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IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS
By Mrs. Paul E. King
(Part 1)

Jonas Crestwood sauntered down the woodland trail on the late Autumn day, unmindful of where he was going: he had to walk, he felt. The air was just the cool side of gentle and the oaks still held on tenaciously to the last of their russet leaves. His mind was set in full motion of memories past; days of such painfully sweet and poignant nostalgia as to evoke sigh

after heavy sigh from him. Tears fell heedlessly and copiously. He felt neither shame nor humiliation over their ceaseless run down his bronzed, copper-tan cheeks; none whatever; only a great empty void that neither days nor weeks were able to erase or take away.

He'd walked down many a woodland trail with his son: Todd had loved the walks as much as he. They had walked through mild autumns of brilliant color as well as deep, cold winters with hard-glinting snows, and springs as fair and gentle and sweet and beautiful as any he had ever seen. What pricelessly treasured times the two of them had shared and enjoyed, he mused now in painful silence. He always considered their time together as time well-spent and most profitable, for who but a father could help mold the life of his son and bend the twig toward spiritual things and God!

He had taken Todd into the woods with him since he was a mere toddler, showing him where rabbits liked to hide and where the squirrels built their nests high in the trees. They had listened in silence to the song of the birds, the call of the whippoorwill and the whistling of the partridge and, always, Jonas told his son that God had created each and every thing they had seen and heard and that it was created for man to enjoy and, in some cases, to be used for food. Their fellowship together had been indescribably wonderful and close.

Todd had listened like a wise old owl and never a day ended without his childish lips lisping a deep, heart-felt thanks to God for the beauties which his eyes had beheld and his ears had heard. He grew up being thankful, and with a heart desiring above all else to please the God whom he had come to know and love as a little boy in saving grace and sanctifying power.

Jonas recalled now how overjoyed and full and thankful his heart was the night Todd came home from a revival meeting with the news that he felt God wanted him to use his voice as a singer for Him in revival meetings and camps and street meetings. Or anywhere -- missions, prisons, jails -- wherever the doors opened. He had been so excited and he had broken the news to his mother and him -- Jonas -- as soon as he got home from the meeting. Jonas remembered how he had heard Todd's knock on their bedroom door and he had bade him to enter. Todd sat on the edge of the bed and recounted the mighty movings of the Spirit upon the night's meeting and then he joyously proclaimed his call from God, to sing for His glory.

For three years, things went well with their son. He was used of God to influence the lives of many young people as well as older ones, and lead them to Jesus in saving grace and sanctifying power. It was when he joined up with a singing group that Jonas noticed the subtle changes in Todd. Not that there was anything wrong in singing with others; not at all. But the three young men with whom he traveled now were not deeply spiritual. Marvelous voices, yes. Beautiful harmony--indeed. Religious, yes. But shallow and light.

Jonas heaved a heavy sigh. Above all else, he and his wife wanted their son to be spiritual and to remain Spirit-filled, keeping self in the background while the Holy Spirit manifested Christ in and through Todd. True, their son's travels had widened and broadened his field of ministry considerably -- almost unbelievably -- once he became part of the singing group. In fact, they were so much in demand that Todd was seldom ever home.

It was while the group was singing in a four month engagement abroad that Todd gave them the news that shook them most of all. Jonas and Naomi, Todd's mother, had read and re-read the letter through at least half a dozen times and each time the news was re-read it seemed harder to believe.

"I have had a job offer," Todd had written, "with a big music company over here and I have consented to take it. The salary is far above anything I have been offered at home, and I'm confident that I'll thoroughly enjoy what I am to do. Now don't worry about me; after all, I'm almost twenty-five years old and I'm able to take care of myself and of my own affairs. This is not a religious music company, as I know you would much have preferred that it be--and so would I have preferred. But it's an old and well-established company dealing, mainly, in music of the past. So I have signed on with them, and it.

"And, oh yes, there is another good reason for me to work over here: I have found the young lady whom I hope to someday convince that the name of Mrs. Todd Crestwood is of far greater beauty and meaning than is the name of Laurel Evonne Haggert, even if she is the daughter of the president of the music company for which I shall be working.

