

All I Want for Christmas is...

Grace and Peace with Immanuel!

✧ **Long time** (vv.1-4)

✧ **Full volume** (vv.5,6)

✧ **Warm blanket** (v.7)

In the name of Jesus – Immanuel, dearly loved children of God, celebrating “God With Us”:

Are you good at gift giving? Many years ago a woman cried when her husband bought her a box of chocolates for Mother’s Day. She had just gone on a diet. You’ve heard about the excited little boy with the biggest gift ever under the tree, terribly disappointed to find inside all that wrapping paper – a snow shovel. The years when my parents could finally afford some really great Christmas gifts are still etched in my memories. Like that pair of Sperry-Remington, four-function calculators, one for my brother and one for me, regular price \$70, on sale for \$35. These few decades later, your cell phone has a calculator, plus camera, calendar, GPS, Internet, and maybe you got it free with your minutes. What if you had a bunch of friends really good at gift giving who all bought you the same great gift? You can’t even re-gift in that case, just find more storage space. Gifts can disappoint, grow obsolete and clutter.

But what gift would last forever? What gift could you never have too much? The older I get, the more **All I Want for Christmas is...Grace and Peace with Immanuel!**

✧ **Long time** (vv.1-4)

This gift was a **Long time** in coming. And quite frankly, I didn’t always want it. There’s a sludge pot inside each of us that will always want less of God and more of self. And without a doubt God feels the same way about us. Some are too young to remember, but without indoor plumbing and city sewers, people used to dig a hole in the back yard and put a little shed over it. It was called an “outhouse.” The guy inside did not want to be seen, and no one particularly cared to see him.

That’s too tame to describe our natural born relationship with God. You can tell in the story of the author of this letter to the Christians in Rome. The outhouse of his former, God-hating life had wheels and machine guns for going after God. Well, he couldn’t actually reach God. No matter how mad you get, your arms are too short. And since God is a spirit, it’s like shooting at the wind. So Saul of Tarsus went after God’s people, every man and woman he could find worshipping that Rabbi from Nazareth who claimed to be God’s Son and got what he deserved on a Roman cross – as far as Saul was concerned. Incensed that people claimed Jesus was alive and the long-promised Christ, the Jewish Messiah, Saul persecuted the church of God with everything he had to wipe it out. His obsession was about as effective as a man who slips off his shoes before he licks a frozen flagpole, then starts kicking with bare feet.

God could have just laughed and left Saul alone in his self-destruction. Instead, He convinced Saul that Jesus is the God-Man, risen from the dead, and most truly the long promised Messiah of the Jews and Savior of the world. God gave Saul **Grace and Peace with Immanuel** by repentant faith and trust in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. It was a **Long time** in coming, promised over so many centuries through the prophets, but all the more amazing when God changed his name and made him the missionary to us Gentiles. He writes so warmly: *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”* Yielding his will as a slave to Jesus, his God and Lord, Paul was holy by God’s declaration. **Immanuel** came to live in his heart with the greatest gifts of **Grace and Peace**.

☆ Full volume (vv.5,6)

Isn't that remarkable? I say, "Isn't that remarkable!" We have to crank up the **volume** on God-With-Us. **Immanuel**, placed Paul in a long line of proclaimers stretching back to the beginning when God first started warning about Judgment Day and the one Way to escape. (Cf. Jude 14f) God kept promising through His prophets a Savior who would cause God to forget all our sins that we might never forget, "**God is love.**" (1 John 4:16) Undeserved love, **Grace**, is what Paul got instead of hell's condemnation along with all the rest of us ungrateful, rebellious sinners.

In Paul we find **Full volume**, high definition gratitude: "***Through [Jesus] and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.***"

Have you answered God's call to "***the obedience that comes from faith***"? We're too much like little children who don't want to admit we need rest. We drive ourselves to exhaustion, gobble our food and keep looking for fun that runs away faster as we get older. Clicking cable channels, you can't help noticing Hugh Hefner, the famous "Playboy," running out of time to enjoy the life of sin he's piled up for himself. God's question haunts such souls as the clock ticks on. But God first asked this of self-righteous religious people: "***The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?***" (Jeremiah 5:31 NIV), when God takes it all away?

Girls and boys with all the toys, God is still calling us "***to the obedience that comes from faith.***" Brave snowmobilers lose their way in the dark. From the murky depths won't you obey when God reaches down and shouts, "Climb up here!" Does your sled still hold your heart then? Does some friend or lover when you're going down for the last time? **All I Want for Christmas is...Grace and Peace with Immanuel!** "God With Us" is like coming from the wet and deadly cold to the dry comfort of a...

☆ Warm blanket (v.7)

"***To all in Rome,***" and everywhere Christians love Christmas – you "***who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.***"

God's gifts never grow old, never turn obsolete, never take up storage space because God's gracious gifts are good for the bright, sunny days, and doubly delightful in the gloom of a storm or the dark of the night. Yes, God wants us to be sorry for our sins, but only so He can cover us with the **Warm blanket** of His loving kindness and tender mercy. Instead of kicking and screaming, God wants us to settle down and come back to Him for the good He already knows we don't deserve, but loves to give us anyway. If you're a parent, you know how this works. When your child finally stops fighting and humbly comes home, it gives you the greatest joy to wrap him up in a **Warm blanket** and hold him close. Couples who can finally kiss and make up treasure that warmth even more than before.

How could you ever get too much of God calling you a "***saint***"? Here it is again, you "***who are loved by God and called to be saints.***" Since God called you, it wasn't your idea. When God brought you to faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, the Holy Spirit wrapped you up in the holiness of Christ, so that all God sees when He looks at you is Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus. "Holy ones" are "***saints***" in God's eyes. And since God does the looking and judging in Christ, does it really matter what anyone else says?

Can you ever get too much of God's "***grace***"? People do sometimes get "sated with grace," where they take God's gifts for granted and don't care to come worship, pray, confess and give thanks to God. But the problem is them, not God's **Grace**. That's when we need God to pull back a corner of His **Warm blanket** and let us feel how cold it is out there without Him. God's discipline is another gracious gift of God to draw us back to His loving heart. And when He does, we enjoy the "***peace***" that only the Prince of Peace can give, the kind that "***guards [our] hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.***" (Philippians 4:7) **Peace** makes things work in our lives, relationships hum, and all God's gifts and toys to be enjoyed all the more while we treasure **Grace and Peace with Immanuel!** God is the greatest Gift Giver. And "God With Us" is really all we need for Christmas in our hearts this year and always. Amen.

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