

A Soldier's Tale of Grace

The following true story of the Finno-Russian war, is passed on to you, not just to be “interesting” or “entertaining,” but because it illustrates a tremendous fact, almost forgotten in the world today. Its recognition, however, makes all the difference in one's reactions to the “ups and downs” we all experience in life. The story comes from a Mr. Nordenberg, an eminent engineer in Finland. He writes:

“I offered my services to the Government, and was appointed an officer in General Mannerheim's Army. It was a terrible time—we had besieged the town which had been taken by the Red Army, and retaken it. A number of Red prisoners were under my guard and seven of them were to be shot at dawn on Monday. I will never forget the preceding Sunday. The seven men were kept in the basement of the Town Hall, and in the passage, my men stood at attention with their rifles. The atmosphere was filled with hatred, and my soldiers were drunk with success and taunted their prisoners, who swore and beat on the walls with their bleeding fists. Others called for their wives and children who were far away. **At dawn they were all to die.**

“We had the victory—that was true enough—but the value of this seemed to diminish as the night advanced. Then something happened. One of the men doomed to death began to sing. ‘He is mad’ was everybody's first thought, but I had noticed that this man, Koskinen, had not raved and cursed. Quietly, he sat on his bench, a picture of utter despair. Nobody said anything to him, for each was carrying his burden in his own way. Koskinen sang, rather waveringly at first; but then his voice grew stronger and became natural and free. All the prisoners turned and looked at him as he sang:

*Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'er-shaded,
Sweetly my soul shall rest.*

*Hark 'tis the voice of angels,
Borne in a song to me,
Over the field of jasper,
Over the crystal sea.*

“Over and over again, he sang that verse, and when he finished, everyone was quiet for a few minutes, until a wild-looking man broke out with, ‘Where did you get that you fool? Are you trying to make us religious?’

“Koskinen looked at his comrades with tear-filled eyes, as he quietly said, ‘Comrades, will you listen to me for a minute? You asked me where I got this song; it was

from the Salvation Army. I heard it three weeks ago; my mother sang about Jesus and prayed to Him.'

"He stopped a little while, as if to gather strength. Then he rose to his feet, being the soldier that he was, looked straight in front of him and continued. 'It is cowardly to hide your beliefs: the God my mother believed in is now my God. I cannot tell how it happened. I lay awake last night, and suddenly saw mother's face before me, and it reminded me of the song that I had heard. I felt I had to find the Saviour and hide in Him. Then I prayed, like the thief on the cross (Luk 23:39-43), that Christ would forgive me and cleanse my sinful soul and make me ready to stand before Him Whom I should meet so soon.

"It was a strange night, with times when everything seemed to shine around me. Verses from the Bible and the song book came to my mind. They brought messages of the crucified Saviour and the Blood that cleanses from sin (1Jo 1:7), and the home He has prepared for us. I thanked Him, accepted Him, and since then, this verse has been sounding inside me. It was God's answer to my prayer. I could no longer keep it to myself; within a few hours, I shall be with the Lord, saved by grace!"

"Koskinen's face shone as if by an inward light. His comrades sat there quietly. He himself stood there transfixed. My soldiers were listening to what this Red revolutionary had to say. 'You are right, Koskinen,' said one of his comrades at last. 'If only I knew there was mercy for me too, but these hands of mine have shed blood, and I have reviled God and trampled on all that is holy. Now I realise that there is a hell, and that it is the proper place for me!'

"He sank to the ground with despair on his face. 'Pray for me, Koskinen,' he groaned, 'tomorrow I shall die, and my soul will be in the hands of the devil!' And these two Red soldiers went down on their knees and prayed for each other. It was no long prayer, but it reached heaven; and we who listened to it forgot our hatred; it melted in the light of heaven; for here were two men who were soon to die, seeking reconciliation with their God. A door leading into the Invisible stood ajar, and we were entranced by the sight.

"Let me tell you shortly that by the time it was 4 o'clock, all Koskinen's comrades had followed his example and began to pray. The change in the atmosphere was indescribable! Some of them sat on the floor, some on the benches, some wept quietly, and others talked of spiritual things. None of us had a Bible, but the Spirit of God spoke to us all. Then someone remembered those at home, and there followed an hour of intense letter-writing. Confessions and tears were in those letters.

"The night had almost gone and day was dawning. No one had had a moment's sleep. 'Sing the song once more for us, Koskinen,' said one of them, and you should have heard them sing, not only that song, but verses and choruses long forgotten. The soldiers on guard united with them. The power of God had touched all. Everything had changed, and the venerable Town Hall's basement resounded in that early morning hour with the songs of the Blood of the Lamb (Rev 4:10-11; 7:14; 12:11).

"The clock struck six. How I wished I could beg grace for these men, but I knew that it was impossible. Between two rows of soldiers, they marched out to the place of

execution. One of them asked to be allowed to sing Koskinen's song once again, and permission was granted. Then they asked to be allowed to die with uncovered faces. And with hands to heaven, they sang with might and main, 'Safe in the arms of Jesus.' When the last line had died out, the lieutenant gave the word 'Fire!' and the seven Red soldiers fought their last fight. We inclined our heads in silent prayer.

"What happened in the hearts of the others I do not know, but as far as I was concerned, I was a new man from that hour. I had met Christ in one of His lowliest and youngest disciples, and I had seen enough to realise that I too could be His!"

Reader, you were not there, but the same One Who made it possible for them to face death freed from the guilt of their sin, and therefore, having "peace with God"—waits to make their experience yours.

"God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God..." (1Pe 3:18).

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Act 16:31)!

Well, now that you have read the story, I'm sure it has made a deep impression upon you, as it did upon me. What do you consider the great "fact" it illustrates? There are several, you say, and you are quite right. But the first one, which appeals to me personally, is the fact that God still rules in the affairs of men. Many people in this world seem to forget that. Moreover, His thoughts toward us are *"Thoughts of peace and not of evil"* as we read in the Bible—His word (see Jer 29:11).

He made the world and all in it in the first place, and He made it for His "pleasure" (Rev 4:11). Even after man's alienation by disobedience, from the Creator Who had provided him with every good thing (Rom 3:23), God's love yearned after His estranged children—so much so that He was willing to suffer and die on the Cross to bring us back into allegiance to Him. He became man's substitute and took the punishment due to sinning mankind (2Co 5:21). In this way, He manifested and proved His everlasting love. After Jesus rose from the dead, He ascended to heaven and was crowned King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16).

He keeps the universe under His control, and at the same time, He knows and cares for us in every detail. We read in Matthew 10:30 that the *"very hairs of your head are numbered."* David in Psalm 139:1-2 exclaims, *"Thou knowest my downsitting and my uprising; thou understandest my thought afar off."*

We may also read in 2 Chronicles 16:9, "The eyes of the Lord run to and throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him." And in Hebrews 13:5 we read, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee!" Does not all this make a difference to the way we may face our difficulties and burdens?

There is more yet, for in Psalm 55:22, we read again *"Cast your burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain you."* Indeed, all through the Bible, we find encouragement to

lean upon a loving God, who is ever near and ever ready to help. So the “fact” of God’s active sovereignty in the world is something we must not for a moment doubt, for that knowledge can make all the difference to our courage under stress and to our reactions to every phase of life. So I would leave this final word with you,

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!” (Act 16:31).



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