"Please don't feel badly about this, for I love each of you with a true son's love. Just pray for me, Please. For me, and for Laurel Evonne. I know

my spiritual life is not where or what or how it one time was. This, I am sorry to say. But I have always been open and candid and honest with you, my dear parents, and I mean to remain this way so long as I live. So I ask an interest in your fervent prayers.

"I shall be in touch with you from time to time. I love you. Todd."

In recalling the letter and remembering its contents, Jonas felt a slight tremble shake his body. Never had they so much as thought of their son caring for anyone besides MerriLee Rankin. Not that they were doing the choosing; not at all. But for so long as Todd was at home and from the time he began noticing girls as more than just girls, he seemed to have eyes for no one but MerriLee. And MerriLee seemed to share the same kind of feeling. Only after Todd had been gone more than two years and seemed to forget that there ever was a MerriLee Rankin did MerriLee begin to date other boys. And, a year later, she married one of Todd's best friends. Together, they were a dynamic twosome whose unselfish labors for the Lord produced a radical spiritual change in the church as their new converts set the congregation afire with their dramatically changed hearts and lives and their holy zeal and fervor for the Lord.

Jonas remembered the feeling of loss which he and Naomi battled over after MerriLee's marriage. Still, one could not choose the mate for one's offspring. And all four of their other children had done well in allowing God to lead them to their life's companion, hadn't they?

He bowed his head and removed his hunting cap in reverence to God as he thanked the Lord for His guidance in the lives of the four whose mates could not have been more wonderful and good and kind. Each was par excellence as a husband or wife, as the case may be, and each made a wonderful parent, fearing God and abiding by His commands and holding to His precepts joyously. If only he could have the same assurance where Todd was concerned. Todd had come along late in their lives and, always, he had been so kind and considerate.

Jonas found the copse of pin oaks which to both Todd and himself always seemed to have the most magnificent of all fall colors in their leaves, then he entered the copse with the same reverence he gave to the church. The place had become a sort of outdoor chapel to him: Daily, he entered its sacred ground to wrestle and plead and intercede for Todd. Today,

especially, he needed to get that certain new grip on God; that ". . . still he holdeth fast . . ." grip of which he already had.

Life could pass some rather fast pitches and curves one's way, he realized, and this most recent letter of Todd's was indeed that. Not that they weren't thrilled about Todd's homecoming for Thanksgiving and even excited about the up-coming event; they were. Oh, how they were! But their son wasn't coming home alone: He was bringing home a new bride! A young woman whom they had never seen or met.

Wordly-wise, no doubt, he thought sadly and silently, and with no knowledge whatever of God and the things pertaining to God. Oh, how could their son have so defected from all that he was taught -- and knew -- from the Holy Word! It all seemed night marishly unreal. They had seen it happen in the homes of several of their closest friends, but they had never once thought that it would happen in their home -- and to their Todd! It seemed incredulous. This son, whose very soul seemed to desire nothing greater nor less than to constantly stay close to God and have His moment by moment favor and approval.

Jonas dropped to the damply-cold earth and buried his face in the palms of his hands, a heavy groan and moan escaping his body. Where had he failed in his rearing and upbringing of this last, late-to-arrive child of his? he wondered tearfully. If he knew his heart--and he was sure he did -- he had brought Todd up as carefully and prayerfully as he had brought up the other four of their offspring. If anything, he knew he had spent more hours with Todd than he had ever spent with any of their earlier-to-arrive children. For one thing, he had had more time to do things with Todd since, by then, the four other children were pretty well grown and were earning money of their own and were not so dependent upon him anymore.

For a long while Jonas prostrated himself on the earth, thinking, thinking, questioning himself and wondering just where he had failed. If Naomi were here she would chide him for his deep and great inner search as to the where and the how he had failed, he knew. Repeatedly, she had tried to console him. "God knows we made no difference in our children," she had told him on more than one occasion. Each was reared in the same godly manner, honey, and we must trust the Lord to keep Todd from evil and allow Him to work out His purpose and plan for the boy's life. You haven't failed as

a God-fearing father. Not at all. Please turn Todd over completely to God and then rest in Him."

