fifteen acres with plenty of room to move around ... if he wanted to, which he usually didn't. It was a good life.

Nothing difficult was ever required of him. He had more food than a small herd could eat. Plenty of shade trees around the borders when it was hot, an open barn when it rained ... what more could he want? Hidden high up the western slope of the Cascades, far off the beaten path, visitors rarely bothered him. Most of them were city people who knew nothing about farm animals. The few who ventured over to his pasture were paying guests of the Dude Ranch his owners ran, and they were too intimidated by his enormous size to approach him. The riding horses were in a corral near the main barn.

A sigh ... a gentle snort ... a half-chewed mouth full of sweet grass, and his left eyelid drooped as his right hind foot hitched up like it always did when he dozed off.

His right ear twitched before his brain awakened enough to register anything. Voices ... several of them ... young voices. If he could've understood English he would have heard the excited Boy Scouts exclaim, "Hey! It's a horse." "No it's not, you idiot! It's a mule. Don't you know anything?" He swung his head around and watched dispassionately as 8 or 10 of them climbed up and over the

split-rail fence lining the driveway side of his field. His right hind foot slowly returned to the ground. His ear cocked down at right angle to his head like he was signaling to make a turn. Other than that, he was as still as a statue while they approached.

A couple of them ran toward him without evidence of any threat. The main pack walked briskly, but cautiously as the leaders drew closer. Two brought up the rear very slowly, not too sure what was about to happen or how it might turn out. Better safe than sorry.

All but the two timid ones began circling slowly as they came close enough to reach out and touch him. They looked harmless enough, and even if they weren't, he had dealt with bigger problems than these twerps could hand him. One kick and they would scatter like mice. But, hey ... no risk, no fun.

The first one touched his neck softly. He gently swung his head in his direction, giving the kid permission to stroke his jaw, then his muzzle. This one was not a novice, and the others began to follow suit, patting and petting him all over; on his flanks, his shoulders and his sides. One even began to scratch him behind his ear. Felt nice. These boys might be OK. He closed his eyes again. So far, so good.

One of them started talking again, and as he did the others began to take hold of him all around. Quickly he had a kid fastened

firmly to every part of him except his tail. They knew enough to not be directly behind him. Three of them had both arms wrapped around his neck, one on each leg, and a few more without room enough to get a good grip. Two stood to his left side. Then one of them put both hands up toward the side of his back as the other one stooped down. These punks intended to ride him! This should be fun.

Spry as could be, the one standing at his side was boosted up on his back by the other one as the rest of them jumped backward away from him. Their timing was good. The kid's butt had no more than touched his back when he uncorked a mighty, bucking jolt that sent the boy flying over his head a good ten feet. To his surprise and pleasure the young man landed, rolled and came to a stop laughing like it was the best thing that had ever happened to him. "Let's do it again!" he shouted as he jumped to his feet.

"It's my turn! I'm going next!" yelled the one who had helped him onto the mule's back. "Then me! I'm after you!" And "me next!" erupted the chorus ... all except the two out on the edge. Not a word from them. With that, the boys scrambled to lay hold of the mule again as the next hopeful rider got into position. In their enthusiasm they did not notice that though the mule stood still, his posture was very different. His eyes were wide open, his ears were erect and perfectly still, his tail was not swishing and every muscle in his body was as tight as a piano string. He was an equine trebuchet, ready to launch the next load with his full power.

Once again, Boy Scout up, Boy Scout off, then the scramble for the next rider to get his turn. The field grass was long and thick, the sod was fairly soft and no injuries resulted from the next several thrills. But the mule's eyes began to show a stern resolve unnoticed among the joyful young bronco riders, and things were about to change.

As they gathered around to ready themselves for the next explosion, the big

beast gave a sigh and let all the energy drain from his body. The boys shouted the cadence in unison, "One, two, three," and the next expectant cowboy sprang up onto the mule's back as the others all jumped back, their faces electric with anticipation. To everyone's complete amazement ... nothing. Not a twitch. Then the mule slowly turned his head to look at them, waited a few seconds, and sat down. The kid on his back could not keep from sliding down, off his big rump and onto the ground. The mule blinked once, turned his head back forward and let out a big, lip flapping sigh. The boys stood staring in stunned silence, unwilling to embrace the implications of what had just happened.

What's the point of the story? That depends on whether you identify with the Boy Scouts or the mule.

For Christ's sake, Kurt



Neighbors

August 2010

Ozena Younger was 84 years old and had lived in her home for 21 years since her husband died. They had lived there together for 30 years before that. Some of her relatives helped build the house in 1914, doing all of the stone work for the fireplace, chimney and pillars for the covered, wraparound porch. It was one of only two houses on the street with full front porches and had been in their family since it was built – the first house in that neighborhood.

