

My Testimony

By: Autumnrose Keyes

Dear Friends,

I believe the Lord has laid it on my heart to give an account of His dealings with me. It will be a short account, Lord willing.

I marvel at the mercy God has had on me all my years up to this point, when I've carelessly been about my own business, walking in the lust of my own heart. Truly, I was "shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). Around the age of 11 and 12, my heart turned in rebellion toward my parents: my two older sisters and I were in a kind of revolt against them. We had friends they did not like, we secretly listened to music they forbade, and we got away with as much as we could. My conviction from early on was, "Of course I am a Christian." No one ever questioned me that I can remember.

At 13 I fell into grievous sin that my parents did not know about. I began to doubt God's existence and planned to leave my family as soon as possible and dive head first into sin. I've thanked God many times for my earthly father, who was a strict man. When my sins came to light by God's mercy, he pulled me away from my circumstances and moved the family to an Amish community. Things must have looked patched up. After some time, we had a new life, we had friends in the community, and we definitely looked religious. There was less tension with my parents yet not a closeness or submission. My father passed away when I was 18. I regretted so much my rebellion and the cold distance I'd had toward my father.

One year later my sister and I were talked into going to a week long Charity Bible School. I didn't want to go and didn't know what it would be like. It was there that I experienced, what I believe with all my heart, according to the Bible, to have been a false conversion. For the first couple days I was agreeing with and enjoying the wonderful preaching. I was, as I remember, unshaken, until my sister responded to an altar call. I began to be troubled that she was troubled. The next thing that I knew, my sister came out from counseling and everyone was rejoicing and singing and saying she was saved. I felt like there was something I'd missed. I felt like I was on the outside of a kingdom and suddenly started to bawl. I was taken back to counseling, but I don't remember what was said; I just remember wanting to talk to my sister and find out how she got saved. I finally got the opportunity late that night; she told me something about trusting in Jesus' sacrifice. I think at that moment I closed my eyes and pictured Christ, and I thought that that was all I needed to do - just trust He'd saved me. So that is what I did. I was confirmed much over the next few days by people and just thought I was now part of it all. I was zealous and wanted to be one of those Christians who was a Christian indeed, ready to pick up my cross and follow the Lord. Truly, my life was much reformed. I would strive against sin and seek to do well. I had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof

(1Tim 4). It was all in my own strength and self righteousness. What a grief to have been called by Christ's name falsely. The fruit of my life may have looked good on the outside, but it was not. I had not the freedom from sin, because the ax had not been laid to the root of the tree. The whole while I was in sin but convinced I was a born again believer: saved and following God.

Several years down the road, I was getting really discontent and was a grief to my mother, which she told me. I reformed again and submitted to her, being convicted by a Basic Youth Seminar. Soon, I began to allow more sin in my life that I knew was sin, but I let my conscience become seared. I would watch what I considered "good" movies. I started struggling with impure thoughts and sins. I started listening to contemporary "Christian" music. I would confess these sins sometimes and seek to stop, but things got worse and what I watched got worse. I was in this state when, praise the Lord, I became utterly condemned.

In November 2009, we met the evangelists who traveled around in an RV preaching and seeking the Lord. They came and stayed in our driveway, and we began to get some preaching, mostly just the scriptures being quoted. I could see that God was with them and that they were not like me, in that serving the Lord was their delight. Their lives were as much or more convicting than what they preached. I remember one night after they had preached, I confessed I was either backslidden or never saved at all. They just encouraged me to seek the Lord. I went to my room and started to read the fearful warnings in Hebrews, and because I saw no way that I could have been saved in 2003, I began to believe I was now like Esau and could not repent. I was so tormented by these thoughts most of the night and almost went to tell them to stop praying for me (I could hear their prayer meeting outside), because I couldn't be saved any more. I didn't, and tried to find some way out.

For a few months I went back and forth wondering if I could be forgiven, at times in torment, at times just hoping I was right with God, and eventually, I thought I was back on the path following God zealously. After so much preaching against sin, I had been very convicted and stopped much of it.

The next spring I had the opportunity to hear the evangelists preach in Pennsylvania where I also met a new one who had joined them, William Pearce. Something he asked in his short sermon really troubled me - he said, "If you had to stand before God in 5 minutes, would you be ready?" I couldn't say I would to myself; my conscience was so guilty. I simply didn't know where I was with God. A few days later William was passing through Indiana and stopped at our house to preach to our youth group. Afterward I told him what he said had troubled me, and that I was not sure if I was saved. He encouraged me to seek the Lord and not accept a false assurance. From that point he took up a burden and prayed for me over the next 10 months.

I tried to seek the Lord on it and sincerely wanted to know, but I was so afraid of saying I had never been saved if truly I had. What I wanted the Lord to do was save me if I had not been saved, and if I had been saved, to come and revive me. The Lord did neither, and I was getting pretty desperate to know.

