

Bethlehem

Act Four

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...

Isaiah 9:6 kjv

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:6-7 kjv

IT WAS A GIFT, PLAIN AND SIMPLE. Up to that moment mankind had done nothing—not one solitary thing to deserve the gift of this Savior. Since the earliest moments of mankind's birth, there had been only rebellion, treachery, deceit, anger, and an encyclopedia full of plottings and actions against a generous and gracious God.

And now, during a time of power struggles between nations and vast political upheavals; at a time when religion was running amuck and Jews were looking for Messiah under every stone—at a time and in a way no one expected, God sent His Son.

As I set the final piece into the nativity, gently placing the figurine of the child between Mary and Joseph, I wonder—as I have so many times before: What have I done to deserve this gift? And, again, I remind myself immediately: I have done *nothing*—absolutely *nothing*—to deserve it.

And that is the whole point.



Into our lives God the Father has placed the ultimate gift, and we are to accept this gift in the same manner in which it has been



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given: freely. We are not to heap onto it, in dense, cloying, smothering layers, a stack of requisite demands of goodness, of purity, of righteousness. We remain, after the gift, as undeserving as we were the day before it arrived.



But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...

Ephesians 2:4-6

Just as we could not buy His gift with our stellar behavior in the first place, so it does not require our righteous behavior to keep it.



But, then, now that we have it, what are we to *do* with this gift?

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."

Revelation 4:4,9-11

God will never take back His gift to us of salvation in Jesus Christ. But He *will* graciously receive as righteous homage the many blessings that have been ours through the gift.

Day after day our lives are enriched beyond measure because we live under the

grace of Jesus. Day after day our hearts overflow with gratitude over the bounty He pours into our lives. So what are we to do with this gratitude?

Give it back.

Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You;

And let those who love Your salvation say continually,
"Let God be magnified."

Psalms 70:4

The Lord finds delight in our offerings of thanksgiving and praise, in our devotion in reverent worship. He delights, as well, in the service we perform in His name—acts of kindness and generosity, servanthood, and sacrifice. These acts have to Him the same sweet aroma as that of the ancient temple sacrifices.



As I set the figure of the Christ-child in place, I think about all the wonderful things the Lord has given me. Blessings, yes, but more than that, He has given me a place in His Kingdom, and Kingdom-life is a circle: a circle of gifts. God gives to me, and I give to others, while they are receiving and giving as well.

As we consider this small, precious gift lying in the crude feeding trough, let us resolve, with the elders seated around the throne of God, to receive our gifts with grace. But then let us also resolve to let loose of those gifts, offering them back to the Lord with gratitude and praise, setting them at His feet before the throne.

