

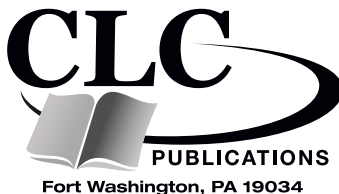
THE RED FEATHER

THE RED FEATHER

A Christmas Story for Every Season

*A true account of the
incredible power of love and forgiveness*

Tom Elliff



The Red Feather

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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Cover design by Mitch Bolton.

Dedicated to

Jewell Canille Carter Elliff

With gratitude
for a lifetime of
extravagant love.

Jesus was all the world to her.

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Prologue

FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS I've been telling the story of the red feather, usually during the Christmas season—but not always. *The Red Feather* is a true story. I know it is true, because it happened to me, and to my family, both immediate and extended.

I also know the story of the red feather is true because it defies human imagination. While many people can identify with this story's beginning, far too few people can identify with its remarkable ending. That's why, after telling this story to multiplied thousands of people, I have decided to put it into writing.

Now, my sister and two brothers might argue a little over the minute details in the story of the red feather, and that's because each one of us has a tendency to selectively file things away in the library of our memory. But we all agree that the story is true, and that it's worth the time it will take for you to read it.

I know that some of you who are reading this have lives that seem impossibly tangled. "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14), God once asked

Abraham. Right now, you may feel the answer to that question is, “Yes! My problems are too difficult for anyone to solve, even the Lord.” My prayer is that this little book will plant the seeds of faith and hope within your heart. You see, not even *your* problems are too difficult for God to solve. What’s so amazing is that He actually delights in solving problems just like yours. I know this is so because, as the story you’re about to read will prove, He has done that very thing for me!

Of all the challenges that face us, I think the most burdensome are relational, that is, how we get along with others. And of all the different kinds of relational challenges we face, I think that family problems are the most important for us to resolve successfully. But family problems can also be some of the most difficult for us to deal with effectively!

Over the years, my own family has experienced many kinds of challenges: an automobile accident that left a daughter severely injured; a house completely destroyed by fire and another dwelling destroyed by a tornado just three months later; the untimely deaths of three of our parents, each after a lingering illness; and my wife’s recent battle with cancer, a battle that ended with her victorious entry into heaven, a battle I chronicled in *The Unwanted Gift*. That’s just a short list! But the single

greatest problem I have ever experienced was a family problem. Though it remains difficult for me to do so, I want to tell you about it.

My struggle was in the area of forgiveness. You see, no one can live an effective, joy-filled life without learning how to forgive. And those who can truly forgive are those who have themselves experienced the complete forgiveness of God. Now I know that this is true, because I have experienced that very thing myself.

What about a family problem that seems impossible to resolve satisfactorily? What if tragic decisions have already been made, and people have been deeply wounded as a result? What if those problems include serious physical illness, or even death? Can those problems have a suitable solution? They certainly can! And I can tell you how.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'd better start at the beginning. My story begins in a small town in southern Arkansas, during the Christmas season of 1946.

1

Christmas 1946

“THERE!” exclaimed Mother as she stood on tiptoe and stretched to place the red feather in the uppermost branches of the Christmas tree. “That’s just what that tree needed, don’t you think?”

My mother’s eyes, green with a hint of brown, sparkled with excitement. A wide smile broke across her face as she turned, first toward my sister and then to me, her long, graceful arms folded in satisfaction. My sister, Sandy, and I stood on either side of her, gazing up at the tree. We were convinced it must surely be the most wonderful Christmas tree in the entire world.

“It’s beautiful!” gasped Sandy.

“Wow, Mommy!” I added with a squeal of delight before quickly returning to play with the remnants of the decorations that were scattered across the hardwood floor.

In reality, the Christmas tree was only sparsely decorated. With the close of the Second World War, our nation was struggling to recover its economic equilibrium. Our small town traded primarily on the produce of the surrounding farms and we were especially feeling the postwar impact.

