

How Losing My Dog Brought Me Closer to God

Who knew a dog could mean so much?

I started out as a skeptic. Well, I should really say that I started out with actual faith in God, but through years of little-to-no real interaction with Him, navigating the intellectual landmines of higher education, and a profound sense that something about evangelical Christianity wasn't all adding up, I gradually grew into a God-fearing skeptic. I questioned the supernatural, I questioned church, and I really questioned God. He wasn't someone to necessarily be trusted, just worshipped.

All that changed when I started making films about Him. Through the course of nearly 10 years of chasing Him, He's shown me a thing or two about both His nature and His love. The most profound thing I've learned is that, at the end of the day, God desires true, lasting friendship with us. And that friendship can only be obtained through hard earned trust; or to use another word for it: faith.

Now I travel the world not only filming God being faithful to His kids, but more and more I am speaking in churches and conferences about it. I've written entire books about it. In the course of a decade, I've gone from a burnt-out Christian to a passionate friend of God.

Now, you might think that friendship was most tested in some of the things I've filmed over the years. While showdowns with witch doctors, risking my life attempting the impossible or facing down the truly demonic certainly have shaped my faith, I can say with total certainty that the thing that has tested my faith in a good God who wants to be my friend was not found halfway around the world, but right in my own backyard, with

my dog, Moses.

Anyone who follows me on Instagram has seen pictures of him. He's the laziest, goofiest dog I've ever known, and for the last five years he's been my best friend. The story of how I got him could have been in one of my films.

I'm a dog person, but I married a cat person. Jenell is the love of my life, but she doesn't quite get my obsession with dogs. I've had them my whole life, and they bring me joy more than almost anything in the world besides my own family. Other dog people will understand. Non-dog people will think I'm loony.

For most of our married life, Jenell and I haven't had a ton of money, so anytime we were able to bring a dog into our lives, we typically had to go the cheapest route. Humane societies. We liked the idea of saving an animal, and neither of us were interested in training a puppy, so the local pound was it. The only problem, at least in our case, was that every dog we ever got from the pound was in some way "broken."

Behavior issues up the wazoo, peeing issues, mental issues, you name it, we had it. My wife is fond of saying that I am very good at loving a dog; I'm just very lousy at taking care of a dog. So after years of having to give up dogs we had become attached to, or having to put down dogs who were sick before their time, Jenell finally came to me and said she had had enough. It was too painful. We stunk at taking care of dogs, and she just couldn't do it anymore.

The only problem with this was the fact that I was still a dog person. I've never known life without them. And I really wanted a dog, but a *good* dog. Unfortunately, my wife was resolute. No way. Never again. And then the ultimate stonewall: "God Himself would have to tell me to get a dog before I'd get another one."

Years went by, and occasionally I'd bring it up, but it was

always a lost cause. No way was she going to budge. So I did the only thing I knew to do: I prayed.

After a few months, my wife and some friends went on a mission trip, and along the way they stayed with a friend of mine who was very prophetic. All week long the others received words from the Lord, but my wife, who has become very healthy and doesn't chase such things, was content to just abide in Christ. Of course she'd *like* a prophetic word, but she didn't *need* one.

As they were all arriving at the airport to come home, my friend pulled Jenell aside and told her he had a word from the Lord for her. A smile came across her face, a silent thank-you to God for blessing her. Then, He hit her with a sledgehammer.

"Jenell, the Lord said it's time to get a dog. Darren needs a dog. Your kids need a dog. And He has already picked the perfect one out for you. In fact, this dog will heal your heart."

Her response was far from elation. "Did Darren put you up to this?"

He assured her he never talked to me, and Jenell contacted me to reluctantly tell me to start researching dogs.

I couldn't believe it. God, You are amazing. But this time I was determined to do this right. So I researched actual breeders and dog breeds until I found what seemed the perfect dog breed for me: a king cavalier spaniel. The only problem I had was that we only had about \$500 we could put toward this mutt, and the little research I was doing showed that purebreds were decidedly more than that, and then you had another \$350 in shipping costs. But I believed in the God of the impossible now, so I jumped in with faith.