In March 2011, my sisters and I went to Texas wanting to find some answers, knowing that we would get preaching. I believe it was the first day we arrived that I heard preaching, and I was more and more convinced that I was indeed lost. I started to see that the God I had believed in was not the God of the Bible. I had believed in the God of love but not the God who is just and holy, Who's angry every day with the wicked and who sends people to hell for eternity. Even though I knew the Bible taught these things, I was inclined to not dwell on them and rather, would brush it off, thinking, "Surely God will punish people as much as they deserve", thinking that that couldn't possibly mean torment for eternity. When I started to see this God of the Bible, I realized I didn't think it could be true and that I really hated God. I thought that if I was going to hell, most of the people I know must be going to hell too, and that was a revelation. I began to reckon with the God who made me and I didn't want to, yet I was propelled by a real fear, for the reality of hell was before me. I realized that if the Bible was true, these things had to be true, or all of Christianity was false and there was no truth in it.

I was so distraught over how deceived I had been. I remember talking to my mother and telling her I was lost; she began to pray and in her prayer she said, "We love you Lord." I interrupted her prayer and said "NO we don't - it's not true, we don't know or love God". For the first time, I was seeing my lost condition and becoming a sinner. In God's mercy, He was showing me many scriptures that I knew condemned me. God's wrath and justice for sinners was starting to be revealed to me. I knew that if the Bible was true, I had to face up to the reality of hell. There are many souls in hell burning - sincere people, who thought they were right with God, are there, and that was where I was going. This made me so fearful, yet my wicked heart contended with God that it just could not be. I was sorely tempted at times in the midst of these contemplations to disbelieve God and the Bible altogether, but then the fear of judgment would drive me again to seek peace with God.

One morning I woke up quoting "Now consider this ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces and there be none to deliver" (Ps. 50:22). I was terrified; I knew it was from God, as I hadn't had that verse memorized before. Ryan's wife, Joy, bore witness too: a short while later she came to my room, and when I'd told her what God had spoken, she said she had just read that chapter and had been weeping over it. The next verse after it gave me some direction on how I must seek God: "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me, and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God." I started to realize I needed to praise God, thank Him for giving me life so long, thank Him for giving me the opportunity to hear the gospel, and thank Him for sending me to the saints to even hear from the Lord's people. I started to see that God was not obligated to save me and that if He did, it was going to be his mercy. The verse that God spoke to me out of Psalm 50 really helped me to see how tiny I am and how Almighty God is.

Finally, I had to go home and from there go to Maine to fulfill some obligations. I was determined to separate myself as much as possible to "seek and intermeddle with wisdom" (Prov. 18:1). I knew it would be hard for my relatives (a sister, brothers, and many nephews and nieces) to understand, but felt I couldn't let anything stop me from seeking the Lord.

My time in Maine was covered with God's mercy; He continued to show me my pride. It was humbling to confess to people my lost condition.

I went back home, and my sisters Sunshine and Hosanna were used much of God to share scripture with me. God was so merciful to me and started to show me my wicked heart: firstly, He revealed to me how I didn't want to seek God; I would rather be busied with earthly things than striving and seeking after God. He warned me with the words to Martha: "one thing is needful" (Luke 10:42). Secondly, I could see from the Word that I had to lay aside sin and sow in righteousness to reap in mercy (Hos 10:12); yet, the harder I tried the more desperate I became. One day I was very convicted by my sin of intemperance in eating; it seemed my whole self was drawn to food as a comfort. I had no power to be free from this and was crying out to the Lord in my distress: I just wanted to know if it was possible to have the victory and be free from sin. As I was walking home, a note card fell out of the song book I was carrying. I picked it up and read, "For sin shall not have dominion over you" (Romans 6). It seemed to be an encouragement from heaven, though I knew not how; yet, someday sin would not have dominion over me. God showed me my inability to repent. I started to pray, "turn thou me, and I shall be turned" (Jer. 31:18). "Lord incline me to repent, let me now my fall lament, deeply my revolt deplore, weep believe and sin no more" (Charles Wesley). He showed me my inability to believe. This song was quickened to me one day, especially verse 3 and 4:

- 1) *Father I stretch my hands to thee no other help I know, if thou withdraw Thyself from me, ah, wither shall I go?*
- 2) *What did Thy only Son endure before I drew my breath, what pains what labors to secure my soul from endless death!*
- 3) *O, Jesus could I this believe I now should feel thy power, now my poor soul Thou would'st retrieve nor let me wait one hour.*
- 4) *Author of faith to thee I lift my weary longing eyes, o, may I now receive that gift my soul without it dies.*

God would continually give me warnings that would utterly put me in fear, and also encouragement that would give me some hope. I started to come to the Lord like the leper and say, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean" (Matt.8:2).

About the end of June, I went back to Texas to seek the Lord. I was sure I was lost, and I was set to seek the Lord for the rest of my life if that was what it took. My life, my family - they all had to go, and nothing else mattered but eternal life. I knew I'd never be able to enjoy life knowing I was going to hell, and the only choice was to seek God and beg for mercy.