When the new family moved in next door she still mowed her own lawn by hand with a push, reel type mower. She didn't need the catcher that typically hung from the handle. She never let it get that long. She was recycling before mulching mowers were invented. It was good for the lawn.

Her new neighbors were a dad and mom in their 30's with two teenagers. When spring came that year they were all outside often and began to get to know each other. Ozena didn't have pets, but enjoyed the family's dog and cat, both of which hung around the yard when their people were out.

One day when the dad and Ozena were both working in the yard they started talking about tending different plants, and he asked if he could help her with something. She didn't have any needs at the time, but thanked him and asked if she could take a rain check. He said, "Yes, Ma'am." She said, "My name is Ozena." He replied, "Yes, Ma'am." Her mild irritation and pleasure were both evident in her eyes and at the corners of her small mouth. Her mouth wasn't her only small feature. She was petite in every way, though certainly not fragile or dainty. This little lady was sturdy and vigorous.

As summer wore on he occasionally just stepped in and handled some things it looked like he should. She never objected and always said thanks. He always said, "Yes, Ma'am." She always reminded him her name was Ozena, and so it went in a very predictable cycle of friendship. He had a pick-up truck and would haul limbs and larger things to the dump for her when he was making a run of his own.

Not long before the overnight temperatures hinted that fall was coming, her family and friends began to drop off firewood in her back yard. There was a gate big enough for a car in the fence along the alley, and it was easy to

move some of it into the basement from the pile stacked against the back of the house.

While helping her move some wood one day she commented how much she loved a good fire in the evening. He mentioned to her that he knew how to build a pretty good fire, and would be happy to set it for her if she wanted. He was very pleased when she said that would be fine. So every evening he went over and prepared a fire she need only put a match to, with enough wood on hand to feed it until she was ready for bed.

They enjoyed being neighbors over the next year, and when various fruits were in season she would invite him in to share some fresh baked pie. She didn't like to eat around most people because some of her physical dexterity was fading and she didn't want others to be uncomfortable. But they were friends and everything was relaxed and comfortable between them.

He was up cleaning his gutters one day when that second fall came, and realized he hadn't seen anyone clean hers since they had lived there. So when he finished he moved his ladder over to her house. He didn't see her, and didn't know if she was home or not, but knew she wouldn't mind. Her granddaughter often came and took her to the store or on some outing or another. In the midst of the task he stopped and thought, "This is the sort of thing Jesus would do for someone."

The next summer Ozena's tired old body had had enough and released her to go and live directly in the presence of the Lord. She had told him over the last year or so, "I don't know why the Lord keeps me here. I've done everything He's asked me to do and I'm ready to go." The family next door was renting, and Ozena had it written in her will that her family could sell her house to no one but the next door neighbors if they wanted it.

For Christ's sake,

Kurt

Really

September 2010

He wasn't real sure what to think. There were a few things he was certain of – that God was still good, that the cold stones supporting him were hard, that the iron manacles clamped to his wrists and ankles cut into him if he moved much at all, that apart from the soldiers guarding him he was alone, and that his prospects did not look good.

The young girl wasn't bored, really. That wasn't it. It was just that they had been at it for quite a while...a long time, really. She was participating, but she was also drifting every now and then. She just felt restless. Should she stay put and work harder at concentrating? It was OK to walk about during these things. Just don't be a distraction. Maybe if she walked around a little it would be easier to maintain her focus.

Well... they had already killed one of his closest friends. It was impossible to not think the executioner may be waiting for him in the morning, too. He had been thrown in jail by these people before, even severely beaten, but he had always gotten out one way or another. Deep inside he felt this was different. This could well be real trouble. And he had expected to see and do so much more.

A heavy sigh escaped his nostrils, and a sleeping guard on one side of him shifted slightly. "I guess they're used to this" he thought, knowing sleep was unlikely to be a part of his night. His mind was ratcheting through multitudes of seemingly random thoughts, from his childhood and working life,

right up through the radical events of the last few months. What happened to normal? Would he do it differently if he knew this would be his end?

For some reason the voices of the others made it impossible for her to think clearly, or hear for that matter. She didn't know what was happening to her. It had never been this way before. They were not disorderly, or behaving outside of what she was used to, but it felt like confusion was growing in her head and she needed to move away from it in hopes of getting some clarity. So she quietly slipped from the room out into the entryway that led to the front. It was actually outside – a covered sort of portico, but longer, like a hallway that was open at one end. Moving toward that opening she could feel the night air and was getting what felt more like freedom the further she was from the room behind her.

