

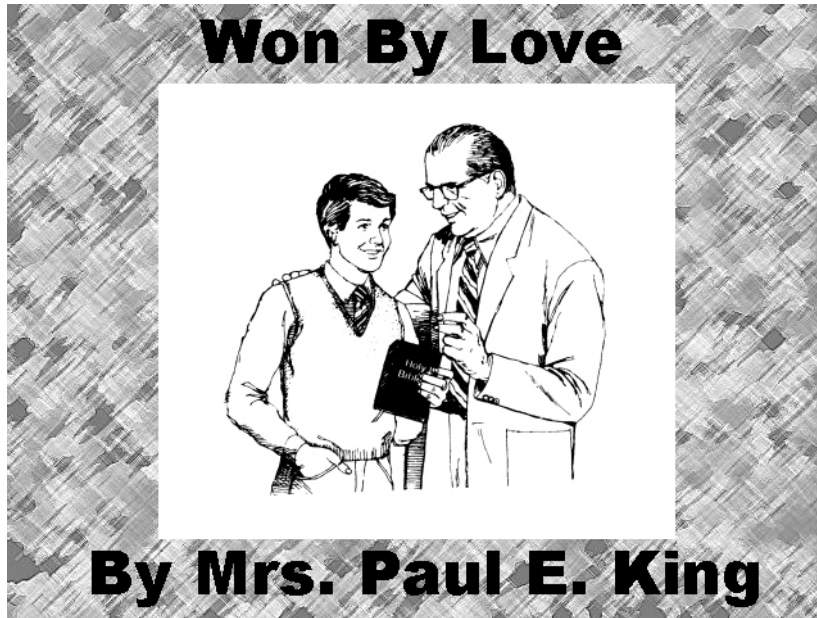
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
October 26, 1997



WON BY LOVE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Chad dawdled all the way home, dreading to enter the door, even. Arguments and fussing were the order of the family's days -- and nights -- it seemed. His father and mother were at odds with each other all the time: his fears of their divorcing and going separate ways haunted him and his three other siblings constantly.

Dragging his shoes through the deep carpet of fallen leaves and "ploughing" leaf furrows with his feet, he sighed sadly. The familiar hard and big lump was not only in the pit of his stomach anymore, it seemed now to have risen into his throat and to have lodged there with his daily home-from-school approaches, he noticed. Swallowing did nothing to dislodge the troublesome thing; it remained stubbornly "put."

It was hard enough on him, the bickering, fussing, arguing and nit-picking of his parents, but he felt sorriest of all for nine-year-old Lanae and twelve-year-old Amber. His fourteen-year-old brother Ronald seemed able to tune out much of the fussing, in spite of his concern of a break-up between his parents. Chad wished that he were able to say as much for himself and do as well as his brother in the tuning out bit. But he couldn't do it. No matter how hard he tried, it didn't work for him; it only increased the size of the knot in his stomach and in his throat, it seemed. He had a sick kind of feeling always, anymore, in the pit of his stomach.

He hadn't seen Mr. Simmons until the man's voice alerted him to the fact that he was nearly home. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons lived three houses down the street from Chad and his folks.

"A penny for your thoughts, Chad, my boy," Mr. Simmons said brightly as he drew a shiny-bright penny from his pocket and held it before Chad.

Startled, Chad looked up from the newly ploughed leaf furrow into the eyes of his kind neighbor. "I . . . I . . . well. . . ." What could he say? he wondered. He wouldn't lie. No way. Neither could he tell Mr. Simmons about his parents. "I . . . I" He stuttered and faltered.

Laughing pleasantly, Mr. Simmons said quickly, "Don't worry, Chad, I was only teasing. I didn't mean to 'pick' your brain, so speaking. Here's the penny, if you want it."

"Thanks, Mr. Simmons; you keep the penny. It won't cost you anything for my thoughts: they aren't worth even a shiny new penny."

"What I really want, Chad," Mr. Simmons said, "is for you to come inside the house while I show you something and see what you think about it."

"Show me something, Mr. Simmons? Me?" Chad questioned in disbelief.

"Yes, you, Chad. Ellen and I've been discussing this for quite some time, and we feel that it's time now for us to do something about it."

