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## MY TESTIMONY

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I want to begin by praising God for the grace He has shown me. There have been many times in my life that He could have given up on me. I am so thankful though that His mercy and love are so abundant and were so graciously shown to me.

This was first seen in the family He gave me. I grew up on the campus of Heritage Baptist University, a small Bible college in Indiana. I was surrounded by people who were striving to live for God, and this was definitely true in my family. My grandpa was president of Heritage, and he and my grandmother had sacrificed much to make the college thrive. My own parents had too. They were singularly focused on preparing the future leaders of the church.

Subsequently from a young age, I was taught about God and His plan for salvation. I was in church three times a week at a minimum as well as special events that the college would have. I also heard the gospel at home though often I struggled with assurance of my salvation. Looking back, I see that I associated my sinning with whether I was truly saved so I would often pray to be saved when I had done wrong. Even so, I do believe that I truly accepted Christ at Hoosier Hills Baptist Camp during my elementary years. Final assurance of my salvation though didn't come until I was in college.

By five years old, I had begun to travel to churches to promote the college along with the rest of my family. I was taught to play the harmonica which really began my love for music though I never particularly liked to play that instrument. I also didn't enjoy waking up early on Sundays or often giving up my entire weekends to travel around the mid-west for the college. I began to build up bitterness in me that I was giving up my time to promote "my dad's work." I felt I was being used and as I became a teenager it often spilled out when my parents would limit what I wanted to do.

It is hard for me to pinpoint the cause of my anger. While my parents were not perfect, I do not blame them for my rebellion. I know that they loved me though they often were at a loss with how to deal with me. In reality, I believe that my rebellion was centered in a strong will that would fight and argue to get what it wanted. When that was denied, I responded with hate and anger as I grew older.

The results were especially evident during my junior high years. In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I got expelled from two different schools. I became increasingly withdrawn and rebellious from my parents. I was going down a dark road. My parents came to the conclusion that there was nothing more they could do and contacted a boarding academy in Oklahoma.

I began my stay there in February 2002. The time I was there was very lonely which was in no way helped by the staff. They strived to get you to obey through fear and intimidation. While it did work, it never produced real change in most of the boys. We merely complied.

In spite of the lack of love, God was working. First, I definitely grew to appreciate the love of my family. While many of my family would write, my dad wrote to me multiple times a week. This was in contrast to many boys who barely got any letters. It showed me that while I was no longer around, I was not forgotten. Also the visits that my parents and grandma made were a tremendous blessing and encouragement to me.

Secondly, I had decided that I would use this time for my own good. This caused me to focus on my guitar and basketball interests as well as my schooling. While I had always enjoyed the former, I had never taken the latter seriously. This began a love of learning that would have life altering results later.

Lastly, God began to change me spiritually. At first, I had decided to play along and act like I had changed until my parents allowed me to come home. I did this for the first seven months. Things began to change though when my parents came to visit me in October. My mom challenged me to read my Bible each day, and I promised I would. Though the boarding academy mandated that we do personal devotions, the reality is that nobody did. While I wouldn't do it for them, I decided to do it for my mom. As I read the Bible each day, God began to truly soften my heart. Though I was still a long way off from renouncing my anger and pride, God had begun to do a new work inside of me.

I still remember the phone call from my dad that I was coming home. It was on a Saturday and I had taken the call in the dining room. I had recently got in trouble and had certain privileges revoked. I thought that the staff was going to recommend that I not go home for Christmas. Instead, my dad was calling to say I was coming home for good. I had tremendous joy in my heart. What felt like prison and isolation was coming to an end.

Looking back, there definitely is no fondness of my time there. I do praise God though for how he worked in spite of the circumstances. I also appreciate the courage of my dad. By this time, he was president of Heritage. By sending me away, he was admitting to all the pastors and staff that he could no longer raise me. Allowing his reputation to take a hit for my good was a brave act and I'm thankful for it.

Once home, I continued to focus on advancing myself. I worked to get better at guitar and basketball. I started my own business, and I took harder courses in school in hopes of becoming valedictorian of my class. I completed all the required classes to graduate by 11<sup>th</sup> grade so I decided to use my senior year doing college level work. I taught myself physics, accounting, economics, and two years of calculus while also taking Greek at the seminary level.

While all seemed to be going according to plan, a new sin had been growing in my heart...the exaltation of myself. During my elementary and junior high years, I had desperately wanted to be popular. I had gone down all kinds of paths so that I could have the approval of my peers. Being away in Oklahoma had changed that. I developed an attitude of self-sufficiency and superiority. I no longer needed the approval of my peers because I thought I was smarter and more talented than any of them. While I had several friends, I wouldn't have been that sad to lose them because I didn't need them. I was solely focused on myself.

Graduation was coming, and I had realized my goal of being valedictorian. It was everything I had worked for and dreamed of. But, there was a problem...I had to give a speech. I absolutely had no idea what to say. I wanted it to be impactful, not simply a bunch of thank you's. As I was talking with my mom about this, she mentioned to do something from the heart. Out of this thought, I decided to entitle my speech "Doing more for God." Other than God's grace, I have

no idea why I chose this topic. During high school, my thoughts had exclusively been on myself. Serving God was nowhere in my plans. This caused a lot of soul searching as I was preparing. I knew that unless I changed, I would be the biggest hypocrite during the commencement.

As I lay in bed one night, I finally offered up this prayer: "Dear God, whatever you want for my life, I want." "I have no desire to be a pastor, but if that is what you want, please change my desires." "No matter what profession you have for me though, my life will ultimately be about serving you." This was the hardest prayer of my life. I finally had surrendered to God and His leading. Everything that had happened through my life had been leading up to this moment. God had always been working to bring me to a place of dependence on Him.

I originally had wanted to go into business at a secular university but decided to attend Heritage Baptist College for one year. While there I began serving in a local church by ministering to kids that lived in poverty. Slowly over time, I began to see that God had changed my desires. More than anything, I wanted to serve Him as a pastor.

Since then, I have seen God continue to grow me in my calling. He has given me the inner conviction that He has called me to serve Him with my life, and I am so excited to see the path He has for me. I have no desire for anything else.

One of the greatest gifts God has given me is a wife that puts Jesus first in her life. She has been such a blessing to me and is an amazing woman who makes me a better pastor.

Looking back, I can clearly see the gracious hand of God throughout my life. What often times have seemed like trials by fire have actually been His purging and refining of my life. Jesus Christ is the best friend I have, and I am so glad that He never gave up on me.

Matthew 11:28-30

(28) Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

(29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

(30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.