

## A CHRISTMAS STORY

A few years ago a young teen-age girl came to the conclusion that life wasn't worth living. To her the only solution was to take her own life. A week before Christmas she took an overdose of sleeping pills.

But let me tell you what lead to this senseless act.

Cathy's mother was an alcoholic and her father had deserted her and her mother when she was only three years old.

Because her father paid no child support, her mother had to work to support Cathy and herself and she had problems holding down a job because of her drinking problems. Because of that they never lived in nice places but moved from one low rent area to another. She wouldn't dare bring a friend home to her place because not only was she ashamed of where she lived, but also of her mother.

Cathy always felt like there was something missing in her life, but questioned whether it was just a matter of having different circumstances. She couldn't help but observe that some of the richest people in the world were also the most miserable. Famous people like Christina Onassis and Barbara Hutton had in her mind dispelled the idea that money brings happiness.

So what did bring happiness, she wondered. Did it come from having a relationship with another person? She couldn't help but be discouraged as she considered that prospect because of the fact that fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce. Also when she thought about all her friends whose parents were married, she saw nothing in their relationships that she envied. It seemed like most couples were tolerating each other rather than being in love with each other.

Then she thought about God. Although she wasn't a regular church-goer, she had visited quite a few churches with different friends; but she hadn't seen any joy in those places either. In fact she would find herself feeling somewhat depressed and bored, so she seriously doubted if what she was looking for was in a church.

Then one day while she and her friend were at the mall shopping a young woman in her early twenties approached them while they were sitting down to rest. The woman, who identified herself as Lynn, told them that she was there talking to people about how they could know they were going to go to heaven. Usually Cathy wouldn't have given someone

talking about that subject matter the time of day, but there was something different about this woman. She wasn't like the people she had met in church, she had something different about her that made Cathy think that perhaps this woman did have something real between herself and God so she told her that she was interested in hearing what she had to say.

Lynn explained to them that going to heaven was not a reward that they could earn by their good deeds but rather was a gift that Jesus paid for when He died on the cross. Since all the work was done by Him to get a person to heaven the only condition to receive the gift of eternal life was to believe in Christ to get them to heaven.

The concept that heaven was unearned and undeserved was completely new to Cathy. She certainly hadn't heard that message in any of the boring churches she had attended. In fact it seemed too good to be true so she decided to check it out in her own Bible when she got home. Lynn had given her a pamphlet with verses in it so Cathy looked to make sure they really were in the Bible and she wanted to read them in context. After about an hour of searching through her Bible she was convinced that what she had been told that afternoon was indeed true. The gift of God was eternal life and she had received this gift by believing in Jesus Christ. Boy, did she feel happy and relieved that heaven was her home.

But Cathy was about to go into the deepest depression she had ever experienced.

About a week later she answered the phone to a man's voice she didn't recognize. "Is this Cathy?" he inquired.

"Yes, do I know you?"

"Well," he said half laughing, "yes and no. You see, Cathy, I'm your father."

Cathy was in such a state of shock she couldn't even respond. She questioned whether this really could be her father or if this was someone playing some cruel joke on her. Her thoughts were interrupted by the man's asking if her mother was home.

Cathy dropped the phone and ran to her mother's bedroom. As usual she was lying on the bed drunk. Cathy in a frantic voice said, "Mom! Mom! There's some man on the phone who says he's my father!"

In slurred speech her mother said, "Is that so? Well let me see for myself."

Cathy after just a few minutes realized that the strange man was really her father and she couldn't believe the yearnings she felt in her heart. It was a longing that bordered on an ache within her soul. How she longed to be reunited with her long lost father.

After her mother had gotten off the phone, Cathy said in a pleading voice, "Mom, am I going to get to meet him?"

"If that's what you want."

After assuring her mother that that was what she wanted her mother called him back at the number he had given her and invited him for dinner the week before Christmas. When she got off the phone, Cathy was overcome with joy and rushed to hug her mother.

Her mother who was not the type to give or receive affection quickly brushed her aside and said, "Well I hope you like him."

