

Holy Spirit's Flame Burns Brightly Within Former Firefighter

Christopher Ryan's* world was going up in flames—literally. Engulfed by pitch-black smoke and scorching heat, the North Carolina firefighter was battling an intense blaze on the second floor of a townhome when he and his partner, a veteran firefighter, realized they couldn't find the way out.

"I heard my partner screaming ... [telling] us to get out as fast as we could," Ryan remembers. But he couldn't see a thing. Worse, his fire hose was stuck somewhere in the building and couldn't be freed. Still green from firefighters' school, his instructors' words echoed in Ryan's mind: "Never leave the hose—it's your lifeline."

And in that moment, Ryan says, time stood still.

"I had [what seemed] like an hour-long conversation right there with God," he explains. "He pretty much affirmed that I wasn't saved and that if He were to allow me to die right then in that fire, I would be burning in hell that instant."

So Ryan dropped the hose. He and his partner escaped the burning building, their protective gear a charred, molten mess. Ryan was hospitalized for burns on his face, neck and shoulders. Though God would heal his body, Ryan's spirit was broken. He didn't yet understand the plan the Lord had set in motion during that fiery confrontation, one that would lead Ryan to risk his life again—this time to share the gospel in Central Asia.

Uncertain Salvation

Ryan grew up in a small North Carolina town deep in the Bible Belt and "got saved" at 15.

“One Sunday, my mother and my brother walked down the aisle, and they got saved. I got caught up in the emotion, so I walked down the aisle, too. I didn’t really know what I was doing,” he says. When the pastor visited to talk about their decisions, he was more interested in Ryan’s music skills than the teenager’s new faith in Jesus.

“They talked me into playing drums in this gospel group. There was nothing really shared regarding the gospel or any questions or affirmation about the decision I had made or why I made it. That started a very long and confusing process for me.

“I always heard the pastor say, ‘You should know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are saved.’ And I never did,” Ryan says. No one seemed to offer any real help.

He was still questioning his salvation when he married his high school sweetheart, Tabitha,* and joined the fire department, a job Ryan expected to make his career.

“I lived one way during the week at the firehouse, and on the Sundays I wasn’t working, I was at church living a different way. It was almost like living two lives,” he says. Ryan still wondered whether he was saved but says he no longer gave the question much thought.

That is, until the day he nearly died in that townhouse fire. Still, there was no dramatic conversion experience that followed, just the sobering realization that Ryan did not know the God he claimed to love.

“Being the sinful person that I was, it still took me several years to address that,” Ryan says.

And when that moment came, it echoed the first time Ryan “got saved”—one Sunday at church. Sitting in his usual back-row pew with Tabitha, Ryan suddenly felt the **Holy Spirit** pushing him to truly surrender his life to **Jesus**. As soon as the service

ended, Ryan walked forward and grabbed the pastor.

“And he pretty much had to grab hold of me because the experience immediately drained me,” Ryan remembers. “I felt like all that sin just washed away from me right then. I could barely stand up.”

He was 27, and it had been 12 years since he first walked the church’s aisle. “God changed so much in me that day—my language, my desires, my behavior—everything changed,” Ryan says.

Surrendered Expectations

But life was still far from perfect. Ryan’s now genuine relationship with Christ was soon tested as he and Tabitha struggled with infertility. Both desperately wanted a child, but a diagnosis of endometriosis meant an uphill battle.

“We got married; we built our house ... we had the career we wanted. So according to my timeframe, it was time to have kids,” Ryan says. “We even went out and bought a minivan in anticipation of getting pregnant.”

But six years later, the Ryans still had no children. God was shaking other expectations, too.

“We felt like the Lord was leading me to leave the fire department, which is kind of unheard of,” Ryan says. “No one ever quit the fire department.” But in 2004 he did, and started a general contracting business with a friend.

A few months later, Ryan got his first taste of missions work during a short-term trip to Honduras. There was an immediate connection, and two months later, he went back—this time with Tabitha.

“I hadn’t seen much of the world, so it was a very eye-opening trip for me,” she says. “When we came back, we ... knew that in some way we would be doing missions.”

