

# Salvation Testimony

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I grew up mainly in the Napa Valley of Northern California, in a home with an older brother and a younger sister. My father was very business minded and my mother seemed occupied, and together they seemed to always be at odds. My parents took us to a Methodist church most Sundays because it was a "good thing to do." I don't recall hearing who Jesus was or what He did. I classified the "Christian Men" as soft men with no opinions or a backbone. I definitely did not want to be one. There was numerous divorces and bad behavior by many of the attendees of the church, leaving a disgust for "Christians" in my brother and I.

My parents divorced when I was 11, leaving me, like many kids of a divorce, lost in life and with a dislike for the idea of marriage. I was encouraged to be sexually driven in my young teens, but to my great benefit, the Lord made me a baby-faced short kid, preventing success in my endeavors. Frustrations with home life, social life, and the falseness of a small affluent town, fostered a deep desire to move out of California as quickly as possible.

I eagerly moved to Bozeman, Montana, where as a child, I fell in love with the freedom of the outdoors Montana had to offer. I joined my older brother in attending Montana State University and thought all my frustrations would be done once I moved away of from my past. After a year and a half of secular college life, I had everything I thought I wanted from this world; I was extremely handsome, had plenty of friends, a great job, outdoor recreation which most men would drool over, "freedom" to do what I wanted, and a girlfriend that was not only smokin' hot, but also smart and lots of fun. But as Nacho Libre once said "It's all lies! Estevan!". These things I thought for sure would make me happy, let me down. I had ideas to quit school, move away and start over again with hopes of some kind of satisfaction.

Then my brother, who was greatly opposed to any religion, started to go to a college Baptist Bible study because his girlfriend wanted him to go. He invited my roommate (who was a Christian) and I to go. After much encouragement from my roommate, I hesitantly agreed. After a few weeks of attending, the leader started inviting me to go to lunch with him. After rejecting his first few attempts, week after week, I gave in and joined the man for a free lunch. We met in the University's food mall. While eating hamburgers and tator tots, he started the conversation with asking the question of what I thought about God. I told him that I believed that there is a god or higher power who was distant, not involved, and probably the same one all religions worship.

He then pulled out a Bible, told me there is a God, Creator of all, and that God desires a relationship with me. He explained that this God has a perfect plan for my life. Starting in John 10:10, he read "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

I questioned this and asked what did he mean? He then read Genesis 1:27 "So God created man in His own image; He created Him in the image of God; He created them male and female."

WHOA! Stop right there! This Bible, that for all these years was just another book to me, all of a sudden clenched all my attention. Little did I know at that time, but the Holy Spirit was unplugging the sinful wax buildup in the ears to my heart and unveiling my eyes to see the truth.

The thought that I could be created intentionally by the Creator of the Universe and in His image and with a purpose, really blew me away with excitement! A few minutes prior I was confused with what I was supposed to do in this life. I was lost and not satisfied with pursuing the lies the world told me would make me "happy." Now my attention was focused. The youth leader continued with some questions about my life. He asked what I thought it meant in John 10:10 when Jesus said "... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." I told him I used to think that having life to the full meant doing all the things I was already doing, but with my feelings of lost emptiness, I was in serious doubts.

He then explained that the emptiness was the fact that I wasn't living the life that God designed for me. He asked if I knew the ten commandments and if I had broken any of them. I only knew a few of them, like no stealing, no murdering, and no lying. I told him I had lied and stolen, but I had never murdered anyone. He responded with a verse in Matthew 5:21-22 that says. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." So, right there, I had broken all three of the commandments I knew.

The man then read some more of the Bible in Isaiah 53:6, "We all like sheep, have gone astray, each of us have gone our own way..." and in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The man pointed out that my sin leads to death and in Romans 6:23 it says "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." He explained that "wages" are something you work for and deserve and my sins have earned me just that, *death*. But a gift is not earned, it's something given to you- given out of love, free, and yours to do with what you want. You can leave it like it is, unopened, and put it on a shelf or, you can open it and enjoy the love and care and time that was put into it, made just for you.

So, God, creator of all, wants to have a personal relationship with me?! But my sin has broken that bridge, stopping that fullness of life, preventing a relationship with God and instead leading to deserved punishment of death and eternal separation from the presence of my creator. I didn't want that, I wanted to be doing what was right in the sight of Him above. Is there any way to fix that?

The youth leader read me another verse out of the Bible, John 3:16 – 18, "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

So, the Bible is telling me I don't have to receive the deserved payment for my sins of death and eternity in Hell? Nope! Jesus took that for me through living a sin free life, dying on the cross, and rising again. How do I open that gift of God through Christ Jesus?

