

MILLIE'S CHRISTMAS

by Bob Steinkamp

Millie stared at her darkened house as she slowly walked up to the front door. Her home seemed as cold as the light snow that was silently falling on her face. Although it was only 5:30 PM, the short days of early December made it look like midnight.

The past Saturday would have been the day that Jimmy, her husband, would have spent the day proudly putting up their outside Christmas lights and decorations. Each year he followed the same routine. The day would be spent, with the help of neighbors, bringing out string after string of lights, the huge manger scene, and the other Christmas objects they had collected during 28 years of marriage. Jimmy's blowing a circuit breaker a couple times during the day had become a neighborhood joke. That evening, just as soon as darkness began to arrive, Jimmy would gather Millie and as many neighbors as he could find to witness his Christmas lights being flipped on officially for the first time of the season. He would then lead the group in an off-key version of Joy To The World.

This year there would be no decorations. There would be no blown circuit breakers. There would be no off-key singing. There would be no Jimmy. There would be no Joy. Standing there, looking at their lightless home, Millie wished there would be no Christmas.

Her husband had moved out several months ago. Jimmy had begun to act different. Millie could not really isolate what was happening, but something was uncommon. At first, Jimmy seemed to be quieter than usual. He was a bit withdrawn. Millie overheard a couple strange phone calls. "If I didn't know my Jimmy better, I would also think that he was having an affair," she had joked to Linda, her best friend. Millie did not know that her words were almost prophetic.

One of their church friends, Susan, had gone through a divorce two years before. She and Jimmy had been the mainstay of Susan's support, encouraging her to go ahead and divorce her unfaithful and abusive husband. During the recent days, Jimmy began to speak of Susan more often than before. He encouraged Millie to include Susan in many of their family's activities.

During the summer, Jimmy told Millie that he thought he was having a mid-life crisis and wanted to separate "for a little while" so that he could "find himself." Two days after he had moved out, Millie discovered that he had moved in with Susan. Apart from two phone calls, that turned into screaming matches, there had been no direct contact between Jimmy and Millie. On an October day, with the smell of burning leaves filling the air, Millie had opened her mailbox and bristled when she read that letter that began, "Please be advised that this office represents...". Jimmy had filed for divorce. Almost subconsciously, Millie reached into the mailbox before unlocking the front door. Checking the mail had become a dreaded ritual each evening on the way home from work. During the past sixty days, she had received a steady stream of yellow Certified Mail notices, always with the Zip Code of Jimmy's attorney. She received plenty of mail about what Jimmy wanted to do, but nothing from Jimmy himself.

“Funny,” she mumbled to herself, “We always talked everything out so easily. Now he has to pay a hundred bucks an hour and postage to tell me anything. They tell me that satan has taken him captive to do his evil will, and I am about to believe it.” She looked at the name plate on the front door while unlocking it: As for me and my house, we will serve The Lord. Millie and Jimmy. They had both served the Lord until this horrible crisis. Jimmy had not actually resigned from his responsibilities at church. He had simply walked away from them. Millie had learned recently that Jimmy and Susan were attending another local church most weeks, without any sign of shame.

Once inside, Millie flipped on the kitchen light and dropped her purse and the mail onto the table. The only lights she used most nights were the kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. No one would come or go through the rest of the house. The yard light had not been turned on since the day Jimmy had left home.

Millie's dinner that Friday evening was the half of a sandwich that she had not eaten for lunch and a glass of milk. While she ate, she attempted to stretch her paycheck to cover the stack of bills that stared back at her. Somehow, with the Lord's help, every payday it all worked out. The first check she wrote every week was the tithe check to her church. For the first weeks after Jimmy left, she wrestled with herself on whether to continue to tithe. She reasoned how great were her obligations, and how much money the church received, but she continued to be obedient.

Shortly after the disclosure of Jimmy/Susan, she had gone to see her pastor, demanding that he confront Jimmy and straighten him out. “Millie, the Lord just hasn't given me the freedom to do that. I promise you that I will continue to pray for both of you, and will always be open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit for an opportunity to talk to Jimmy, but I sense that our time is not His time.”, Pastor Heffernan had shared.