I was there for a few days and hadn't had much preaching, then one night brother William had a burden to preach to me. He and brother Mike preached on Romans 10 and Deuteronomy 30:10-16. Brother William felt the power of God there to save me, and he shared a testimony of someone who recently had been converted. God had simply shown that man that he needed to be baptized in faith, obeying the voice of God who was telling

him this, and lay down all preconceived ideas of how God should save him. I shared with them that I wanted the Lord to save me in a way that I wouldn't be able to doubt it and that no one else would either - that my testimony would be accepted by people. They started to show me my double mind in that. Like Jesus said, "How can ye believe which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44) Yet, still my mind was so full of phrases I had heard from sermons and testimonies of salvation; I couldn't get them out. Needless to say, I was really discouraged.

The next morning I tried to seek the Lord, but my mind was plagued with all these thoughts, and I thought of the scripture; "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt" (Isaiah 49:20).

I was praying that the Lord would take all the thoughts away and that I would stop expecting signs and wonders, and hear His still small voice (which they had preached on the night before).

Also, a line of the song Thy Work Alone My Savior kept going through my mind: "and rid me of this dark unrest". They had sung that song to me the night before as well.

It was in this state that a vision came to me: I was sitting on the ground in the dirt, and both of my legs were broken. Jesus was standing before me, saying; "Walk." I said, "How can I walk? I have no power." The answer came: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12). I asked, "But how do I know it's not presumption?" The answer came: "If it is a command it is not presumption."

I was trembling, not wanting to take any false assurance, and asked for the Lord to continue to confirm me. Isaiah 55:11 was my answer: "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

The Lord was saying He had spoken. I remembered as well that this verse was also one that Hosanna had given to me several weeks prior and it had really spoken to me at that time.

I turned in my Bible to Isaiah 55 and was just meditating on what this meant, and I read across the page this verse: "For a small moment have I forsaken thee: but with great mercies will I gather thee," and then the verse right before it: "For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit..." I thought, "This is too good to be true! What do I do?" The saying came, "Confess with your mouth." "I'll obey," I thought. I went to ask Joy if I could meet with her and Ryan. Ryan was talking to someone else, so she said we could later that evening.

As I waited I started to read the book of John. I was asking the Lord to either continue to confirm me through my meeting with Ryan and Joy, or to totally take every bit away and have me continue to seek Him. I felt somehow that they would give me a word from the Lord. I was thinking I felt how Paul must have felt when he came to Ananias to be told what to do. After I'd told them what happened in full, I waited to hear what they would say; Ryan said that before I even had opened the door, the Lord had given him a word: it was, "Arise!" He said he needed to share the verses with it. (Is.60:1) "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee." Also, he had been given Acts 22:16, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins,

calling on the name of the Lord." I had not told Ryan that I had felt like Paul coming to be told what to do, and yet he had given me the very words that were given to the Apostle. That night and the next day I experienced the presence of Jesus. Where I had been filled with such pain and grief, knowing I was utterly separated from God, now He sent so much love and nearness that my heart ached, and I had to ask Him to hold some back! I continued to read in John, and verses were really speaking to me. I came to John 8:12: "I am the Light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Immediately "why tarriest thou?" came from heaven. I went and told sister Joy. I believed the Lord was saying, "don't tarry, be baptized." She said brother Sean was going to come hear my testimony soon.

The Lord kept showing me things as I waited, then just before I went out to share with brother Sean and sister Lindsay, I read, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice." It spoke so clearly to me, but I did not want to believe it. I thought, like Peter had, that I could never deny him. After I shared, brother Sean asked me if I believed the Lord had saved me, or if I believed He had told me to be baptized and at baptism I would be saved (In obeying the voice of the Lord by faith). He explained how both happened in scripture. I said he hadn't shown me anything about my sins but that he must have forgiven them because I knew He loved me. However, I was confident I just needed to go ask Him and I'd get back with brother Sean on which way it was. Well, I started to seek, and question, and sink. The more I did this the devil lost no time and came in like a flood to destroy me with doubts. To make this short, the next days were very intense. It was also the Lord's mercy to humble me, showing me that I would deny Him but by His grace, and to show how, truly, the long-suffering of the Lord is my salvation (2 Pet 3).

He mightily confirmed in His word to me that I wouldn't be saved until I was baptized. The verse came back to me twice more from the Lord, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized and wash away thy sins calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 9). By the Lord's grace, I obeyed.

The morning after I was baptized, I met with the Lord again. This is what I wrote at that time: "I just realized that I received Him because I received His living word (which can never return unto God void), and He gave me the power to become a son (daughter) of God of His own will. He gave me the Holy Spirit at baptism Who comforts and reveals truth; He simply revealed to me that because all these things are true, all the promises in Christ are yea and Amen. He cast all my sins to the depths of the sea! (Micah 7:18-20) Praise the Lord."

-Autumnrose Keyes