Jonas groaned aloud. He wept as his wife's kind words did one replay after another on his brain. If only he could take Naomi's advice and follow her instructions; but it wasn't an easy thing for him to do. Day after day he battled and wrestled with the Lord in prayer, pleading for Todd's restoration and entire sanctification and asking the Lord to show him where he had failed as a father, and day after day he became more baffled and confused as nothing was revealed to him as to his failure. Nothing.

"I feel you're grieving the Holy Spirit," Naomi had told him gently and kindly one day after a lengthy struggle in prayer over where he had failed. "We are admonished to be careful -- or anxious -- for nothing, but to give thanks in everything, my dear.

"Please turn this over to God and never mention it again to Him. Trust Him to care for our son and to bring him back into the fold. I came to the place where I realized I was making myself sick with worry, and I knew this was not pleasing to God, because worry is not trusting. When one trusts, he doesn't worry: when one worries, like I was doing, he doesn't trust. That's when I turned it all over to the Lord -- every single thing where Todd was concerned -- and I've had perfect inner peace ever since. My faith in God is an unwavering faith, Jonas: what He has promised, He will do."

In agony of soul, Jonas raised his body from the ground and, reaching long arms heavenward, he cried out in anguish, "O God, I'm sorry I've grieved so long over this and fretted my soul with this needless burden. Forgive me for not trusting You more fully. Help me, here and now, like Naomi, to give you this troublesome burden and never again to give it entry into my heart. From this moment on, Todd is completely and entirely in Your hands. I remove my hands and transfer him into Yours. Totally. In Jesus' name. . . ."

In an instant, peace and joy and rest were flooding and filling the man's soul. He stood to his feet and, looking heavenward, praise after praise flowed from his lips. Todd was in God's hands!

The thought was pure bliss. Another season of praise ascended upward. Jonas was beside himself with joy.

(Part 2)

After turning Todd over completely to God, Jonas Crestwood experienced a joy and an inner calm like he hadn't felt or enjoyed in a long time. How utterly needless and futile was all his previous worry, he realized with keen spiritual awareness. And so displeasing to his Heavenly Father, too.

The lessons one learned in God's school were lessons not soon forgotten, he knew now. He had been in the school, and while he may have been a slow learner he felt he had learned invaluable spiritual lessons for having been there for all those dark, lonely, hard and difficult and disappointing months. Some lessons were best learned by way of experience, he realized now; they were lessons that tended to make problems into stepping stones leading toward heaven.

For a truth, he could now testify that all the long months of disappointment and acute hurt and grief and pain had brought him into a relationship with Christ such as he had never known or experienced before. No longer was he anxious over their last child and youngest son, but he had a faith in God that was both stable and unshakable. Instead of worry, he had a song of triumph and of victory, and all because of implicit trust and faith in the Christ of Calvary. Oh, it was bliss. And glory.

The first few flakes of snow fell one day in mid-November and Jonas, like a little boy again, hurried inside to share the excitement of the advent with his wife.

"It's snowing!" he declared, and he spun Naomi around inside he kitchen before kissing her on the nose and setting her free of his bear hug. "Just think of it, honey, snow for Thanksgiving. I feel young and giddy and boyish again, in spite of my hoary head."

Naomi laughed, saying, "That makes two of us, my dear. Just because we're growing old doesn't mean we can't feel young and still be young in heart. Oh, Jonas, I'm as excited as I can be: Todd, home again! And with a brand new bride! I love that girl even though I haven't met her. What a Thanksgiving Day we're going to have! With the Lord Jesus Christ as the

Head and the Heart and the Center of our home, we're going to have a wonderful day."

"I agree, my dear. All things are beautiful when Christ is in control. He makes beauty for ashes and He puts roses where thorns and thistles and briars grew. Oh, I was so slow at seeing this, and learning my lesson. But my loving Teacher was most patient and kind and so long-suffering with me. His teaching methods are so thorough; so never-forgotten. Mine are stamped forever on the tables of my heart and in the memory tapes of my mind. I love Him so!"

