

Hope for Your Young Prodigal

Many young people today are leaving the faith. A 2019 Lifeway Research study showed that two-thirds of young people say they stopped going regularly to church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22, and some leave permanently. But many—like me—come home to the faith of their parents and their childhood, a message of hope for those whose adult children have departed the church and its teachings.

When the seed of faith is planted within a person's heart, there is no getting rid of it. Hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ triggers a reaction within a human's soul. Receiving the greatest truth to grace the ears of humanity moves our souls to recognize our Maker, Savior and Lord. Those who leave the faith may do so out of anger, hurt, disillusionment, ignorance or any number of factors, but deep inside, their souls know the truth.

There are many in America now who claim to believe in "a" god but no longer have faith in "the" God. Often, their journey away from the church is a consolidation of years of spiritual attack, warfare by the enemy to propel them far from God. Rarely does just one reason cause them to fall away.

This was the case for my exit from actively practicing Christianity, something that, growing up as a member of a nondenominational, charismatic church, I never thought would happen. I loved my church and saw it as a second home. I looked up to the strong, mature, loving men and women of God I found there. During praise and worship, banners were flying, hands were raised and members danced like David.

On the steps leading to the stage, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior at the age of 6. After that, I went to church no less than twice a week, and when I was old enough to join the youth group in sixth grade, I was there a minimum of three

days a week.

Growing Up

Our pastors were amazing men of God. They preached the gospel and warned of the dangers of the world. I can recall sitting in the congregation thinking, *I won't live like that*. But within the safe confines of my church, I remained ignorant of the pulls and desires of the flesh.

I was not alone in my love for my church. Other youth enjoyed going as well, and the older generations loved it even more than we did. During my junior high years, many of us looked up to the senior high members as larger-than-life figures, rockstars who looked after us. Many of them went on to Rhema Bible Training College in Oklahoma, and I came to see this as almost an expectation.

These years in the 1990s saw a multitude of Christian movements and events. From See You at the Pole events, Promise Keeper rallies with the men of my church and even a Billy Graham crusade in Columbus, Ohio, I attended many Christian gatherings that built a foundation of faith—one that never left me, even after I left the faith.

In a setting like this, our church longed for revival. Once we heard about revival breaking out in Pensacola, Florida, our praise and worship leader visited there to share in the experience. Upon his return, the revival fire from Brownsville Assembly of God became a reality for our church as well.

I had no understanding of churches that didn't believe or demonstrate the workings of the Holy Spirit. We spoke in tongues, were "slain in the Spirit" every week, stayed back for prayer after the services for more than an hour and anointed people with oil.

At Christ the King Christian Church, we even had our own revivals. We even had the worship leader from the Toronto

Airport Revival, also known as the Toronto Blessing, speak at our “Catch the Fire Columbus” revival.

All of this seemed normal to me; I knew no other way of life. Although I knew Jesus was real, I often felt myself wanting more, but I didn’t understand why.

Perhaps I should have asked more questions during my growing-up years, but at the time, I just went with whatever happened. It was close-knit, communal and everyone seemed like family.

Falling Away

This pattern continued until my senior year of high school. Over the years, the enemy was setting traps to make me stumble, hoping I would fall. He kept chipping away at the house I had built on the foundation built on those church steps.

I was all set to follow the path set by the senior high students who came before me. I wanted to go to Rhema and become a youth pastor, just as mine had. After all those years in church, you would think I would have at least prayed about the decision to go to Bible college, but the truth is I did not seek God on it even once. I just made the decision to go. However, unlike the seniors before me, who often went in groups of four or more, I was the only one from my generation who traveled out to Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

After all my years in church and youth group, surrounded by strong Christian men and women and receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit at our youth camp with the youth pastor I adored, I had no prayer life at all. I didn’t read my Bible outside of church. I got my Bible knowledge from the church, but never created a habit of doing anything during my own time.

The irony of falling away from God while attending Bible college is not lost on me, but this was the culmination of

Satan's traps that had been in place for years, now springing and capturing me.

Two weeks after I began classes, Brother Kenneth E. Hagin, the founder of Rhema Bible Training College, went home to be with the Lord. Satan used this to demotivate me from attending classes.

All I wanted to do was have fun. I was spiritually parched and could only look back on my days growing up at youth group with fond memories. Eventually, I dropped out of Rhema, feeling lost and without a vision for my future.

Over the next decade, I looked for meaning while ignoring the God-shaped hole in my soul. I had experienced Christ and knew He was real. Even during my darkest hours, my lowest lows, dealing with depression, rage and suicidal thoughts, I knew in my very core that Jesus Christ was real.

Through all of this, I had a mother who never stopped praying. I am convinced to this day that having an intercessor Mom saved my life. She knew God had a call on my life and held tight to that promise, knowing it sometimes takes a while for someone to find their way back to the Lord.

My journey in search of identity eventually saw me join the military—twice. My second venture, joining the Marine Corps, became the start of my trek back to God, even though I didn't realize it at the time.

The Lord will always reveal His power, might and amazing ways. But this happens in His timing, not ours. I had to learn the life-lessons He had for me before I moved forward in His plan. I had to grow.