The man went to Romans 10:9 and had me read "... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved." I was chomping at the bit! Let's get going! I want to do this!

The youth leader told me to hold on a minute, and that once I decide to follow Jesus, it can't be half-hearted. It's all or nothing, you must truly believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord and allow Him that place in your life. There will be trials, loss of friends, family disruption, and changing your lifestyle. Do you want to go forward?

I quickly reviewed my life. What could I possibly lose that would be better than: being free of my mountain of sin, glorifying God, living a life that I was created for, and avoiding eternal hell? Nothing! Sign me up! I prayed to God in Heaven, announcing my new found truth that Jesus, Son of God came to this world, lived a sinless life, died on the cross for my sins and was risen from the dead so He could be my Savior from the punishment for my sin. I confessed my sins and asked God to forgive me and turn me away from the life I've lived. I did not want to live for anything else other than for God. Immediately I was filled with an indescribable joy! I felt as if a ton of bricks was lifted off my shoulders! I became a new creation! I belong to my Heavenly Father!

I was joyfully hugging that youth pastor that just two hours ago I was hesitantly meeting with. He handed me a new Bible and told me to start reading the book of John. The Bible held such amazing truths making my life much more sensible and purposeful. We continued to meet weekly and, man, was my life changed! Everyday the Holy Spirit was revealing truths to me about Himself, God, and Jesus Christ. My love for God grew as I learned more and more of His love. My sinful desires, which previously consumed my attention, quickly diminished the more time I spent with God in His word. Trials did come, just like the youth pastor said. There were relationships that were altered considerably as my love was redirected from the created things of this world to the Creator of the things of this world. Any loss that came about was soon shadowed by the reality of the gain I received in salvation of my soul in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 4:22-24 "...put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

My girlfriend, Brianne (now my wife!), and I split ways, which was the hardest worldly gift for me to give up. But in looking back it was the most necessary in order that Christ would be my everything. Our relationship was based on enjoying the present and didn't have the grounding of a Christ-focused future. We were both immature in our walk with the Lord. We needed to be rooted in Him before we could proceed with a future-focused relationship.

During the rest of my college days I was blessed with the opportunity to attend numerous Bible studies and college groups. The Lord gifted me with many outstanding Christians colleagues and pastors to learn from. My relationship with Christ took me on exciting adventures to other cities, states, and even countries. I've been able to witness the greatest excitement of others accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

In 2004 I moved back to Middletown, California, to continue working with my dad in the family ranching business. In 2005, while on a roadtrip up through Montana with my sister, I received a phone call from my now mother-in-law suggesting I give Brianne (my ex-girlfriend) a call. She said Brianne had been going through some rough times in life and she knew we shared a good friendship prior and that may be an uplift to her. So, I gave Brianne a call and we were able to meet up and share the amazing things God had done and was doing in our lives. It was wonderful to discuss the trials that allowed us to shift our focus from ourselves and our personal interests to our all sufficient sovereign Father. It was a real joy to hear that Brianne had placed Christ in the forefront of her life. I continued on my trip and didn't talk with her again for over a month. We had the forethought of not wanting to just fall back into the comfort of the familiarity of our old friendship/relationship. It would have been an easy thing to do, but if a relationship of any sort was in our future, we wanted it to be with intention and with a desire to please God in our endeavors. After much prayer and council, we began to talk over the phone. Our foundation was built up again, across the miles, as we shared our growth in the Lord. From there, we arranged a few in-person visits. It was evident to me that this is the woman for me! A month and a half after we started courting, we were engaged and five months after that we were married! We set up our first home in Middletown, CA. We attended a church that had a soft and 'feel good' teaching style which served spiritual milk and easily-digested Biblical lessons. Our spiritual growth was slow, and we were hungry for more substantial food.

As a newly married cowhand, I worked a lot and loved it all, but didn't know how to slow down to give my wife more time than a few hours on Sunday. She didn't complain, as she came from a ranch family herself, but it became evident that my number one focus of ministry was to be with my wife and newly born child (Owen). I needed to change my focus from a very demanding job. We prayed a bunch and decided it was best for us to move back to Montana. The Lord blessed me with a job in construction while I went through the year-long application process of the Montana Highway Patrol.

In 2008, the Lord our God blessed me with the coming of my second boy (Oatus) and one month later, against big odds, He blessed me again with being hired on with the Montana Highway Patrol. I saw this as an opportunity to serve my Lord. By the grace of God, I was able to focus on Him and He made my efforts more successful than I could have imagined. I graduated top of the Academy and had first pick of locations. We moved from Livingston to Miles City, Montana. We searched around the different churches in the area and settled with another soft "easy" church. The people were great and there wasn't anything hard to accept or to challenge ourselves. We set up a small home in the country and enjoyed our growing family- including a Persian/German Sophomore exchange student!

