

## The Christmas Cup



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Several small monuments--tangible reminders of how God has delivered me and worked through my congregation--adorn the corner of my desk. Just as Joshua heeded God's instruction to build a stone monument on the Jordan's edge to remind future generations that God brought the Israelites through the water safely, the monuments on my desk remind me of fabulous ways that I have seen God work in the past. These reassure me that God still works today.

A plastic cup decorated with symbols of Christmas time is one of my monuments. When friends--adult and child alike--ask me what it means, I tell them this story.

Two years ago a seven-year-old girl owned the cup. She used it throughout the year as her piggy bank. Week by week she dropped her allowance money into the Christmas cup. She had big dreams for the money she was collecting, but they were not dreams for herself. She had a much more magnificent plan in mind.

When the girl went to visit Santa, she took her cup, now half full, with her. She just knew that Santa would know that perfect person who needed to have a special Christmas. When it was her turn, she whispered to the jolly man and offered him the cup, "I want you to take my allowance from this year and give it to someone who will not have a Christmas without it." A lump rose in Santa's throat. After a holiday season filled with trails of kids who brought him expensive gift lists and still wanted more, he was humbled by this remarkable child.

But Santa did not know who would not have a Christmas without this little girl's Christmas cup. For this Santa was just an ordinary man who put on a red suit and a white beard to make some extra money during the holidays. Overwhelmed by the girl's request, he took the Christmas cup home to his wife and asked her for advice. Neither of them were involved in a church or in community service activities that might have brought them in contact, with someone in need. But the wife said, "I have a friend who goes to church. She is always helping people. She'll know someone in need of Christmas."

So the Christmas cup the little girl gave to Santa passed on to Santa's wife who took it to her church friend who is a member of the church I pastor. She brought the cup to me, saying, "You're a pastor. You will know what to do with it." She left the Christmas cup on my desk. Truth is, of course, I didn't know what to do with it either. And the Christmas cup relay had taken so much time that Christmas was only two days away.

When the cup landed on my desk it seemed more like a hot potato than a gift. It had become heavy with responsibility. A little girl had gone without all the bright, glittery, special, ribbon-covered, delicious, and new things that a year of allowances could buy so that one special person could have a good Christmas. And now it was my job to find just the right person.

I searched through my mental lists of people in need. Then I remembered something that happened to me a couple days earlier. I had been in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida, when I saw a very poor person collecting aluminum cans from trash bins. Many months previously I had made a vow to God promising that I would give a financial gift to the next obviously poor person I saw collecting cans. The sight of this elderly, sad-looking man brought my promise back to me. I walked up to the man, wished him a Merry Christmas, and told him that the God who loved him wanted to give him a gift through me. I handed him a respectable financial gift. I immediately knew it was right. His eyes welled up with tears. He was deeply thankful. And he told me that he received my gift as a gift from Jesus.

That experience had been so satisfying and so right that I could now believe that this Christmas cup was going to get to just the right person.

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But only forty-eight hours remained until Christmas, and I had many other things to do in preparation for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. So I started with prayer, then called some contacts who are closer to the needs of the poor in St. Pete's. One by one they admitted they didn't know just who would need this special gift.

Christmas Eve found me sitting at my study desk still holding the Christmas cup. It seemed that everyone involved was depending on me to know what to do with it. So I prayed some more, and began to sense that the cup did not have to go to a person or family in St. Petersburg where both the little girl and I live. The Covenant had just started an inner-city church in Atlanta just a few weeks earlier. Many poor people had gathered in this church. Our church had declared that we wanted to be partners with this quickly growing congregation so I called Robert Owens, pastor to Atlanta's New Life Covenant Church and told him the story. I asked him if he would be on the lookout for an appropriate recipient. Robert indicated that he might just have a clue as to what God was up to.

That evening, at my church's candlelight service, I shared the unfinished story of a little girl's faith and gave our congregation the opportunity to join with this little girl's gift. We added our own offerings by giving with love from what we had in our pockets, just as the little girl had.

When we counted the little girl's money and our additional money, it amounted to \$307. Not a huge amount, but enough for someone to celebrate Christmas.

Robert Owens called back on Christmas Day sure that he knew who was to receive this special Christmas gift. I assured him that a check for \$307 would be on its way to him immediately. I asked him, "Could you deliver news of the gift today?"

Knowing the money was on its way, Robert wrote out a check for \$307 and went out into the city to find Booker Herrings. Booker was a contractor who had worked tirelessly to renovate a rundown crack house and turn it into New Life Covenant Church. Booker had agreed to work for Robert at no cost. "Work's been slow coming, anyhow," he had said. This skilled man showed up almost every day, and while he wasn't making much of a living, he was doing a lot of loving. It was because of him that the church was able to open its doors before Christmas, and Robert was very grateful to him.

Although the contractor did not mention his own needs, Robert knew Booker was doing without that Christmas. Robert went looking for him and was told that Booker had headed to a nearby building supply store.

Booker was indeed there, sitting in his truck in the parking lot. As Robert approached Booker, he said, "I have a gift for you. It's your Christmas gift. It comes to you because a little girl has saved all year long so that someone special would have a Christmas. You are that someone special. God wants you to have this gift at Christmas." Robert handed him the check for \$307.

Booker is a strong man, a working man who has learned to make it through the lean times, but he could not hold back tears. "Pastor," he said, choked up with emotion, "I have been sitting here praying and asking God what I am to do." He pointed to a piece of paper on the seat, "Next to me is an overdue bill for my truck. It is the final notice. If I do not make this payment by tomorrow, my truck will be repossessed. I would lose my business and my livelihood. The bill is for \$307 exactly."

So an unselfish seven-year-old girl in St. Petersburg got her wish--someone special got a perfect Christmas gift. And a bunch of us got to share in that special Christmas--one that won't soon be forgotten.

That's why the Christmas cup from Christmas 1994 sits on the corner of my desk. Like the Israelites' twelve stones erected by the Jordan's edge, it sits as a monument to the truth that God knows, cares, and delivers. And he uses us to care for others in a way that really does make a difference.

 *Merry Christmas!* 