That meeting had been a real test of Millie's commitment to the Lord and a turning point in her walk with Him. It took a few weeks before she had in focus the fact that she was giving to and praying for her Lord Jesus Christ, not Pastor Heffernan, nor First Church. The Pastor was not going to bring Jimmy home; it could only be done by the Holy Spirit. The kitchen radio played the music of Christmas, almost unnoticed, while Millie paid her bills. Suddenly the first words of one song captured her complete attention: “Joy to the world, the Lord has come ...” Her mind immediately conjured up visions of Jimmy turning on his outdoor Christmas lights and leading a neighborhood choir in those words.

Millie's tears came almost as quickly as did the thoughts of Christmas without Jimmy. She sobbed and sobbed, crying out to God over and over, “Why! Why! Why God?” Her words were not a question as much as they were a statement of her pain. Millie cried so hard that her teeth ached and she had chest pain.

Sobbing and shaking, she reached across the kitchen table and slid her well-worn Bible toward her. It was still opened to the page where she had read her devotional that morning. A different verse seemed to leap off the page at her, a verse she had read dozens of times, but yet

had never read at all:

The next morning, Millie was awakened by someone knocking on her front door. The bedside clock reported that it was 8:31 AM. She wondered who would be so inconsiderate to awaken her on Saturday, her only day to sleep in.

Millie grabbed her robe and peered out the peep hole to see Bart and Gloria, her next door neighbors standing there. The Jacksons had been their neighbors for about four years. They were more than simply wave-to neighbors, but had been strangely silent since Jimmy's exit. Millie had actually wondered if they were seeing Jimmy and Susan socially.

She opened the door to Gloria's warm greeting. "Merry Christmas, Millie. How are you doing?"

"How am I doing?" Millie thought. "Why don't you ask my sick husband how I am doing the next time you guys talk to him?"

Instead, Millie voiced that great lie told by everyone going through separation and divorce: "I'm fine." Sometimes that seemed like the easiest way out. "Come on in", she added, trying to put some enthusiasm into her unenthusiastic voice. "Want coffee or anything?"

"No thanks, not a thing, except for a few minutes of your time. Foremost, we want to apologize to you, Millie.", Gloria began. "We haven't had time to talk with you since-since, ah, since Jimmy moved. We want you to know that we are praying that God will touch Jimmy, and you, and restore your marriage. Bart is praying that the Lord will allow him an opportunity to talk with Jimmy."

That remark suddenly made Bart and Gloria welcomed guests in Millie's home. They were not seeing Jimmy and Susan.

Bart began to speak for the first time during the visit. Millie noticed that he was wearing a nail apron. "Millie, you know three of the men in the neighborhood car pool together. Yesterday we were talking about, well we were talking about how wrong Jimmy had done you, and what Christmas was going to be like for you. Someone said they were going to miss Jimmy's outdoor decorations.

Anyway, three of us want to know if you would consider allowing us to put up Jimmy's lights--just for you. Two of us helped him last year and know pretty much where everything goes and how it works."

Millie was speechless. She did not speak for fear of breaking down. She did not know what to say. Her plans had been to overlook Christmas totally this year. Gloria spoke before she could reply.

"Millie, the wives don't want to be left out, so we want to help you decorate the inside of

your home while the guys work outside. How about it?" All that Millie could provide was an affirming nod.

Shortly after 9 AM, three men were leaving footprints in the light snow, as they began to bring Christmas lights and decorations from the garage. The wives arrived and one brought a coffee cake. Soon the smell of fresh coffee filled the home. As the ladies sat around the kitchen table, with the bills now pushed aside, they planned what Millie wanted to decorate. Even greater, they shared encouragement with her that God would be her husband and provide for her every need during this Christmas season.

From outdoors, Millie listened to the three men calling out to each other: "Bring that one over here"; "Jimmy uses the green lights on this one;" "How far back does the manger sit?" Every once in a while, she would hear a hearty laugh arise from outdoors. It almost seemed that Jimmy should come in the back door any minute, stomping snow off of his boots, grinning widely, and offering an enthusiastic Christmas greeting. Millie was quickly jolted back to reality by the thought that there was no Jimmy this year, and that she was hurting very, very deeply, in spite of all the efforts of her neighbors.

