

There are several reasons you or I might be unable to describe a Christmas gift. We might be overcome with emotion so that words fail us. We might be unable to identify the gift. We might open it and say “It’s beautiful – just what I always wanted. Uh – what is it?” Or we might care so little for a gift that we might not even bother to describe it.

Our failures would not make the gift indescribable, however, for there would always be someone else who could describe it. The salesperson could describe it, and probably did. So could the manufacturer. If it is a large or well-known gift, many others might get into the act. 40 years ago, an actor named Richard Burton gave his actress wife Elizabeth Taylor the largest diamond that anyone had ever given anybody (except a king). It was a superlative present, worth over a million dollars. But it was not indescribable. On the contrary, it was described in every newspaper in the country so that soon nearly everyone knew the diamond’s size, color, shape and value.

So what might make a gift indescribable? Since we can describe all human presents, indescribable gifts must be more than human. It has to have something of God mixed with it. That was Paul’s thinking when he wrote 2 Corinthians 9:15. He had been thinking of very human gifts like the donations of the Corinthians to the poor in Jerusalem. But the subject of giving turned his mind to God and the gift of Christ to His people. Jesus is the greatest of all possible gifts, and Paul ended his comments by referring to that divine bounty. He said, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

The text points to a gift that, if we have it or have received it, makes us richer than any king and wealthier than any celebrity. When Paul speaks like this about Jesus, he is not toying with words or exaggerating by an undisciplined use of superlatives. He only says what is true. It is as true for us as it was for him. Who has been able to fully describe the gift of salvation from God in Christ? Painters have tried. Some of the most beautiful paintings in the world are of the little family of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. But however beautiful those works may be, they do not do justice to their subject.

Musicians have tried to describe Christ’s coming. There are probably no grander attempts to do this in all history than George Frederick Handel’s Messiah with its glorious Hallelujah Chorus or Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio. But though glorious compositions, were they more glorious than the angel chorus above the fields of Bethlehem? Are they more glorious than the praise of the redeemed recorded in the book of Revelation? Even the final

choruses in Revelation fall short of describing God's gift, for it is necessary for those who sing them to continue singing day and night.

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever . . . Amen! (Revelation 5:13-14)

So why is the gift of God beyond description?

The gift of God is indescribable first because of the identity of Christ. In order fully to describe God's gift, we must be able to fully describe who Jesus is, which we cannot do. Think of the difficulties involved in unfolding Jesus' identity. Jesus describes Himself as being one with God the Father, and the Scripture everywhere testifies to that fact. Even His name, Jesus, means Yahweh Saves. Immanuel means God with us. If Jesus is God, we cannot describe Him because God Himself is indescribable. Can we say what it means for God to be self-existent, having no origins and beyond the full range of human discovery? Can we say what it means for Him to be self-sufficient, needing nobody? Can we understand what it means to be a spirit or to be "infinite, eternal and unchangeable?" Those things are beyond us. When Moses asked God who he should say God was, God answered, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelite: I AM has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:14). God didn't describe Himself – He just declared that He was who He was.

We have another problem if we attempt to describe God: **we cannot understand the Trinity.** Jesus claimed to be God, but at the same time He spoke of God the Father and prayed to Him, thus indicating that there were distinctions of Persons within the Godhead. How are we to get a handle on that? We even have difficulty finding language that does not somehow inevitably err when we attempt to describe what the Trinity means. In fact, it took the church more than three hundred years – from the death of Christ to the council of Constantinople in 381 – before it finally ratified the formula of one God existing in three co-equal persons. But even that only kept the church from mistaken statements. It did not exhaust the meaning the Trinity.

Yet, Jesus is not only God. He is man as well and **we cannot adequately describe the incarnation** or embodiment of God in human flesh. It was another 80 years at the Council of Chalcedon (451) when language described the Lord's dual nature. This council spoke of Christ being:

Perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of rational soul and body; coessential with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to Manhood; in all things like us

yet without sin; begotten before the ages of the Father according to the Godhead and in these latter days, for us and our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.

That is a mouthful, a paragraph full, a deep description that attempts to describe our Lord. These creeds or declarations state there is one God in three persons and Jesus is one person in two natures. But that does not adequately describe God's gift. At best, it only keeps us from errors when we think about him.

