

Rosebud

As I look back into my youth, the Christmases were, as a rule, absolutely fantastic! Until I was nine years old, Christmas was usually celebrated at our home, just outside Washington D.C. The entire world was static with Christmas in the air! Mom would often take us into downtown Washington decorated like no other place. Huge Christmas trees, downtown windows with animated themes, often snowing or at least cold enough for an occasional warming up with hot chocolate were the bill of fare. Two Christmases really stand out. The Christmas we got our train set and the Christmas we got our first two-wheelers.

I have wracked my memory trying to recall when I received one of the most prized items in my youth -- my sled. Until I was nine, I never remember not having my sled. There were few joys more exciting than when the snow would blanket our area and the neighborhood boys (and a few daring girls) would take our sleds and conquer every hill within two miles of our home. It was great. In all my amusement ride escapades, nothing compared with the thrill of taking our sled, getting into a run, then putting the runners at the crest of a hill, which to a kid was more like a mountain, and speeding down the hill with snow flying in your face. Our yelps and whoops of glee could be heard from glen to glen!

When my dad told us we were moving to Florida, I envisioned a place of sunshine, heat, palm trees and no hills. Now, when you put together the absence of hills with an absence of snow, sleds would serve no other purpose beside wall decorations, and Mom was not into designing ideas with sled art. So the day came as we approached our move to Florida, our parents gave a solemn meeting explaining that my brother and I were going to need to become generous and give our sleds to some other boy, because we would no longer have need of them. I tried explaining that perhaps the weather patterns could change and just in case, we would really need to have our sleds handy. It didn't sell. In the end, we still had to surrender our sleds.

Allow me to change the scene slightly. It has been said the greatest movie ever made was the old classic, *Citizen Kane*. Some of you remember Kane came from a happy but brief time in his early youth to an impoverished, sad existence in his later youth. One of the saddest moments was when his sled was being forcefully taken from him. He grew up to become the wealthiest man in America; he even ran for President of the United States. He had everything, even warehouses full of the rarest, most expensive art. He possessed the type of grown-up toys people only dream of. After he died his prized collections were evaluated for auction or such, and the movie shows his sled being discovered and inadvertently thrown into a fire, with the name of the sled on top being shown to the audience just before it was consumed in the fire. The name of the sled was the last word the mighty mogul uttered before he died, "Rosebud." As you watch the film you might ask at the conclusion, what was he saying? I cried out, "I know what he was saying! He was saying he had everything thing he ever desired, but what he really wanted, he was deprived of!" Symbolically, they used his sled, but in my youthful reality, I related.

The first Christmas we celebrated in Florida was my saddest. First of all, it was hot. Everybody knows it needs to be cold to have the true Christmas feeling. You don't sled in hot weather. We had suffered a financial set-back in that first year in Florida, so the Christmas was sparse. It was also the first Christmas we opened our presents early, on Christmas Eve. By the way, I believe this is the main reason I have through the years been so against opening presents early because of the disappointment of my first remembered early opening. Mom always asked us what we were interested in for Christmas, and we mentioned a couple of things and we always got that and more, much more. But not this first Florida Christmas. We had an S&H Green Stamp catalogue that had pictures of items you could pick out and receive, if you had the required books filled with Green Stamps. In the fall of that year I had commented that I would love to have the Bible I saw in the catalogue. This was probably some relief to Mom, because money was not necessary to purchase this gift, Green Stamps were available when you bought groceries or gas and any number of necessary items. So the accumulation of stamps came without even trying or buying anything extra. Green Stamps or their rival Top Value Stamps were available everywhere.

On Christmas morning, the first Christmas in Florida, I woke up hoping beyond hope that the big presents were now coming. I was hoping when we had opened our presents on Christmas Eve, we, in fact, were not through. Mom and Dad were having fun with us. They were holding back until this morning. We got up, had our breakfast and discovered the activity that swirled around Christmas was over. We could now go and play with our Christmas stuff. Are you ready for this? My entire Christmas was a small rubber ball and that S&H Green Stamp King James Bible. That was it! I went outside, bounced my rubber ball on the sidewalk with one hand, held my Bible in the other hand and cried. I didn't let my parents see me, because I didn't want them to know of my disappointment. I felt ashamed with the Bible in my hand to show any unhappiness.

As the bright sun shone down upon me that Christmas Day, I, at the age of nine, opened my Bible and began to read. I've been reading and re-reading it ever since. The train is gone, the first, second, and third bikes are gone, but if you come to my office you'll find on my book shelf a worn out Bible, my "Rosebud." It was never discarded. I still read that very same Bible from time to time. On special occasions, I still preach from it. I have quite literally made my living teaching and preaching from that wonderful Bible. I have literally preached that Bible around the world. I have fed, clothed, educated, and put a roof over the heads of our family solely by the preaching of the Gospel. I have used no other investments, business schemes, or any other source of income. I relied on no other business acumen or plan. I did nothing else on the side to support my family. I give God the glory and praise. Many of my brothers in the ministry have not been so fortunate. Even the Apostle Paul made tents temporarily. But I am thankful for the calling God has given me, that I have never been diverted in forty years from that glorious Book.

Now as I look back, I think that Green Stamp Bible Christmas was the best Christmas I ever experienced in my youth. It was important for God to show me at the

age of nine what He was wanting for my life, i.e. His Word, without competition, without diversion. If you were to ask any of our four children, what was the one present that Dad was most likely to give them for their birthday or Christmas, I am sure they would tell you, "a Bible." I have never gotten over the impact of how important my Green Stamp Bible was to me; I guess I was trying to get the same message over to my kids. As we approach this New Year, let's not worry about getting a new Bible; let's just read the one we already have.

- Pastor Pope -