

OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD

A STORY OF SIMPLE GIFTS



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Nashville, Tennessee

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DEDICATION



A Story of Simple Gifts is dedicated to the Lord's Army of compassionate hearts—our Operation Christmas Child volunteers.

From Asia to Australia, from Europe to the Americas, from the Middle East to Africa, these dedicated men, women, and young people serve with a sense of calling, hearts of compassion, and an overwhelming desire to see children come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior.

From the staff of Samaritan's Purse and the Operation Christmas Child team—and from our many donors who make this work possible—we say thank you and God bless you in your sacrificial service that reaches around the world to the glory of God.

“Doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord.” (Eph. 6:6–8)

PREFACE: ON THE OUTSIDE WANTING IN



What appears to be the thing that young people are looking for the most?” This was a question my father Billy Graham once asked the president of Harvard University. Without hesitation he answered: “They want to belong.”

Even children in faraway places have a strong desire to “belong” but do not know why, or to what, or to whom. The Bible tells us that God has set eternity in the hearts of the human race (Eccles. 3:11). Even children search for this great truth—the meaning of life.

This is the purpose of Operation Christmas Child—to proclaim the message that Jesus Christ came to mankind in the form of the Christmas Child, to bring eternal life to all. What a blessing it is when people come to Christ as children. But how can they hear this message without someone to tell them?

The shoebox is the vehicle God has put into our hands to reach the little children of the world. We have seen how receptive children are to the Gospel message and we want to be faithful in proclaiming its great truth—inviting a lost world into the saving faith of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some years ago, Samaritan’s Purse had joined with national church leaders in Kosovo to do a massive shoebox distribution in that war-torn country. Four-wheel drive vehicles loaded with cartons of shoeboxes took the team about twelve miles off the beaten path, back into the hills around Kosovo, a European country in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula. This once-suppressed society allowed Operation Christmas Child to “come in” from what had been to them the “outside world.”

The little school was abuzz with excitement when the team arrived. The teachers had prepared the children for a party and they were patiently waiting. As the vehicles approached the schoolhouse, children were halfway out the windows waving. Not to keep them in suspense any longer, the team quickly organized the distribution and handed out hundreds of boxes along with a Gospel storybook for each child.

While the children sang and played together with their toys, and heard the Christmas story, one of the team members walked outside the building and found a little boy standing at the window, peering into the schoolhouse with longing in his eyes.

Many children are forbidden by their parents or guardians to attend a distribution or to accept a gift from strangers, but the longing in their eyes is something not easily forgotten.

There are still many little ones on the outside wanting in, and this is what keeps us motivated—to reach as many as possible with the Gospel that calls lost souls from the world of sin into God's forgiveness and love.

This book, therefore, gives account of Jesus Christ, the Savior of lost souls, who calls people into His salvation. Winning the hearts of children for Him is what keeps us on the journey to deliver a profound message in a simple shoebox.

INTRODUCTION



Christmas! *It's still summertime*, I thought, as I propped my boots up on the desk and listened to the young man calling from England.

Jumping into the Christmas flurry didn't excite me too much, but Christmas in July is a big event in western North Carolina. Mountain towns rope off Main Street lined with booths that are filled with local crafts. Exhibitors peddle homemade tree ornaments. Banners coax residents and vacationers to shop early, even though Christmas is still months away.

Being in ministry nearly forty years has taught me the importance of planning ahead. But in the early days, I embraced each one for what it held in store.

Having just returned from Croatia and Bosnia and soon headed to Somalia and Sudan, Christmas was the furthest thing from my mind. Yet on that summer morning 1993, there was something about what the man said that got my attention—he wanted to help the children of Bosnia who had been left homeless, injured, and hopeless. “Will you help us?” he asked.

It was the height of the war in Bosnia. I had already been there three times that year. Thousands of refugees had been scattered throughout the Balkan states. Husbands and fathers had been killed. Hospitals were filled with young widows and children who had been stricken with multiple injuries. It was a mess!

Samaritan's Purse had provided relief supplies to families that had been torn apart through the atrocity of ethnic cleansing. We had shipped one hundred thousand copies of my father's book *Peace with God* for these victims of war who were longing for peace, giving

them the opportunity to read in their own language about God's salvation and finding real peace with Him. We had sent Bible storybooks to comfort children caught in the incomprehensible war.

All of this was going through my mind as the man poured his heart out and shared with me his plan to fill empty shoeboxes with small toys and needed items to deliver to the children of war at Christmastime.

Samaritan's Purse had become proficient in packing and shipping box loads of medicines, cartons of food, containers of equipment and supplies—but shoeboxes? What could possibly fit inside a shoebox that could help anyone in despair? But I couldn't say no.

"I'll be glad to help," I told him and hung up. I stared out the window at the brilliant sun, listened to the sounds of summer, and thought, *Christmas time's a comin'—but it's still a long way off.*

BIG TROUBLE, BIG TASK, BIG THANKS

Days before Thanksgiving my secretary came through the door with a look on her face that I knew very well. "Do you remember that man from Britain that called you back in the summer asking for shoeboxes? He's on the phone asking when you'll be sending them—he's leaving for Bosnia soon," she stated with an air of "You're in big trouble!" I had forgotten about it and now the Christmas season was fast approaching.

I picked up the phone. "Mr. Graham, how many shoeboxes have you collected?" I couldn't let him down. His cause was worthy, so I said, "David, we're working on it; I'll get back to you." He was thrilled and I was, well, in trouble.

"We've got to collect some shoeboxes—fast!" I said. We threw some ideas around and then called Ross Rhoads, a member of our board of directors and, at the time, senior pastor of Calvary Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. As always, Ross was glad to help and said, "Tell me what to do."