At noon, Emily, another neighbor, brought in a huge pot of vegetable soup and sandwiches. When the men came in to eat, Bart said that he would pray. A minute later, Millie wasn't sure if he had said that he was going to pray or preach.

"Lord, we thank You for neighbors like Millie and Jimmy. We thank You that You give us opportunities to help our brothers and sisters during their dark days. We pray blessings on Millie this Christmas season. Father, we ask that Your hand might reach out and touch Jimmy, where ever he is right now and bring him home to You and home to a praying wife. Father, please bless this food and the hands that prepared it. Lord, we commit this home and all that is done today to you. Lord we pray that even one person might drive down this street and be drawn to You through what they see displayed here. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus, who died for our sins, Amen."

Thankfully, the soup was still on the stove, being kept warm while Bart prayed. That entire prayer had been accompanied by several "Amen's" from the others. Millie attempted to take a quick spiritual inventory. Two couples went to their church, although one was far from active. She had seen the third couple drive away on Sunday mornings, but she knew nothing about their church life. Suddenly, all seven people in the room had become as one, echoing Bart's prayer.

While they were eating, there came a knock at the front door. A surprised Susan answered it to find Pastor and Mrs. Heffernan standing there, holding two hot pumpkin pies. Susan could not understand, since they lived all the way across town.

"Millie, a good pastor has little birds that tell him things," he joked. "Donna and I didn't want to miss out on whatever is happening here today. Where's the coffee?"

Everyone sat around Millie's living room, amidst half-emptied boxes of Christmas decorations and a partially decorated tree. She was embarrassed by the layer of dust the mid-day sun streaming in the windows seemed to highlight. She was embarrassed by all the attention that she was receiving. She was embarrassed that there were nine people, not ten, enjoying this day.

When a pastor enters a group, everyone seems to step back and expect him to lead the conversation. Today was no exception. The name of Jimmy had been mentioned only a few times that entire morning. Suddenly, Pastor Heffernan brought his name to the forefront of the conversation.

“I trust that all of us are fervently praying for Jimmy. He really needs our prayers, not our condemnation right now. The enemy is a deceiver who has come to rob, kill, and destroy families. Folks, Jimmy belongs to the Lord, and we will not allow Satan to have him.” Satan is a liar and NOT taking any more of our folk by divorce, as long as the Lord gives me strength to fight this terrible plague that the world has given an approving nod!” His exclamation was accompanied by a slap on the sofa next to him, causing more dust to swirl.

Millie had been so blessed by hearing her pastor take such a strong stand against divorce that she had not even noticed the dust. Suddenly she knew that she was not in this battle alone.

“Amen!”, Bart concluded, “Outside crew, time to hit the snow again. Jimmy would want us to be done by dark so the lights can be turned on. By the way, Millie, do you know where the circuit breakers are? Looks like we have kept the tradition going and have blown one.” Everyone howled with laughter.

Later that afternoon, Gloria took Millie shopping for Christmas cards. She had not planned to send any at all, but things had changed now. Work at her home, both inside and out, continued as the two friends drove away.

“Millie, this day has been a blessing to each of us. Thank you for allowing us to take over your Christmas,” Gloria remarked.

“I did not have a Christmas for you to take over, until today,” Millie responded.

“Honey”, Gloria paused, “I don't know if I should even be telling you this, but at lunch Bart whispered to me that the name of Susan had come up while the men were working outside this morning. It seems that all three men had sensed something from her, and she had actually ‘come on’ to one husband, who needs to remain nameless.”

“But why was Jimmy the one to fall? I don't understand?”

“Had you been praying God's protection on him each day? You know, putting on the armor of God before Jimmy left home?”

“Well, yes and no. We used to have devotions together, but then we just got out of the habit. You know, things all stay so busy.”

“Were you guys praying together and for each other's needs?”

“Not for a long, long time. I know what you mean, though. We used to pray together every day. I guess I just allowed several cracks to open and the enemy came in. Gloria, where do I go now? The attorneys won't even allow us to talk to each other. I have been praying that God would touch Jimmy, but everything looks hopeless. Can you even imagine what it is like to lie in bed at night and just sob, knowing that your husband is with someone else?”