Lake Village, Arkansas clings fiercely to the willowed banks of Lake Chicot in the southeastern corner of the state and only a few miles from the Mississippi River. In a large sweeping curve resembling an oxbow, Lake Chicot follows an earlier path of the Mississippi River for over twenty miles. It was to this small town along Lake Chicot that my father brought his young family in 1944 when he assumed the pastorate of the town's First Baptist Church.

We lived in the church parsonage, a comfortable house provided by the church for its pastor and his family. The parsonage was ideally situated just down the street from the church and across the road from the lake. In addition to his family responsibilities and those associated with pastoring his church flock, my father was also the proud owner of two goats and a large blue roan horse. The goats provided much-needed milk for our family. The horse provided a recreational outlet for my dad, until it went blind—a sad fact discovered only

when it was spooked by the sound of its own hoofbeats on a wooden bridge, throwing my surprised father to the ground.

Early on, our family made a tradition of decorating the Christmas tree on the weekend following the Thanksgiving holiday, a practice that remains in my own home to this day. Though not quite three years of age at the time, I still possess several vivid memories of our Christmas in 1946, including the gifts I received on that Christmas morning: a box of wooden soldiers cut out by my father on a small jigsaw, a complete set of twenty-six alphabet blocks, and a plastic ball with a face painted on it. But on that night in 1946, very few decorations ornamented the somewhat gangly spruce that had been harvested from the woods nearby and brought home that very evening by my father. The tree filled the house with a wonderful aroma I still associate with Christmas. The tree's decorations included one long strand of popcorn, carefully threaded by my five-year-old sister, Sandy, and a multicolored chain made of construction paper loops that I had glued together with the help of my mother. As a final touch, my mother methodically layered the tree's branches with store-bought tinsel "icicles."

"It still needs something," said Mother, seemingly in deep thought as we played around the sparsely decorated

tree. “There’s just something missing, Tommy,” she said as she cocked her head toward me. “But I’m not sure what it is.”

While Mother stood, hands on hips, squinting intently at the tree, our attention was drawn to the sound of an automobile as it turned from the road and into our drive. The engine sputtered to a stop. We heard the sharp ratcheting sound of the emergency brake as the driver pulled it on, followed by the squeak of an automobile door as it was first opened then firmly shut.

“I’ll get it,” said my father, walking toward the front door. “I can’t imagine who’d be coming to see us on a cold night like this.”

Situated as it was on such a large lake, the winter nights in Lake Village could seem remarkably frigid for a town so far south and so close to the Louisiana state line. This was one of those cold nights when the thick fog seemed to slip around a person’s shoulders like a second coat, drawing warmth out of the body and replacing it with an icy embrace.

My father’s question was answered by the unmistakable clicking of a lady’s high-heeled shoes on the wooden steps leading up to our front porch. Undoubtedly, this meant we were receiving a visit from Mrs. Dr. Johnson, the wife of Dr. Johnson, our local physician. In those

days, we didn't think it proper to refer to older adults by their first names. And the "Dr." in her title did not mean she was an actual medical doctor but was simply a means of distinguishing her from the other Mrs. Johnsons in the community.

Both Dr. Johnson and his wife were members of the church and noted for their gracious and generous spirits. Though just a young boy, I was captivated by Mrs. Dr. Johnson, who usually sat right in front of us on Sunday mornings. I was especially intrigued by the fox stole that was often draped over her shoulders, especially since the stole sported both the tail and the head of the fox—nose, eyes, ears and all. My mother would reach out to grab my arm as I attempted to touch the fox's nose. Putting her finger to her mouth, Mother would shake her head from side to side, signaling that I was to be quiet, sit still, and keep my hands to myself.

"You get in here and out of the cold!" insisted my father, smiling broadly as he opened the door to greet Mrs. Dr. Johnson. Mrs. Dr. Johnson was possessed of a bearing that bespoke her position in our community. She never just entered a room; she "arrived." In my young mind she was the closest thing to royalty I'd ever met. Now she was standing there in our doorway, dressed regally in a warm coat, that intriguing fox stole

and the customary hat. In those days, no decent person, man or woman, would be caught dead in public without a hat, even in small towns like Lake Village. Trips to the store on Saturdays, for instance, required decent dress, and that always included a hat. Hats had a way of signaling one's position in society. Ladies, in particular, usually accumulated an array of hats to be worn on various occasions, and they stored them carefully in boxes placed high on their closet shelves. New hats, when such could be afforded, were always chosen carefully and worn proudly.

