

## The Gift (10)

*In the previous installment of "The Gift" the old man had busied himself with baking goodies for the VanVleets, intending to bring them the next day as a celebration for what he supposed had been good news from the doctor regarding Ruth's diagnosis. Though miss-understanding the situation, this thoughtful act would do more for the VanVleets than the cookies or bars ever could.*

If it were the case that the old man was on the peak of a mountain the previous day then it was a valley into which he found himself descending today. As he sat in a chair at the kitchen table he stared at the mug of coffee that his hands were wrapped around and just shook his head, watching the steam as it rose into the air and then was gone. Still, only hours after he had discovered that Ruth had been diagnosed with cancer he struggled to comprehend it. It just didn't seem real, as if it couldn't really be happening. All the joy and peace he had felt the previous evening was gone, only to be replaced with a melancholy that seemed to envelop him. In addition to this were the questions that his immature faith now grappled with.

He grunted softly as the irony of the steam rising from his coffee cup hit him. Life was so short. Even his life which by all accounts had thus far been quite long and full seemed now as he looked back to have flown by in mere moments. And now Ruth could quite possibly be facing the end of her very young life, a life only ten or so years on. It was so difficult to believe. It was so difficult to understand.

He recalled then in his mind the events of the morning. Oh, if only he had looked at the signs he would have realized something wasn't right. So caught up was he in what he was doing that he didn't see anything else. For one thing, none of the children were outside playing or working in the yard. For that matter, Jack was also nowhere to be seen which was very strange indeed for a Saturday. Normally he was out in the yard or in the garage working on something. And then there was the car in the driveway. He actually had not given it a second thought. He wished now that he had.

Or just maybe God had been using him in a way he could never have thought possible to bring some joy to this family in a time in which they desperately needed it.

Having risen early and eaten a good breakfast he had decided to bring the goodies he had baked the evening before over to the VanVleets. Because it was Saturday he waited a little while to make sure they would be awake, gathered all the goodies he had baked the night before, and made his way next door.

Barely managing to hang on to all the goodies he nudged the doorbell with his elbow and stepped back to wait for the door to open. Janet had seen him coming across the yard and now opened the door and asked him to come in.

“Good morning Mr. Michealson!” she said as she held open the door in order for him to come through. “Here, let me help you with that.” Carefully she took one of the packages from him not knowing for sure what it was but all of a sudden smelling the aroma of fresh baked goods. “Are those chocolate chip cookies on that plate?” she asked as her eyes fell on the plate he carried in his other hand.

“Yes they are, my girl,” he said as he set the plate down on the counter along with the bag he had been carrying in the other hand.

“What is all this?” asked Jack as he walked into the kitchen to see what had brought Mr. Michealson to their home. Seeing the plate of cookies on the counter he pulled up a part of the plastic wrap in order to get a better look. “It smells like a bakery in here.”

“Well, I know you folks have been going through some tough times lately,” said Mr. Michealson as he leaned up against the counter seeing through the doorway that Janet’s parents sat in the family room. “You did so much for us before Jenny died and you have been so good to me.... I just wanted to do something for you, something to help you celebrate.” He had paused in mid-sentence in order to compose himself. He hated to cry in front of other people. Not to mention he did not want that on a day that should be filled with joy for this family.

Both Jack and Janet looked at each other then acknowledging what each was thinking. He doesn’t know.

Taking his direction from the look on Janet’s face, Jack put his hand on Mr. Michealson’s shoulder. “Bill, we talked to the doctor yesterday.” He slowly stepped back and leaned on the island in the center of the kitchen and prepared to tell the story he had told what seemed like a hundred times already.

By the look on Jack’s face Mr. Michealson could tell that he had been wrong. The news could not have been good. Immediately he wished he could turn and leave, to get away before he caused any more damage.

In his mind he was suddenly brought back to that cool autumn day not so long past when that young man had walked up on him as he sat staring at the casket that held the body of his beloved. He imagined the look on his own face right now probably matched the look that had crossed the face of that young man; disbelief and embarrassment for having intruded on this family at such a time as this.

“I am so sorry Jack and Janet,” he said as the look on his face turned from disbelief to anguish. He stepped forward and took both of them in his arms and hugged them tightly. “I thanked God last night before bed that you had gotten good news and now...” Tears streamed down his face and for a few moments he could say nothing more. As he relaxed his grip Jack and Janet stepped back with tears in their own eyes.

Although each of them cried, they did so for far different reasons.

The old man cried because his heart went out to these two people to whom he had grown quite close over these last months. He cried because his own recent wounds now seemed to ache once again.

Jack and Janet cried for a number of reasons. First there was the old man’s kindness to them in their time of need. Then there was the fact that they felt terrible for the confusion they may have had a part in creating. But more than these they cried because for the first time they saw solid evidence of a softening in this old man’s hard heart. Only a few months ago he would never have shown such emotion. Only a few months ago the only reason he would have talked of God at all would be to voice his doubt that such a being could exist.

And now here he was, telling them that he had prayed. He prayed! Oh how that filled both of them with inexplicable happiness! In an instant they both forgot the seriousness of their own situation and basked in this new joy that the Lord had given them.

“Don’t be sorry,” Janet said as she took the old man’s hands in her own. “There was no way for you to have known.” Letting go of one of his hands she reached around him and pulled some tissues from the box that sat on the counter, and divided them up between the old man, Jack, and herself.

While everyone wiped the tears that streaked their faces Jack went on to tell Mr. Michealson about their visit with the doctor and the difficult night they had spent coming to terms with the situation that God had now placed them in. He also told him that the prognosis seemed positive and that they were confident that everything would be alright. In fact, they knew it would because Ruth, along with the whole family, was in the loving hands of Father.

“But Mr. Michealson,” Janet said as she took his hand in hers once again and looked him in the eye. “God answered the prayer we made last night. You see, we asked for him to lift our burdened hearts and to give us joy, even in this difficulty he has placed in Ruth’s life and in our life as a family.”

Uncertain of exactly what she had meant and unsure how to respond or even if it had been expected, he simply stood there, his gaze slowly dropping to the floor. After a few silent moments he said he must be going and began to move towards the door. As he opened it he turned back around to face the two of them.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” he said softly with a questioning look on his face. “How do you know God answered you?”

Janet had also begun to leave the room and turning she said with a smile on her face and tears brimming in her eyes, “You prayed.”

Nodding his head slowly in understanding the old man had looked from one to the other and as he reached for the door to leave many questions echoed in his mind. Had God heard him when he had prayed? How could a loving God place a family such as this into such a difficult situation?

Confused and bewildered the old man made his way back home. He would need some time for this news to sink in.

In the kitchen that the old man had just left Jack and Janet hugged each other once again and hurried into the family room to share this good news with Ruth and the rest of the family.