

Hope Church Testimony

August 2, 2009

I'm Clay Larsen. We've been coming to Hope Church for 13 years now. I did not grow up in a Christian home. I had very nice parents; they both worked in the education field and, all in all, provided for me a pleasant and uneventful childhood. In retrospect, they had an unhappy marriage and eventually divorced when I was in college. But as a young kid, though, you just don't realize that.

I was really a well behaved, good kid, very good in school and, though I carried a chubby body through adolescence, I was always pretty talented in sports. My wife Susan would probably point out that I am regressing in my chubbiness at this stage of my life as well. What is an interesting note about my upbringing is that I have no recollection of my parents ever taking any opportunity to proactively or intentionally teach me right from wrong.

The first tug from God that I can recall came early on when I was just 4 years old in one of our infrequent visits to church. That memory was hearing the great old hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers." Funny thing to remember something like that so vividly, that is, until you recognize in hindsight that it was the beginning step of several that God would provide to me over the course of the next 25 years.

The second subtle tug from God came in High School when I was attending a very academically rigorous private school. I was fortunate to have been a very good student and, in an English class my senior year, the teacher made an allusion to some biblical reference strictly from a literary perspective. I can distinctly remember walking across the high school parking lot that afternoon saying to myself that I ought read the Bible some time in order to be intellectually "well rounded".

From high school I thought I might be able to play some college golf so I decided to go down south and attended Wake Forest in North Carolina. There I got my third tug from God when I got involved in a summer job opportunity selling books door to door for a Christian based company. It was a remarkably rewarding experience but it was also the hardest job I ever had or will ever have both physically and psychologically. I was exposed to the Gospel somewhat for the first time so spiritually I now knew about Jesus but I didn't know Him.

I did not feel at home in the south. Though it now attracts many more students from the north, back then at Wake I was still considered a “Yankee”. So as it turns out I was able to enter into Yale as a transfer student and then went on to get a rather obnoxious sounding degree in something called Molecular Biophysics & Biochemistry. Both at Yale and in the next few years of my young adulthood I knew no Christians whatsoever, or at least any that identified themselves as such. I had no guiding posts. No mentors. I still had that “good kid” streak in me so that I was not on the offense in seeking out sin, but I certainly had no defense against it when it came to my doorstep. There was no moral foundation that had been poured into me, so that my innate “good kid” was really not translating into being a “good adult”.

The fourth tug at my heart from God came when I met my future wife Susan. She had grown up in a Christian home and her father had even been a pastor earlier in his career. When we got serious about our relationship, we knew we wanted to go to church and raise kids in that environment. We made the commitment to God as a basis of marriage but here in New England we didn’t have a good church to get plugged in to so I still had scarce little understanding of any of the details of Christianity.

Right after getting married a job opportunity moved us to Cleveland and there God led us to a great church where a young Scottish Pastor named Alistair Begg preached. Sad to say my first observation coming into the parking lot of the large High School where they gathered was that there were actually a lot of nice cars there. My second observation was that the audience had many young professionals and young couples that were more of our age.

I learned, though, over the next few biblically based sermons that a man named Jesus claimed to be equal to God and that he led a sinless life and that he did not simply purport himself to be a good teacher or a prophet. There were documented miracles that had never been seen before that gave proof to his claims. And this Jesus made the outrageous claim to be able to forgive people of their sins and for these assertions the hypocritical leaders of that day had him crucified and killed on a cross. This Jesus died and then rose again three days later. His resurrection was unarguably witnessed by more than 500 people and those who believed in Him were given the Holy Spirit to dwell within them and guide them in their actions and choices and these people were

completely transformed. And all of these circumstances had been predicted hundreds of years earlier and were incontrovertibly documented with early manuscripts more than any other ancient writings in history. These biblical messages did not just try to pull on my heartstrings. They appealed directly to my skeptical New England private school and Ivy League intellect.

