

A GIVING HAND

Revelation 4:2-11, Luke 2:1-7, Revelation 5:6-14 (NASB)

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THE THING

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Brandon pressed his nose up against the chill store window until it hurt. The Thing glinted in the cold winter sun reflecting an odd purplish-bluish hue. As he stared, hardly blinking, his heart yearned for it with an intensity he could not explain. Why did he want the Thing so badly? He could not explain it, and the only thing standing in the way was the little white and black price tag. Out of reach--for now.

Brandon trudged down the icy sidewalk to Grandma's house. "Come right home after school," she had said. "Watch out for those boys--you know the ones I mean. And keep your scarf wrapped tight. After all, this is Minnesota!" But perhaps the words he remembered most were the ones she said last as he left for school every day. She would hug him right through his bundle of warm clothing--practically smothering him--and say: "I love you Brandon, and God loves you, too." And off he would go.

As he made his way up the gray-painted back steps he thought, *Living at Grandma's isn't so bad*--except that he cried himself to sleep every night. Grandpa had gone the year before. Brandon didn't really understand why he had to go. Mom and Dad had said that his heart just stopped. *Can that happen to anyone?* he had thought, filled with a vague fear that life could just leave without warning. He twisted the back door knob. Before it swung half open Grandma pulled it all the way open and grabbed him up in a bear hug.

"How was school?" she cried with a cheery voice. "What took you so long to get home? Are you hungry?"

Brandon tried to shoot answers back but the questions just came too fast. Grandma always asked the same things. He knew the best question of all was still coming: "Would you like some milk and cookies?"

"Yes, please." Each day Brandon would eat, play a while, and then supper would begin. The table always seemed strangely empty. No Grandpa, and no Mom or Dad. Grandma would usually play some music while they were eating. She had never done it before, but now there was always some happy thing playing on the old record player. And there were days when the music wasn't enough. He could always tell when it would be a TV day by Grandma's face when he came home from school. On those days she would give the television in the living room a twist so they could see it from the kitchen table. Those were the bad days.

After dinner Brandon would do his schoolwork with Grandma's help, they would watch a little more TV, and then it was off to bed. Brandon dreaded that moment. In spite of everything Grandma had done, he felt alone. He thought of his mother and father every single night. First Grandpa had gone,

and he couldn't understand why. Then, just a few months ago, had come the night that would change everything. Mom and Dad had gone out for a special evening, and Grandma had come to watch him. The police came. With very sad faces they stood by the front door. "There has been a terrible accident," they said. Then there was a long pause. "There's no easy way to say this, but Mr. and Mrs. Cornwell, they uh...they didn't make it."

Brandon had no idea what this meant, but the policemen left, and Grandma had sat down with him on the couch and explained: "Mom and Dad are...gone. They can't come back--ever." And Grandma wept and wept, squeezing him so hard and so long he thought he would never breathe again.

And now it was just him and her--and the Thing. Brandon would think about the Thing as he lay in his bed every night to keep from thinking about Mom and Dad. It almost worked, but an aching, crushing sense of pain and loss would always come, and he would cry until he fell asleep.

Even at school, when thoughts of Mom and Dad came into his head he would try to think about the Thing. Every day he saved his milk money for it. He saved his weekly allowance. It seemed like it would never be enough to buy it. And every day after school he would go and stare into the store window before going home.

Finally, the pile of dimes, nickels, and quarters seemed like it would be big enough to buy the Thing. He put them all in a sock, and on the way home from school he went inside. "Sir, I would like to buy the...uh, the thing...in the window." He ran to the window and pointed. Brandon's heart pounded as the shopkeeper set it on the counter. "Is this enough?" Brandon almost shouted with excitement as he dumped the change on the counter with a ching and coins went rolling everywhere.

The shopkeeper removed his reading glasses and gazed at him for a moment. "You're Brandon, aren't you? I know your grandmother." Another pause. "Yep, looks like just the right amount."