"Merry Christmas! My, what a lovely tree! Hello Sandy, Tommy, and Jewell. No, but thanks anyway, Pastor." In one breath, Mrs. Dr. Johnson simultaneously greeted each of us in the room, paid due respect to our tree, and declined the customary invitation to be seated.

"No time now," she stated matter-of-factly. "I've got a lot to do before I sleep tonight." She then held out before us an exquisitely wrapped gift box. "Here, Jewell," she smiled, referring to my mother whose name was truly suited to her personality. "This is for you. Merry Christmas!"

"For me?" Mother gasped, obviously both surprised and excited. "Whatever could it be?"

"Well, just open it and you'll find out," replied Mrs. Dr. Johnson. "I sure hope you like it. When I saw it, I

said, "That's just for Jewell.' Go ahead. Don't just stand there, open it!"

My mother sat down in a chair, placed the gift box in her lap, and began carefully removing the bow and wrapping paper, intending to save both for use later on. Opening the box, she cautiously lifted the tissue paper covering its contents inside.

"Why, it's absolutely gorgeous!" Mother exclaimed, shaking her head in amazement. "I've never seen such a beautiful hat in my life!"

"Well don't just look at it, for goodness' sake, take it out of the box," insisted Mrs. Dr. Johnson. "I think your family might like to see it, don't you?" By now, Sandy and I were at Mother's side, eager to see what the box contained.

Slowly, Mother drew the contents from the box and held it up for us all to see. She was right. It was indeed beautiful—the most beautiful hat any of us had ever seen. The hat itself was made of a dark-green felt material, with matching green netting draped across the front. But it was neither the color of the hat nor the abundance of netting that set it apart from any other we'd ever seen. What distinguished the hat was a large, bright-red feather firmly attached to one side, just above a gently curved brim.

“Oh, Mother,” said my sister excitedly, “let me see it!”

“Me too!” I chimed in, actually wanting my mother to put it on my head.

“Not right now,” protested my mother, turning her attention to Mrs. Dr. Johnson. “How can I ever thank you for such an absolutely beautiful gift?” Mother asked, rising from her chair and holding the hat up out of the reach of her eager children.

“It’s just my way of saying Merry Christmas,” replied Mrs. Dr. Johnson. “Now really, I must go. Merry Christmas to you all! By the way, Jewell, I’m really looking forward to seeing how that hat looks on you this Sunday.”

With those last words, Mrs. Dr. Johnson stepped to the door, waited as my father opened it, nodded her gratitude, and departed. My father closed the door behind her, and we stood listening to the click of heels as she descended the front steps, walked to the car, started it, and drove away into the foggy night.

Oddly, when Sandy and I looked up at our mother, we were taken with the fact that she was *not* admiring her beautiful new hat. Instead, she was looking toward the Christmas tree, eyes slightly squinted and apparently in deep thought. After pensively gazing at the tree, Mother then shifted her attention to the hat in her hands.

Turning it from side to side, she ran her fingers along the edges of the red feather. With an uncharacteristic abruptness, Mother suddenly grasped the red feather, pulled it from the hat, and held it up for her surprised audience to see. Then standing on tiptoe and reaching as high as she could, Mother placed the red feather in the uppermost branches of the tree, just below the top. Before any of us could protest, Mother exclaimed, “There! That’s just what that tree needed!”

My mother, in one deliberate and extravagantly generous act, had just illustrated for her family the true meaning of Christmas. In that decisive moment, she had sacrificed something of beauty and value, something that by all rights she would naturally have been expected to keep and wear proudly for others to see—and she had done it all for the benefit of those whom she loved.

That night, Mother’s joyous exclamation was bound to have echoed the sentiments of the heavenly Father who, on that first Christmas long ago, might have looked down on that humble scene in Bethlehem and exclaimed, “There! That’s just what this old, sin-cursed world needed—a Savior who is Christ the Lord!”