Chad followed the neighbor inside the house. The fragrance of freshly-baked bread perfumed the place in a delicious way and the feeling of peace and tranquillity and love felt like a warm and comforting blanket around his love-starved being. Why couldn't his home be like this? he wondered with pain in his heart. Why?

"Chad, it's good to see you again," Mrs. Simmons declared with a smile. "You look like the world caved in on you. Here, have a slice or two of this freshly baked bread and a glass of milk. Something about good, homemade bread and milk has a way of lifting one's spirit when he's down."

She set a plate of still-warm bread down on the table and motioned for him to sit. Then she poured milk from a pitcher into a tall glass and placed it in front of him, saying, "I mustn't forget the butter and the peach jam. Dear me, I almost forgot."

"I'll have a slice too," Mr. Simmons said, as he seated himself at the table near Chad and bowed his head in prayer. "We'll feel more like taking care of the business with some fresh bread and milk in our stomach, now isn't that so, Chad?"

In spite of the weight on his heart, Chad smiled. "I suppose you're right, Mr. Simmons," he answered. "Only I don't have any business matters to take care of."

"Well, now, that's right, my boy; you don't. But Ellen and I do, and we'll soon tell you about it. She's quite a little baker, isn't she, Chad? No one can bake bread like my Ellen."

Chad nodded his head in agreement. The bread was wonderful. So was the jam. But the atmosphere of the home was the most wonderful thing of all.

"Everything's so delicious," Chad said as he took the last bite of bread and finished the milk in his glass. "It's kind of you to have had me in. Thank you. Mrs. Simmons, you are the best baker."

"Now we're ready for that business matter, Chad. We'll go into my office. Come, my boy."

Once inside, Chad was taken to a cabinet along one of the walls. Opening the door, Mr. Simmons lifted a case from within and handed it to the young man, saying, "Ellen and I want you to have this. Open it, please."

Carefully, Chad opened the case. He gasped when he saw the saxophone. "Th . . . thank you, Mr. Simmons. But I . . . I've never played on a saxophone. I've never played anything. And I . . . I . . . well. . . . "

"Do you like it, my boy?"

"It's beautiful. But what good will it be to someone who knows nothing about it, and who isn't able to pay for lessons so he can learn to play it? You are most kind, Mr. Simmons, and I feel honored that you have wanted me to have it, but I am sure that you could sell it. It's beautiful."

"Chad, I don't want to sell it. I could have sold it many times. But I held on to it. The Lord knew why I did. It's your instrument, my boy: a love gift from your neighbors. What's more, I want to teach you how to play it. Free of any charge. I used to give music lessons; taught many a young person how to play the wind instruments."

Chad was speechless. He realized the saxophone had great worth and could have brought its owner a sizable sum of money, had it been sold. But instead, it was his! A gift. A gift!

"I . . . I don't know what to say, nor how to express my thanks and appreciation, Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. Thank you. I hope I won't disappoint you as a student."

Slapping Chad on the back, Mr. Simmons declared congenially, "You won't disappoint me; I know you won't. I have confidence in you. Now, if you can comply, we'll have one lesson per week beginning at four tomorrow afternoon, God willing."

"That will be every Tuesday afternoon, right, Mr. Simmons?"

"Right, God willing. I'll acquaint you with your instrument first."

"Thanks, again." Confidence! Mr. Simmons had confidence in him.

Chad was shaking when he left the house. He didn't know if it was fear, excitement or nervousness. Maybe it was a combination and mixture of all three, he thought, as he entered the kitchen door to the usual scoldings of his mother.

He hurried to the bedroom he shared with his brother and set the history book on the dresser, saying, "You won't believe this, Ronald, but it's a fact: the neighbors just gave me a saxophone. And Mr. Simmons himself is going to teach me how to play it."

Ronald whistled a long whistle. Then he said, "We sure could use some music around here. Maybe you can teach me how to play it after you learn, Chad. Where is it?"

"At Mr. Simmons' house. Tomorrow at four I'll get lesson number one; a get-acquainted sort of thing, Mr. Simmons told me. Wait till you see it, Ron; it's a beauty!"

"I'm sure it is. Do the girls know about it?"

