

Grandpa's Gift

By Dana Buck

*T*hanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 9: 15

Black Xs on a calendar
March relentless toward a date
That's been circled, colored, starred, highlighted
Deemed to celebrate

It's been a ritual for weeks
This month, so studied and so scanned
With the passing days each noted by
A boy's impatient hand

Hanging on the fridge
Those Xs form a steady line
That lead directly to this morning
The last day Ryan will be nine

Tomorrow is his birthday
And he can hardly stand to wait
Have a party, open presents
Blow out candles, eat some cake

Everyone will be there
Come to sing and honor him
All his family, all his friends
And, of course, his Grandpa Jim

He's come to every party
'Long as Ryan can remember
New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving, Easter
Christmas in December

Ryan loves his Grandpa Jim
Though at every celebration
The gifts he gives, well, they lack fun
Or much imagination

Last year he opened school supplies
A pair of wool long johns
The year before, a lunch box
And two U.S. savings bonds

Ryan dreams about his presents
Entertains excited whims
He can't wait to tear them open
Well, all except for Grandpa Jim's

Not far 'cross town in a modest house
This morning will awaken
With the smell of coffee, toast and jam
Two eggs and crispy bacon

At the little kitchen table
Sits a man, gray haired and slim
Sips his coffee, reads his paper
Another day for Grandpa Jim

He finishes his breakfast
Puts the dishes in the sink
And moves into his study
For he needs to sit and think

He settles in his favorite chair
But soon he's stumped and sighin'
For he must choose a birthday gift
To give his grandson, Ryan

He's seen the disappointed looks
His grandson has displayed
The last few birthdays he's been to
So he feels a bit dismayed

So many things to think about
And so many he's got wrong
So hard to live these past few years
With his Madalyn now gone

She would always choose the gifts
They'd wrap up for the kids
He misses her so very much
And all the things she did

He smiles just at the thought of her
And speaks these words out loud
"Well Maddie, guess it's now my turn"
"I'll try and make you proud"

"A present really meaningful"
"It's not the price or wealth"
"Something that says you're special"
His eyes wander to a shelf

It's there he keeps his precious things
Gifts from his dad and mom
Some photographs and medals
From his time in Vietnam Nam

A little fishing box contains
His favorite lures and hooks
Some post cards and a wristwatch
Sit beside a stack of books

And it's the books that catch his eye
That give him inspiration
He rises and lays hands upon
One special publication

It's Treasure Island he selects
His favorite as a boy
"How nice if Ryan came to love"
"This book I've so enjoyed"

"Long John Silver, Captain Flint"
"Jim Hawkins, buried treasure"
"I've read this book a dozen times"
"And loved it without measure"

“I think this is the perfect gift”
“I’ll wrap it carefully”
“Why, it feels like giving Ryan”
“Just a little piece of me”

Back at Ryan’s house
All the balloons have been inflated
The cake is done, the streamers hung
A birthday sign’s been painted

Chairs and tables readied
Hot dogs waiting to be grilled
And lots of paper towels on hand
‘Case anything is spilled

This party, organized
Just like a military coup
And arranged in perfect order
Till there’s nothing left to do

As the day turns into evening
Like a mountain, vast and steep
Comes Ryan’s greatest challenge
He must somehow go to sleep

After agonizing effort
He accomplishes his aim
Now he dreams of action figures
Baseball gloves and video games

Meanwhile in his study
Grandpa Jim prepares his gift
His beloved Treasure Island
To his grandson he will shift

But before the book is bundled up
In paper, tape and bow
He writes down in the fly leaf
Words he wants the boy to know

And when he's satisfied
He's done the best that he is able
He wraps the book as Maddie smiles
From a frame upon the table

The early rays of sunlight
Seek to pass the bedroom shade
Ryan's long been up and dressed
His room is clean, his bed is made

Breakfast passes quickly
And the house soon comes alive
When finally, the clock strikes noon
And birthday guests arrive

Hot dogs disappear
The day's in full swing party mode
A donkey gets a winning tail
A piñata spills its load

Candles are extinguished
With a silent, secret wish
And everyone has birthday cake
With ice cream in a dish

Then at last arrives the moment
Ryan's long been waiting for
When they move into the living room
Filled with birthday gifts galore

Presents wrapped like royalty
Their fate, they can't avoid
As paper, ribbons, bows and bags
Are plundered and destroyed

Legos, board games, Star Wars sheets
A soccer ball and goal
A race car and a helicopter
Both remote control

Comic books (Batman and Thor)
A football and a tee
A hockey stick and roller blades
Two dozen DVDs

Gift after gift emerging
From a pile so tall and wide
Admired for a moment
And then quickly set aside

The cavalcade of opulence
Surprises Grandpa Jim
As he wonders will his grandson ever
Find the one from him?