"Jonas, look!" Naomi called, as she glanced through the kitchen window. "A car just pulled up into our driveway. I wonder whom it . . . why . . . why . . . Todd! Todd! It's Todd, honey. He's here! He's here!" and Naomi was out of the door and rushing madly toward the car, crying joyously, "Todd! Todd! Oh, you're here! You're here!"

Mother and son met in the driveway and were soon locked in each other's arms. Then Todd spied Jonas. With a glad cry, he exclaimed, "Dad! O Dad, I love you! You and Mother are the greatest parents in all the world."

For a long time the trio stood locked in each other's arms, weeping soft, gentle tears of joy and gladness.

"Come, Todd finally said, "meet my lovely wife." And he led them to the car.

"Laurel Evonne," he said proudly, as he opened the car door and helped the petite, shy looking and attractive young woman from the car, "meet my parents, Mom and Dad Crestwood. Dad and Mother, meet my wonderful wife, Laurel Evonne. We couldn't wait till Thanksgiving Day so decided to come early. We got in the airport last night and rented a car first thing this morning. Oh but it's good to be home again and to see you both."

Suddenly, everybody seemed to be talking at once. And laughing. And crying--for joy. And in that wonderful moment of happy excitement, Laurel Evonne knew she was accepted as one of the family. What's more, she knew she was loved. A warmth like she had never known before seemed to enfold her completely. She loved Todd's parents. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Your room is ready," Mrs. Crestwood said, still laughing, and feeling like a teenager instead of a grandmother five times over. Linking arms with Laurel, she said, "Come, my dear daughter, we'll go inside where it's warm. Our men can bring the luggage in. Oh but I'm glad you're here."

"It is I who am glad to be here," Laurel said in her softly-quiet tone of voice. "I could scarcely wait to meet you. I knew I would love you both, because I love Todd so deeply. Oh, Mother Crestwood, you folks have given me the finest, noblest, most wonderful man the world has ever had. Todd is a gentleman through and through."

"He was always a fine and good son, Laurel. We love him very deeply. Now give me your coat, please," Naomi said, as they entered the warm kitchen. "And make yourself at home, my dear. This is now your home, just like it has always been Todd's. Welcome to your new and loving family."

Tears were sliding down Laurel's cheeks. "Thank you, thank you," she remarked softly. "Todd kept telling me how perfectly wonderful his parents are and now I am seeing it for myself. I can scarcely believe this is actually real and that all of these beautiful things are happening to me. I have never felt so welcome before."

"Heave ho!" Todd cried, opening the kitchen door and sliding the luggage pieces gently across the shiny clean, shiny-bright shiny-vinyl floor. Seeing Laurel wiping tears from her cheeks, he asked, "And why is my lovely bride crying, may I ask? I want you to be happy, honey."

"Oh, but I am happy, Todd: that's why I'm crying. I can't believe this is happening to me. It's like something I used to read when I was a little girl. I feel I've come home."

"You have, Laurel my dear. You have And now, Mother dear, where shall I go with these things?"

"You may take your pick, Todd. Except for your father's and my bedroom, the other rooms are all ready for occupancy. Perhaps Laurel may enjoy picking out the room. The guest room is by far the largest of all; but she may prefer one of the other rooms. Take her up, son, and show her around," Mrs. Crestwood said kindly. "This is her home now."

Like a couple of children, the two mounted the open stairway, laughing and holding hands.

The guest room was chosen, quickly. Laurel fell in love with the view of the countryside from its sparkling-clean windows and its gaily-cushioned window seats, Todd informed his parents as he carried the luggage pieces up the familiar steps, whistling like he used to do when he was a boy.

A short while later, Todd called his parents. "Can you come up, please?" he asked. "Laurel and I need to know something before we finish unpacking."

"Of course, Son," Mr. Crestwood answered, reaching for Naomi's hand and going up the stairs side by side.

Todd looked at Laurel and smiled. "I suppose it's only proper that I, being the son, should do the asking," he said, squeezing his wife's hand.

"Please, yes," Laurel said softly and shyly.