"Not yet. They'll find out when I bring it home and begin making all kinds of weird sounds and noises on it," Chad said, smiling at his brother.

Ronald burst out laughing. It sounded so good to hear laughter, Chad thought, instead of the bickering and fussing and scolding.

"Let's pretend we're a happy family," Ronald said. "I surprised myself by laughing. But Chad, I like it far better than . . . than the other. Let's do something to bring laughter into our sisters' and our lives. We don't need to become like . . . well, you know who. That laugh did something to me: it made me feel good all over."

"I know; and, Ron, we must do it often: laugh, I mean. The Simmonses seem so happy and loving. I'm going to watch carefully, when I go there for my lessons, and listen, too, and see if I can learn their secret."

"Do it, Chad. Please, do it."

The lessons became the highlight of Chad's week. More than once, he found an open Bible on Mr. Simmons' desk when he entered the office. Each week was a week of encouragement: Mr. Simmons found something about which to compliment and praise his student. Always, there was a note of encouragement regarding Chad's progress on the instrument, as well as other things--what a fine, respectful young man he was; how praiseworthy it was that he took such excellent care of his younger brother and two sisters.

Chad could scarcely wait from one week to the next to get to his patient and kind teacher. His heart warmed strangely and marvelously toward Mr. Simmons and everything he said or told him to do. It was a delight to practice on the saxophone and please the gentle mannered neighbor man and his loving wife, whose praise was profuse and sincere over the beautiful music he was making on the instrument, and his care and handling of the same.

"The Lord has answered our prayers," Mr. Simmons told Chad after a lesson some weeks later. "He has helped you to learn to play. He will continue to help you, Chad, as you practice. Do you suppose Ronald would enjoy playing?"

"I'm teaching him what I learn, Mr. Simmons. You should hear him. We take turns at practicing."

Mr. Simmons' face beamed. "You mean it, Chad; that you're teaching Ronald?"

"Not like you. But I'm doing my best, and Ron's playing the notes the same as I. We love it, Mr. Simmons. And even our sisters love to hear us. They're trying to learn too."

"Tell you what, Chad, you bring Ronald and those girls over and we'll see about getting them started too. Ellen and I have a piano and an organ that are in desperate need of having small hands and fingers to move over

those keys again. Too, I have a French horn, a trumpet and another saxophone that need to be making music. Ellen and I miss the music. . . ."

Chad was overwhelmed. Tears sprang to his eyes. On an impulse, he threw his arms around Mr. Simmons, exclaiming, "You are so good to me! To us. Why couldn't we have had a father and a mother like you and Ellen, Mr. Simmons? I love you! You have given me love when I thought I would never know the meaning of love. Why have you done it, Mr. Simmons? Why? I've watched you with an eagle eye, and I've learned that you folks love and worship the Lord. Would . . . would He be interested in me? In us? Would He? I told Ronald and the girls about the Bible, and some of the verses I read and memorized when you walked out of the room; told them about seeing you pray and listening to every word you said before you started my weekly lessons. Tell me more; will you, please?" Tears flowed copiously down Chad's face.

In a hoarse sounding voice which nearly choked with emotion, Mr. Simmons said, "Ellen and I have been praying and fasting and waiting for this hour, dear boy. I've wanted to tell you about Jesus and His great love for you; wanted to invite you all to attend church with us. But always, the gentle Spirit of God seemed to whisper that He would let me know when the right moment had come for me to do so. Now is the time, Chad. This is the hour. Sit down, dear boy, while I tell you the old, old story of Jesus and His love. . . ."

What a story, the story of redemption! What a love, the love of God who sent His only begotten Son into the world to die for sinners: yes, sinners like Chad and Ronald, Lance and Amber.

The day marked a year of new beginnings for the four -- Chad was gloriously converted and, like Andrew in St. John 1:41-42 who "first findeth his own brother, Simon . . . and brought him to Jesus," so Chad brought Ronald and his sisters to Christ. What a difference since God moved in. Now there were melodies of praise to God by four -- not in hearts alone, but in the church with the Simmonses.

Won by love, and gentleness and kindness! God give us more like John and Ellen Simmons, whose great hearts of overflowing love and compassion reach out to the hurt and the hurting and bring them in.