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Digital Edition 08/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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Holiday Of Peace

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the November 23, 1980 Sunday School Beacon

Barry Smallwood turned the key in the door of his swanky apartment, and trying the knob to make sure that it was locked securely, he hurled into the waiting cab that was parked along the circular driveway. Leaving his own shiny-black Lincoln Continental safely locked inside the heated garage of his apartment-home was a decision he had arrived at quickly and impetuously only a few hours earlier when the thought had struck him to go home this Thanksgiving -- a thing he hadn't done for five years.



Like an exceed child, he discovered that his heart was racing in eager anticipation of the event and his thoughts -- for a change -- were happily-pleasant. Smiling, he got into the back seat of the freshly-cleaned and newly-polished cab, the bulk of his 235 pound six-foot-four frame filling at least half of the seat.

"Looks like we're in for another snowfall," the cabby remarked in a cheerful voice, pulling away from the curb.

"That's not good news," Barry said, knotting his brow in wrinkled furrows. "At least I don't like it. Snow, I mean."

"But it's that time of year, Mr. Smallwood. I take it you had another difficult week," he exclaimed, raising his eyes and glancing quickly and surreptitiously at his passenger via the rear view mirror.

Barry sighed and gave the single piece of luggage he had brought with him a fight kick. "No more difficult than usual, Art," he answered, calling the man by his given name. "Sometimes I loathe the day when I aspired to become a lawyer and followed through with that aspiration. You, now . . . well, when your day's finished, you can turn in the cab keys, walk away, hurry home, kick off your shoes and relax by the fireside with your wife and children. Me, I hurry home -- to be sure -- and, sitting by my fireside, my clients' problems are ever before me. Sometimes I long to throw them all into the glowing embers of the dying fire and never hear of them again. The problems, I mean." And Barry's fingers nervously combed his dark hair. "That's where a good wife is a bulwark of strength and help."

Barry's jaw set involuntarily in a quick but firm line and his mouth registered bitterness in its corners. "That's a matter of personal opinion," he countered quickly.

Art cast another surreptitious glance in the mirror at the lawyer; then he settled down to driving, aware of the fact that he had touched a sensitive spot in the man. "The railroad station, you said?" he asked kindly.

"The airport," was the terse reply.

"Sorry," the cabby apologized, wishing there was some way he could get through to the unhappy man. It seemed such a waste to spend one's prime years in bitterness of soul and lack of joy and happiness, he mused, heading out of town toward the airport ten miles distant.

Snow began falling before they had driven two miles, and the occasional glance Art gave his passenger revealed to him that Barry was in one of his morose moods again, locked tightly and securely in a web of self-pity. There were times -- like today -- when he felt like compelling the man to sit down and listen while he told him that life was too short to be spent selfishly and in self-pity; many another had been jilted by his sweetheart and had survived, surmounting the hurt and the acute pain by turning it over to an infinite God whose oil of healing had acted as balm for the wound.

An opened his mouth to speak, but the frowning face behind him acted as a minute silencer and the journey was made without further conversation.

At the airport Barry paid the cab fare with a generous tip thrown in for Art; then, without so much as a "Have-a-nice-day" farewell, he strode determinedly into the busy, crowded terminal.

Once airborne, Barry's thoughts turned involuntarily to Elizabeth . . . his reason for not returning home the past five years. It had been hard on his parents, he knew, but he couldn't risk the possibility of seeing Elizabeth . . . not when she had rejected him for religion, as he had dubbed her experience of conversion and heart holiness.

But today he was going home. Finally, he had mustered up enough courage to spend a holiday with those whose love was undying and unfailing. It was a heady thought; and in spite of the bitterness which had been the thief and robber of his happiness, he found that he was smiling . . . a thing he rarely ever did these days.

Barry leaned his head back against the cushioned seat and was soon asleep, not awaking until the plane taxied into his hometown airport.

It was snowing hard by the time he hailed a cab and headed for the country, and when the cab driver started down the lane leading to his father's farm, Barry knew there was no way the car would get through; the snow was too deep and the drifts were too high.

In a light-hearted mood he told the driver to back out on to the main highway and hurry back to town, informing him that he would walk the rest of the way.

"It's going to be cold!" the driver exclaimed as Barry paid him and left a generous tip in his hand.

"Perhaps, but the walk will do me good. Besides, this isn't a blizzard -- just a normal November snowfall -- and the air may put some color back into these city-paled cheeks of mine."

