What is a tsar? A tsar (pronounced as “zar”) is a title for European supreme rulers of countries like Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia from the 10th to the 20th century. This word is derived from the Latin word “Caesar”, and is intended to mean “Emperor”. The tsar in this story was an emperor of Russia. His name is Alexander Pavlovich, also known as Alexander I of Russia, and he reigned from 1801-1825.

At the start of his reign, Alexander was not a good leader. He was also not faithful to his wife (Princess Elizabeth), had no religious convictions, and did not prepare himself or his men for warfare. He only knew how to dream and boast of what he could do. As a result, when Napoleon and his army fought against him and his army, Tsar Alexander failed to direct his men, leaving them in disarray, and himself in great shame.

Who was this Napoleon who fought the Russians? He was a great French military commander. He was very clever and brave and had won many victories in battle against other European nations. It was probably no surprise that he could
defeat Russia too. But after defeating Russia this first time, things started to change for the better for Alexander and his country, and for the worse for Napoleon. What changed, and why?

First, Tsar Alexander was humbled by his country’s first defeat under him. He began to see the ugly side of his life – his pride, immorality and empty dreams. He also thought about his friend, Prince Galitsin, who was once a playboy notorious for his outrageous public life but had become an entirely different person after he professed to have known a living Saviour. Amidst his shame and public ridicule, and with the persuasion of Galitsin, Alexander turned to the Scriptures and often had Galitsin talk to him about spiritual things. Alexander’s search for God had just begun, but more troubles were in store for him that would eventually turn him to the Lord, and change Russia.

Second, Tsar Alexander’s little daughter born to Princess Elizabeth developed tuberculosis and died. The couple’s sorrow brought them together again although Alexander had been unfaithful to his wife. The girl’s death also made Alexander more aware that Someone greater than he was in control of life and eternity.

The third life-turning event for Tsar Alexander involved another setback in his military campaigns. Napoleon had come again to attack Russia. His artillery, cavalry and infantry fought the Russians on the
Moscow Road and forced them to retreat. The people of Moscow were also frantic and left the city. For unknown reasons, the whole city, which was the capital and pride of Russia, was set ablaze so when Napoleon and his men entered it, nothing but flames greeted them.

While all seemed lost for Alexander and Russia, it was just the beginning of victory, and more so a time which brought Alexander’s search for God to a climax. He strategised to keep Moscow abandoned and Napoleon’s army in it until the harsh winter closed in on them, and then defeat him. He also realised that through the death of Moscow, Russia could be saved – a parallel of his own life, how that by the death of his pride and self-love, he could be saved by the Lord, just as Prince Galitsin had been. So Alexander fell before God and prayed. He acknowledged his sinfulness and pleaded for forgiveness. God heard his prayers, and he was no more a seeking soul, but a man who knew and walked with God. He wrote to Prince Galitsin – “My faith is now sincere and ardent. It grows firmer everyday and I taste joys of a kind I never knew before. For several years now, I have been seeking my way. The reading of the Scriptures, which I know very superficially, has done me a benefit which is not possible to express in words. Pray to the Almighty Father, and to our Lord Jesus, and to the Spirit… that They may guide me and confirm me in the only way of salvation.”

As planned by Alexander, Napoleon and his army faced near total destruction by the terrible Russian winter. They were forced to withdraw into their own land by the Russians and other nations in league.
with Tsar Alexander. The tsar then marched into Paris to take over. But Paris simply surrendered without violence. It was March 1814. Tsar Alexander, already a Christian then, chose not to humiliate or hurt the French people. However, together with the other forces, he exiled Napoleon to the Isle of Elba, an island near Italy. And this was the start of Napoleon's downfall.

Having defeated Napoleon the French, what did Tsar Alexander also do for his own people in Russia? It is recorded that he established a university system; founded a system of over 2,000 local schools; freed slaves; and helped the poor. He knew his people well too, particularly the Christian congregations in the main cities. Although Russia was full of government officials who were corrupt, Alexander upheld a character of compassion and uprightness true to that of a Christian. He had become the most kindly ruler the Russian people ever had.

Children, we see in this beautiful story how it was God and God alone who ordered the events in the life of Tsar Alexander – not only to defeat Napoleon and save Russia, but also to save Alexander’s own soul and mould him unto Christlikeness. As clay in the hand of our Master and Lord, may we all humble ourselves before God and yield to Him as Alexander did! “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).
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*Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.* – Jeremiah 6:16