A few weeks later we got a call from a couple who lived in our town who led a week night Fellowship in their home that was referred to as a Flocks Group. We showed up not knowing anybody and it was a nice social gathering at first until they got down to studying in 1 Peter. Now anybody who has led a small group knows the uncomfortable silence that can ensue when you ask a question about the verse you are supposed to be studying and you get deafening silence and fidgeting from people in the room. Well to me the Holy Spirit and scripture came alive right at that point that night and I could not wait to chime in on virtually every verse and question.

The last and most important pull from God came just a few weeks later when I came to reflect upon the sins I had encountered along the ways of my young adulthood. I was swept away with remorse and bitter brokenness of my fallenness. But most importantly I knew that I was forgiven not because of any good things I did as a good student and good athlete. I had failed miserably in being a good person if you looked at everything I had done compared to the awesome holiness of God. But I knew then with complete confidence that Jesus had paid the price for me on the cross. And the forgiveness of sins was a real thing if you just accepted what God in His grace was giving to you. This experience of a new birth that people wrote about 2,000 years ago in that literary book called the Bible were exactly the same things I was personally experiencing then because I was faithful to respond to those tugs along the way.

There is an interesting verse about obedience in the Gospel of John chapter 14 verse 21 where Jesus says ***“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”*** That I think perfectly describes the process of personally getting to know Jesus, not just knowing about him.

I think the experience of how each of us responds to God is much like a tug of war match. God gives each of us the rope and lays it in our hands and at multiple points of time in our lives he tugs at us. And there really are three reactions we can have. We

can hold on tight, dig in our heels and keep pulling in our own direction, choosing to take control over our own lives. The sad part in this situation is God will let you win that tug of war and you end up far away from him. Other people's reaction to God is to simply let go of the rope completely and deny that there even is a God. Sadly in this case, one will invariably wander completely off track with no connection to God whatsoever. And finally there are those who hang on to the rope, will tug against God occasionally, we may even let the rope slip in our hands a bit and lose some ground, but, in the end, we hold on and let God draw us to Him until we reach His side of the rope. You see that rope is not a game you might play in grade school or at a picnic. It is a lifeline for saving us from the inevitable punishment for our own sin. God gives us that rope because he loves us, not because he wants to bind us up in all kinds of rules.

Since coming to know Jesus as Lord of my life that relationship has not only transformed me into a new creation but it has taught me many things that are not discerned necessarily by the intellect but require God's wisdom to understand. Here are just five that I want to highlight that have been important to me:

- 1. Reading the Bible. It alone beyond any literary book written by man has the power of God in its words for those who seek it.
- 2. Getting plugged into "flocks" or small groups or home fellowships was critical for my spiritual growth. Logistically in our busy lives it is difficult, but God will honor your efforts. That is where both scripture and Christian friendships came alive for me.
- 3. Susan and I learned early on that the basis of marriage should be your marriage, not your kids. Long after the kids are gone your marriage will still be important. And if your marriage is strong, then your kids will be blessed.
- 4. The feeling of humility and having at some point in your life experienced brokenness is more of an indicator of spiritual maturity, not biblical fact knowledge.
- 5. And finally it made a huge difference in my understanding of complex and thorny theological issues if I just understood three seemingly simple words. These are words that you rarely hear people use in normal discourse outside the walls of church. They are justice, mercy and grace. And there are three simple definitions

for these that, once I knew them, then every book of the Bible I read and every sermon I hear makes more sense. Justice is getting what I deserve. And I certainly deserve condemnation for the sins I have committed in my life. Mercy is not getting what I deserve. Psalm 103 has a fantastic way of describing this truth: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; He does not treat as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” Finally and most importantly, grace is getting what I don’t deserve. In Ephesians 2:8,9 it says “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God b– not by works, so no one can boast.”

I pray that you will recognize the tugs God gives you, respond to them and confidently receive that awesome gift of eternal life.