Even this is not all we must face when we think of trying to describe God's gift. For the gift consists not merely of who Jesus Christ is, which we have struggled to summarize. We also struggle to describe the gift because of **what Jesus has done**. Jesus came to provide salvation for us by His sacrifice on the cross, and we cannot adequately describe that, either. God gave us terms by which to understand it – sacrifice; atonement; propitiation; reconciliation. But how did Jesus achieve reconciliation by dying? Take his great cry of abandonment from the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). What does that mean? Had God actually forsaken Jesus? Was there some kind of temporary division in the Godhead? Or was Jesus only abandoned in the sense that He was given up to death rather than being delivered from it? Yet there can never be a division in the Godhead. The nature and work of the Lord Jesus Christ are beyond our full understanding, and therefore also beyond our powers of description.

But the gift is also indescribable because of the **grace by which it is given**. Most of our gifts have little to do with grace. We give because the recipients of our gifts have some claim upon us: they are members of our family or people who have helped us in some way or individuals who gave to us last year. Even when we give to someone who has no special claim upon us, someone in great physical or material need, we usually do so because of some recognized obligation due to both of us being members of the human race. But God is not a member of the human race and our race is in rebellion against Him. We are His enemies. Yet it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Walter A. Maier a Luther preacher said this: The Lutheran Hour from Andrew Blackwood – Anthology of Master Sermons

The great gift of Christ is granted not to God's friends, but to his enemies, to those who in their sins have risen up against God and declared war against the Almighty. To every one of us, suffering, as we and our world are, under the destructive powers of sin God offers his gift of "unspeakable" grace. Christmas does not offer rejoicing to a selected few; it cries out "Joy to the World!" We stand before that supreme and saving truth, the holy of holies of our Christian faith; the blessed assurance that Christ Jesus came into the world," not to build big and costly churches, not to give his followers earthly power to rule, but to save sinners. He came, not to establish social service, social consciousness, social justice but first and foremost to seal our salvation.

No wonder that the apostle calls the mercy of God as shown by the gift of Christ "unspeakable"; it goes beyond the limit of human speech. Just as taking in the sun's glare, people lose their power of vision, so raising our eyes to the brilliance of Jesus, can lead to as to be blinded by the splendor of the greatest Gift that God himself could give.

So the gift of Jesus is indescribable because of who Jesus is; what He has done, and the gracious manner by which it is given and finally because of the **effects it produces**. These are unmeasurable by human beings. Through the gift of God, Jesus brings forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of God's grace. We are in rebellion against God, yet God has loved us while we were yet sinners. But God does not merely love us and let it go at that. He also forgives our sins through Christ's sacrifice. That means removal of sin so far as God is concerned. The prophet Micah tells us that God hurls "all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. In Isaiah God says "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist" David wrote – "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Hebrews 10:17, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more". God knows everything but according to these verses, He chooses not to remember the sins of those who trust that Jesus died for them. If we have received God's gift, we do not need to fear that our sins will ever rise up again to haunt us.

Through the gift of God, we are also justified before the bar of God's justice. We have new standing before God that we did not have before and could never have achieved for ourselves. We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, as with a new suit of clothes. Before, we were clothed with the filthy rags of our own righteousness. Those are taken off and we are given new garments.

We are adopted into God's family. Before, we were of no family. We were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12). But now, "how great is the love the Father

has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God! (1 John 3:1). As children we have the privilege of coming to God at any time with any matter.

We could go on about the gift of God making us not only children but heirs. Or that through the gift of God we receive the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ forever. Or that we receive divine peace that goes beyond circumstances – a peace that transcends understanding. Or that we have a home in heaven prepared for us by Christ – so many indescribable blessings.

But even though the gift of God is indescribable in so many ways, we must still speak of it. To who? What about to God? Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Have you thanked God for His incredible gift to you in Jesus Christ? Have you thanked God for anything this Christmas? We also speak to others of the indescribable gift. To those who already know Christ, our speaking of Christ can strengthen their faith. Those who don't know Christ are exposed to the one gift they can receive this Christmas that will never be forgotten or completely described.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. Maybe today and through the rest of this Christmas we thank God for giving the gift of Jesus that is truly beyond description.