“I can't. I really can't. Having a prodigal spouse means much more than the loss of a paycheck and no one to help with the decisions. This day, being with you, and hearing Pastor Heffernan at lunch has really opened my eyes to what divorce means. I think today has been good for all of us.”

Millie and Gloria had a grand afternoon selecting Christmas cards. Millie even picked up gifts for both their grown children and their families, who lived out of town. Since the separation, they had all pulled back from Millie. She had not intended to even send them gifts.

As soon as hearing Millie comment that she could not afford a gift they were looking at, Gloria quietly pressed a folded bill into her palm.

“Don't worry about where it came from,” she whispered, “The Lord sent it to you.”

Shortly after 5 PM, they returned to Millie's home. Although the exterior was dark, lights shown brightly from every window. During their absence, the decorating for Christmas had been completed. A decorated tree stood in the corner of the living room. All the dust had disappeared. Even the bills on the kitchen table had been stacked out of the way. Someone had left a tape on marriage restoration on top of them.

About 5:30, those same neighbors and the Heffernans began to re-assemble. Soon Bart announced that it was time for the outdoor decorations to come alive.

“Millie, we've put a timer on the lights, so that after tonight you won't have to bother with turning them on and off.”, one of the men remarked. “That timer is only on loan to you. As soon as we pray Jimmy home, I want it back.”, he added with a reassuring grin.

Those assembled stood there in the dark. Someone had to throw the switch and Jimmy wasn't there. Whom would it be? In a minute that seemed like an hour, Pastor Heffernan stepped forward.

“As Jimmy's pastor, and in his stead, I dedicate this display to the glory of God. May each light remind us of Jesus, the Light of the world, who has come so that there will be no more darkness.” With a slow, deliberate motion, he reached into the timer box and flipped the loud

switch. Suddenly, the entire Wilkson home was aglow with the lights of Christmas.

Millie first noticed the manger display. It was in the right place, but something seemed different this year. She could not remember what was changed. She looked into the faces of Mary and Joseph. They each displayed such peaceful smiles. What a display of the peace of Christmas.

No one spoke a word. Suddenly, someone began to sing: "Joy to the World. The Lord has come." By that time, everyone picked up on the words and was singing. For a moment, Millie closed her eyes and imagined that her Jimmy was there singing with them.

Late that night, as Millie lay in her bed reading the Bible and praying, the timer once again brought darkness to the outside of the Wilkson home. Half asleep, she closed her eyes and imagined that Jimmy had turned off his Christmas lights and would soon be making his way to her side. She fell fast asleep waiting for her husband.

Sunday morning, everyone who had worked on Millie's Christmas project greeted each other with warm embraces. Something about all that had happened the day before had ignited a common spirit among them. Millie could not remember how many times she had heard, "I'm praying for Jimmy!", said to her that morning.

Most Sundays, someone who thought they had the gift of discouragement, would come up to her and volunteer, "I saw Jimmy and Susan this week," or comment about the pending divorce. This week there were none.

Pastor Heffernan, in his sermon, had done a great job blending the Christmas story into the covenant of marriage. He compared the covenant between a man and wife with the covenant between God and man, and told why Jesus had come. It was a sermon that Millie had wished Jimmy could have heard.

Pastor Heffernan had a unique way of shaking a hand, and secretly whispering a word of encouragement at the same time. It was almost as if he were talking to the person behind the one of whom his hand he grasped. On that Sunday morning, he had tightly gripped Millie's hand with both of his and loudly declared, "Donna and I had a blessed time yesterday." He then took one of his trademark side-steps and whispered, "I'm praying for the day that Jimmy calls me. Don't you give up on him, because God sure hasn't."

For the next couple of weeks, Millie would come home each evening after work to that illuminated Christmas display. Yes, she still hurt deeply, but it seemed like Christmas after all.

Each evening she would be aware of the many cars and pedestrians that made their way slowly by that beautiful display. Every few days, one of the couples from Saturday would stop by, replace the burned out bulbs, and straighten anything on which the snow had taken its toll.

Each evening, Millie would lie in bed, waiting for the lights to go off around 10 PM. She would fall asleep waiting for Jimmy, who never came.

