

How God Saved a Pharisee: The Testimony of Chris Smith

By: Chris Smith

My hope and prayer is that this testimony of the drawing and reconciling work unto Christ in my life would in no wise be despised nor gainsaid; for in truth, as it was with the blind man: “*I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see*” (John 9:25). Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen.

Before I was saved, I was very religious, with fasting, many prayers, even all-night prayer meetings, preaching, missionary trips, memorizing much of the book of Romans, and other like things. Though some reading this will hold to the conclusion therefore that I must have been saved, because of all these outward “good works” - in the following work, I will endeavor to highlight the hypocritical and sinful life I continued to live (despite the above religious acts) while representing with my lips the name of Christ before my recent conversion, but all the while in my heart being far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). It is for this cause, namely the dreadful danger of deception, that I believe the Lord was pleased to have me write out this testimony, so that those who are partaking of the same delusion that snared my soul might be alarmed and awakened to seek the Lord for salvation; i.e., those that are in a similar predicament might be warned about the lengths of false religion and morality a man can reach without being savingly converted.

I. A Whitewashed Grave: How I Became a Pharisee

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Matt. 23:27-28)

Sadly, those who view God as a God afar off and not a God nigh at hand, with no quickening reality of Biblical truth, look at the scriptures concerning Pharisees with no fear of God before their eyes, never considering that it could be them - a fear, I might add, that could wake them up to the Pharisees around them on every side, yea, even the Pharisee within. To help illustrate how my life appeared outwardly righteous unto men, but how inwardly I was full of hypocrisy and iniquity like the Pharisees of the Bible, I believe it would be profitable to share some of it. My parents, both professing Christians and participants *in occasional religious practices*, thought that they would do well to bring up their children in the church. Through my early years, they would read Bible stories with us, pray with us every night, and faithfully take us to church and Sunday school every Sunday and Wednesday. When I was six or seven, this praying at night slowed down, but my involvement in church grew. The programs we were involved in at the local church strongly encouraged scripture memorization, small personal Bible studies, and corporate times of children's Bible studies where there would be an “altar call” after the study. I would always see (at least in part) the need they expressed that we should give our lives to Christ, so I would faithfully raise my hand and do what they told me to do, which typically involved praying a prayer led by the leader of that Bible study. After this time, they would encourage me to believe that I was saved and that I needed to be baptized. This happened at least seven times, as far as I can remember. Now, the grievous effect this practice, and all these

religious activities without the Spirit of God, had on me was only to help me outwardly, while I was still bound by sin (i.e., I had struggles and arguments with my brothers and sisters, was disobedient to my parents upon occasion, lied, and lived my life for myself). I was told time and time again about what the Lord had done for me and how I just had to trust Him, giving me a cheap version of the cross which encouraged me to take sin lightly and to seek forgiveness without repentance. There was no consideration, however, to what the following scriptures and quotes mean in truth:

“...except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:3) – Jesus

*“For if we continue **willfully sinning** after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries.” (Heb. 10:26-27)*

“I consider that the chief dangers which confront the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost; Christianity without Christ; forgiveness without repentance; salvation without regeneration; politics without God; and Heaven without Hell”.

–William Booth

Formerly, I never knew how evil it was to lie, to disobey my parents, to argue with my brothers and sisters, to desire my own good above the good of others, or even the wickedness of heart sins like lust. Please let the reader understand, however, that *“the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable... and **all liars**, shall have their part in the Lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death”* (Rev. 21:8). Notwithstanding, because I didn’t understand the severity of sin, throughout my early childhood to preteen years, I thought that I was in good standing before God, but my sinful nature was progressively beginning to show itself: *“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart”* (Matt. 5:27-28). And in Romans 7:7-8: *“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.”* Though I had heard and gone through much of the Bible with this church that my parents had taken me to, I was fast becoming aware that I was a slave to Satan, helpless within his chains, ensnared by the very sins addressed in the above and following scripture (especially the particular sin I will mention): *“Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin”* (2 Peter 2:14a) - this fearful habit consumed my free time late at night when on the computer, as it does a great majority of “Christian men” in this nation, who like I was, are whitewashed graves. This sin (unlawfully lusting after women), above all others, troubled my conscience and made plain the accusation that I am a slave to sin. However, though this sin was the greatest trouble in my mind, and was used of God to make me aware of my depravity, I was blind to the fact that all that I did was sin. I did not come to see this (which is the lost estate of every man who is once born) until the Spirit of God strove with me later in my life – a time of which I will soon tell.

