

Memoir

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Preface

On October 12, 2002, I witnessed something extraordinary: the birth of my first son.

It's one of a select few moments in my life that leave me convinced in the existence of a loving God.

1 A Good Christian Boy

The year is 1975. I am three years old. It's Sunday morning, and I'm in our living room standing next to my father who is sitting in his Lay-Z-Boy recliner chair. I'm holding his hand, which really means I'm gripping his large index finger in my small fist. My mother is with us, sitting a few feet away in her recliner chair. Her arms are extended with her hands raised, palms facing upward in the posture of receiving from God. We're watching television. We're watching Oral Roberts. I know him by his swept-straight-back hairstyle and his speech which sounds very similar to my parents. My parents' eyes are closed. Roberts is leading us in prayer.

This tiny house in which we live is on Leland Street, which is located in San Pedro, California, a small city in the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Outside the air here is thick and briny from the Pacific Ocean only a few miles away.

In this same house I've had nightmares of a monster. They're so vivid and severe they wake me in the night and send me running and crying to my parents' bedroom. My mother wakes, gets out of bed, and together we go to the living room where she sits in her rocking recliner chair and I climb into her lap. There she rocks me, lays hands on me and prays for me, and sings "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." I can't see Jesus but I can imagine him because I've seen him in my picture Bible. He has long hair and a beard and wears long flowing robes. He smiles at the children who have gathered around him. Based on this image I can imagine him smiling at me, too, and this comforts me. Although I can't see him, I believe he is here in the living room with us, and between his presence and my mother's care, my terror subsides and I feel safe and calm.

Finally, it is a bright sunny morning in the first week of May. My grandmother has come to visit and the two of us are alone in the house. We look out the window to the street and watch the rising sun in the eastern sky. My parents' station wagon pulls up to our house and comes to a stop. My mother steps out of the car from the passenger side and retrieves something from the back seat. My father joins her and they turn and slowly approach the house. In her arms my mother is holding a small, tightly-swaddled infant. "Look, Jack," my grandmother says in her Texan drawl. "That's your sister." I'm excited to see the new baby.

These are my earliest memories. They take me back to the specific time and place where I entered the world. They are also my earliest memories of God. My journey begins here.

My parents were country people. They came from the "cotton country" of west Texas. My mother came from a rural family. Her father, a plumber and farmer, and her mother, a

hairdresser. They belonged to the Church of Christ. My father spent his childhood in the country and moved to the city from his high school years on. His father was a cotton buyer and his mother, a homemaker, was a Charismatic Christian and had the gift of tongues. They were married in Lubbock, Texas, in 1967. They moved to Tennessee where they lived for a time. Then they moved to Los Angeles for better job prospects and to be near my father's relatives and start a family.

For a while they tried without success to conceive. Then one night in 1971, my father laid his loving hands on my mother, most likely her head and shoulder, and prayed for her "in the Spirit." Suddenly something like electricity shot through my mother. Her legs fully extended themselves and she lept up and prayed exuberantly in an unfamiliar tongue for hours afterwards. Soon after, she learned from her physician that the condition that prevented her from conceiving was gone and that she was pregnant with me, her first child. Nine months later, I was born. Each of my parents has told me that story, and their accounts match.

In the late 1970s, we moved to Pasadena, California, which brought us closer to family. In a city near us lived my father's aunt Barbra and uncle Frank and their son, Kelly, who later went to seminary and church ministry. There also was my father's grandmother Rena who was the oldest woman I'd ever met. She frightened me a little, but she was a peaceful woman. For those few years, we gathered together to celebrate holidays. We said grace over big meals, and afterwards my sister and I played while the adults discussed doctrine and theology, quoting Scripture all throughout.

I remember these early years with fondness. Los Angeles in the 1970s was a big and exciting place to be a child. Life was fun and interesting, and I felt that I belonged, that I was loved. Behind it all, in the background, was God.

1.0.1 Albuquerque, 1979-1982

In 1979, when I was seven years old, we left Los Angeles and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. There my father had gotten a good job as an assistant pro at a country club which, for him, was a big step up in his career.

For me, it was a difficult move, because I was smitten with a girl in my first grade class. Leaving her broke my heart, the first of many heartbreaks to come.