As Christmas approached, the traffic outside the Wilkson home increased. She was unaware that on the Monday evening before Christmas, a blue car that was well-known on that street, had slowly driven by.

Jimmy, who was supposed to be so happy in that adulterous relationship into which satan had deceived him, had worked late. His thoughts were elsewhere, as he drove toward home instead of to the other woman. It was not until Jimmy saw his display, all aglow with the happiness of Christmas, that he realized his routing mistake. By then it was too late to pull out of the slow-moving traffic. He was being forced, although unnoticed, to drive by his home.

Jimmy was so preoccupied at the thought of being discovered that he hardly noticed the decorations at all. He wondered how in the world Millie had arranged to have everything displayed. He had always imagined that no one but him could set up their display.

That night, lying in bed next to a sleeping woman who was not his wife, Jimmy thought about Christmas at home. He recalled all the baking Millie always did at this time of year. He recalled how happy she always seemed at Christmas. He recalled the Christmas music that always played in their home. He recalled how much they looked forward to the holiday visits from their children and grandchildren. He recalled the special events at their church, especially the Christmas Eve candlelight service, without a doubt his favorite church event of the year.

When Jimmy had first driven down 88th Drive by accident, the guilt that he carried 24 hours a day for walking out on his wife, was tempered by knowing that Millie was still going to celebrate Christmas. Viewing his home for the first time since moving out now only fueled a full-blown case of remorse and shame.

Tuesday evening, on his way from work, and under the cover of darkness, Jimmy again drove by his home. This time he wanted to actually see the decorations. He could not believe that Millie had everything displayed, just as if he were there. Did she even miss him at all?

Jimmy followed the winding procession down his street. He had to admit that their home looked beautiful. But there was something different. He dared not stop and stare, and had to avoid the other cars, but something was definitely not the way that he set things up.

Wednesday evening he once again took that same route home. He was determined to find what struck him as different in that display. He brought the car almost to a complete stop directly in front of their home. Suddenly, he discovered the difference. Baby Jesus, in the manger scene, was lying backward. Someone had displayed Him in the opposite direction of how Jimmy had done for years.

Jimmy's peace at discovering what was different did not bring him the peace that he had anticipated/ Now he wanted to silently walk across that frozen lawn and turn Baby Jesus

around. It was something that he knew must be done.

He knew that he could not sneak out on Susan, for she knew all his schemes for going out at night, so Jimmy arranged to work until almost 10 PM on Thursday night. He stopped his car several houses away, in front of the home of people whom he did not know.

Jimmy was waiting for exactly the right moment to make his move. Sitting in that cold car, he asked himself why this was so important to him. He could not provide an answer. Somewhere, off in the distance, a dog barked. He watched the silhouette of a man far up the street, moving toward the curb. It was his friend, Bart, taking the trash out to the curb.

Suddenly, with no one in sight, the lights on the display at his home went out. Had he been discovered? Had Bart called Millie? Whom, if anyone, was watching him? This was the time that Jimmy knew he had to make his move. He walked quickly toward the manger, wondering why the light snow crackling under his feet was so loud.

Reaching the manger, Jimmy picked up the figurine of baby Jesus. Although the temperature was in the 20's, the baby's flesh seemed warm to his touch. There was something comfortable about tanding in his own lawn and actually touching his own Christmas display. Instead of turning the Jesus figurine around, he clutched the Baby to his chest with both arms.

The only light that he had noticed in their home had been in the bedroom window. Suddenly that light went out also. He envisioned Millie, comfortable in their warm bed, wearing one of the cute flannel gowns that she always wore on nights like this. How he wished he was sleeping safe and secure curled up next to her.

Freeing one hand from the baby, Jimmy reached into his pocket. He felt the triangular head of their front door key. Jimmy wondered if she had changed their locks. He took one hesitating step toward the door, just to find out, and then he stopped. His attorney was forever reminding him, "Any contact with Mrs. Wilkson could jeopardize our position."

"This is not Mrs. Wilkson," he thought, "This is my wife. How could any man tell him not to contact my own wife?" The fifty feet to their front door looked to him like fifty miles. Suddenly the entire Susan/divorce thing seemed like a bad dream, one in which he was the star character. He replaced the figurine of Jesus, in the correct direction, and walked slowly back to his car. Now he wished that he could be discovered, but no one had seen him.