Till finally from the massive stack
A small, flat gift is skimmed
The tag attached announcing
That it comes from Grandpa Jim

Ryan smiles and then proceeds
To quickly tear the paper
And Grandpa Jim's anticipation
Dissolves just like a vapor

For though Ryan says a "thank you"
As he holds the cherished book
His tone is forced and wooden
There's that familiar birthday look

"I loved that book when I was ten"
"I hope that you do too"
"I've written something special"
"On the inside just for you"

Ryan gets up from his chair
Gives Grandpa Jim a hug
And as he grabs another gift
Sets Treasure Island on the rug

The opening goes on and on
But Ryan never carries
Till under all the birthday wrap
The Novel is now buried

The final gift emerges from
A decorated box
It's quite anticlimactic
Being underwear and sox

But Ryan doesn't mind it
For the haul is quite extensive
A couple may be duds
But most are awesome and expensive

The party goes cheer and then
Begin to say goodbyes
Coats and gloves are put on now
Kids calling home for rides

Grandpa Jim moves to the doorway
Giving hugs to all his kin
Ryan hugs him back and says
"Thanks for the story Grandpa Jim"

"You're welcome Ryan, don't forget"
"You're Grandma loved you too"
"I think she would be pleased to know"
"I gave that book to you"

He said goodbye, walked to his car
And as he zipped his vest
"He softly whispers "Madalyn"
"I surely did my best"

But no one heard these words he said
Except the stars and sky
He slips behind the wheel
And makes his way home with a sigh

As Grandpa Jim drives through the night
And Ryan takes a bath
Mom and Dad, exhausted
Face the birthday aftermath

Paper plates and popped balloons
Limp streamers gently flapping
Left over cake and dogs and drinks
And tons of birthday wrapping

Mom starts in the kitchen
Ryan's dad picks up the trash
Beginning with the pile of paper
Near the presents stash

He fills up seven garbage bags
Which takes a little while
All the time he never sees
Treasure Island's in that pile

Paper, boxes, ribbons, bags
Make up the refuse mix
With Grandpa's now forgotten book
Buried neatly in bag six

That precious gift of Grandpa's love
And all it had to say
Now sits out on the sidewalk
And tomorrow's garbage day

A frosty, early morning
Gives the neighborhood a hug
As wisps of aromatic steam
Rise from a travel coffee mug

Seated snugly in the cab
Of a battered, gray machine
A man attempts to thwart the cold
Wrapped in a heavy coat and jeans

Glove encumbered fingers grip
A well-worn steering wheel
And like an over worked accordion
The brakes protest and squeal

The stops and goes are frequent
House by house they long repeat
We recognize the trash man
Coming slowly down the street

He works with practiced rhythm
Climbing in and climbing out
Each movement so familiar
As he accomplishes his route

The repetition of his task
Is like a chain with endless links
It occupies his body
Leaving lots of time to think

His thoughts this chilly morning
Are all centered on a boy
His musings are a mixture of
Keen sadness and great joy

Photos fill the Spartan cab
The dashboard and the visor
Where he placed them one by one
Like the treasure of a miser

The first is now a decade old
So faded and so worn
Sent to him by his daughter
Shortly after Luke was born

Thereafter each November
He'd receive one in the mail
The annual reminder
Of the family that he'd failed

The memories are disjointed
Fractured, compromised and mottled
He'd lost them when he'd slowly
Disappeared into a bottle

Though time and faith had healed him
From the curse that he'd been under
The damage ran too deep
His family still remained asunder

And so the season comes again
Just like a sad routine
The birthday of his grandson, Luke
Who he's never held or seen

He'd like to give a present
Just to say "I think of you"
But his wallet's flat and empty
And his rent is overdue

So his hope dissolves in silence
Like the flicking of an ash
As he exits from the truck
To empty someone else's trash

The mountain on the sidewalk
Is impressive in its scale
There's a mound of gleaming trash bags
Like a beached and bloated whale

Strong hands grab zip tied plastic
As his knees and back complain
He moves them two by two until
A single bag remains

He nabs the lone survivor
Now to make this stop complete
Then the bottom of it fails
And spills the contents in the street

He grits his teeth and bares them
Like an angry alligator
He'd like to swear but he'd only have to
Ask forgiveness later

So forestalling the commitment
Of a sin he must confess
He bends his tired body
And he gathers up the mess

Then something hard and heavy
At the bottom is discovered
It's a book, the title bearing
"Treasure Island" on the cover

He pauses in his work
And feels a warmth from head to toe
As he's taken to a memory
Many, many years ago

His family had just moved
Into a house far out of town
His mom and dad, both working
Meant that no one was around

Treasure Island was his savior
He would read out on the lawn
With his back against a tree
Until his loneliness was gone

