

## THE TWO PICTURES OF CHRISTMAS

I gaze at two differing pictures of Christmas. The first, a photograph my wife discovered tucked away in an old book, hints of the 1940s. It's Christmas morning, and five smiling children radiate the pleasure of having a few simple gifts arrayed before them, fully satisfied.

Curiously, I recall but one Christmas present of my own childhood.

Pulling three cars around the shiny oval, the black engine in that Lionel electric train set sported both headlight and puffing smokestack. And the odd mixture of high-pitched whine tempering the clickety-clacking metal-to-metal crunch of wheel on track thrilled this young lad immensely.

But the engine unexpectedly ground to a halt shortly thereafter. Today I suspect its cataclysmic demise derived from my incessant determination to see how fast I could propel it around curves without jumping the track as it often did.

Perhaps anticipating my future engineering career, I immediately initiated exploratory disassembly to resolve the malfunction. Finding nothing, reassembly left several screws and gears without homes. After observing a respectable period of mourning, Mother decisively tossed out the box of useless hardware. My toy brought no more happiness.

Without doubt, the children in the first picture eventually experienced similar disappointments with their toys. Interestingly, the first picture and its gifts actually exist in commemoration of a second picture--one abiding not in my hand, but in my mind--and a gift that never disappoints.

In this other picture, a small knot of men lounge on a grassy slope, gazing into the starry night. Devout in worship, they have oft considered--and assuredly murmured in prayer--those things perceived to bring enduring happiness. Their prayers found unique fulfillment that night.

For in one glorious instant, God drew back the veil between two worlds, allowing them to momentarily peer into His eternal inner sanctum. And they gazed in wonder upon the Babe who would eventually become the Man, realizing not that the Man would give even greater gifts than those they had thoughtfully, fervently, carefully articulated in their prayers.

They had long cried out for relief from Roman oppression; the Man would instead release them from the rule of sin in their hearts. They had daily desired food for sheep and families; the Man would instead lead them to green pastures and still waters for their souls.

Our finite minds formulate plans and schemes, and we ask for this and that, positive that having our requests satisfied will assure lasting happiness. But every toy has a way of disappointing, of breaking, of jumping track.

Far better is the gift we neither expect nor deserve; the gift that salves the deep hurts and wide chasms that none but the Man can discern. And the essence of His gift to us--the gift of Himself--lies in a simple phrase He once spoke: "Go your way. Your faith has made you whole."

And in this spirit of this wholeness, both seemingly incongruous pictures of Christmas smoothly reconcile into a single inescapable conclusion: there is but one true Gift and one true giver--and they are one.