The following day was Christmas Eve and Jimmy was off work. About mid-morning, he found a phone booth and made one phone call. "Pastor, Jimmy Wilkson is on the phone for you," the church secretary announced.

"Pastor Heffernan speaking."

"This is Jimmy Wilkson. Please don't come down on me, because I just couldn't handle that right now. I am all messed up and need to talk to someone and I thought of you."

“Jimmy, my brother, I have been praying and fasting for this one phone call for six months. I will be available for you any time at any place, and no one will ever know we met, unless you want them to know.”

An hour later, at a small coffee shop in an obscure part of town, the two men met for what was to have been lunch. Both ordered food that neither one touched. Jimmy confessed everything to his pastor. He sought advice on what to do. Jimmy did not even catch the part of his story, when telling about the manger display, that he commented, “As soon as I touched Jesus something changed.”

Pastor Heffernan advised Jimmy that if he was serious, and he sensed that he was, he had to move out of Susan's immediately. The pastor also pledged his time for counseling for both Jimmy and Millie, and assured him, once again, that no one would know they had met until Jimmy wanted them to know.

Jimmy returned to Susan's home within an hour, thankful to not find her at home. He packed up his belongings, and left a note with his door key. He never saw Susan again.

He then checked into a motel and spent the balance of Christmas Eve afternoon reading a Gideon Bible and crying out to God. He was shocked to discover that God still spoke to him through His Word, as verse after verse came alive to him. He suspected the Gideons would understand why he would be taking that Bible with him that he was marking up.

During the past two weeks, Millie had experienced very high and very low days. She had been dreading Christmas Eve without Jimmy. They had always gone to that candlelight service and had sat in the same place for as long as she could recall.

At noon on Christmas Eve, as she was leaving work, a male co-worker had invited her out for a date that evening. “No one should be alone on Christmas Eve,” he added with a strange little wink.

At the same hour as Jimmy was pouring his heart out to their Pastor, Millie had accepted her first date in almost 30 years. She reasoned that Jimmy was going on with his life and divorcing her, so why should she grow old alone?

That evening, when her date came to pick her up, she did not answer the door. She had sensed in the spirit that what she was about to do was wrong. She had just survived another attempt from the enemy to destroy all that God was doing, unseen, in their marriage.

As soon as her date's car pulled away, Millie was out her door and on the way to the candlelight service. She decided to sit in a different area, far removed from that pew that brought back so many memories.

As usual on Christmas Eve, the church was crowded with strangers. She sat near no one she recognized. After the candles were lit, the congregation was led in singing “Joy To The

World". Much like she had done in front of their home when their lawn decorations were first unveiled, she closed her eyes and pretended to hear Jimmy's off-key singing of his favorite Christmas carol. Tears flowed from Millie's closed eyes as she imagined that she was listening to Jimmy. By the third verse, she had isolated those poor attempts to sing. That IS Jimmy! By the light of hundreds of candles, she followed that voice, afraid that her emotions were playing tricks on her, and that she was about to be disappointed once again.

By the time she reached the aisle, where they would have been found sitting together on Christmas Eve before all this mess, she had broken into a run. She found Jimmy, singing loudly, clutching a Gideon Bible to his chest with one hand, and the other hand holding a lighted candle, raised high in praise to our Lord God.

Neither Jimmy nor Millie can tell you a thing about how the candlelight service was dismissed on Christmas Eve. The first they recall is being surrounded by Pastor Heffernan and his wife. Word of their restoration spread quickly to friends who quickly gathered at their side. The two tissues Mrs. Heffernan offered did nothing to stop the tears that flowed from both of the Wilkson's. Merry Christmas, dear friends. There is much healing to be done but this had indeed become Millie's Christmas.

- Bob Steinkamp

Rejoice Marriage Ministries, Inc.
Bob and Charlyne Steinkamp
Post office Box 10548
Pompano Beach, Florida 33061 USA
<http://rejoiceministries.org>

Copyright© 2007 Rejoice Marriage Ministries Inc®-All rights reserved. **Before republishing this story in any form, please see our Reprint Permission page**
<http://rejoiceministries.org/reprint.html>