During my time in the Marine Corps, while I was drinking, smoking and cursing as if there were no tomorrow, the seed God had planted in my heart continued to grow. When the time came for me to determine if I was signing up for another four-year

enlistment, I knew it didn't feel right to my spirit. I received an honorable discharge and began planning my future as a civilian once more.

Of course, God already knew my path. He wanted my complete surrender. It was prayer that saved me during my rebellion. It was prayer that planted the seed now softening my heart to receive what the Lord had for me. And it was prayer that broke me into a million pieces and finally made Jesus my Lord and not just my Savior.

Coming Back

While attending a friend's wedding, I encountered another friend's mother, who is a wonderful example of everything God calls a loving Christian to be. Her obedience to the Lord's nudging changed my life. She asked to pray for me. When she did, all the prayers offered on my behalf over the years were put into a spiritual censer and thrown into His fire before His throne.

I left the wedding shortly afterward and, in tears, called my mother. I told her how God had grabbed my spirit during the woman's prayer and that I had no choice but to follow Him. Her tears soon joined mine, and my journey of complete surrender began.

In the years following this return to Him, God has been preparing my heart. In my mind, not knowing exactly what He had for me was a daunting situation. But God knew what He was doing with my surrender and with me. Still single, I could go anywhere and do anything He put on my heart, and I did.

First, He built a strong foundation in my heart by sending me to live in Guatemala for six months, assisting a missionary. I broke down countless times. He taught me to trust in and rely on Him. I developed a prayerful relationship with Him and made reading the Bible a regular habit, two essentials for any Christian to advance in their relationship with God.

As my time in Guatemala was coming to an end, God made my next chapter clear. I would travel to the Los Angeles Dream Center and serve Him there. He provided a way out to California, and once I was accepted into the Volunteer Missionary Program, a whole new chapter began.

LA is about as different from the small village I stayed at in the Guatemalan mountains as can be. The leadership placed me in the children's ministry, and I couldn't stand the kids. Looking back, I realize that my time in LA served as a season of stretching; God was still removing unrighteous elements from my life. My time at the Dream Center was a phenomenal and life-changing experience. Christian communal living 24/7 had its challenges, but the rewards were so much greater. This was also the place where the Lord introduced me to the woman who became my wife.

Since I did not have marriage on my mind at all, the speed at which God moved in our relationship amazed me. He gave us an instantaneous knowing that we would marry, and our love for one another was based in our love for Him. But to reach this point, the Lord made me stop caring so much about myself and put others first. When I realized that this amazing woman of God was the first person I cared about more than myself, I also realized she was the one He intended for me.

Our time at the Dream Center came to a bittersweet close, and we left and got married in her hometown in Georgia. We then moved to Ohio, where I had grown up, so I could begin the next step the Lord put on my heart, now much more sensitive to His calling: using my military benefits from years before to go to college.

Pursuing My Calling

This season taught me how to be a good husband, love my wife and study hard. It flew by, and through it, God gave us a time of growing with one another. We had built our house on the

foundation of Jesus Christ, and it withstood the struggles of the season. Using the lessons learned from my decade away from God, I was able to continue growing in Christ, weeding out anything not uplifting and righteous.

Once I made Jesus my Lord, there was no going back. I experienced a settled finality to my relationship with Him that I had not known in my younger years.

As my season in college ended, the Lord felt my wife and I were ready for the biggest step a married couple can take: bringing a child into the world.

Becoming a father opened my eyes spiritually in a way I had never imagined. I was looking for a job during the end of the COVID lockdown and had not had a “real” job in years. For a year and a half, God kept stretching me as a stay-at-home father. I had to work hard and be intentional to become the father this amazing little girl deserved.

As parents, we fasted and prayed for what the Lord had next for us, but we remained in a quiet season. We thought He told us a change would come in July 2021, but when the month came and went, we thought we must not have heard Him right.

Amid our anger, fear, anxiety and ignorance, we never stopped praying. We had no clue what God was doing, but He did.

After a year and a half of searching, He answered. I was offered the job I almost jokingly applied for as a copy editor at Charisma Media in July 2022. I was now working for the company that produced the same magazine my mother had subscribed to in the mid-'90s. The same one from which she had sent me articles to encourage me during my years running from God. The place that is a business but also a ministry. Since I had prayed for so long for a job in a ministry and earned a degree in journalism and media communications, God could not have worked it out any better.

None of this would have been possible without a continuous prayer covering over my life. The prayer of a parent for a child who is struggling with their faith is invaluable in bringing that child back to the Lord. However, not only was my mother praying, but every friend and intercessor she knew covered me in prayer and kept watering the seed the Lord had planted in my heart. Because of their persistence, I found my way back to our Father, back to the calling He placed on my life all those years ago on the steps of our church's stage.

Don't stop praying for your prodigal. Your prayers are watering the soil of their heart and preparing them for the harvest. I'm living proof that God hears all prayers and knows what He is doing more than we ever could. Trust Him and believe His plan will also come to fruition for your loved one.

James Lasher *is staff writer at Charisma Media.*