Dear Lexie,

When Will It All End?

Let me start with an apology about addressing a sad event at this very happy time of year. I am lying here in my living room listening to the news about the two police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, who were gunned down in cold blood in New York City. I could not hold back the tears as I listened to the wife of Officer Liu struggle to express her thoughts over the tragic untimely death of her husband. Her grief was palpable. "When will all this come to an end," I heard myself shout.

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The Giving Tree of Life

Did you know that a recent Harvard study showed that simply contemplating generosity boosts your immune system? In addition, the study concluded that giving money to someone...
else lifted the giver's happiness more than spending it on themselves (surprisingly, the study participants' generally predicted that spending on themselves would make them happier). It turns out, giving actually makes us feel happy! When people give, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust. A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better physical and mental health. Individuals who provided practical help or gave emotional support had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn't. Interestingly, receiving is not linked to reduced health risks.

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Merry Christmas

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Missed Last Week's Sermon?
When Will It All End

Let me start with an apology about addressing a sad event at this very happy time of year. I am lying here in my living room listening to the news about the two police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, who were gunned down in cold blood in New York City. I could not hold back the tears as I listened to the wife of Officer Liu struggle to express her thoughts over the tragic untimely death of her husband. Her grief was palpable. “When will all this come to an end,” I heard myself shout.

Imagine the empty and tearful Christmas these two families are going to have. Most likely there will be no special Christmas meal or exchange of gifts. Their grief might not allow them to engage in such celebratory activities. And yet the event that Christmas commemorates is the only ground of hope these two families and all other families who have lost loved ones tragically have.

In a “former life” and in another place, my colleagues and I hired one of the most prestigious venues in the world, the Royal Albert Hall, to celebrate two centuries of Christianity at the start of the current millennium. It was an expensive exercise but we thought it was worth every penny. Over 5000 of us packed into this renowned building to remind ourselves of the most important watershed in earth’s history – God clothing himself with the garb of humanity and becoming part of our family in order to rescue us and give hope to the Ramos and Liu families, and to me and you. No sci-fi plot has come even close to this.

I remember leaving the Royal Albert Hall, late that Saturday night, with the strains of the legendary Heritage Singers ringing in my ears and basking in the glow of the knowledge that we had not been left on our own to struggle through the thick undergrowth of broken dreams, shattered hopes, financial challenges, debilitating sickness and death. Jesus has made a clear path that leads to a bright future. It will come to an end! The Christmas story in contemporary language is that Jesus came to be with us in all our experiences and lead us from captivity to freedom. This was worth celebrating after two thousand years and is worth celebrating every year.

How can we best celebrate the coming of Christ to earth? Certainly, with music and feasting, with gifts and songs, with lights and laughter, but more importantly, with gratitude and giving. Gratitude for the greatest demonstration of love ever seen and for what Christ’s coming to earth means for us all. Giving, because Christmas is essentially about giving – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son…” Why not give some “real gifts” this Christmas! By this I mean giving something that takes a bit of sacrifice, such as buying some grocery for a poor family, paying for the shopping of someone in the supermarket line who has to put back items because of having to watch every dime, inviting someone to your table, who otherwise would be on his or her own. Give a gift for which you expect nothing in return, but the joy of entering into the spirit of the One who gave Himself to us on that first Christmas, that all our sad experiences will come to an end one day.

Merry Christmas!
Jamie Jean

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.” (Proverbs 19:17; NIV)

Did you know that a recent Harvard study showed that simply contemplating generosity boosts your immune system? In addition, the study concluded that giving money to someone else lifted the giver’s happiness more than spending it on themselves (surprisingly, the study participants’ generally predicted that spending on themselves would make them happier). It turns out, giving actually makes us feel happy! When people give, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust. A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better physical and mental health. Individuals who provided practical help or gave emotional support had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn’t. Interestingly, receiving is not linked to reduced health risks.

Researchers suggest that one reason giving may improve physical health and longevity is that it helps decrease stress, which is in turn associated with a variety of health problems.

“A cheerful heart is good medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22)

As evidenced by the benefits to our physical and mental wellbeing resulting from giving, God, in His infinite wisdom, designed us to be generous. Furthermore, the benefits extend into an important realm: our spiritual health.

“Money has great value, because it can do great good. In the hands of God’s children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.” (Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, pp. 351, 352)

We often focus on the dangers of money, greed, and financial idolatry. For good reasons, we are cautioned to store up treasures in Heaven and not on earth. But money itself is not bad. There’s nothing wrong with having money. Money is not evil. It is merely a tool. Money can be a powerful instrument for good when put to proper use.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control…” (Galatians 5:22-23; NIV)

The problem actually lies in our own hearts and how we relate to money. It doesn’t matter whether we are rich or poor, but rather whether material wealth occupies a priority above our duty to God and His will. Fortunately for us, God built a spiritual safeguard through the gifts of giving and service to others. And He offers this gift freely to those who seek to reflect His character. By serving the Lord through sharing His blessings with others, we put our trust in Him to magnify the positive impact that money can produce when invested in God’s purposes. When we give, we open our hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and it’s actually good for our health. When we keep our earthly blessings to ourselves, King Solomon put it best:
“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; NIV)

Whereas the Bible offers us eternal blessings when we give freely from what we have.

“Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:33-34; NIV)

“The poor man who has faith and confidence in God, who trusts in His love and care, and who abounds in good works, judiciously using the little he has in blessing others with his means, is rich toward God. He feels that his neighbor has claims upon him that he cannot disregard and yet obey the commandment of God: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2)

Ten days symbolizes a test period in the Bible. The benefits from practicing the gift of giving is something we can assess fairly easily, so I challenge you to give with a generous and trusting heart this holiday season—as well as ALL seasons and see how it improves your spiritual and physical wellbeing. You can start with just ten days and see what happens...

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6:38; NIV)

Please share your personal experiences with giving and the benefits or blessings you’ve received as a result in the comments section below. I look forward to hearing your stories!

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Merry Christmas

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