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## And A Time To Give Thanks

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Ezra Zurmann untangled his arthritic legs. Stiffly, and not without trembling, he got to his feet and stood beside the hand-woven, cane-bottom chair. Steadying himself against the chair's sturdy back, he took a step forward, then walked to the edge of the porch and stepped down.

The pines whispered and sighed around him and above him; the earth beneath his feet was a thickly padded carpet of brown-green pine needles, and the air, clean and pure and flagrantly-fresh, smelled pungently delicious of pine pitch. Ah, but it was good to be alive, he thought, walking a bit more steadily now.



He paused for a moment and sighed heavily. Then he inhaled long, deep draughts of the fresh, clean mountain air. Lifting his faded blue eyes upward, he watched a hawk in flight -- saw, too, as the red-brown wings took a quick trip earthward then flew quickly away to enjoy the meal it had spotted and picked up in the meadow grasses.

Oh, that he could fly away, he thought. Life without Hannah was almost intolerable and unbearable at times, he mused silently, lifting his feet and starting once more toward the barn.

At thought of Hannah, hot tears stung his eyes; for a brief moment his vision was blurred. His wife was a saint if ever there was one. She was as old-fashioned as her name, and every bit as godly and as modest as any of the notable Bible women, too.

Should there have been another listing of heroes of faith, Hannah's name would most surely have been recorded, he had no doubt.

The lowing of the cattle and the neighing of the horses brought Ezra out of his reverie. With quickened step, he hurried to the barn, where a flurry of wings and a medley of animal sounds greeted his arrival.

Pausing inside the barn door, he spoke soothingly to his charges. Then he set diligently to the task of feeding and caring for them, leaving the milking till last.

While he worked, his loneliness was forgotten... left outside the door.., in his concerted effort to be of help to and to satisfy the needs of the creatures so dependent upon him for their sustenance.

It was good to be needed, Ezra thought, cleaning stalls and filling mangers with sweet-smelling hay and grain. He needed the conversation time with the animals, he soliloquized, as much as they needed the food and water which he provided. Since Hannah's passing and Richard's sudden flight from home, the animals were his only companions.., if one dared call them such.

How Hannah and he had loved that boy, Ezra thought, as he poured fresh, warm milk into an old pan for the purring meowing cats that waited expectantly nearby. They had had such high hopes for their only child -- such noble ambitions, too, he remembered with a great ache inside his chest.

The milking done, Ezra turned the cows out to pasture for the day. Then he hurried to the pig pen where the hungry, shoving, pushing sows and their young greeted him with squeals of impatience.

"So you're hungry again!" he called, smiling as he poured hog slop into the long trough and stood back to watch while they ate. Yonder was Chestnut, Richard's red-brown prize beauty. The young gilt had not reached maturity when the boy left home; now she was the proud mother of ten lively piglets, each one a beauty in its own way.

"Now to gather the eggs," the man said aloud to no one in particular as he turned toward the hen-house.

Between the barn and the chicken house he paused, longing to rest, like he used to do, for just a brief moment.

The cool shade of a copse of trees between the two buildings invited him to sit and refresh himself beneath their leafy foliage, but his steps continued on, the longer way around. The trees had been off-limits to him since Richard's departure: it was there they had had "words" . . . bitter words.

The memory of it all washed over Ezra now with such pain and anguish as to make him feel faint and weak.

Without further delay of deliberation, he made his way into the cool, refreshing, leaf-shaded oasis and sat down on a stump. Closing his eyes, he heaved a great, heavy sigh. This was an accomplishment for him, he realized. It was his first time into the wooded area since the day he'd had those harsh words with his son. Always thereafter he had avoided it, trying, he supposed, to forget the harsh, unkind things he'd said to Richard.

But memory -- and conscience -- had not allowed him this privilege, he realized. He could avoid the woods, he knew -- and he had -- but memory, never. It slept with him when he went to bed at night; it followed him to the barn and back to the house again, and it sat beside him at the table -- reminding him. Ever and always reminding him -- of his words!

Oh, if only he could go back and do some things over, he thought, feeling suddenly all soft and mellow inside.

Reaching a hand to his face, he felt tears; they were running down his cheeks . . . a thing most unusual and uncommon for proud Ezra Zurmann, he had to admit.

With the realization that he was crying . . . actually crying! . . . and with the new sensation of a softened heart, the man admitted brokenly to God that he was hard and harsh and mean with his son, like Hannah had told him kindly and tearfully on more than one occasion when they were alone and Richard was not around.

"Don't drive him away, dear Ezra!" Hannah begged of him. "Richard wants your love; he needs your love. Let him know when he does a thing well; and please," she implored "don't scold him so much. The Bible says, 'And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.'"

Hannah's words, as clear now as the day she uttered them, stung and pierced his heart. He had provoked Richard repeatedly, he knew: and the bringing their boy up in "the nurture of the Lord" he had left entirely to his good wife.