"We have so much to tell you," Todd said with a happy sigh, "so maybe you'd better sit down. It may become rather lengthy, and neither Laurel nor I want to tire you."

"Thanks, Son. These rocking chairs always were comfortable," Jonas Crestwood declared as he sat down.

"I suppose you were wondering why we have so many pieces of luggage," Todd said, smiling. "Laurel and I were wondering if we could stay here until we find something for rent to move into later on, God willing."

"You . . . you . . . mean . . . that . . . you're home to . . . stay?" Mrs. Crestwood asked, almost breathless with excitement.

"That's right, Mother. And until I can find a decent place to rent, we'll need a place to stay. . . ."

"Oh, Todd. Todd!" the parents exclaimed tearfully. "That's wonderful news. You have made us so happy."

"This house is big enough for you and Laurel to stay as long as you care to, rent free," Mr. Crestwood said in a hoarse-sounding voice. "Unpack all your luggage pieces, dear children, and welcome home."

By now, everyone was crying and hugging each other.

"Thanks, Dad and Mother, thanks much," Todd said, in a voice quivering with emotion. "I know I caused you many tears," he went on, "but I never got away from your wonderful training. It kept me from doing many things that would have been wicked and sinful. And, always, the gentle Holy Spirit was there to plead with me and to woo me. I knew my wonderful father and mother were doing a lot of earnest praying and pleading with God for me and for my soul.

"It was Laurel who helped me to come back into my Heavenly Father's sheepfold," Todd said with a break in his voice.

"Laurel!" Mrs. Crestwood said the name with reverence.

"I talked so much about both of you, and how you led each of us children to the Lord when we were young and tender-hearted, until Laurel begged me to take her to church. At first I was hesitant and reluctant, knowing that I'd have to repent and turn about-face and come back to the Lord, to whom I had done such despite by turning traitor and forsaking the One who was once more than life to me.

"Laurel insisted that, if we were going to marry, I take her to church and that we go consistently and regularly. She felt totally deprived for having never gone to church. Her parents are socially prominent people but this never satisfied Laurel's heart nor fulfilled her desires, she informed me.

"At her insistence, and out of love for her, I took her, and soon it became a regular habit with us. I'd pick her up at her folks' home on Sunday morning, Sunday evening and for the mid-week prayer meeting service, and take her home after the services were over. We began reading the Bible together, too, and this is when my dear little Laurel saw her need of a Savior and became gloriously converted.

"It was easy for me to repent and confess my backslidden condition to God, and I, too, was wondrously restored and converted and sanctified wholly shortly thereafter, as Laurel was also.

"Her parents took issue against us, telling Laurel she'd either go their way or she'd get out, since she was bringing a stigma upon them. She chose to follow Jesus. We were married, and we're ready now to work for the Lord in a church where we'll get our souls stirred and fed.

"The Lord has provided work for me in a Christian bookstore not far from here. I contacted an old friend of mine, after we were saved; he works in this bookstore, and he told me to come back home; he needs an assistant manager. The job is mine. God is so good. He has led us every step of the way."

Jonas and Naomi Crestwood listened in awe and amazement, saying a reverent, "Praise the Lord," every now and then.

Getting to his feet, Jonas Crestwood said brokenly, "Welcome home, children. Welcome home. Unpack, and settle in. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have an important mission to fulfill. My heart is full; I feel like I'll burst if I don't carry it out," and quickly he left the room.

The climb up the hill and into the woods was made in record time. The snow was falling faster and heavier now; the ground was turning white. The pin oaks stood starkly naked against the background of white, now forming into a heavy carpet on the ground. Jonas found his kneeling spot and had just dropped down on to it when a voice reached his ears.

"Dad, please, may I join you? It's been so long since we prayed together like this up here. . . ."

"Not at all, Son. Not at all. In fact, I'm overjoyed to have you. My happy heart feels like it's going to burst, though, unless I get this prayer of thanksgiving off my soul and aired to my kind Heavenly Father. His are past finding out."

The copse of pin oaks became a cathedral of praise and glory as the voice of father and son blended harmoniously in psalms of thanksgiving and praise.