

The Gift (12)

His wife had attended this church for many years and yet he had never once stepped foot inside. There was a time in his life when he wore that fact as a badge of honor but now as he looked through the car window at the large, and admittedly beautiful, building he couldn't help but feel only shame. What had he done? What pain he had subjected his beloved wife to he was only now beginning to understand.

Slowly and somewhat reluctantly he walked up the walk that led to the front doors of the church, taking in the landscaping and the building itself. Reaching out he grasped the handle of the door in his hand, fully expecting it to be locked, but to his surprise it opened easily. Hesitantly he moved through the doorway and into the narthex. There was a faint scent of cleaner in the air but what really caught his attention was the music. Piano music seemed to flow throughout the building and at first he thought it was coming from some type of speaker system. Only after he stood there for a minute did he realize that it was coming from the sanctuary.

Making his way through the narthex he quietly opened one of the doors that led into the sanctuary and peeked in. Off to the left side in the front of the church was a beautiful grand piano upon which a younger woman played, seemingly lost in the music. So intent was she that she didn't notice him ease through the doorway and sit down in the back row of pews.

He didn't recognize any of the songs she played but the music itself had a very calming and reassuring effect on him. It wasn't long before he too became caught up in the music. Sitting back he closed his eyes and just enjoyed it.

The hand that gently came to rest on his shoulder brought him immediately back to reality. In fact, it scared him quite badly. With a start he turned to see the pastor of the church standing next to him.

"I am so sorry," whispered the pastor. "I didn't mean to startle you, Bill."

"That's...that's okay," replied the old man as he stood up and regained at least some of his composure. "How in the world did you know I was here?" he asked with a bit of a puzzled look on his face.

Instead of answering the question, Pastor Kielman gestured for the old man to follow him back out into the narthex so that they would not disturb the young woman who continued to play the piano.

Near the doorway that led into the sanctuary were a couch and chair to which the pastor directed the old man. “Whenever Cindy or one of the other pianists or organists is here practicing,” he said as he sat down in the chair and the old man sat down on the couch, “my wife and I try to keep an eye from the parsonage on who comes and goes. You just never know these days.”

The old man nodded his head in understanding. “I see,” he said. “I suppose that makes good sense.”

As the piano music continued to flow from the sanctuary the two men sat opposite each other, both struck with the same irony of the situation. Here were two whose lives had been completely different. The pastor was a man who had dedicated his life to serving the Lord. The old man had spent his life serving himself.

Although quite a bit younger than the old man, pastor Kielman had been in the ministry for more than twenty years, the last eight of which had been in this particular congregation. He and his wife Beverly had been blessed with four children who now ranged in ages from twenty-three down to ten. Both he and his wife had been close to Jenny and in the last weeks of her life they had visited her often.

This was the first time in his ministry that he had encountered a situation in which one spouse was a devoted member of the church while the other spouse would have nothing to do with it. It was a situation with which he had struggled for all of the eight years he had been in this congregation. The last months however had been particularly difficult for him.

He and his wife had watched Jenny slowly die and had shared her joy in her salvation and rejoiced in the faith that God had given her. Both had also watched with a feeling of utter helplessness as the old man watched with a despair that could be seen on his face and in his actions and heard in his voice as his beloved wife of many years slowly faded away. Many nights he would lay awake in bed wondering and praying that God would work in the heart of the old man. On one particular night he had broken down from the sheer frustration of the situation and his inability to do anything to rectify it. His wife Beverly had awoken to his sobs and had wept along with him as both of their hearts felt the same anguish and pain.

A couple of days before the Lord took Jenny home they had visited her at the hospital, and this experienced pastor and his wife had been ministered to by the one to whom they had originally intended to minister to themselves.

Jenny had been asleep when they had entered her room but her eyelids fluttered open as they came up beside the bed almost as if she had sensed them enter the room. The

normal pleasantries had been voiced and they had talked for some time about some of the recent goings on in the church. Before he read scripture with her and prayed he felt compelled to ask her how William was handling everything.

“Not so well I am afraid,” she had replied quietly. A tear began to form in the corner of her eye and then made its way down her cheek. “Oh, he hurts so deeply but he won’t admit it.” She raised her hand carefully so as not to detach any of the tubes that were attached to it and attempted to wipe away the tears from her face. “He is a stubborn old man.”

Pastor Kielman smiled slightly along with Jenny and Beverly for they knew all too well how true this was. Reaching out he took her hand and held it firmly in his own.

“Jenny, I only wish that I could break through that stubbornness.” He let out his breath and shook his head slowly in resignation, looking down at the floor as he did so. “There is a wall there that I just can’t seem to get past.”

The room had remained quiet except for the nearly imperceptible hum of the IV machine. All three of them silent in their thoughts, wanting the same thing but only one of them knowing, at least at that moment, how best to answer the questions that swirled through all of their minds.

Jenny finally broke the silence. “You know, it has been such a burden for me over the years. Not being able to share the joy of my salvation with William, not being able to talk with him about spiritual things, not being able to explain the hope that is in me in a way that he will understand.” She paused briefly to catch her breath and then continued. “But I don’t carry that burden anymore.” As she said this she looked up into the faces of pastor Kielman and his wife and smiled.

Neither of them had quite understood what she had meant at first, as was evident by the looks on their faces.

“God has made me realize in the last few weeks that His ways are not our ways. If it is his will that William not be saved, all my fretting and worrying aren’t going to change that. And you know what?” she asked, again with a slight smile on her face. “God’s will is good. For me in what he has laid upon me, and for William, whatever that may be.”

She reached out then with her other hand to grasp Beverly’s hand and looked from one to the other, a fire in her eyes. “I believe with all my heart that God is able to turn William toward him. He can! I don’t know how but I know he is able. We just have to have faith and leave it in the hands of God.”

What a testimony! Here lay a woman near to death and yet the Lord had given her such strength even to instruct her pastor and remind him and his wife of the Lord's unfailing mercies and his power to overcome even the most stubborn of men.

Looking into the old man's eyes now as they sat in the narthex of the church he smiled, remembering the grace that God had shown him and his wife through Jenny and silently thanking him once again for it.

They had spent the remainder of the afternoon talking in the narthex of the church. This was not a great and deep doctrinal discussion. They actually didn't talk about doctrine at all. Nor was it a counseling session in which the pastor arduously calls the sinner to repentance. It was in fact a mostly one-sided conversation.

The Lord had laid it upon the heart of this old man to talk, and the pastor, having counseled many saints in his years in the ministry, knew by the grace of God that the very best thing he could do was listen. There were burdens on the heart of this man, grief that weighed heavily on his soul, and more than anything he needed to bare that heart and soul to another.

As he listened the pastor felt an incredible awe and a deep sense of humility as he witnessed with his own eyes the grace of God at work in this old man. He could almost perceive his hardened heart slowly softening with each word the man spoke.

As the daylight had begun to fade they had parted ways with a firm and genuine handshake as well as an agreement to meet the following morning for breakfast at a local restaurant. Having parted outside the doors of the church, each going their own way, both men brought a hand to their face to wipe away the tears that had begun to form in each of their eyes.