He'd turn the yellowed pages
Till he'd finally reach the end
Then flip back to page one
And start the story once again

He followed this routine
Just like a repetitious drummer
And found his solace in the book
That long ago and lonely summer

He quickly finished picking up
The spillage in the street
Climbed in the cab and placed the book
Beside him on the seat

After many hours of work
He drove the truck back to the barn
Clocked out and caught his bus
With Treasure Island 'neath his arm

Then reaching his apartment
Moving up the steps by twos
He hangs his heavy coat
And puts away his battered shoes

This often lonely room
Now feels as if it's had a lift
He's so happy just to think he can
Give Luke a birthday gift

But what to do for paper?
He's no wrapping and no money
It's then he spies the folded
And forgotten Sunday funnies

Beetle Bailey, Charlie Brown
Garfield and Marmaduke
Brightly embrace the special gift
That he intends for Luke

He pulls a piece of ribbon
From around a box of candy
And ties a bow where Doonesbury
Meets Little Orphan Annie

And once the book is wrapped and tied
He makes a little card
He tries to write what's in his heart
But words come slow and hard

There's so much he wants to tell him
There's so much he wants to say
But his effort's coldly stifled
As regret gets in the way

After pausing many moments
'Ore that promise laden note
"To Luke with love, from Grandpa"
We're all the words he wrote

He eats a bite of dinner
(Just some stew right from the can)
Re-dons his coat and shoes
The birthday present in his hands

And walks down to the corner
Where the bus stop can be found
It's there he starts his journey
To the other side of town

It takes some time to travel
As three transfers are required
To the final destination
Treasure Island has inspired

His daughter's house seems tiny
From his view across the street
Many nights he's stood here watching
Where the light and shadows meet

He imagines all the life
Those walls could lovingly confide
In his mind it's so familiar
Yet he's never been inside

He walks across the pavement
Where he's never walked before
And silently he leans the present
Up against the door

He pauses there a moment
Just to try and catch a voice
As he turns and walks away
His eyes are glistening and moist

He climbs back in the bus
The empty seats serve to remind him
Of what awaits when he gets home
As doors swing closed behind him

The faint glow of a television
Casts uncertain light
As a woman settles back
To finally ease into the night

Dinner has been eaten
All the dishes have been done
The lone figure at the table
Doing homework is her son

She ignores the glowing screen
And simply watches him instead
The way he holds his pencil
Bends his elbows, tilts his head

Has it really been a decade?
Is that birthday really here?
So much life has come and gone
So many smiles, so many tears

It's never been too easy
And she does the best she can
The birthday celebration
Just a simple, modest plan

Some pizza and a movie
And a trip to the arcade
Thank goodness for the timing
'Cause tomorrow she gets paid

Luke never gives her trouble
She's never heard him once complain
Yet a burden rests upon her
Like a heavy, heavy chain

To love him as a parent
She must be both mom and dad
She strives to build a home-life
Like the one she never had

He'll never have to wake
To angry voices in the hall
Or wonder where she is
Or if she's coming home at all

She offers up a prayer
That God will always keep and bless
As Luke writes out an essay
On the Gettysburg Address

A sound gains her attention
Makes her quickly turn her head
Their cat is pawing at the door
And wanting to be fed

She gathers up to rise
To get his bowl and pop a tin
But Luke is up before her
“You just chill, I’ll let him in”

The cat enters the room
With an ungrateful feline hiss
While Luke exclaims as he looks down
“Well hey now, what is this?”

He kneels down in the doorway
And retrieves a heavy object
Sporting a funny bow and
Wrapped up in the Sunday comics

Luke pulls the card that’s tucked between
The ribbon and the wrap
“It says that it’s from Grandpa!”
And he tears a gaping flap

His mother stands, uneasy
This surprise is unexpected
Though he’s tried to reconcile
Her Father’s efforts she’s rejected

She knows that he has changed
And made a better, honest start
But she can’t seem to forgive him
Nor to open up her heart

But she sees the keen excitement
Showing in her child’s face
He rips aside the paper
In elation and in haste

And when the Sunday funnies
Lie in pieces on the floor
She sees a look of wonder
That she’s never seen before

Luke holds a sturdy book
And sighs as if it’s made of gold
She sees it’s Treasure Island
Spelled in letters big and bold

She remembers how her Father
Once had talked about that book
When she'd mixed up Long John Silver
In her mind with Captain Hook

He'd laughed and shook his head
And then he took her by the hand
And explained "one's Treasure Island"
"While the other's Peter Pan"

That memory overcomes her
Takes her backward to a time
When her Father was her hero
And her love was pure and blind

She is shaken from her reverie
By Luke's impassioned voice
The book he holds is open
And his eyes read and rejoice

"Grandpa's written something"
"It's inside here on this page"
He carries the book to her
It's cover creased and worn by age