Cathy had no doubt in her mind that she was going to like him. And that night she had trouble going to sleep because she was imagining what it was going to be like when they finally would be reunited. She was wondering what he would think of her. Oh, how she hoped he would like her.

So much of how Cathy lived her life was influenced by what she thought of her father. She imagined him as someone totally different than her mother, someone who was a giving and caring person.

And Cathy tried to emulate the qualities that she believed her father had. Even though she had always had very little in the way of material goods she would always be willing to share what she had with those less fortunate than herself. And not only did she give away things but she gave of herself. One of the things she would do is make regular visits to the nursing home nearby so she could cheer many of the lonely and suffering people there.

As she lay in bed that night, she wondered if she should do something special for her father especially since his coming was so close to Christmas. Then she came up with the idea of getting a part-time job so she could buy him an extra special gift for Christmas. She got a job as a waitress at a diner close by and even though her feet would ache at night, she knew it was worth it all to get something for her father.

By the end of a month's time she had saved over two hundred and fifty dollars and after buying her mother some perfume for thirty-five dollars, she spent the rest on a watch for her father. It was a beautiful watch and she knew he would be pleased with it.

The night she had been hoping and praying for finally came and Cathy was at first taken back by her father's gruff appearance. She had a much more refined picture of her father. But what did looks matter? This was her flesh and bones.

She was so excited about giving him his gift that she couldn't even wait till after dinner. As soon as he had sat down in

the living room she ran to her bedroom to get the package she had so lovingly wrapped.

When he saw what she had given him it was obvious by his expression that he was very pleased. When he gave her a kiss to thank her she couldn't help but smell the unpleasant scent that a person exudes that smokes and drinks too much. But so what, this was her father.

When they sat down to eat dinner Cathy couldn't hide her curiosity about what her father had been doing all those years since she was three.

Before he answered her, he shoved a large portion of beef stew into his mouth and then proceeded to talk with his mouth full.

As he sopped up the gravy with his bread, Cathy wasn't sure if it was the story she was hearing or his uncouth manners that was making her sick to her stomach. But she felt nauseous as she listened to the tale of a man who had been in and out of prison. Cathy realized that her mother hadn't told her to spare her pain.

After explaining that the last time he was in prison was because he had stolen some funds from the company he had worked for, he said, "You know, I had no choice but to take that money. They weren't paying me enough and they refused to give me a raise. If they had just been fair with me I wouldn't have had to spend three years of my life behind bars.

"You wouldn't believe how horrible prison is," he said with a distressed look on his face. "It's terrible having to be in the same place with people who really are criminals."

Cathy couldn't believe that her father looked at himself as an innocent victim of circumstances and that he wasn't accepting responsibility for his fate. And on top of all that he had an air of superiority. He thought he was better than the rest of the prison inmates.

Then after telling his story he inquired about Cathy's life. After she had finished talking, he looked at Cathy's mother and said, "I can't believe how pretty Cathy is." And then he teasingly said, "Come on now, tell me the truth, am I really her father or did you take up with some good looking sailor?" Then he laughed loudly as though he had just said the funniest thing in the world.

Cathy felt like she could have broken down in tears on the spot. What she had dreamed about as being a joyous reunion was turning out to be a bitter disappointment. And she couldn't help but wonder why her father had shown up after all these years.

After dinner she got her answer. Her mother asked her to go to her room after she had gotten to say good-bye to her

father. Cathy went to her bedroom door and shut it but she didn't go in. She just wanted them to think she was in her bedroom. She very quietly walked back to where she would be unseen but within ear-shot and she heard her father ask her mother for money.

She heard her mother respond, "So that's the reason you got in touch, eh? I figured it wasn't to renew old ties."

What really hurt Cathy is that her father never responded. After her mother told him that she had no money to spare, he left. She wanted to run after her father and tell him that she hated him, hoping in some way to hurt him the way he had hurt her. She just couldn't let him walk out of her life this way.

She quickly snuck back to her room and climbed out the window. She saw the direction he was walking and followed, keeping a distance between herself and him so he wouldn't spot her. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to beat out of her chest.

