

The Letter

It was the night before Christmas and Michael sat alone in the glow of a fully decorated 8-foot blue spruce. It was late and everyone had gone to bed. He held in his hand a letter. A letter stained with dirt, sweat and blood. A letter he had read many, many times before. The same letter that had become a tradition to read aloud to his family each Christmas morning.

As he began to read the words to himself from the treasured parchment, in his mind he was taken to a battlefield. The sound of artillery crashed through the night's silence. Shell flashes pierced the darkness to give sporadic glimpses of fear, death and chaos... and a young soldier in a foxhole penning a letter to his son...

"My beloved Michael,

I want to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry because a boy shouldn't lose his daddy, especially on Christmas. You were so small the last time I saw you that I'm sure you won't remember me. Someday you will ask your mommy about me, and she will probably tell you I was a hero and show you some medals and my picture. I hope this letter survives, so some day, when you are older, your mother will give it to you. I don't know if I am a hero. I'm not sure I even understand what a hero is. There are a lot of things I don't understand, but I want you to know that I love you.

As I look back on my life there are things I regret and things I wish I could have done. I wish I could hold you one more time. I think of all the things that seemed so important. In grade school it was baseball. In high school it was football. After that it was financial success. I remember the Mustang I was saving up for, but never could afford, but that's not important. The football scholarship that fell through which I thought had destroyed my life is less than a shadow. The disappointment I felt the summer my dad wouldn't let me join the rock band is but a vapor. I'm not sorry I missed seeing Elvis at the coliseum. I don't care who won the super bowl or that I wouldn't have been a millionaire by the time I was 25. I understand now, being the strongest, smartest or richest means nothing. I want you to know"

Michael looked up from the letter that ended so abruptly. He forced a slight smile amid the tears that streamed down his face. He gently laid the letter on the old family bible, raised his eyes and softly said "Thank you" and quietly went up the stairs to bed.

Everyone as usual was up early on Christmas morning. Their glowing faces were as shiny as the brightly wrapped packages under the tree. Michael's wife, two sons, his daughter-in-law and two grandchildren listened intently to each word as he now read the letter to them in a trembling voice.

When he finished reading the letter he laid it down and smiled. "That was a strange way to end a letter, but you see there was a reason for that," Michael confirmed. "I was never so scared in all my life. The enemy surrounded us, and we were out of ammunition, we hadn't eaten for days and we were weak from hiking the rugged terrain. All I knew to do was pray. I prayed for God to save me. I guess what they say is true. There are no atheists in foxholes. When I was sure there was no hope, that's when I wrote the letter. You see, Michael, my son, I thought I would never see you again and I wanted you to know how much I loved you.

As I was writing that letter, enemy soldiers came out of nowhere. They kept shooting for what seemed to be an eternity. I watched in horror as a teenage lad, tried to outrun a tank. As his young athletic body was being crushed and torn apart, he cried out with fear and pain just one word... Mother.

Then just as suddenly as the massacre began, total silence took over. The bullets, and screams of buddies ceased. By some miracle my life was spared. I lay silently in the foxhole covered with the blood of my friends. Friends I ate with, friends I laughed with, friends I fought alongside, friends I depended on.

An enemy soldier walked close to me, kicking the bodies of my fallen comrades. When his boot struck me, I didn't even flinch. I held my breath. The soldier stepped over me checking other bodies for any signs of life.

As I climbed from the foxhole, I realized that I was the only man left alive. I also realized the enemy thought I was dead. My life was spared because of the blood the other men had shed. I was saved by the blood.

Looking toward heaven, I noticed a star in the sky. It was shining so brightly, somehow it gave me hope. Then I remembered it was Christmas. I thought about the star that led the wise men to Jesus. I thought about the account of that first Christmas. I had heard it all my life, but now it was more than just a story. I reflected how the King of Kings and Lord of Lords humbled Himself and was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem. I never really understood that. I continued to consider, how Jesus lived a perfect life, how He went about doing good, yet He was crucified. It was like a thunderous voice from heaven spoke. 'Jesus really died for your sins.'

I fell to my knees. I realized, just as the blood of my fallen comrades saved my life, I was truly saved by the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. I realized His

blood paid the penalty for my sins. I asked Him to forgive me and to help me turn from my sins. At that moment, alone on the battlefield, I wasn't certain if I would live or die, but I knew I was bound for heaven. Again, I looked toward heaven and said 'Thank you Jesus. I was saved by the blood.'"

Michael picked up the letter. "Thanks to God's mercy and guidance, I caught up with another unit and instead of this letter being delivered to you by the chaplain, I have the honor and privilege of reading it to my beautiful family every year. I've just got to say it again. 'Thank you, Jesus. I was saved by the blood.'"

Each year in the Christmas season we are reminded of how Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His mother wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. When angels brought the good tidings of the birth of the Savior to shepherds, they hurried to see Him. Later wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. When Jesus grew to be a man He devoted His life to others. He was moved with compassion as He fed the hungry, healed the sick and loved the sinner. Despite doing only good and living a perfect life, He died on Mt. Calvary nailed to a cross. He had committed no sin, but rather the blood He shed was to pay the penalty for the sin of all mankind.

How wonderful it would be if this Christmas, we all, could say, "Thank you Jesus. I am saved by the blood."

Merry Christmas!