What?! Just as he sensed the presence of someone standing over him, the growing intensity of a strong light filled the room and something hard struck him in the side. All of his senses were instantly taking input at lightning speed, yet no one else noticed – just him and the guy who hit him. His head rotated to one side then the other. Both guards were still asleep.

As the guy said, "Get up" the chains fell away from him. "Get dressed and put on your sandals" he said, and he did. He must have been looking at him with complete

bewilderment. He felt bewildered. "Now put on your coat and follow me." The guy was walking away and he half stumbled after him while wondering, "Am I in a dream? This isn't real." He looked right at both sets of standing guards as they walked past them, but they didn't see him. The whole thing was unreal.

Leaving the guards behind, he looked forward as they walked toward the heavy iron gates separating the prison from the city. They opened on their own. Following his mysterious guide they walked out into the city and down the street, when...the guy was GONE! Vanished. All of a sudden the fog in his head was gone too; he was fully aware and realized, "That was an angel! God sent an angel to deliver me from the king and the Jews. They WERE going to kill me!" With clarity for the first time during this whole episode he thought, "OK... what do I do now? Where should I go? I'll go to Mark's mother's house. At least I know I'll get in there and be safe for a minute."

She had finally gotten some peace and quiet and felt like she could listen for God without distraction. The knock at the large wooden gate startled her! It was the middle of the night. No one dropped by at this hour. Her fears jumped to the forefront. With James dead and Peter in prison, they might all be rounded up and...but the knock wasn't the harsh pounding of Roman soldiers. She leaned closer to the gate and asked in a soft voice, just above a whisper, "Who is it?"

The husky voice on the other side answered, but not too loudly, "It's me, Peter." It was like an explosion of every good and exciting feeling she had every known, all at once! Without a word she shot back toward the house, running as swiftly as her little feet could carry her. This was what they were all here praying for! Oh, My! God has answered our prayers! She burst through the door at a dead run. The potential for disruption never occurred to her. Every face in the room was already turning in her direction when she shouted, "It's Peter! He's at the gate!"

They all sat in stunned silence, looking first at her wildly illuminated face, then at each other, then back at her. She was bouncing up and down, unable to contain her excitement. OK...we've lost our focus on prayer here...let's get things under control. One of the men stood to his feet as he half asked, half stated, "Are you out of your mind? Peter is in prison. They will probably kill him tomorrow. This is why we're here pleading for his life. Get control of yourself."

But she would not. "It's Peter, I tell you! I heard his voice. I'm not dreaming. I know who he is and I know his voice. It's him! He's right outside at our own gate!" Not wanting to argue with her they decided it was probably his angel. But she had left the door hanging open, they could now hear the knocking, and it was getting a little louder.

A few more began to stand and several of the most prominent men started out to the gate as everyone followed with their eyes and ears. Reaching to lift the iron latch, they slowly opened the gate and there stood Peter.

God answers prayer. Don't fail to ask for what only He can do, and don't be shocked when He does it

For Christ's sake,

Kurt



A Season of Its Own

October 2010

Looking out from his window there was an undeniable beauty to it. The tree that stood forth with such magnificence several months ago now presented a new splendor. Leaves once green and supple, heavy laden with glucose, were now spectral in places – red, orange, golden and yellow; some fading to brown near the edges. Lighter, too – soon to be wind-blown when they released their grip. Fall had arrived and change was in the air. What would it bring?

Among the cycle of seasons—winter, spring, summer and fall—fall stands alone. The others all anticipate newness, but fall seems to linger between, hanging as if suspended. For some it is more about what is being left behind than what comes next, skiers, snow boarders and such excepted.

Every day the owner looked out at the tree, drinking in the ever-changing sight. He hoped for crisp, cold, clear days when some of the beautiful leaves would pile up and crunch beneath his feet, shuffling around his ankles before he had to gather them in heaps and send them away in the recycle truck. He also realized some would become rain soaked and messy. Of such was the balance of life. And faith needed to look beyond the hood ornament. Real life extended much further down the road.

One undeniable thing about God-authored seasons is that they cannot be rushed. They will take their own time ... or His, rather. An old American Indian proverb advises, “Don’t push the river.”

His mind drifted back to the first time he had taken a good, long look at the tree. Then he saw almost exclusively what he wanted it to

become; what he knew it could become. And it was well on the way; much more that it had been, even a different tree so to speak. Now, so much deeper into the process, he could both see and understand; believe and believe for, anticipate, even expect that it would all continue. Because God was the author of the tree, its life and the cycles it would live through within the boundaries of His creation.

Was the tree wise? No. It could not contemplate or comprehend. But it served to demonstrate wisdom... to declare... to proclaim it.

“Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 8)

Whatever he knew now, whatever the tree was, more would come, and he didn’t want to miss any of it.

All for Christ’s sake, Kurt