Albuquerque was a step up for us. My father's job at the country club was prestigious and probably came with a decent salary that bought us a comparatively higher standard living than we had in Los Angeles. We bought what was for us a large house in a prestigious neighborhood--Sandia Heights--in the foothills of the Sandia Mountain Range to the east of the city. In this house, I had my own room, and my sister hers, and from its perch on a sloping hill, the house had a breathtaking view of the city to the west. The house also enjoyed some distance from neighboring houses, surrounded nearly on all sides by undeveloped mesa where I enjoyed playing with caution for snakes. From this house I most enjoyed seeing the annual hot

air balloon festival when it seemed the sky filled with colorful balloons which, from a distance, looked like candies.

Our Albuquerque years were hard. It was a difficult time for my parents. They seemed to fight all the time--terrible fights with shouting and screaming and crying and violence to property. My father worked long hours and was often in a bad mood. There were parties with drinking, and I didn't like how my father acted after he had been drinking. (Nor did my mother. My mother and grandmother did not get along, and my mother also had problems with Granny and Grandad.

We left under difficult circumstances. My father lost his job suddenly, and this hit him hard. There were days when he spent long hours in bed, and once, when he and my sister and I were out walking in the neighborhood, and he was carrying my sister, I heard him crying. For a time he searched for a new job, and he found the perfect position as the Head Pro at a city golf course in Phoenix. Things were looking up.

When we left, once again leaving was hard for me, because I had made friends and liked my school and become smitten with a girl.

My memories of faith over this time are dim. We did not pray over meals. We went to church on some Sundays. My parents went into the sanctuary while my sister and I went to Sunday school. Whatever faith we practiced as a family was probably my mother's doing. By this age, I had come to know Jesus as a friend. When I was eight years old, I saw Robert Powell's portrayal of Jesus in Franco Zeffirelli's miniseries Jesus of Nazareth. This made such a powerful impression on me that, at recess, a fellow Christian friend in my class and I would re-enact key scenes from the movie. (He always played Jesus while I played Pontius Pilate.) To this day, when I picture Jesus, I see Robert Powell.

1.0.2 Phoenix, 1982-1995

I took it on faith that Jesus "died for our sins" so that we could go to heaven and not hell, a place of eternal conscious torment.

Our home, like most Evangelical homes, was a biblical home. We saw the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. It was to be interpreted literally with a plain reading. The Bible was the authority. All this was taken for granted. Surely there was some verse that we could lift out of context to apply to our own needs. We went to churches and watched religious television that reinforced this. With no exposure to other Christian traditions or hermeneutics, we really had no reason to question it. I never wondered where the Bible actually came from.

Prophecy was a part of my experience. My mother was an avid viewer of religious television, particularly Trinity Broadcasting Network with Paul and Jan Crouch where Hal Lindsey was a regular guest and offered his latest prophecies based on current events. I lived with the hope of being swept up in the Rapture and the fear of being left behind to go through the Tribulation. I was also afraid of being annihilated at any time by nuclear war with the Russians.

From the sixth grade through half of seventh, I attended a private Evangelical school where I had many difficult times with peers. In my science class I learned about creation and evolution and in my history class I learned about dispensationalism. From seventh grade through half of ninth, I was home-schooled. When I entered high school, I found that I excelled academically but was very socially deficient.

Looking back on these years, I had the kind of faith I was taught to have: a healthy reverence and respect for the Almighty Father and a "personal relationship with Jesus." I prayed with some frequency. I believed as a historical fact everything found in the Bible and viewed every commandment and exhortation in it as binding to all people worldwide throughout all of human history. I believed that Jesus "died for my sins" and that the point of Christianity was to go to heaven and not hell. I hoped to be swept up in the Rapture and feared being left behind for the Tribulation. I believed in a supernatural realm of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels, demons, and Satan which actively influence human thoughts, emotions, attitudes, behavior, and thus human history, and that history was heading nowhere good. In these respects, fear was a very important part of my faith. The God in which I believed was a god who wanted obedience and would severely judge those who disobeyed. Above all else, God was a god of judgment.

I grew up in a world oriented toward salvation. There were two kinds of people in the world: the saved and the damned. And for all the scorn my family had toward Catholics for "rituals", what separated the saved from the damned in our world was one ritual: the Sinner's Prayer.