He was guilty before God, he knew; someday he would be judged by the One whose injunction he had failed to obey. Instead of commending and complimenting Richard for his numerous and varied achievements and accomplishments, he had provoked his son, belittling him and finding fault with him. He called attention to errors, flaws and faults only. He had literally driven the boy away from home.

Ezra groaned aloud, recalling Richard's words that day in the woods . . . the woods where he was now taking a brief respite from his labor: "I'm going to leave home, Dad," he had said with pathos but firm finality.. "I can't do anything to please you; nothing

I do is right." (Was there a sad little catch in his voice after the statement?) "Don't worry about me; and please, for Mother's sake, pray for God to soften your heart and give you a bit of kindness. Good-bye." Turning, he had walked out of the woods.

Ezra recalled thinking the words were idle tales; but when he returned to the house later in the day and found the drawers emptied, the closet bare, and Richard's old but durable and well-kept car gone, he knew his rationale was wrong. Nor did he once return. And, the father admitted now, he did miss the boy. Terribly so!

Ezra's face dropped into the open palms of his hands. The fountain of his heart (so recently softened) was opened. He wept bitterly, longing . . . yea, wanting, even! . . . to make amends, to confess his harsh attitude and his wrong-doing to his patient, kind and long-suffering son.

Sliding off the tree stump, he bent his arthritic knees., another uncommon thing for the man who had prided himself in his good moral living, formerly believing and maintaining stubbornly that such was all that was needed for him.

Praying was easy, now that his heart was humbled and broken. Smiting himself on the chest, with head raised upward, he cried in great agony of soul, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Ezra marveled, as he walked to the house sometime later, at the change within him. This "new" man was indeed a happy man -- a changed man, too. Oh, how changed!

His days were now no longer lonely nor the nights long; each was filled with myriad pleasant and beautiful surprises as God's Word became Heaven's inspired Promise Book to him personally. Through the Word, he found promise after promise and, clinging to them tenaciously, he claimed them for each peculiar or particular need he had. Thus it was that, while reading the Bible, he saw his need of a holy heart -- a heart cleansed from every trace of inbred sin -- and, walking "in the light as He is in the Light," Ezra was filled with the Holy Ghost and endured with power from on High. His consuming passion was now for the souls of men; his one desire to please the Saviour who redeemed his lost soul.

Days grew shorter now; the nights longer and crisply-cold. Golden yellow corn bulged its fat ears through cracks in the crib while apples, gathered carefully and cached away for winter's eating, blushed scarlet-red from crates and baskets in the cellar. Trees, once leaf-garbed, waved naked, empty branches at the brittle air and pumpkins, orange-red and fat and round, huddled together in piles in a corner of the enclosed porch. Inside, a hearth fire burned with warmth and cheerfulness and welcome, and the lamp which burned all night on the window sill as a welcome-home for the departed son was little comparison to the undying, brighter faith of the man, Ezra Zurmann.

Finishing his supper dishes, (the sun had long since tucked its shining rays behind the pines on the hill), Ezra stood on the porch, his eyes on the road. Save for the lone cry of a screech owl in the woods, all was silent and still; nothing else was heard . . . no sound of a car's motor in the distance; nothing.

"Perhaps tomorrow," he exclaimed patiently, triumphantly and expectantly as he turned and walked into the house to his favorite chair by the fire.

Half-dozing and nodding, he sat up with a start, his ears attuned to a distant sound . . . a familiar sound.

A car door banged; Ezra, dizzy with excitement and eager anticipation, stumbled toward the door, his heart hammering in his chest. Throwing the door open wide, he exclaimed joyously, "Welcome home, Son. Welcome! I was expecting you..."

Overcome by the change in his father, Richard's eyes grew wide with amazement and awe. He stood as one in shock; then, rushing forward, he fell on his father's neck and wept.

The moon rose high over the pines; it rode lazily in the sky, higher, farther and farther into the west; still the pair talked . . . apologized, begged forgiveness, and wept and cried.

"And now, dear boy," Ezra said, getting to his feet as the sun peeked through the curtained kitchen windows, "it is time to celebrate. The wise man, Solomon, declared there was "a time to weep, and a time to laugh;" my days of longing and weeping for you are over. We have been reconciled, both to God and to each other; now, my dear Richard, it is a time to give thanks. Your bed is ready for you; go and rest while I do the barn chores. Today is our special day of thanksgiving . . . the turkey's ready for stuffing and roasting and the cranberries wait in the refrigerator. Go, my son, and rest."

"Never, Father! You rest; I'll take care of the morning chores." And Richard, tall, broad-shouldered man that he was, whipped a pair of overalls out of his partially unpacked suitcase and put them on.

In a quivering voice, Ezra said softly, "We'll go together, Son."

Tears danced in Richard's eyes. "Like we used to do," he said hoarsely in a broken half-whisper.

"Yes, Son. Yes!" Ezra exclaimed, feeling all soft and mellow on the inside.

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THE END