

ERNIE

Cindy doesn't know what to do with Grandpa Ernie. He is 96 and just sits in his wheelchair all day, staring out into space. He hasn't said a word in years, and she doesn't think he knows any of his friends and family or even what's going on around him anymore. He is gotten up and dressed every morning, fed and changed when he needs it, and put to bed at night, but he is becoming more and more of a burden for her and her growing family. She loves Ernie and wants him to be comfortable and cared for, but Cindy is facing physical and emotional exhaustion, and, frankly, she and her husband have been arguing a lot about what to do with her father's dad. She's already 40 years old, and he kids are growing up all at once it seems. Daddy would have been 69 this year if he had survived Viet Nam, and Grandpa Ernie is really the only father she's ever known. That's what makes it so hard to decide what to do - that and the fact that he seems to be completely lost in his dementia, 24/7.

Ernie spent four years as a Marine in the South Pacific during WWII, but seldom spoke of his experiences with his family or friends - it was just too painful to recall. He had told his family that he had made a deal with God while lying in a muddy foxhole with mortars exploding all around and deadly snipers hidden in the trees. If God would get him back to his home and family, he would live the best life he could, and not bother God for anything again in his whole life. When he came back home, he got married, got a job driving a truck, and started in on a family. Through the years, Ernie lived a good life, raised his two sons and a daughter, and, of all things, fell in love with motorcycles. He basically lived a trucker/biker's life of freedom, and was involved with many charities and veterans' events throughout his middle years. He was one of those guys that would stop to help anyone, and give the shirt off of his back, practicing the brotherhood of the road. Today, Ernie's legs are bent and his feet unable to bear his weight. His once helpful hands are curled and clinched, unable to grasp or hold onto anything. Now that he is the one who was really in need, Cindy thinks, it is too late for him to ask God, or anyone else for anything.

Cindy has invited the pastor over to pray with and talk to Ernie about spiritual things, but she knows she is grasping at straws. Ernie is obviously too far gone to understand anything, especially about God. As they sit out on the porch in the warm sunlight, the kind-hearted minister explains what God has done for us. "He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into this sin-darkened, war-torn world to be the light of the world. Because the wages of sin is death, and all who sin will die because of



it, Jesus came as the perfect Lamb of God, to die in our place for our sins. Because He died for us, we can have life in him. Because he rose from the grave, we can live forever, if we turn from sin and believe in him." Ernie just stares out across the road. Cindy's fears are confirmed by the seeming lack of awareness on Ernie's part. His mind doesn't work anymore. Every so often, when a Harley comes roaring down the road where they live, Cindy thinks maybe she sees Ernie's eyes light up a bit, but it's probably just wishful thinking.

One of Ernie's favorite holidays has always been Memorial Day, and Cindy takes him down along Main Street to watch the parade. They roll Grandpa to his special vantage point just as the parade begins, and one of the great grand kids uses duct tape to attach an American flag to the back of Ernie's chair. From that spot, Ernie impassively watches the life that he had fought for pass before his eyes. The honor guard, the bands, the fire trucks, the Red Hat Ladies, all pass by to the cheers of the crowd, and throw candy to Ernie's great grand children. At the end of the procession, the local motorcycle club rides in formation, noisily proclaiming the end of the parade by revving their big twins and waving their American flags, their POW flags, and their "Loud Pipes Save Lives" flags. As they near Ernie's position, they see his flag and his USMC hat, and the whole line of bikes form a single file before him. As they slowly pass by, each biker raises his hand in respectful salute to a mute and motionless Marine. A grateful Cindy watches the bikers pass with tear-stained eyes, but does not notice when Ernie slowly raises his right hand and gently touches his forehead above his right eyebrow with his straightened fingers. His great grand kids are busy collecting their candy as he slowly lowers his arm. His family is unaware that he has moved at all - that he is aware. But God knows. "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

Ernie is aware of God, of life, of love. He has made peace with God, and experiences the peace of God. Are you aware that, deep inside, He is calling to you? Pastor Sam Downey
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