With the exception of a guilty conscience, for some time, I was still able to continue in pursuing this perversion and hiding my chains of darkness. This particular device of Satan would cause me to draw much into self-righteous Phariseeism by the means of making me believe that all my trouble was wrapped around this one sin, and not that I was altogether in

darkness before God. The guilt of this sin overwhelmed me at times however, but I resisted the work of the Holy Spirit to convict me of a deeper problem, namely, that I was a thoroughly depraved sinner. My false religion led me to believe that I could gain relief from my guilt through the reading of scripture. After I sought after and found sin, I would attempt to sear my disturbed conscience by reading a chapter out of the Bible and praying for forgiveness, therefore believing that I was now right with God. I did not know that repentance includes an approving yourself to be clear in the matter at hand (2 Cor. 7:9-11 - see here a biblical explanation of the fruits of repentance, without which no man has truly repented). I did not know that true repentance gave a man power to overcome sin which he never had before. I used the Bible to stay in sin, not come to Christ for freedom from it, just like the Pharisees in John 5:39-40: *"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."* Sin had a fierce hold on me, and as a cruel master, sin made me do grievous and beastly things that are not worthy to speak of. *"Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"* (Rom. 6:16; 2 Pet. 2:19)

All of this was done without anyone knowing about it for years - no one, from when I was ten until I was about fifteen. I loved my sin and was always afraid of being found out. At church they began to have accountability groups where we were encouraged to make confession of our sins. This gave me some boldness not only to share openly these things I had done in secret, but now there was more boldness to keep doing them, as I thought that I was being "sanctified" through my confession, which gave me a false assurance that the Lord was going to bring deliverance, **although my heart did not ever truly seek to be set free**. Seeing that these things are common among men, at times it began to be easy to think I was doing well because I was "not as bad off as the next one", although we were all in slavery to sin. Such a deception is warned against by Paul: *"For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise"* (2 Cor. 10:12). It is as a club of men who are enchained to the sin of lust, but are only able to sympathize with each other's chains and locks because all are helplessly held captive to do the devil's will. This is pseudo-accountability where none holds each other accountable to God's Word, which clearly condemns all such slaves as children of wrath...and even more horrifying, none have knowledge of the true gospel which makes a man dead to sin and alive to righteousness (Rom. 6). May the Lord have mercy.

My love for sin worsened still, to the point that the things that had once brought satisfaction now needed more to be satisfied. Those of you reading who are enslaved men know what I speak of. The devil is not satisfied with your service and begins to demand more of you, and since you are his slave, you follow as an ox to the slaughter and as a bird hasting to the snare (Prov. 7:22-23; see also a descriptive poem by John Bunyan, "Upon the Lark and the Fowler"). To prove this point, I will share the following example. As I finished high school and entered college, I began to date a young lady, my first girlfriend. I had never done anything shameful with women before and was deceived because I thought I could set boundaries by my own willpower and not be overcome. My sin continued and my lusts *"did wage war within my members"* (James 4:1). My hunger for sin now was driving me, and I began to sin with this girl, doing things that my heart was desiring to do in those secret places where no one knows; to my grief, I was becoming that man that I never wanted to be. I carried on my discipline of reading a chapter out of the Bible when my conscience would scream out, and still I would pray for forgiveness to deal with this guilty conscience, not knowing that God's Word says that *"He that*

turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination" (Prov. 28:9). For two years this routine would take place. As she observed this in me, she became weary with me and therefore broke off the relationship because it grieved her that I would have such regrets.

Two months before the previously mentioned relationship was broken off, I believe the Lord spoke to me, "I want you to know me, Chris," and I thought that the Lord was bringing me into true salvation. At the hearing of this word that I believed to be from God, I thought that I was ready to find Him, but I was only feeling after Him. I was not enabled to find Him for a long 10 years after this! Oh, that men would obligate themselves to this holy duty to find their Creator! *"That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him."* (Acts 17:27) It is written again: *"Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. They shall be ashamed, and also confounded, all of them: they shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols"* (Isaiah 45:15-16).

