

## Three Defining Christmas Seasons

If I were to ask you, "What does Christmas mean to you?" what would you say? I believe for most Christians reading this, you would say Christmas is for celebrating when Christ came to earth. We may dispute about the date, but most Christians will agree that it is well that we should rejoice in His coming. Secondly, we would probably say it is a time when family gets together. Thirdly, we might say it is a time when we exchange presents.

We all have a tendency to interpret life from our own frame of reference. I would say with the Apostle Paul, "*Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly...*" (II Corinthians 11:1). I would like to tell you what I think of when I think of Christmas. I would like to tell you of three defining Christmas seasons that came in the first half of my life, which forever shaped Christmas for me. So go with me in the spirit of Christmas past to:

### 1. The Bible Christmas

When we were youngsters in Washington D.C. white Christmases were not unusual. I remember my parents taking us to the big department stores downtown and seeing the windows beautifully decorated, some with animation depicting happy events. I remember one year we won the award for the best decorated house in our community. The newspaper came and took pictures. Our Christmas trees reached the ceiling, with what seemed to be a mountain of toys beneath. My brother and I had sleds for the snow; Dad always had a new car, Mom had lots of friends that would come over and spoil us, and our house had two stories with a fireplace in the first level and second. It was not unusual for congressmen to come to our church along with the Navy boys from Annapolis. I remember on a couple of Christmases we drove to a beautiful place in Pennsylvania that looked like a picture out of Currier and Ives.

When we moved to Florida, it was anything but a sunshine state to us. For one thing, we had to get rid of our sleds. I felt like Citizen Kane crying for "Rosebud." Our house was not new, Dad kept his cars longer, and Mom's new friends didn't spoil us. But in my heart I always knew, no matter how tough things had become, we always had Christmas to look forward to. Well, Christmas came and it was so warm, you could walk outside in short sleeves! It didn't feel or look like Christmas. But that was okay, Christmas was coming no matter what the weather was. Under the tree I had two presents. I thought, they must be really great presents to be in only two rather small packages. Christmas morning came and I opened them. I got a rubber ball and a Bible. Even then, the Bible was purchased with collecting stamps my mother had saved called Green Stamps. It was beautiful. I held my Bible, looked at it, laid it by my bed and went outside to the warm weather. I took my only other gift, the rubber ball. I bounced it twice, and on the second throw I threw it down rather hurt and angrily, not caring whether I lost it or not. Standing on the sidewalk in front of our house, God spoke to me. He rebuked my young heart. Here's the message I carry with me to this day: "Well, Johnny, you said you were following Me; and now you are upset that on My birthday, you were mistreated. Whose birthday is this anyway? Your mom and dad have done their best; don't let them see your being unappreciative. They feel badly enough already. Beside all this, the one thing you asked for was a Bible and you received it. The words in that Book are My words; it the best gift a nine and a half year old boy could ever receive." I remember a fear of God came over me along with a new reverence for the Word of God. Why, it seemed to God and now to me that His Word was so special that He was determined that no other present is cluttering the memory of my Christmas Bible! The Bible tells us, He has me and I have Him. The Bible tells us what Christmas is all about. The Bible tells us "*...to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35).

### 2. The Christmas Carol Christmas

Around the eleventh Christmas season of my life, I lifted our Viewmaster to discover Mom had purchased us a slide presentation of Charles Dickens', A Christmas Carol. Do you baby-boomers remember how you could enter you own little world of the Viewmaster? That year I entered the world of

Dickens and I've never escaped the Christmas effect that story has held to my heart. Ever year since then I have read it, watched it or told the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Crotchet, and Tiny Tim. Through my upbringing and the illustration from The Christmas Carol, I learned a valuable lesson that people are more important than things. I learned we won't have to regret the hurt we inflict or the pain we receive if we do what is right in our youth. I learned if we discover we are wrong and God gives us an opportunity to make it right, then it is never too late. Scrooge was proof of that! And if we study the character of Tiny Tim, we should have the love in our heart to say under all circumstances, "And God bless us everyone!" *"God shall bless us..."* (Psalm 67:7). *"The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it"* (Proverbs 10:22).

### **3. The Christmas Marriage**

On the winter's Solstice, just before Christmas, 1973, Barbara and I married. The Bible says, *"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD"* (Proverbs 18:22). I considered my wife the greatest Christmas present I had. We have had some absolutely wonderful Christmases with our kids and grandkids, and this Christmas is going to be another good one, but it goes back to Christmas, 1973. That's when it all started for our immediate family.

We were on our honeymoon in a modest motel. We got a pizza, came back to our room and after our Christmas pizza I gave Barbara a Bible. The Bible that had the same words of my Green Stamp Bible. The Bible that tells us God is love and that believers are saved by His grace. It is the same Bible that says, *"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn"* (Luke 2:7). Although there was room for us in an inn on Christmas, 1973, we were remembering the little Lord Jesus who gave up His glorious heavenly home temporarily, came to a manger and eventually a cross to give us room in Heaven with Him. And with Barbara by my side for these thirty-three Christmases since, I am ever mindful of His promise, *"...I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10).

- Pastor Pope -

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