

*"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

By now the majority of the gifts have been opened. The surprise has been revealed. But are the gifts always what we hoped they would be? Listen to this letter to Santa from a young boy: "Dear Santa Claus, last year I asked for a bike. Instead you brought me a sister. Maybe some other boy wanted a sister and got my bike. We have kept the sister, but I would still like a bike." In the many letters to Santa we see just what it is that children want for Christmas. "Dear Santa, since last year I have changed bedrooms. My grandma and her cat are in my old room now. Don't leave my presents there because the cat will play with them. Maybe grandma, too."

God bless the children! They seem to know what they want for Christmas, even if they aren't always overly enthusiastic about it. One child wrote: "Dear Santa, my Mommy says I must ask you for some clothes as well as toys. I suppose she is right. Though I am just a child now, I will one day be a woman. So I must be sensible." Then there was, "Dear Santa, you seemed to have trouble getting my tractor and bicycle last time. Have you tried the yellow pages?" Other children are more bold: "I like what you are putting in my stocking this year. I know I'll like it because I looked on top of the cupboard and I saw the gifts." Some children are understanding: "Santa, You don't have to give me anything for Christmas; just leave me something for the other days."

Every once in a while there is a glimmer of hope. Think of the young boy who wrote: "Dear Santa me and my brother are not very happy this Christmas. Our daddy left home in the summer and has not sent any money. Plus my mom is sick and can't get out to work much. We don't have a tree this year, and I am afraid we won't have any presents at all. Will you please send just a small box of candy to my brother David to make him feel good? Thank you. From your friend, Sammy."

Gifts can mean so much. Yet far too many children do not know the real treasure that is hidden under the tree, what St. Paul referred to in our text as *the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints*. And if they don't know it, just think how hard it is for the adults, especially when Jesus tells us: *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 18:3, ESV)

What do adults want? That seems to be a great mystery. I'm sure some psychologists could help us understand our hidden desires, based on something like the greeting cards we select each year. Many cards have a nostalgic theme, suggesting that the senders want to return to the sedate and mellow days of yesteryear. Beautiful snow swept landscapes being traversed by a sleigh that carries a mother, father and smiling siblings, seems to show a display of unity which can be found only on an artists palette. Cards are decorated with bells, bows, packages, doves and reindeer may suggest a party mood. There are cards filled with wonderful wishes, high hopes, and delectable desires. But not very many of these cards tell us how we can actually find the hope, the peace, the love that they often describe. All the fondest wishes in the world still can't change things. It's sad that so many adults still do not understand *the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations*.

In the Summer of 1823, a fellow by the name of Major Henry led a fur-trapping expedition out of St. Louis. A 60-year-old giant of a man, Hugh Glass, was the scout. They travelled without incident until they reached northwestern South Dakota. There a huge grizzly attacked Glass. Although armed only with a knife, Glass killed the bear, but only after one side of his face had been scraped away and other injuries brought him close to death. Two men were designated to wait with Glass until he died. Although delirious, he hung on to life. For five days his companions waited and then, taking Glass' few possessions they caught up to the rest of the expedition. They reported they had given Hugh Glass a "decent burial."

Glass did not die. A few days after his friends left him, his mind cleared. His first thoughts centred on revenge. His friends

had not only abandoned him, they had also robbed him of his gun, knife, flint and steel for making fire. The desire for vengeance helped keep Hugh Glass alive. He started crawling for the Missouri River, 100 miles to the east. All the painful way he lived on berries, grasses, roots or on raw meat when he managed to frighten the wolves away from a buffalo carcass. At the Missouri, Glass met two trappers who took him northwest to the Yellowstone. By then he had recovered, mostly, and secured enough weapons for his purpose. He had his revenge planned. One bullet from his rifle, one from his pistol, and the two that had deserted him would be dead. Hugh Glass pushed on, 250 miles more to the Big Horn River. Through blizzard and subzero cold he plodded on. Finally, near Custer, Montana, Hugh Glass arrived at the Henry expedition's winter fort. Quietly, he entered the lighted room and without a word of greeting demanded of the awe stricken men who first thought him a ghost, "Where are the men who deserted me while I was dying and stole everything I had?" No word was spoken, but all eyes turned to two men. This was the moment he had dreamed of. Glass pulled the pistol from its holster. As he did, he noticed a rough evergreen cradle with a homemade figure of the Christ Child. Then his eyes swept the room and spotted decorations of pine and red calico strips. After an amazed moment he asked: "What's all this? Why all the pretty things?" The answer came from several men. They said one word: "Christmas!"

A single word! As Glass looked at the hand-carved Christ Child, the Saviour's love flooded into him and proved stronger than that desire to kill which had spurred him on those past months. Dropping his rifle, he cried, "Christmas, and I'm here to take my revenge. I can't kill a dog on this day." Looking at the Christ Child in the pine-cone manger, he cried, "For the hellish misery they've put me through, I forgive them." That Christmas day in 1823, the mystery that had been kept hidden for ages and generations, was disclosed to a mountain man by the name of Hugh Glass. Oh, if only more people in our world could see that wonderful treasure hidden beneath the tree!

It is hard to believe that there is anyone in North America, except for those in a coma, who doesn't know it is Christmas. How much time and effort has been poured into this yearly celebration! But even as people celebrate Christmas, there are so many who still do not know *the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations*. People may watch, "It's A Wonderful Life," and sing *Joy to the World* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* many times. Yet so many do not know why the angels sing. They do not know the joy of God's love for them. To them, Christmas is still a mystery.

The wonderful treasure that is Christmas is not found wrapped in bright paper, but in swaddling cloths. The majesty of God lays hidden in frail human flesh. Yet the Christ Child, who lies in the manger, is the One who comes to bring us what we really want for Christmas. Thankfully, God has given us His Spirit, who reveals the treasure that God has made known to us in His Son. The Spirit helps us see that all we want or need comes to us in Christ.

What do we want for Christmas? When we look again at the cards, we see we want love. Everybody wants to be loved. Unfortunately our best friends drift away. Parents pass away. People we thought we could trust, betray us. We may be blessed enough to have two or three people we can trust most of the time. But even then we're never absolutely sure that they love us. Even marriages end. Do you want love? Then look in the manger and see God's love. His is a love that goes all the way to the cross for you, and which is greater than death itself. It is a love that gives its best. It is a love that cannot be turned away by something you do wrong. It is not destroyed because you are less than perfect. His is a love that keeps coming back again and again. It is a love that waits for you to talk, that wants to hear no matter what you say. It is a love that is yours for as long as you live.

What do we want for Christmas? Let's face it: we also want to be rich. Who can make you richer than Jesus? Do you want to feel important? Jesus thought so much of you He was willing to die for you. Do you want to have an easier life? Jesus has removed your worries. He says to us: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** (Matthew 11:28 - NIV) Do you want to have a life which is fulfilling? Jesus promises that. He says: ***I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*** (John 10:10 - NIV) Do you want to feel beautiful? Who is more beautiful than the sinner whose heart and life radiate God's glory through the forgiveness we have in Christ?

What do you want for Christmas? Week by week, in our bible studies and our worship we keep opening God's glorious gift. We see that treasure that God has made known in His Son. In Christ, we have it all. We have hope and happiness and peace and love. We have forgiveness for our sins and life beyond this world. We have all the sentiment of Christmas cards—but more than sentiment, we have the reality in Christ. How blessed we are, because God gives us this glorious gift—the gift of His Son, who is ours through faith. Amen.