Brandon's heart soared as he skipped home with the Thing. He opened the back door and went into the kitchen. "I'm in the living room!" Grandma called out. Without even taking off his boots, he clomped into the room where Grandma was sitting on the couch in front of a large cardboard box. Her hands were wrapped in a long strand of silvery Christmas tree garland she was untangling.

Brandon threw himself at her and gave her a bear hug. "Merry Christmas, Grandma!" He almost shouted as he handed her the small box. "It's the Thing! The thing you wanted! I got it!" Grandma looked at Brandon with tears welling up in her eyes. Without a word she opened the box and carefully unwrapped a gleaming hand-blown glass bird, glinting a purplish-bluish hue in the winter sunlight which streamed through the living room window.

GLORIES DROPPED

It is a simple fact of logic that if you want to pick something up, and you already have something in your hand, you are going to have to let go of what you already have. As we meditate on the taking on of human form by the Son of God at Christmas, we need to consider whether he had to let go of anything. I once heard a pastor say that the Son of God let go of his Godhood in order to become a man. That is impossible, because then he would no longer have been one in essence with the Father and the Spirit. He would no longer have been God.

What the son of God did let out of his grasp is described in the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation. John wrote: **"Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. 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. Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, 'HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.' 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 4:2-11).

In order for the Son of God to come to us by being born in a manger, he had to open his hand and let go of his present experience of unspeakable glories! Words fail when we try to describe the normal existence of Christ in the presence of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Our most precious things cannot begin to do justice: precious stones and metals, rich garments, crowns, a floor made of a single sheet of diamond. There are thunder, lightning, and inscrutable angelic creatures who perpetually call out the glory and wonder of God. Twenty-four elders, seemingly representing humanity in the program of redemption, fall down in worship, humbly throw their crowns at the feet of God, and proclaim his wondrous character and works. This all belongs to Christ. Christmas could never have happened unless the Son of God willingly opened his hand and let his rightful enjoyment of his own glory slip away.

LOSS ENDURED

Because the story of Christmas works out to our benefit, it is hard for us to recognize that the act of incarnation--of the Son of God adding perfect humanity to his person--was the enduring of loss for him. Luke's account is perhaps our most familiar: **"Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn"** (Luke 2:1-7).

When Christ arrived, what did he find? Instead of perpetual glorification, there was no official

reception at all. His Father's house was desecrated. His Father's people were oppressed by political and religious leaders alike. His Father's word was largely ignored, or twisted into superstition. The hearts of the people he came to save were so closed that his perfect humanity, divine holiness, words of truth, and miracles of grace left most people unconvinced and provoked murderous intent in others.

It was loss everywhere the Son of God looked. And he endured it willingly, in order to grasp something else.

REDEMPTION GRASPED

The picture of what the Son of Man had come to grasp is painted in Revelation 5: **"And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.'** Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.' And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.' And the four living creatures kept saying, 'Amen.' And the elders fell down and worshiped" (Revelation 5:6-14).

To the glories which the Son of God received in heaven before the incarnation are now added the glories of the accomplishment of the redemption of all who trust in him. By letting go of the enjoyment of his glory, enduring the loss by arriving among us in this broken world, and by grasping the work of redemption in the cross, Christ laid hold of you and I.

Brandon had lost his grandfather, and then, in a shock which would leave its mark forever, he lost his father and mother. And yet, in a childlike way, he somehow came to realize that the giving of a blessing of love to his one remaining relative was worth more than every coin in his piggy bank. So he opened his hand, endured the loss, and gained something more precious than gold—the joy of love.

What is in your hand—a little sock of coins? Is the stuff you are hanging on to keeping you from becoming a believer in Christ? You cannot grasp Christ until you let go of the other things. But the most precious things await you in him. They are more valuable than any earthly treasure! The loss is tiny compared to the gain. And if you have already grasped redemption by trusting in Christ, you have a calling to have the same kind of hand as your Savior: a giving hand. The joy of giving to others to achieve the purposes of our Heavenly Father dwarfs all earthly pleasures. So when you are confronted by someone's need, release your grip, endure the loss, and then tighten your hand on the grace and glory of the God in the manger. The manger scene is the story of giving. And that is what Christmas is all about!