

The Perfect Gift

A famous line from Louisa Mae Alcott's classic *Little Women* sums up much of what we feel about this holiday season: "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents." How much time, energy, and money we invest in picking just the right gifts for all our friends and relatives. How many times do we go back and forth to the sales counter to look at, pick up, put down, reconsider, buy, return, and maybe even buy again that gift which doesn't seem just right for that hard-to-buy-for person on our gift list? My wife even sometimes buys two gifts and takes them home to decide, intending to return one of the gifts.

Sometimes the gift buying and giving--not to mention the gift receiving--seems to eclipse the real meaning of the season. However, when gifts are exchanged from the right attitude of the heart, they enhance and establish the spirit of Christmas. O'Henry, in *The Gift of the Magi*, spins a tale of a young couple who wanted to give the perfect gift to each other. Jim's treasured possession was a family heirloom, a magnificent pocket watch, so Della determined to buy him a beautiful chain suitable for the exquisite antique. The bride's glory was her long, splendid hair, and Jim was set on purchasing jeweled hair combs to adorn her fabulous locks. Each found a way to fulfill these dreams even though the gifts far exceeded their meager budgets. What joy awaited these lovers as they opened their gifts on Christmas morning. Della could hardly contain herself waiting to see the watch attached to the new chain she had purchased. Jim was equally eager to see displayed in his wife's strands the combs he had sacrificed so dearly to purchase. Alas, the twist of the story is that Della had sold her hair to the wig maker in order to buy the watch chain and Jim had pawned his watch for the combs! The true gifts came not in the boxes and bows, but in the sacrifice that filled the boxes and love that tied the bows!

The best Christmas story of all is set half a world away from the snowy scenes we associate with our white Christmases. It came not in December and not in the warm hearth-side setting of a tree surrounded with mounds of brightly wrapped packages. This story came from the horrors of the Vietnam War. A mortar round had crashed into a mission orphanage, killing the missionaries and some of the children. When an American Navy doctor and nurse arrived, they found one critically injured eight-year-old girl. She needed a transfusion immediately. The results of quick tests showed that one of the uninjured children had a matching blood type. When the medical team asked the boy to give his blood to save his friend's life, he responded at first with wide-eyed silence. In her limited French, the nurse explained to Heng what they were going to do. The young boy then lay down and prepared to give his blood. As the transfusion began, he burst into uncontrollable sobs. By this time, a Vietnamese nurse had arrived and began to try to console Heng. She explained to the Americans that the

young boy had expected to die. He had thought that the doctor was going to take all of his blood in order to save the little girl's life. Heng explained in just one short sentence why he was willing to volunteer for the transfusion even though he thought it meant giving his life: "She's my friend." These three words remind us of the biblical explanation of Christmas, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Yet the Bible goes much further in explaining why Christ came. Paul, in Romans 5:10, tells us that it was more than our friendship that caused Jesus to give His blood for us. "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life."

The true story of Christmas is told only in the story of Easter. In Bethlehem, God gave His son and the wise men gave their gold, frankincense, and myrrh; but a Calvary, Jesus gave His all. He gave on the cosmic level what Heng was willing to give in that little bombed-out orphanage in Vietnam. In fact, we know that the whole purpose of Christmas was to make Good Friday and Easter possible. One artist portrayed the life of Christ in a most dramatic series of paintings. The first was the nativity scene with the Bethlehem star shining brightly outside the stable door. As the shafts of light from the star fell on the manger, a couple of rafters blotted out the light to cast a cross-like shadow across the Christ child. The second of the paintings was of Jesus as a toddler running to the waiting arms of His mother. With the sun behind Mary, her outstretched arms formed another cross-shaped shadow across the path of her young son. Next in the series is Jesus as a teenager working at Joseph's carpenter's bench. The sun's rays passing through the supply of wood randomly stacked in the father's shop again formed the shadow of the cross upon the adolescent. Jesus' whole destiny was bound to one act of giving--the giving of His life on Golgotha's hill. This was the perfect Christmas gift. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32)

The Apostle Paul spoke of Jesus' Christmas gift to us in II Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." As Jim and Della must have been left speechless when they realized the sacrifices each had made; and, as those doctors and nurses at the little orphanage must have been dumbfounded by Heng's heroic act of selflessness--we find ourselves unable to adequately express that gift of God's love in Jesus' appearance on Planet Earth.

The Psalmist David caught a glimpse of that unspeakable gift and described it prophetically some thousand years before the event. In Psalm 22 he masterfully spreads out the canvas and sketches out the entire scene of Calvary.

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded. But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head saying, He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him. But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly. Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help. Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round. They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.

They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns. I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.

Perhaps this revelation of the unspeakable gift that God was giving to mankind was on David's mind and in his heart when he was offered the sacrifice spot on Temple Mount as a free gift. If so, then we can readily understand why he responded, "I will not offer to God anything that cost me nothing." (II Samuel 24:24)

This Christmas season, let's not only pick the right gifts for all our friends and relatives, let's find the right gift for the One who gave us the unspeakable gift-- Himself and His life; let's give to Jesus ourselves and our lives.