"As you wish, Sir. Well, have a happy Thanksgiving Day. Going to your folks, I presume . . ."

"That's right," Barry said, picking up his luggage and starting down the lane.

All about him was a whiteness and cleanness impossible to describe; and still, still! The snow was heaped on every side in soft fluffy mounds. It tufted the fence posts, powdered the treetops, and lay deep and white upon the fields. His breath made a frosty plume as he walked in the crisp, cold air, and the snow creaked and crunched beneath his feet.

Barry stopped in the middle of the road and looked around him, memories like giant waves washing over his being. There was the Bowersock farm -- the sprawling new brick house replacing the once tall, white frame farm house in which he had played when a boy with Johnny Bowersock, his own age. And there was the apple tree ahead of him, its gnarled limbs and the diameter of the trunk attesting to its antiquity, the snow on its hoary limbs its crowning glory.

Barry sighed deeply and contentedly and ploughed onward, savoring every moment of the walk. Soon the outline of the homeplace came into view. A lump caught in his throat; he stifled a sob. It was painfully-sweet, this homecoming.

Walking briskly now, each step drawing the man nearer and nearer to the beloved home, Barry saw the lights come on inside the house. How cheerful they looked against the fast-approaching twilight; how welcome! So unlike the Ainsworth's house, and the Knisley's, whose window eyes were all closed tight with shutters and lay asleep in the valley, with not a single breath of life rising from their great stone chimneys, their occupants vacationing in Florida.

Barry looked up in time to see a figure disappear inside the house from the porch. His father! His heart pounded noisily and crazily inside his chest beneath his coat, seeming to turn a round of happy cartwheels at the reality of being home. His father hadn't seen him, else it would have been a repeat performance of Luke 15:20-32, he knew. He had gone to the porch for more wood for the fireplace and the cookstove, no doubt, the young man soliloquized, smiling broadly and feeling kingly and wonderful.

Like a little boy playing hide-and-go-seek, he walked in the shadows of the trees and the bushes lest either of his parents looked through the windows that faced the road and see him, and when he stepped upon the front porch it was with a foot-fall as soft and as quiet as the mountain cat's that preyed upon some of the lesser, smaller farm animals his father raised.

He stood for a while looking toward the mountain, its feet digging deeply into the far edges of his father's peach and apple orchard before it rose to loftier heights, while memories and more memories washed like rolling surf over him. The falling snow with its softly-soothing sound relaxed his nerves and soothed his heart in a most unusual manner, and for a sudden, fleeting moment Barry longed to be a boy again . . . a carefree, happy, Christian boy running his trap line as in by-gone days.

Drawing himself up to his full stature and tearing himself away from the peaceful scene before him, he knocked lightly on the door. Inside, he heard the teakettle whistling merely on top of the stove and the scraping of a pan . . . his mother was dishing up the food for supper. Ah, sweet, sweet sounds, familiarly haunting!

The door opened suddenly and Barry, totally lost in the wonder of what he was hearing, stood dumb with silence while his entire being was caught in the wide shaft of light that spilled through the now-open doorway from the kitchen out to the porch.

"Barry! My son! My son!" his father exclaimed in beautiful but almost disbelieving surprise. "Father! Mother!"

The greeting was simple, but the tears and warm embraces and the oft-repeated, "It's been so long! So long, dear boy!" stabbed like a dagger into Barry's heart.

"You should have told us you were coming," Mrs. Smallwood teased when she had recovered sufficiently to talk. "At least you'd have had more than reheated left-overs for supper."

"Your left-overs are far better than anything I buy in the city, Mother dear," Barry said. "And if I had told you I was coming, it wouldn't have been a surprise."

Sitting around the fireside that evening, Barry realized with a sudden ache just how hungry he had been to see his parents. Often he quite lost their talk -- it being a lesser form of communication -- because of the intensity with which he looked at his father and mother; and when his noble father reached for the much-used Bible on the table and began reading from its pages, the lawyer's eyes became moist with tears.

All through family prayer, the young man's eyes remained steadfastly set upon that noble face: His father had squared his shoulders, lifted up his fine old face which was shining with a kind of heavenly glory, and was speaking out to God as a tested, certain, deeply-loved Friend.

His parents understood love, understood it better than almost any other two people he knew. That love was not something soft, yielding, sentimental, but something strong, true, fine, upon which one could rest as upon a rock in a weary land. Its tenderness was not weakness, nor its joy selfish.

