

**Years ago I heard a story** about a little town up in the mountains that had an annual Christmas tree celebration. It was small town, and somehow it was arranged that every year there would be a gift on the tree for every person in town—young or old, rich or poor. It was a tall tree, requiring ladders and long arms. But somehow there was a present for every person on that tree. And on Christmas Eve the entire town would assemble in the town square, sing the carols of the season, and distribute the presents. And every year there was a present for every single person – except old Eb.

Eb was the town bum. He was the closest thing to a homeless, shiftless character in the county. He slept in barns or in the local jail, and he was surly and unfriendly, and wasn't as bright or alert as other people. He usually stayed out of sight, but sometimes people would see him walking along the highway or slinking through the alleys.

Well, one year some boys decided to play a trick on old Eb. They put a present for him up on the town Christmas tree, and someone told him about it. “Eb, there’s a package for you on the tree this year.” For the first time in a long time, Eb was excited. His eyes brightened. And when Christmas Eve came, he was there along the edge of the crowd, craning around, standing on tiptoe, trying to see, trying to hear.

He waited patiently through the Christmas carols and through the mayor’s remarks, and finally time came for the distribution of the gifts. Several of the older boys mounted the ladders and started shouting out names and passing out gifts. Finally of the fellows pulled a gift off the tree, looked at it, and shouted, “Why, this one is for old Eb.” He tossed it down and Eb ran and grasped it in his hands. He tore off the paper. He pulled off the lid, He thrashed through the tissue. And it was empty. Nothing in it. A joke.

Some very mean boys had played a cruel joke on someone less fortunate than they were and who couldn’t understand what Christmas was all about.<sup>1</sup>

That’s the way life treats a lot of people. They get excited about something. They anticipate. They grow hopeful. They set their goals. They build their lives. They reach as high as they can. They unwrap their aspirations and dreams and ambitions—only to find them empty. And they can’t understand what life is all about. The devil tricks them like those boys tricked old Eb.

But Jesus came to change that. He said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Jesus came to give us a goal, an aspiration, an ambition that will stand the test of time. He came to give us substantial joy, substantial meaning, substantial life. He emptied Himself that we might be full. He left the throne empty for the manger, the manger for the cross, the cross for the tomb, the tomb for heaven—all so that He could fill our empty lives.

That’s what His mother, Mary, told us in her prayer recorded in Luke 1. This is the prayer she composed after her unexpected meeting with the angel Gabriel, who told her she would bear the Christchild, and after having visited with her older relative, Elizabeth. We sometimes call her prayer by its Latin name, the *Magnificat*. It’s found in Luke 1:46-55.

*And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

This is one of the greatest prayers in the New Testament, and it tells us that Mary – even if she was a small-town teenager – was not only a woman of deep prayer and piety; she was a diligent student of the Old Testament. Her prayer is filled with phrases and allusions from the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, look at the phrase in verse in verse 53.

*He has filled the hungry with good things...*

She was reminding the Lord of His promise in Psalm 107:9, which says, “He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”

### Three Great Words

And this is the great truth of Christ. He became empty that we might become full. As I thought about this, I began thinking of three great words used in the Bible to describe how Christ and how Christmas fill our lives with good things.

**The first word is abundant.** The word itself means more than adequate, over-sufficient, richly supplied. It’s a word used about a hundred times in the Bible.

Joshua 17:14 says: The Lord has blessed us abundantly.

Psalm 36 says that we are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of His blessings.

Romans 5:17 talks about God’s abundant provision of grace.

Paul said: The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly (1 Timothy 1:14).

Ephesians 3:20 says that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Peter said: Grace and peace be yours in abundance (1 Peter 1:2).

Psalm 86 says God is abundant in mercy.

Isaiah said: He will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

And as we’ve seen, Jesus said: I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.

Do you need forgiveness? Do you need pardon? Do you need mercy? Do you need hope? Do you need blessings? God provides those in abundance. He fills the empty heart and blesses the humble.

The second word is **sufficient**.

The apostle Paul said, “God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.”

He told the Philippians that He was not ashamed to bear witness for the Gospel, but would “have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death.”

When He was battling the illness that he described as the thorn in the flesh, the Lord gave Him a special message: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

There’s an old story that one day the British preacher Charles Spurgeon was riding home through the grimy streets of London, spent and discouraged. But suddenly this verse of Scripture came to his mind: My grace is sufficient for you.”

He thought to himself—what an understatement! That’s like a little fish realizing that the flowing waters of a great river were sufficient for his thirst. That’s like a little mouse realizing Joseph’s granaries in Egypt were sufficient for His hunger. That’s like a man on a mountainside realizing that all the oxygen in the atmosphere is sufficient for his breathing.

The third word is **overflowing**.

Psalm 23 says, “My cup overflows.”

Psalm 65 says, “You crown the year with Your bounty and Your carts overflow with abundance.”

Romans 15:13 says: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Psalm 119 says: “May my lips overflow with praise.”

Psalm 45 says our hearts should be overflowing with a good theme.

Philippians 1 says we should be overflowing with joy.

Colossians 2 says we should be overflowing with thanksgiving.

1 Thessalonians 3 says we should be overflowing with love.

I know that we might know these things theoretically. We might know them theologically. But how can we know them experientially? How can they be as real to us – and more real – than our everyday problems and pressures?

### Two Great Habits

Well, that comes with two great habits.

**First, we have to find our rest in the will of God.** When I was a student in college, I had the privilege of spending time with the pastor of a large church – a mega-church – who would answer my questions and let me see how he went about his work. One day I asked him about the prestige of pastoring a large downtown historic congregation. He said something to this effect: “I’d be just as happy pastoring a small country church. I have learned that Dante was right.” Well, I had not read Dante – still haven’t, sad to say – but he went on to quote from the Divine Comedy, and I’ve never forgotten the quote. Some people say that it’s the most beautiful sentence that Dante ever wrote: “In His will is my peace.”