A Call (and a Miracle)

The Ryans began praying through the possibilities. It took many months, but God's will was clear—He wanted them overseas full time, serving as Jesus' heart, hands and voice to a lost world. And there was a surprise, too. In January 2005, the same month they committed to serving through IMB, the Ryans discovered Tabitha was pregnant. No fertility drugs, no surgeries—just a simple, old-fashioned miracle.

"I actually took two [pregnancy] tests because I didn't believe the first one," Tabitha says, explaining that doctors had told her she could never have children. "We were overjoyed and felt like it was a blessing from God for being obedient to His call in our life."

In preparation for their move overseas, the Ryans wanted to find a new home church with strong ties to international missions. They settled at The Summit Church in Durham, N.C.

"We fell in love with it," Ryan says. By 2006, Summit pastor J.D. Greear began telling the congregation about his vision for sending a team of Summit church members through IMB to work in Central Asia.

"We didn't have any idea where Central Asia was," Ryan admits, but he and Tabitha met with Summit leadership anyway, told them about their passion for missions and their willingness to explore serving in that region of the world.

The Ryans didn't waste time. They sold their home plus a spec house that Ryan's contracting business had built, as well as their "toys"—two campers and an ATV. Scouting trips in 2006 and again in 2007 confirmed the specific Central Asian country where they wanted to serve. It was a dangerous place, very poor and politically unstable, where Christians were frequently persecuted: cast out of families, jailed, tortured, even murdered. But it also was a place in dire need of the gospel. Less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the country's

population knows Jesus as Lord and Savior.

"I knew that this is where God wanted us to be. We had fallen in love with the country and the people in that short time," Tabitha recalls. "This was the right choice. This was His choice, where He wanted us as a family to go serve these people."

Soon the Ryans got another miracle: God placed a second child in Tabitha's womb, another girl.

"It's not easy for people to give it all to God," Tabitha says. "I still find myself every now and then trying to hold onto certain things, or ideas or plans. And then God reminds me of the blessing of handing it all over."

Sharing Christ in Central Asia

Those blessings have come through people like Omar Khan.* The Ryans met Khan soon after they moved to Central Asia as IMB workers, now more than three years ago.

Khan disciples, trains and pastors more than 20 small home groups scattered across four provinces. Ryan serves as Khan's mentor, discipler, theological sounding board, church-planting partner and friend.

Once a staunch atheist, Khan became a believer after what he calls a miraculous encounter with Jesus in a dream. He began reading the Bible, repented of his sin and gave his life to Christ.

"Every local believer I've met has had dreams and visions regarding God and Christ," Ryan says, explaining that the phenomenon is common to Muslim-background Christians. "Khan's accepted the fact that God's got His hands on him right now."

Despite such blessings, living and working in a place like this is a constant challenge—especially with two little girls.

"I lived in three houses my whole life until I came over here, and we are now in our fifth house in three years," Ryan says. Beyond convenience-related hardships like unreliable electricity or the occasional dust storm, Ryan says security precautions are the single greatest challenge, sometimes leaving his family feeling trapped in their home. Getting away on the weekend isn't possible, and one date-night might require weeks of planning. Support from Summit has been critical, through prayer, friendships and even visits from short-term volunteer teams.

"I don't think there's one thing that's happened security-wise that makes me think, 'What in the world are we doing here?'" Ryan says. "A lot of times, I feel safer here than I did in the States. I've seen a whole lot less shootings here than I did when I was working on the fire department."

The Ryans send their girls to local schools, allowing them to soak up the local language and interact with other children.

"Her language is amazing. Sometimes, she's correcting us," Tabitha says of their oldest daughter, 6-year-old Grace.*

"We're trying to give them just as normal a life as possible," Ryan says. Dinner that night serves as evidence: cheeseburgers.

"These children are a gift from God—they're not ours," Tabitha says. "He lends them to us for a period of time and we are to love them and nurture them, but, ultimately, they are still His."

Above all, the Ryans say they are in this for the long haul.

"We've pretty much decided we want to be here for the next 30 years, plus," Ryan says. "We prayed that God would break our heart for these people, and that's what He's done. ... He never told us it was going to be easy, but He's promised to be faithful. And we need to be faithful to the call that He's

placed in our life.”

“This is our home,” Tabitha adds. “We wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

*Names have been changed.

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