She opens to the fly leaf
Runs her fingers through Luke's hair
And slowly reads the words
A steady hand has written there

"This book is for my Grandson"
"Who I love with all my heart"
"May your life be filled with laughter"
"Every blessed, joyous part"

"And please enjoy this story"
"There's adventure in each line"
"I hope it touches your life"
"Just as much as it has mine"

“So have a happy birthday”
“And may God your dreams fulfill”
“And know your Grandpa loves you”
“And I always, always will”

Her eyes grow bright and glistening
And her hand moves to her throat
Ryan’s just ecstatic
At the words his Grandpa wrote

And so she doesn’t tell him
She suspects he’ll never look
At the difference in the handwriting
Between the note card and the book

But somehow that doesn’t matter
For she finds somehow she knows
If he’d penned the words there written
He would have chosen those

Her heart so cold and empty
When she thought about her Dad
Now held a tiny ember
And that ember made her glad

Handing Luke his present
He sits down to read alone
As she rummaged through an address book
And then picked up the phone

She heard the distant ringing
Then his voice, and this felt right
“Hi Dad, it’s me, Melinda”
“Are you free tomorrow night?”

Epilogue

A gentle rain is falling
Makes the roadway gleam and shine
Windshield wipers beat and seem
To mark the passing time

A man drives on alone
The seatbelt next to him is slack
And passing headlights shine upon
Empty car seats in the back

This commute, so like a ritual
The turns, so automatic
The road signs all are memorized
Like heirlooms in an attic

The time to come is precious
So important, dear to him
As Ryan travels through the night
To visit Grandpa Jim
The years have passed so quickly
Youthful minds don't comprehend
That life is full of seasons
And each season has its end

The things you take for granted
Come and go just like a whim
And so it is with people
And so it is with Grandpa Jim

The gift that is his grandfather
He'd never fully grasped
Past days are bagged and buried
Like decorations in the trash

They can't be resurrected
But they can be newly won
The days that we regret
Can make so sweet the days to come

For time brings understanding
When the pieces seem to fit
When the fires of keen discernment
And maturity are lit

And so it was for Ryan
As he aged and as he grew
And came to know the greatest gift
That he ever knew

When Ryan became married
Loved a woman to his core
He understood the meaning of
The ring that grandpa wore

When he became a father
New found love began to reach him
Casting light upon the lessons
Grandpa Jim had tried to teach him

That family is a present
Wrapped up for the ones we know
Treasured moments are the ribbon
And our memories the bow

So, he drives on through the night
Ignores the stubborn urge to sleep
For in a window waits a silhouette
And he has promises to keep

A parking lot half empty
Yields a close, inviting space
His car between the lines
Feels like a welcoming embrace

He greets attending nurses
Signs the registration book
“He’s waiting for your visit”
“Over in the breakfast nook”

Ryan smiles a thank you
“He’s so sweet when you come by”
“Insisting that we help him”
“Dress up in a coat and tie”

Moving down the hallway
Ryan knows he’ll find him there
Sweetly looking out the window
Sitting in his favorite chair

The smile that he receives
The hearty hug that he is given
Is worth ten times the hours
And all the miles that he has driven

Settling near his grandpa
Splendid in his suit and cap
His right hand holds his tea
His left hand rigid in his lap

The stroke that took his speech
That manifested last July
Is routed and defeated
By the pleasure in his eyes

Ryan's brought him fresh baked cookies
New framed photos of the girls
And one more thing to share
As their now sacred time unfurls

Crossing legs and donning glasses
Under a warm expectant look
Ryan smiles and nods to grandpa
As he opens up a book

So our story comes full circle
And no part is left undone
"Are you ready Grandpa Jim?"
"Treasure Island, chapter one..."

Devotional Thoughts

There's only one thing that beats the feeling of receiving a really thoughtful gift. And that is the incomparable pleasure of giving someone you love a special gift. We are all familiar with the phrase "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20: 35).

When you are a child, it can be hard to grasp the truth of this phrase, as most of your life experience has revolved around you getting your needs met. I can remember hearing that phrase as a kid and thinking "Yeah, right." Then, it happens. It may be Christmas, Mother's Day or a birthday. It may be directed toward a parent, sibling or grandparent. It's that first opportunity you have to give something meaningful to someone you love. It may be a bloopy ashtray made as a school art project, or something special that you saved up your nickels, dimes and quarters to buy. But, that first experience, when you feel the genuine appreciation of the recipient, can stay with you your entire life.

Just as any good parent would, God the Father affirms the behaviors that he wants to see practiced by his children. I believe that God gives us this blessing of giving to help us grasp a small fraction of the love he has for us as he gave the greatest gift of all – his Son, Jesus. What a gift, what a giver, what a God!