As the Christmas season approached in 1979, America was in crisis because the nation of Iran had seized 52 American diplomats from our embassy and was holding them hostage. President Jimmy Carter seemed powerless to resolve the problem, and as a token of his frustration he decided that the national Christmas tree would not be lit until they were returned. Well, the hostage crisis lasted 444 days, and so for two years the National Christmas Tree was dark.

One of those hostages was a U.S. Diplomat named Kathryn

Koob. She later said that at the moment she and her colleagues were seized, she was terrified. The embassy was surrounded by mobs yelling and preparing to storm the building. The Americans were trapped inside. As the day and night wore on, fatigue over came her and she had to lie down. By 2 a.m. the shouting outside had died down, and she knew she had to get some sleep. Suddenly she felt someone sit down on her cot, but turning quickly to look no one was there. Instantly she was reminded of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, and she had a sense of His presence. Then a hymn came into her mind:

Have Thine own way, Lord!  
Have Thine own way!  
Thou art the potter, I am the clay!  
Mold me and make me after Thy will,  
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

She said, “How those words spoke to me! I knew I couldn’t do anything to change my situation as a political prisoner. But when I accepted that fact, I could say, “Okay, Lord, here I am. I don’t know what’s going to happen in this situation. But use me. While I am waiting, yielded and still.”

As the days wore on, she devised a routine and set about ordering her morning hours in a kind of contemplative system for herself—Bible studies, prayer and meditation, reading. She developed a morning prayer that went something like this: “Thank You, Lord, for bringing me through the night. Thank you for giving me today. I give it back to You. Show me what You would have me do with it.”

It was this attitude and these simple habits that enabled Kathryn Koob to not only survive but thrive during the 444 days of her captivity.<sup>2</sup>

In His will is my peace. Have Thine own way. Mold me and make me while I am waiting, yielded and still.

That’s what it means to find rest in the will of God. One of the reasons Jimmy Carter was defeated in his reelection attempt was because of that National Christmas Tree. When another year came and went and it was still dark, it became a symbol of his failure, the lesson being that we should never let the lights of Christmas go off in our hearts. We should always let the light of Jesus be shining in our lives, even during times of darkness or twilight.

**Second, we have to find our reassurance in the Blood of Christ.** God’s abundance, sufficiency, and overflow are resources that are only available to His children, to those who have received Christ as their Savior.

It’s important to remember that when Jesus came the first time, few people recognized or accepted Him. There was Joseph and Mary, of course. There were the ragged shepherds and the mysterious wise men. But most of the world missed it. Some violently opposed it. Even in infancy He was forced to flee His own country. His life was endangered when He was a baby and He was slain as an adult. He came unto His own but His own received Him not. But to as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.

Even on Christmas Day, even in a service like this, it’s possible to miss Him. I believe we must intentionally, consciously, deliberately turn our lives over to Him, confessing our sins and acknowledging Him as Lord of all.

Last week I read about what happened one Christmas in a small town where there was a family of three people—a mother, a father and their daughter. This had once been a family of four, a little boy. But the boy had passed away at the end of August. The family was naturally having a difficult time processing its grief, especially as the holidays approached. The father had grown distant, and whenever the subject came up he would simply say: “Only eternity will fix it. Only eternity will fix it.”

Well, this father worked at the local post office. He was postmaster for the town. A day or two before Christmas, he was going through some of the mail that had come in, and there were several letters addressed to Santa Claus. One letter in particular caught his attention. The handwriting was strangely familiar. It was his daughter’s.

Sure enough it bore their return address. Realizing she had already written Santa, his curiosity got the best of him and he opened it. This is what he read:

“Dear Santa. Things have not been well at our house since my little brother died. We are all so unhappy. When I try to talk to Daddy about it, the only thing he can say is that ‘only eternity will change it.’ I don’t know what eternity is, but if you have any extra eternities, would you please leave one at our house on Christmas Eve?”

As the father read that letter, he realized what had happened and he learned a life-changing lesson. He knew that he needed an eternity. He knew that Santa could never bring him an eternity, but Jesus could. He quietly bowed his head and as best he knew how he confessed his sin and invited Christ into his heart. He went home that day a different person, realizing that even in death life really is wonderful in Jesus Christ.

Well, there is plenty of eternity to go around—enough for you

and me and for everybody in the world.<sup>3</sup>

His blessings are abundant. His life is sufficient. His goodness is overflowing. He fills the empty heart. He became empty that we might be full. He emptied the throne, the manger, the cross, and the tomb that we might be filled and fulfilled in Him. For...

This, this is Christ the King  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing.  
Haste! Haste! To bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> This is my recollection of a story I heard sometime in the early 1970s at the First Baptist Church of Columbia, South Carolina, where Dr. H. Edwin Young was pastor. It was during one of Dr. Young’s Sunday evening sermons.

<sup>2</sup> “Waiting, Yielded and Still” by Kathryn Koob in *A Very Present Help* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1985), 17.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/11662181/>

This sermon is printed and distributed as a part of the ongoing ministry of The Donelson Fellowship. You may download the weekly sermons from our website listed below. For further information, or if you desire spiritual counsel, please write, call, or visit:

Donelson Free Will Baptist Church  
3210 McGavock Pike  
Nashville, TN 37214  
Across from McGavock High School

(615) 871-GROW  
[www.donelson.org](http://www.donelson.org)

*An Empty Christmas Series*

# *The Empty Heart*

A Pocket Paper  
from  
The Donelson Fellowship

---

Robert J. Morgan  
December 25, 2011

---

