

The Gift of Christmas

The late Harry Ironside, former pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, once told the story of a young soldier in the Russian army who had the job of paymaster. It was his responsibility to see that the right amount of money was distributed to the soldiers each month. Although the young man was a decent sort of a fellow, he gave in to the temptation of gambling. Eventually, he gambled away most of his own money along with a great deal of the government's money.

About this same time, the young Russian paymaster received word that a representative of Emperor Czar Nicholas 1st, was coming to check the accounts. That night he totaled up the books to see how much money he was short. Next, he checked his own money and then went to the safe and got out what was left of the government's money. As he looked at the books and realized the astronomical debt that he owed versus the small amount of money that he had, he knew that he was ruined. The shame and punishment would be too much for him to bear. He determined that he had no other choice but to take his own life. He opened the ledger and at the bottom of one of the pages he wrote down all that he had done, along with these words, "A great debt. Who can pay?" He decided that he would take his life at the stroke of midnight.

As the night wore on, he began to be drowsy and eventually he fell asleep. That particular night, Czar Nicholas himself was making the rounds in the barracks—as he did from time to time—to personally check on things. He saw the young paymaster asleep, looked over his shoulder at the ledger book and realized what had taken place. He was about to awaken him and place him under arrest when he looked at the last words on the page, "A great debt. Who can pay?" In a moment of compassion he reached down and wrote one word at the bottom of the ledger and slipped quietly out of the room.

Sometime later, the young man awakened suddenly and realized that it was long after midnight. He was preparing to go forward with the plan to end his life when he glanced down at the ledger. Something was different. At the bottom of the page where he had written, "A great debt. Who can pay," someone had written the word *Nicholas*. Could it be? He ran to the safe and looked at the material that had the Czar's signature on it. It was a perfect match. He couldn't believe it! This young soldier thought, "He must have come while I was asleep. He knows everything and yet he's willing to forgive me." The young paymaster changed his mind about taking his own life and rested on the promise of the Czar. The next morning a messenger came with the exact amount of money to meet the deficit. Only the Czar could have paid the debt that was owed. And he did!

All mankind, because of the sin of Adam, has a debt that we owe that we cannot pay. We're required to live a perfect sinless life, and like the young Russian

paymaster who didn't have the money he needed, we fall woefully short of the standard of obedience that God requires (Matthew 5:48). We deserve the punishment of death for our sins (Ezekiel 18:4). What—or better Who—is the answer to our problem? Jesus came and lived a life of perfect obedience that is imputed, or credited, to all those who trust him by faith. That's not all! He also died an atoning death for this same group of people who trust him by faith. Our sin debt past, present and future is cancelled. He not only cancels the debt, he gives us a new heart and new desires. We're a new creation in Christ! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The story of Christmas is not merely about a baby in a manger. It is that, but it's so much more! It's about Immanuel, 'God with us,' the sinless Son of God—Jesus Christ—who came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21-23). Have you pondered the true meaning of Christmas? Have you received the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:23)? Jesus promised that he would never turn away anyone who would turn to him in faith (John 3:16; 6:37). As we move beyond Black Friday and Cyber Monday, may we be excited to share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ; the greatest gift of all!

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