


A Present for Papa

A hand is shown holding a red gift box wrapped with white ribbons and a white bow. The background is a dark green gradient.

“One Christmas eve, about six years ago, duty compelled me to spend the night at the prison, instead of at home, as I had anticipated. Early in the morning while it was yet dark, I left the prison for my home, my pockets full of presents for my little girl. It was a bitter cold morning, and I buttoned my overcoat up to protect myself from the cutting wind that swept in from the lake. As I hurried along, I thought I saw somebody skulking in the shadow of the prison wall. I stopped and looked a little more closely, and then, I saw a little girl, wretchedly clothed in a thin dress; her bare feet thrust into a pair of shoes much the worse for wear. In her hand she held, tightly clasped, a small paper parcel. Wondering who she was and why she was out so early in the morning, and yet too weary to be interested, I hurried on. But soon heard that I was being followed. I stopped, and turned around, and there before me stood the same wretched-looking child.

“What do you want?” I asked sharply. “Are you the keeper of the prison, sir.” “Yes, who are you, and why are you not at home?” “Please sir, I have no home, mama died two weeks ago, and she told me just before she died that papa was in prison, an’ she thought maybe he would like to see his little girl now. Please, can’t you let me see my papa? Today is Christmas, and I want to give him a present.”

“No,” I replied gruffly, “you will have to wait until visitors’ day,” and started on. I had not gone many steps when I felt a pull at my coat, and a pleading voice said, “Please, don’t go.” I stopped once more, and looked into the pinched, beseeching face before me. Great tears were in her eyes, while her little chin quivered with emotion.

“Mister,” she said, “if your little girl was me, and your little girl’s mama had died an’ her papa was in the prison, an’ she had no place to go an’ no one to love her, don’t you think she would like to see her papa? If it was Christmas, and your little girl came to see me, if I was keeper of the prison, an’ asked me to please let her see her papa to give him a present, don’t you—don’t you think I would say yes?”

“By this time a great lump was in my throat, and my eyes were swimming in tears. I answered, ‘Yes, my little girl, I think you would and you shall see your papa,’ and taking her hand, I hurried back to the prison, thinking of my own fair-haired little girl at home. Arriving in my office, I bade her come near the warm stove, while I sent a guard to Cell No. 37. The man came out of the cell and

when he saw the little girl his face formed an angry frown and in a gruff, angry voice he snarled:

“Nellie, what are you doing here, what do you want, go back to your mama.” “Please papa,” begged the little girl, “mama’s dead. And before she died she told me to take care of little Jimmie, ‘cause you loved him so, an’ told me to tell you she loved you, too—but papa,”—and her voice broke in sobs and tears—“Jimmie died, too, last week, and now I am alone, papa, an’ today is Christmas, papa, an’-and I thought maybe as you loved Jimmie, you would like a little Christmas present from him.”

Here she unrolled the little bundle she held in her hand, until she came to a little package of tissue paper, from which she took out a little fair curl, and put it in her father’s hand, saying as she did so, “I cut it from dear little Jimmie’s head, papa, just before they buried him.”

“Her papa by this time was sobbing like a child, and so was I. Stooping down, he picked up the little girl, pressed her convulsively to his breast, while his great frame shook with suppressed emotion.”

“The scene was too sacred for me to look upon, so I softly opened the door and left them alone. In about an hour I returned. Her father stayed near the stove with his little daughter on his knee. He looked at me sheepishly, for a moment, and then said, ‘Sir, I haven’t any money.’ Then, suddenly stripping off his prison jacket, he said, ‘For God’s sake don’t let my little girl go out this bitter cold day with that thin dress. Let me give her this coat. I’ll work early and late, I’ll do anything. I’ll be a

man. Please, Sir, let me cover her with this coat.’ Tears were streaming down the face of the hardened man.

“‘No,’ I said, ‘keep your coat, your little girl shall not suffer. I’ll take her to my home and see what my wife can do for her.’ ‘God bless you,’ sobbed the prisoner. I took the girl to my home. She remained a number of years and became a Christian by faith in the Lord Jesus.

“A few years later, I visited Nellie and her father, also a born again believer, in their neat little home on a quiet street. It was a real joy to see the change in that man. Because of his reformation, he had been pardoned, and was now living an upright Christian life with his daughter, whose little Christmas gift had broken his hard heart.”

What does it take for us to stop what we are doing to ourselves—our family—and our world? Will it take tragedy, despair, loneliness, financial loss, or even death. Will we ever look around us and become sensitive and aware of our loved ones. Yes, Christmas is a time of families, of tender moments, but until we stop and realize that the greatest gift has already been given to us, we can never enjoy the full benefits of our families. That gift is salvation, yes, accept Jesus Christ into your heart as Lord and Savior.

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