He walked directly to the downtown area which was about five minutes from her place. She couldn't believe her eyes when he walked into a pawnshop. Her heart was breaking as she saw him hand the watch she had given him to the man who owned the pawnshop.

As she ran home she couldn't restrain the tears that fell like a torrential rain.

As she lay in bed that night weeping, she cried so hard that at times she had trouble breathing. Cathy had always held a low opinion of herself, but now her sense of self-worth had plummeted even lower. It was so low, in fact, that she saw absolutely no purpose for her existence. Her grief over her father was immeasurable and the only way she saw to stop the pain was to kill herself. She saw herself as a loser with two parents who were losers.

She went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and took the bottle of sleeping pills to her room. She emptied the entire contents in her hand and began taking them a few at a time swallowing them down with water. She decided to leave no suicide note because she thought it would add to her mother's pain. Then she lay down and went to sleep expecting to wake up in heaven.

When she opened her eyes she vaguely recognized the woman who stood before her who was dressed in white. Then all of the sudden she realized that it was Lynn, the young woman who had talked to her and her friend about God that one day at the shopping center.

"Lynn," she said in a sleepy voice, "are we in heaven?"

A smile came across Lynn's face and she gently put her hand on Cathy's forehead. "No, Cathy," she answered, "you're in the hospital. You came very close though to going to heaven. Thank God your mother found you in your room and got you here in time." When Cathy started remembering exactly why she was in the hospital and what had driven her to attempt suicide, she started crying.

Lynn asked her why she had wanted to end her life.

Cathy didn't say much then because she felt so tired but the next day she told her the whole story because she could tell that Lynn was a very caring person.

After listening to Cathy's story, Lynn sighed deeply and said, "I don't often share the story about my life with anyone, but I feel that it might help you."

Cathy could tell by the pained expression on Lynn's face that it was going to hurt her to even talk about whatever it was she was going to say.

Lynn cast her eyes downward and began her story.

"I also come from a broken home. My parents divorced when I was seven and my dad remarried shortly thereafter and he really didn't come to see me and my older brother much. But when I was twelve my mother remarried and that's when my real nightmare began." She paused momentarily and tears welled up in her eyes. "My step-father was very abusive and whenever he would drink too much he would beat up both my mother and myself. And he abused me in other ways that I'd rather not say.

"When I was sixteen I ran away from home and tried to make a life for myself. Thankfully, I found a place for kids like myself that gave us a place to stay and food to eat and helped us find work.

"The people there were really caring and I thank God for them. I decided that I should go back and finish school and after I graduated, I decided to become a nurse.

"It was while I was at nursing school that I heard the Gospel. One of the girls from my class shared with me one day about how I could know I was going to heaven if I believed in Christ to get me there. I had always thought, like most people, that you had to be good to go to heaven. After she explained about how it was free to go to heaven she told me that good works would earn me rewards on earth and in heaven.

"She showed me a verse from Proverbs that said 'Delight yourself also in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.' Let me tell you Cathy, the desire of my heart was to be happy. I had always thought the only place I could ever be happy was in heaven. I had no idea that I could really

experience it while I was here on earth.

"This girl invited me to Bible studies and let me tell you I have never seen people as happy as these people were. I found out that I could be just as happy if I served the Lord. So I asked the girl who had talked to me to teach me how to tell other people the Gospel. She took me out with her so I could listen to her as she preached the Gospel. After spending a few times out with her I had no doubt that God rewards His servants with joy and peace.

"I became actively involved in serving the Lord and I don't think I could have been happier, but I regret to say that as time went by I let things slip between myself and the Lord."

Cathy, who had been listening intently to every word couldn't imagine finding joy and peace on this earth, let alone letting it slip away. She was intensely curious about what Lynn was going to tell her next. "Cathy, serving the Lord isn't something you devote yourself to part-time; it's a total commitment of your life to God. Many Christians fall away from serving the Lord because they stop reading the Bible everyday or they get distracted by the things of this world. It's tragic that most believers are more concerned about what other people think of them than what the Lord thinks of them.

"And I am ashamed to say it, but I became one of those people.