An opportunity arose for us to get back into the cattle industry and my excitement was too much to contain. I accepted a job as a ranch manager back in the comfort of Middletown, CA. We trucked our (now) 3 boys 1,100 miles across the country and settled into a new home in a known area. Within the month, Brianne's cousin made the same trek from MT to CA to live with us to get caught up in school in order to be able to graduate high school. Our ministry was our 4 boys- 2 youngers and 2 teens.

We attended the same church we were married in and expected to enjoy the comforts of what we had known. The difference is that just as we had grown and changed in our walk, so had our easy-going church. Many of the things that were acceptable in the church's eyes were made known to Brianne and I's hearts as being unacceptable to God. We had to confront these convictions and as we did, we grew in our walk with the Lord and gained confidence in our faith as well.

The summer the two high school boys went home to their families, we discovered we were to be blessed with our third child. Halfway through the pregnancy, we found out there were some major complications endangering the lives of both my wife and our daughter in-utero. The needs associated put our family in a bit of a tailspin. With two toddlers in tow, we trucked all over the Bay Area going to doctors appointments and surgeries. My mother-in-law came from Montana and spent many weeks aiding our family with the needs of daily life. It was a humbling and exhausting experience, all at once. It was a tremendous time of growth for me as I had to learn to take the worries and fears that would come and hand them over to God. Prayer and the Living Word fed me and greatly changed my priorities. God brought us from our knees in prayer to a successful, healthy birth of Milli Mae. Days later, the team of doctors were able to complete the final procedures to help Brianne's health to be restored. Those four months brought us to a new appreciation for our Savior and His sovereign grace over our lives.

As we got our feet back under us, we wanted to serve the Lord with appreciation and fervor. We tried to dig into our church body, group devotionals, and faithful attendance. The more we yearned to grow, the more our convictions were brought to light. We couldn't continue along our path without making some necessary changes. Those changes came as we enrolled our oldest son Owen into Middletown Christian School, which is part of Middletown Bible Church. Owen had always been a little hesitant to jump into new environments, so we decided to help him feel more comfortable and attend Middletown Bible Church one Sunday. Well that was the change we needed.

The church was a great example of the body of Christ and His different parts working together. There were all ages of Christian-maturity from newly born fresh conversions to those strongly immersed in their relationship with Christ. Between Bible studies and friendships there was evident discipling going on all around. The love of Christ was clear in the scripture focused conversations. My wife and I were hooked and we joined Middletown Bible Church.

A year later we were blessed with our fourth child, Auggie. What a blessing to have my mission field grown by 25% in one year! Everything seemed to be going well. We had two kids in school, and my wife's good health allowed her wonderful opportunities to build relationships with other moms and a great area for her to serve in the school. Soon my wife's involvement of serving in the church and school became a large priority of her time. I, too, wanted to be of more physical service to the church like my wife, but I struggled to see a place of service that I could fit in with my demanding work schedule and need to be at home while my wife was serving. But by God's grace, I was slowly remembering that like in Ephesian 5:25, my number one area to serve my Lord is at home, to love my wife as Christ loved the Church, to give myself up for her. I realized I was serving by taking care of things that freed my wife up to do the service she had a gift for. It was a perfect opportunity for my children and I to learn the rolls of rope holders, as we lowered Brianne into the depths of service.

Well, not too long after that, God took away the ability for my wife to serve in her physical capacity by allowing her a consuming illness. My prayers of having my wife home more were answered, but not the way I had hoped. Her illness was immense as she went through excruciating pain, sometimes making her unable to leave her room for weeks at a time, except maybe to visit doctors. It put the breaks on all of our worldly plans and, once again, it was very evident that we live by God alone. The disease was a challenging one for the doctors to treat, so years went by before we were able to feel any kind of 'normal' or routine in our lives. Praise Jesus for being the Rock we needed in such a challenging season of our lives!

In comparison to the past, life did get tougher, but this tough chapter was an outstanding time of growth and joy! Both my wife and I were reminded that every day is from God and we should be living it for Him. We were, and surely still are, learning to trust God and to take action in faith. These steps led us to our fifth child and a greater opportunity to serve God through a ministry position at Hartstone Bible Camp in Potter Valley, CA. The world told us differently, but the sweetness we have tasted in trusting God developed an unquenchable craving for more. I long to see and feel my God become greater in my life as my revealed weakness increases my dependence on Him.

There have been many trials that have blessed me with great growth in my relationship, reliance and love of my Savior Jesus Christ. I have a long way to go, but I am confident in Him. "And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in [me] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." - Philippians 1:6

I share this only that it would bring glory to God.