

# *The* SPIRIT

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# We Feel at Christmastime

Recently as I have reminisced concerning past Christmases I've realized that probably no other time of the year yields as many poignant memories as does Christmas. The Christmases we remember best generally have little to do with worldly goods, but a lot to do with families, with love, and with compassion and caring. . . .

Many years ago I read of an experience at Christmastime which took place when thousands of weary travelers were stranded in the congested Atlanta, Georgia, airport.<sup>1</sup> An ice storm had seriously delayed air travel as these people were trying to get wherever they most wanted to be for Christmas—most likely home.

It happened in December of 1970. As the midnight hour tolled, unhappy passengers clustered around the ticket counters conferring anxiously with agents whose cheerfulness had long since evaporated. They too wanted to be home. A few people managed to doze in uncomfortable seats. Others gathered at the newsstands to thumb silently through paperback books. If there was a common bond among this diverse throng it was loneliness: pervasive, inescapable, suffocating loneliness. . . .

The fact of the matter was that there were more passengers than there were available seats on any of the planes. When an occasional plane managed to break out, more passengers stayed behind than made

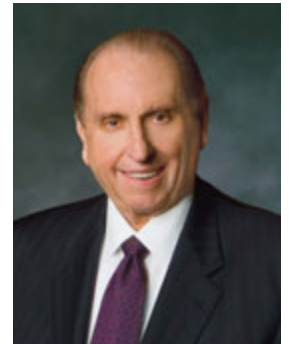
it aboard. . . .

Gate 67 in Atlanta was a microcosm of the whole cavernous airport. Scarcely more than a glassed-in cubicle, it was jammed with travelers hoping to fly to New Orleans, Dallas, and points west. Except for the fortunate few traveling in pairs, there was little conversation at gate 67. A salesman stared absently into space as if resigned. A young mother cradled an infant in her arms, gently rocking in a vain effort to sooth the soft whimpering.

Then there was a man in a finely-tailored gray flannel suit, who somehow seemed impervious to the collective suffering. There was a certain indifference about his manner. He was absorbed in paperwork: figuring the year-end corporate profits perhaps. A nerve-frayed traveler sitting nearby observing this busy man might have indentified him as an Ebenezer Scrooge.

Suddenly the relative silence was broken by a commotion. A young man in military uniform, no more than 19 years old, was in animated conversation with the desk agent. The boy held a low-priority ticket. He pleaded with the agent to help him get to New Orleans so that he could take the bus to the obscure Louisiana village he called home.

The agent wearily told him that prospects were poor for the next 24 hours, maybe longer. The boy grew frantic. Immediately after Christmas, his unit was to be sent to Vietnam—where at that time war was



**By President  
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*The Savior gave freely to all. And His gifts were of value beyond measure.*

raging—and if he didn't make this flight, he might never again spend Christmas at home. Even the businessman looked up from his cryptic computations to show a guarded interest. The agent clearly was moved, even a bit embarrassed. But he could only offer sympathy, not hope. The boy stood at the departure desk casting anxious looks around the crowded room, as if seeking just one friendly face.

Finally the agent announced that the flight was ready for boarding. The travelers who had been waiting long hours heaved themselves up, gathered their belongings, and shuffled down the small corridor to the waiting aircraft: 20, 30, 100, until there were no more seats. The agent turned to the frantic young soldier and shrugged.

Inexplicably, the businessman had lingered behind. Now he stepped forward. "I have a confirmed ticket," he quietly told the agent. "I'd like to give my seat to this young man." The agent stared incredulously; then he motioned to the soldier. Unable to speak, tears streaming down his face, the boy in olive drab shook hands with the man in the gray flannel suit, who simply murmured, "Good luck. Have a fine Christmas. Good luck."

As the plane door closed and the engines began their rising whine, the businessman turned away, clutching his briefcase and trudged toward the all-night restaurant.

No more than a few among the thousands stranded there at the Atlanta airport witnessed the drama at gate 67. But for those who did, the sullenness, the frustration, the hostility all dissolved into a glow. That act of love and kindness between strangers had brought the spirit of Christmas into their hearts.

The lights of the departing plane blinked starlike as the craft moved off into the darkness. The infant slept silently, now in the lap of the young mother. Perhaps another flight would be leaving before many more hours. But those who witnessed the interchange were less impatient. The glow lingered gently, pervasively in that small glass and plastic stable at gate 67.

My brothers and sisters, finding the real joy of the season comes not in the hurrying and the scurrying to get more done or in the purchasing of obligatory gifts. Really, joy comes as we show the love and compassion inspired by the Savior of the world, who said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). . . .

As we contemplate how we are going to spend our money to buy gifts this holiday season let us plan also for how we will spend our time in order to help bring the true spirit of Christmas into the lives of others.

The Savior gave freely to all. And His gifts were of value beyond measure. Throughout His ministry, He blessed the sick, restored sight to the blind, made the deaf to hear, and the halt and the lame to walk. He gave cleanliness to the unclean. He restored breath to the lifeless. He gave hope to the despairing, and He sowed light in the darkness.

He gave us His love, His service, and His life.

What is the spirit we feel at Christmastime? It is His spirit—the spirit of Christ. **NE**

*From the First Presidency Christmas Devotional, December 6, 2009.*

**NOTE**

1. From Ray Jenkins, "The Quiet Drama at Gate 67, in Atlanta," *The New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1979, 23.