Something of all this his father radiated there as he prayed -- bracing, liberating, making life seem somehow a worthier and higher thing than Barry had thought it to be. And there around the sacred family altar the young man realized suddenly and longingly just how much he was missing in life. He had relinquished his hold upon the cross for cheap and fleeting worldly baubles, for something that did not -- could not -- satisfy.

Long after the lights were turned out and after his parents had gone to their bedroom and he to his, Barry sat in the chair thinking, thinking, thinking. What was he doing that was worthwhile -- really worthwhile? Compared to his father's and mother's rich, full, and completely-satisfying way of living, his life was empty, shallow and meaningless. But there was a time . . . yes, way back in his life . . . this "better way" . . .

Shameless tears surfaced and rolled suddenly down his cheeks in remembering . . . thinking . . . recalling. Reason and logic screamed that he was a man . . . a full-grown man . . . that he had chosen a noble career, a lucrative career. The Spirit entreated softly, gently, tenderly, "This is the way, walk ye in it." . . . he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee."

Rising quickly, Barry dropped to his knees. Smothering his sobs in the rocker's cushion, emptied his heart out to God in humble confession and deepest contrition of soul. Several hours later when he crawled between the dean white sheets on his bed, he slept the peaceful and restful sleep of the redeemed . . . the forgiven.

Early the following morning he heard his father's slippers footsteps going down the stairs. Instantly he was out of bed. He dressed quickly and hurled into the kitchen. "I'll light the fire this morning, Father," he said kindly, placing one hand upon the work-worn shoulder and taking the poker out of the aging man's hand with the other.

"Mother wanted you to sleep in, Son."

"Nothing doing! I'm home, Dad. It's been so-o long . . ."

"I know." The father swallowed hard. "We . . . we've missed you terribly, Barry. Terribly!" Tears glistened in the tender eyes.

"I'm sorry, Father. Sorry! And I promise, I'll never do it again. I came home last night . . ."

"We're glad. So happy, dear boy."

"I . . . mean, I came home -- two ways! Way into the morning hours I got to thinking, and . . . and Father, God forgave me of all my sins and took me back; I'm His child again . . ."

The scene was one of sacred joy; heaven came down; parents and son shouted and rejoiced together, their praises being joined by the heavenly host who rejoice over one sinner that repents more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.

"Well, I'd better stir those dying embers," Barry said after a while. "A few chips, then some wood and the kitchen will be cozy-warm."

"And breakfast will be ready in a jiffy," his mother declared.

While the bacon sizzled tantalizingly in the skillet on the stove, Barry headed for the fireplace in the living room. Down on his knees he went, building up a lively blaze among the old ashes. Getting the largest stick he could find for a back-log, he added smaller ones around it and in short order he had a great fire that lighted up the entire room, sending out a delicious glow of heat to every part of the room. To his surprise and amazement, Barry discovered that he was whistling and shunt, a thing he always did when he was sure of his solitude.

Around the breakfast table, his mother said, "I hope you don't mind that I invited Elizabeth for Thanksgiving dinner, Son. She's been quite lonesome since her parents passed away."

Barry smiled. "You mean she never married?" "Never. We've had her here every holiday," Mrs. Smallwood commented. "She's been like a daughter to us. We couldn't bear the thought of eating alone."

Thus it was that the beautiful and modest Elizabeth arrived, her arms laden with good things to eat and her eyes aglow with glad surprise at seeing Barry.

No holiday was ever more wonderful to the returned prodigal; this was, for him, the holiday of peace -- peace of soul and mind. And he knew it was merely the beginning, for was not holiness of heart and life a continuation of this wonderful first work of grace, a second, definite work, subsequent to regeneration!

Yes, this was a truly great Thanksgiving . . . the one holiday that celebrated no battle, no fall of a Bastille, no bank or business holiday, the birthday of no great man, no political revolution and no church ritual. It was the great holiday of common people who worked all year and were now thanking God humbly for good harvests . . . the ripe product of the year, and the deep, deep connection of all these things with God.

Barry looked across at Elizabeth and smiled. Suddenly he knew what he must do. He would finish his present work in the city and then move back and take over the farm. There were many things of far greater importance than his profession -- things like caring for his soul and making life easier for his parents. And for Elizabeth, too!

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THE END