"After I graduated from nursing school I started working here at the hospital and I started dating an intern. Tim was the type of guy who really took his job seriously. It was like medicine was his life. And I found myself wanting to please him more than I wanted to please God. Since he personally wasn't interested in religion, God and the Bible were never a topic of our discussion. I knew it was wrong to neglect the spiritual aspects of my life but my love for Tim became the all consuming passion of my life. After dating for almost a year we got engaged to be married."

She stopped talking for a minute reflecting on the price she paid for her disobedience. She sighed again deeply and said, "It was right around this time that I had a female patient who was dying of cancer. It was especially tragic because she was only twenty-five years old. I really got to know her well and as her health deteriorated I knew that she would soon be facing eternity. I knew that I should talk to her and tell her the Gospel but I kept putting it off."

As she spoke her voice cracked and she broke down crying. In an anguished voice she said, "That woman died in my arms but I never told her how to go to heaven."

After composing herself she continued, "I was eaten up by guilt over letting that woman die without hearing the Gospel. I slipped into such a state of depression that I couldn't eat

or sleep and of course I was miserable company to be with.

"Then to top it all off, Tim came and told me that he wanted to call off the wedding. The reason was because a girl, who I thought was my friend, had gone out of her way to spend time with him when I wasn't around and he had become interested in her.

"I can't even begin to tell you what I went through. I was so hurt and humiliated and felt so betrayed. At first I seriously thought about killing them both, but thank goodness, I came to my senses. But then I thought about taking my own life."

Lynn looked at Cathy at that point and said with tears in her eyes, "Cathy, suicide is never the answer. Believe me, you would have been very upset if you had been successful in your attempt."

Cathy was confused by Lynn's statement. After all, hadn't she told her that day at the shopping center that even if a person who believed in Christ committed suicide that he would still go to heaven?

So Cathy asked, "But I thought that I would go to heaven 'cause I had believed in Christ."

"You would have."

"So what did you mean then when you said I would be upset?"

"Cathy, as a child of God, you have to give an account of your life from the time you became a believer till the time you go to heaven. If you had killed yourself you would stand before the Lord ashamed for what you had done and you would end up missing out on rewards in heaven."

"Really?" she said with obvious surprise. "Gee, I didn't know that."

"In fact," Lynn continued, "that's what stopped me from carrying out my attempt.

"I had gotten some pills together and went to my room fully intending to end my life. But before I did I felt this nagging feeling to at least look at the Bible. When I was reading I came across Second Corinthians, chapter five, verse ten that says, 'For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he has done, whether it be good or bad.'

"The thought of having to stand before the Lord with nothing to show for my life overwhelmed me. I just couldn't stand the thought. So I asked the Lord that if He could use me to please help me endure the pain I was suffering. When I prayed that prayer I just had a feeling that everything was going to

be all right.

"I started reading the book of Psalms and I couldn't believe how many of the verses I was reading applied to my very situation. I ended up reading all night and by the time that the sun was beginning to rise I had seen God perform a miracle in my life."

Cathy was wondering if some angel had appeared to her or something so she asked, "Did God talk to you or did you see an angel?"

She smiled and said, "Nothing like that. I saw God take my total feelings of hopelessness and rejection and replace them with a peace that passes understanding.

"You see, Cathy, God didn't change my circumstances, He changed me."

After Cathy and Lynn had finished talking and Cathy was alone in her hospital room, she opened up the Bible that Lynn had left with her. She opened up to the book of Psalms and started reading. Because she was tired it was hard to read much but one particular verse got her attention. It was Psalm thirty, verse five, and it said, "...weeping may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning." When she read it she burst into tears. She knew that her suffering would not last because she had decided to serve the Lord.

And it wasn't long until Cathy's life did change. She got out of the hospital two days before Christmas and was able to go out talking to people with Lynn. She couldn't believe how much fun it was and how many people were really interested in hearing the Gospel. There was no question in her mind that she had found what she was looking for in life.

That Christmas ended up being the happiest she had ever had and she could say with the Psalmist,

"You have turned for me my mourning into dancing. You have put off my sackcloth, and clothed me with gladness." Psalm 30:11