"Get a shoebox and fill it with some little toys for kids—maybe some toothpaste and a toothbrush, a hair brush, and socks," I

suggested. “Take it to the pulpit on Sunday and show your congregation. Ask if they will help us collect shoebox gifts for the kids in Bosnia. And by the way, tell them to put a note inside with their picture so the child will know who the box is from—maybe some of the kids will write back.” Ross enthusiastically agreed. Then I called Sean Campbell, our executive director in Canada. “Sean, see what kind of response you can get from a church up there.”

I hung up and forgot about it again, until a few days after Thanksgiving. My secretary walked into my office and announced a call from Ross with that “you’re in trouble” look on her face. “Ross needs to talk to you.”

Picking up the phone, I heard his voice filled with troubled excitement. “Franklin, you’ve got to send someone down here to pick up all of these shoeboxes!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, we’ve got shoeboxes stacked up in the gym, in the foyer, and in Sunday school rooms—they’re in the way.”

“So you’ve really been able to collect a few hundred boxes?” I asked.

“A few hundred?” Ross answered. “How about eleven thousand!” I was stunned. Ross had a big church, but eleven thousand in two weeks? He said, “Franklin, this is obviously something the Lord has blessed.”

Reflecting years later, Ross said, “All I did that Sunday morning was to show the congregation a shoebox Carol had packed and asked them to do the same. That afternoon, a member of the church with the Bible Broadcast Network (BBN) interviewed me and gave me the chance to tell about the project. We did not solicit for boxes nor was the church address given. Over the next several days, however, people began bringing shoeboxes to the church and deliveries were made daily by the post office and courier services. The church was known for ‘sending help,’ but ‘receiving’ was not something we were set up for.”

I said a great big thank you to Ross and then placed a call to David and reported the big news. Immediately, I sent my projects director (now vice president of projects and government relations)

Kenney Isaacs to Charlotte to assess the situation. He called and said, “Franklin, you’re not going to believe this. People are really excited!”

The response was so overwhelming that Ross suggested I come on Sunday, December 12, to preach and thank the congregation.

HYPHENATED BY THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

That was twenty years ago. Two decades have passed—hyphenated by the turn of the century. Not every generation experiences living from one millennium to another. We have now surpassed that milestone and have come into the second decade of the twenty-first century, marking one hundred million shoebox gifts collected and delivered, representing an even larger number who have heard God’s message. When I look back on this project—Operation Christmas Child (OCC)—I think of the Scripture that says, “Oh, what God has done!” (Num. 23:23).

The Lord has blessed this outreach in numbers—monumental numbers. But more important, He has blessed it by changing hearts, one at a time. And in the twentieth year of Operation Christmas Child, we delivered the one hundred millionth shoebox!

There are miles of smiles that tell stories about changed lives, miles of oceans away. But it all started with:

One phone call

One request

One shoebox

One church

And one message about the Christmas Child

For one heart at a time

We pray that the heartbeat of the Gospel will stir the hearts of hundreds of millions more.

Come with us on this journey as we tell you about one profound truth that changes one life at a time.

—Franklin Graham

LOOKING BACK WHILE MOVING FORWARD



The year 1993 was a turning point for Samaritan's Purse—and for many people who rummaged through their closets to find shoeboxes just waiting to be filled with something more than shoes! Recycling is a big thing these days and Operation Christmas Child was steps ahead. We put shoeboxes back into circulation—filling them with smiles that would travel miles to children not forgotten by God.

When Ross and Carol Rhoads agreed to help fulfill a promise I had made to David Cooke in England, we could have never guessed what the Lord had in store for our ministry and for children, families, and churches around the world. Many who had never thought about reaching out to their neighbors began engaging with pastors and Christians in countries burdened by Communism, ravaged by war, ruined by natural disasters, or devastated by famine and disease. When we think of people around the world in turmoil, we think of terrorized victims who need to be reached with God's truth, but the churches in these countries had so little to work with.

Like March winds that come in like a lion, the first surprising collection of twenty-eight thousand shoeboxes in the United States and Canada within a two-week period caused OCC to roar into existence and it has been like a runaway train—but one that has kept the course. The years have rushed by and we have marveled at God's great work accomplished through a simple concept—giving a gift that carries a prayer and the Gospel message in the name of Jesus.

The idea of children giving to children electrified families, families got churches excited, and before we knew it, businesses were catching the vision. Like a rocket, the idea spread like wildfire that

seemed to burn off the dross of complacency. Whether rich or poor, filling a shoebox seemed a realistic goal for anyone to reach, and the results were dynamite, kindling passionate generosity in people's hearts.

It wasn't long before we saw the reaction from children receiving the boxes. Some opened their shoebox, carefully selected a gift and then handed the box back. When they were told the entire box belonged to them, their joy was indescribable as they peered back into the box with wonder. We see this still today; some cry, others giggle, but most just hug the boxes close to their grateful hearts. For many children in harsh and cruel places, one small present by our standards is unbelievably lavish by another's.

We have been asked over and over, "When are you going to put in a book what God has done through Operation Christmas Child?"

Samaritan's Purse has tried through the years to document how the Lord has blessed this outreach. We have sent out newsletters, special reports, and the always popular videos and DVDs that live up to the integrity that a picture is worth a thousand words. It takes a great library to catalog the photographs and volumes to document the reports. But it takes only one book to whet the appetite in telling how one heart can be changed, one person at a time.

The milestones are worth recounting. The stories are heart-warming and riveting, and the answers to prayer so real. This is what you now hold in your hands. But while this one book casts twenty years into framed memories, it will more importantly point you to the Book that is our foundation—the Bible—God's Holy Word.