The first breeder I came across had some awesome dogs, but, man, were they expensive. So I decided to just contact them

anyway and ask if they had any old dogs they just wanted to get rid of. It was the best I could hope for. All I told them was that I was a filmmaker looking for a dog. I didn't mention that what I really wanted was a black and tan male, around 2 years old. And I didn't mention that I only had \$500.

The next morning I awoke to an email from the breeder. The first line shocked me.

"Dear Darren, first of all, we want you to know that we are huge fans of *Finger of God*."

She then went on to say that they pray about every dog they place, and when she was praying the night before, the Lord highlighted one of her dogs in particular. His parents were both champion show dogs, and he was a male, 2 years old, with black and tan coloring. She then said that while she was praying God told her something strange. Usually they tithe on every dog they sell, and this particular dog was \$1500. But God told her to keep the tithe and give Him the rest, so she asked if I'd be willing to take the dog for \$150, plus \$350 for shipping, for a total of \$500?

I was speechless.

And that's how Moses came into my life. He was a supernatural gift from God, and he truly did heal my wife's heart. We all grew to love Moses (in fact, everyone who met him agreed there was something special about him) that we actually wound up getting a second dog because he was such a joy. Not a day went by that I didn't look at Moses at some point and thank God for this gift. He was the best present the Lord ever gave me outside my family. He brought me so much joy.

Then, five years later, my dogs accidentally escaped our house and went for one of their "joy rides." Occasionally they would do this, and they'd typically be gone for a few hours and come home covered in mud but no worse for the wear. I always worried about Moses, so I'd gotten him a GPS collar. But a few

days before this latest joyride, the collar had malfunctioned and stopped working.

True to form, our second dog, Maui, showed up at the house a few hours later. But Moses wasn't with her. I waited. No Moses. I worried and prayed. No Moses. I went to bed that night, believing God would bring him home in the morning. No Moses. We contacted shelters, canvased neighborhoods and did everything we could think of.

But Moses never came home.

It's been over a month, and I've realized I'll probably never see Moses this side of heaven again. One week into his disappearance, I had my "moment" with God.

I had just walked through the woods behind our house for over two hours, trying to cover every nook and cranny. As I walked, tears filled my eyes and hope drained from me. I just had a feeling about this one, but I didn't want to accept it. But I knew that God and I needed to have a conversation.

I stopped on a pathway and just unloaded on Him. *Why would you give me this gift and then take it away? Bringing Moses home to me was nothing to You, a mere whisper of a thought. Couldn't you even do that for me?* I then moved on to the "after all I've done for You" rant, and finally ended with pure, tear-filled begging. I tried to move His heart by laying out my sadness.

He quietly listened to me throw my tantrum, then He answered me with a very measured, simple response. Like a Father.

"Will you still trust Me?"

It cut me to the core, because I knew what it meant. I knew He wasn't asking if I'd trust Him to bring Moses home. He was asking if I'd trust Him even if He didn't bring Moses home. And I also knew that's probably what was about to go down. And

just like that, everything I've preached about, written about and made movies about stood before me in technicolor. This wasn't theory. It wasn't theology. It was a Father asking His son what he really believed.

I won't lie, I hesitated. But in the end, He had ravaged my heart too much.

"Of course I'll trust You. You give and You take away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

At that moment, the burden on my heart lifted. The sadness remained, and remains to this day, but the weight of anger at God, at a growing mistrust of God's goodness simply vanished.

I have no idea if Moses is alive in someone else's house, or if he is dead in some unmarked, unseen spot in South Carolina. The Lord gave me a gift for five years, and it was an amazing gift—more than I could have expected from Him. He gave that to me, but then it was lost. I don't think God took Him from me, because I don't believe in a God who does unloving things. But when life happened, or the enemy stole my friend from me, or whatever it was that happened, I know that God is good. He is loving. He is trustworthy, even when life doesn't always make sense. And that's something we can all hold onto no matter what happens. Because without faith it is impossible to please God. And I don't know about you, but my great desire in this life is to please my Father. And come hell or high water, that's what I plan to do.