

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from His unexpected and transformative gift for you, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

If you are a procrastinator, you know what time it is: The last minute. The last-minute for buying Christmas presents. Fortunately, there are an overabundance of websites and stores to help with picking that perfect gift for our loved ones. Many of this year's offerings are unique, unforgettable and frankly pretty weird. Put one of these under the Christmas tree, and your generosity will *never* be forgotten... ... Guaranteed.

First, a pair of air-conditioned shoes. (SLIDE) That's right, air conditioned shoes might be just the thing for that runner or basketball player in the family... Made by a Japanese company called Hydro-Tech, these \$78 shoes have filters and micro fans built right into them. Or you could just give them to anyone who wants to be cool. Literally.

For another \$20, you can buy your loved one an Ostrich Pillow (SLIDE). This napping pillow goes completely around a person's head, and can help them get some sleep on a couch or even at a desk. The company's motto: "Dreams Happen Anywhere." I really like this one so when I'm napping... er... praying at my desk my neck doesn't get sore... If your budget is a bit tighter, \$15 will get you a toilet nightlight, (SLIDE) which will provide much-needed guidance in the

dead of night. Or maybe there is a man in your life who would be interested in a clip-on man bun. (SLIDE) Available for only \$9.99, this hair accessory enables any businessman to be conservative all day and then turn into a hipster at night!

Here's one of my favorites. Some of you might know we feed many cats outside on the patio deck. Many are strays and they need lots of TLC which PJ is quick to provide. Even so, some of our feline friends wander off and don't return for some reason. So, when I saw this Christmas gift, I thought it would be perfect for PJ... For just \$25 you can buy a cat brush shaped like a tongue. (SLIDE) Yes, that's right: This brush is held in your mouth, and you use it to bond with your kitty by pretending to lick it like a mother cat. By doing so, you're communicating in their "love language," just like Dr Gary Chapman suggests we should all do with one another in his famous Love Language book. Using the Licki Brush is said to be an "oddly meditative practice," soothing for both owner and cat. For most people, a Licki Brush, a man bun, a toilet light, an ostrich pillow, or airconditioned shoes would be *truly* unexpected gifts.

So it was and is with God's gift to humankind. What were the people of Israel expecting during the rule of Emperor Augustus of Rome? They had no Christmas to celebrate, so they weren't looking for anyone to surprise them with a Licki Brush or an Ostrich Pillow. But the people had hopes and dreams in their time of oppression, and some of these expectations were based on their Hebrew

Scriptures. They expected a Messiah King who would lead them to independence.

They expected a leader who would, dare I say it, Make Israel great again...

So, what they got was a pregnant girl... This is a really odd gift, don't you think? The prophet Isaiah had explained that "the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Such a prophecy was thrilling, because the name Immanuel means "God is with us," and the people of Israel were longing for God's presence and power. In the face of threats from foreign rulers, Isaiah was predicting that God was going to free them from oppression and bring peace to their land. So, maybe the gift was a girl *with child*, who would bear the child, yet another gift — a child named Immanuel, a sign of God's presence and power.

The people also knew Psalm 80, a prayer for the restoration of Israel. "Stir up your might, and come to save us!" says the desperate appeal to God. "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!" (vv. 2-3). The people of Israel heard their enemies laughing at them, and they sensed their neighbors were looking down on them, so they cried to God, "Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself." So, maybe the gift was a mighty messenger, God's right-hand man.

Both of these were expected gifts — desirable and deeply appreciated. Both Immanuel, God with us and the mighty messenger, God’s right-hand man, were part of the expectations of the people. Here’s the thing, the gospel of Matthew tells us “the birth of Jesus the Messiah” took place this way... A teenage girl found to be with child from the Holy Spirit -- pregnant by the Holy Spirit —now how unexpected is that!?!

Just when Joseph had resolved to quietly divorce her, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream — that’s unexpected! And the angel gave him the name Jesus, which means “Savior” — that’s unexpected! Jesus came to save us from our sins not lead Israel in victory over the Roman oppressors, that’s unexpected!

Just about everything about Jesus is unexpected. He may be the most surprising gift of all time. Jesus may be an unexpected gift, but he’s not weird at all. Instead, he shows that God is truly with us, and his mission is to save us from our sins. Jesus is the most unexpected gift, but he’s also the most transformative. We are transformed by the way we respond to the gift of the Babe born in Bethlehem. So how can we respond to such a gift? A short thank-you note may be

appropriate for a pair of air-conditioned shoes or a clip-on man bun, but thanks for the gift of Jesus might take a bit more thought.

The gift of Jesus as *Immanuel* means that God is with us in every time and place and situation. Jesus comes to us as nothing less than the presence and power of God in human form. He's with us when our friends desert us. When our marriage is falling apart. When our jobs are unsatisfying, unstable or unexpectedly taken away from us. He's with us when our loved ones pass, and we're left to grieve with a giant hole left in our lives. In all these traumatic experiences and in anything you might be experiencing right now, Jesus is Immanuel, present with you in surprising and life-giving ways. The gift of Jesus as Savior means God is with you to help you, save you, and transform you. Jesus is not simply standing by our side, as a supportive friend would be. No, he comes in decisive action. The name Jesus literally means "God helps" or "God saves," which tells us he has a particular agenda in the world. When we are feeling overwhelmed, Jesus helps. When we are overcome by sin, Jesus forgives. When we feel lost or defeated or powerless, Jesus saves. Together, these actions are transformative. Jesus transforms us until we're completely new creations in Christ. The old has passed away. Everything is now new. A re-invention has taken place. All possible because Jesus is Lord.

Make no mistake, Jesus is Lord! The gift of Jesus as Messiah and Lord means Jesus is leading you as your Lord and master. We might be reluctant to accept this gift, because we like to stand up as independent people and say to the people around us, “You’re not the boss of me!” But the truth is we all need guidance as we make our way in the world. To accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord is to fall in line when Jesus says, “Follow me”. It’s to make a serious effort to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” It’s to accept the truth of Jesus’ words, “You cannot serve God and wealth”, and to structure our lives so that we are storing up treasures in heaven, instead of on earth.

By this point in the month of December, it may be too late to buy the perfect Christmas present for a friend or family member, but it is not too late to receive the unexpected gift God is giving you this Christmas season — the gift of Jesus as Immanuel... Savior... Messiah... and Lord.

I hope your unexpected gifts this Christmas aren’t too weird, but I pray Jesus comes to you in surprising and unexpected ways. May his presence as God with you bring you joy and comfort in your times of need. May His power as God almighty transform you into the saint God intended for you all along. Merry Christmas and may you each receive the most unexpected gift ever, Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.