By this measure I was "saved" more times growing up than I can remember. The one I most remember was at a high school winter camp. A group of us high school kids from our church retreated to a camp in the mountains where we slept in cabins and spent much of our time playing games, singing songs in worship, and hearing sermons. On our final night, the youth pastor gave a compelling sermon, and this was followed by a period of quiet music and a pastor's voice gently inviting us to "give our lives once more to Jesus," especially as repentance from some sin. It worked on me. The sin about which I felt particularly guilty was a rock album: Rush, Moving Pictures. Moved by the music and wracked with guilt, I rose from my spot in the crowd and tiptoed my way to the side where one of several youth pastors was waiting to receive wayward young souls. When I sobbed my "confession" of listening to Satanic rock music and he helped me through a prayer of repentance, the look on his face gave me the distinct sense that he was working very hard to conceal his amusement.

This memory attests to my teenage faith. I truly believed that I had sinned, that I had gone against what God wanted of me. But I also truly believed that God forgave sin, and that from wherever I had gone, I could come back to Jesus.

By my high school years, a number of things happened that caused me to question the faith I was taught.

The first was a difficult conversation about faith between my parents and me. One night we as a family were driving home from a vacation. My father and I were sitting up front and began to engage me in conversation about faith, raising to my awareness some of his musings and

questions about various aspects of doctrine. My mother would have none of it. She lambasted my father for "corrupting" my faith and vigorously defended the orthodox positions on the matters we were discussing. This bothered me. Something seemed wrong with a faith so easily threatened by a few good questions and deductive thinking.

The second was a conflict with my father over evolution. That first year I was taking a speech communication course, and for my required speech I decided on an argumentative speech on creation over evolution. The night before my speech, I shared the speech with my father along with reservations about its merit or how it would go over with my peers. My father got angry and demanded that I deliver the speech persuasively and leave no listener unconvinced. This upset me on multiple levels. Of course no teenager appreciates a heavy hand, but this went deeper. To me, the speech was a stupid assignment with the stakes being my image among my peers whom I was trying to impress. To my father, the task was evangelical; to him, the beauty and majesty of Creation were (and probably had been and will be) incontrovertible evidence of the Creator that demands a verdict, and perhaps he never had the time, interest, or intellectual humility to go beyond the simplistic understanding of evolution science. While I agreed, what bothered me was the seemingly unnecessarily heavy hand. A so-called faith that needed a raised voice and authoritarianism seemed very brittle and unattractive.

The third was my first and only deliberate effort at evangelism. That year I became friends with a Jewish boy my age who was not very popular. One day I took him aside to tell him about Jesus and invite him to say the Sinner's Prayer. In response, he laughed and proceeded to give a very lengthy yet polite defense of his faith and rejection of Christianity. I found it convincing. He was a generous and virtuous person of clearly deep faith in God and love for his tradition. That he declined to give his life to Jesus seemed to me a technicality and hardly worth an eternity of conscious torment.

The fourth was a conflict with my parents on racism. My junior year in high school, I saw a documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize*, that showed me, for the first time, the horrors of racism and the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. I was horrified by what I saw--images of black Americans being sprayed with water, beaten with sticks and clubs, and lynched. When I shared this with my mother, what I saw in her was an utter lack of affect. When I later brought my concerns to my father, his response was the same. Neither racism nor any other social justice issue concerned--or, as far as I could remember, had ever concerned--my parents. Or, for that matter, any church we had ever attended, any sermon we had ever heard on televangelism. My parents were more interested in heaven than earth.

This troubled me deeply. Here, it seemed, was the first expression of my own conscience screaming that something was wrong, that surely Christians should be part of the solution rather than bury their heads in the sand. But my parents, my church, the entire Christian world, rather than confirm and affirm my stirring of conscience, seemed silent on the issue. It became increasingly clear that my parents held to and practiced a Christian faith that no longer seemed credible or attractive to me.

2 A World Beyond

Around the block from my home in Scottsdale was a Presbyterian church. I had two girlfriends from high school who attended this church. Some time in my early college years, I decided to try it.

There were several things I liked about. I liked the liturgy. It followed a format and it seemed traditional. I liked the sermons. I liked the minister. I liked the focus on social justice.

I started attending on my own. I was part of a Twenties group that met after the main service to do a more in-depth Bible study. I enjoyed being part of the 20s group. I don't remember much about what was discussed but I enjoyed being part of it. Here was a church that was not afraid of education and critical thinking.

Blacksburg

Lake Forest Park

THE PATH TO ROME

Early attractions

The Way of St. James

RCIA

Where I am Now

3 The Path to Rome

THE PATH TO ROME

Early attractions

The Way of St. James

RCIA

Where I am Now

References