During this time after the word, I began reading the Bible more and taking notes of what was coming to my mind. In my thoughts, I began to think that I had some freedom from my guilt and my sins. I believed I had "turned over a new leaf", but in truth I still only had what Paul calls *"the course of this world"* (Eph. 2:2) - I had yet another false peace. As I was reaching new heights of zeal without knowledge (Rom. 10:2-3), I became disinterested with my friends that I had grown up with in this church and thought that as we gathered we should be praying for each other (as each Sunday there was always the opportunity to lay out prayer requests for the class to pray for)...**but no one had anything to pray for!** I was amazed at this, and so I journeyed to another church called Sagemont. Here I joined the "College and Career" class. I had a meeting with the minister of this class where I confessed my sins and shared what I thought happened to me and how the Lord had spoken that word which I thought I heard: "I want you to know me, Chris". He received my sincere testimony, and his response to hastily and unrighteously receive my confessions is well described in this verse: *"Thy prophets have seen vain and foolish things for thee: and they have not discovered thine iniquity, to turn away thy captivity; but have seen for thee false burdens and causes of banishment"* (Lam. 2:14). I eventually joined the ministry with this pastor. This pastor let me begin service in the ministry by first testing me to see if I would be faithful according to his worldly standards of faithfulness, and in time I even became his right-hand man in this ministry. In my flesh I can save face and appear to have a servant's heart; this behaviour is revealed very well as Jesus describes here in Matt. 23:25: *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess."* This *false faithfulness* was highly esteemed everywhere and was convincing to that minister very much that I truly had had a heart change, although because of my enslavement to sin and deadness to Jesus Christ, all my works were dead works with no true motive for God and His glory - I was altogether outside of Christ. I believed that I had been set free from my sin, that my chains were broken off, but I was still under the slavery of my sin in my heart, though outward sins apparent to the limited eyes of man were different. In this way I appeared to be free, nevertheless: *"The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart"* (1 Sam. 16:7).

II. Zeal Without Knowledge, True Christians Sent, and my Road to Becoming Lost and Undone

“For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.”

(Rom. 10:2-3)

As I was being stirred up with this zeal for religion, I met two men, Cory and Dylan, who had just recently been savingly converted. A strong desire to do works was pressed upon my conscience immediately upon meeting these men who were on fire to get the gospel out, had a hatred for sin, and had a vehement desire to seek the Lord with reckless abandon. Moreover, they loved not their lives unto death and their cups did overflow with love for God. To illustrate this, I would like to give account of the following: Sagemont, this church I was in at the time, believed in sending mission teams out all over the world to do evangelism. There was a trip planned to do mission work in Ethiopia, and Dylan, Cory, and I, along with several others, went. While on this trip going about our work, it was apparent that the Lord was specifically with Dylan and Cory - the rest of us were humanitarians which merely carried the name “Christian missionary”. We would go to remote villages on this tour and would encounter various groups of people. Each time, the zeal of the Lord would stir in the hearts of Dylan and Cory, and large groups of people would gather around them as they would preach in the open air. The Lord would always bring in a translator, even if He had to raise one up from among the crowds. Due to the power of the Holy Ghost with them, demons would manifest and angry crowds would be set against them. Instead of fearing, Dylan and Cory would wax bold with zeal in the Spirit of God and a dying passion for God-hating men. They were the only ones I can remember that were stirred in this way. It could be said of their preaching on that trip: *“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake”* (1 Th. 1:5). As I walked along-side Dylan and Cory, inevitably I became more religious and even had some heightened Biblical convictions.

To express the growing zeal I had for religion after this trip, I will share another brief account. At one point, I was helping the College and Career minister of Sagemont put together the bulletin for Sunday service, and I was given liberty to write something for it. I desired to stir up the hearts of those in this class because of evident spiritual deadness I witnessed compared to the manner of life manifested in Dylan and Cory and that which I, in my flesh, was trying to work up. Yet, I was hindered by the minister who said something to the end that it was too sharp and condemning. The minister of this class did favor me much, though, and I was given responsibilities under him, therefore giving me some credibility in the eyes of others in this class. I was looked upon as one who was a good example to follow - not based upon true righteousness, but simply because of my Pharisaical, self-righteous form of religion, denying the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5). Also around this time, my friends Dylan and Cory began a small Bible study at their mobile home, and they had me join them. They were much more religious and inflamed with passion for the Lord than anyone I had ever known. We began with these Bible studies and coupled them with prayer meetings - even some of which went all night long. There were days we would go out to parks to hand out tracts and preach, and we would also go to the nightclub district and preach in the open air in the evenings. We believed that the Lord would break bonds of wickedness and set captives free, and we would fast - trying everything we knew to do according to the scriptural light we had. Every so often, someone would ask us how we knew we were saved. I was not very confident in my answers, partly because I just did not know. I had something of a testimony that I was never too sure of, which

I would share with them, but my heart blamed me in light of my secret sins. My conscience did not allow me much freedom to speak confidently, because I was trying to uphold a false righteousness, **one that allowed me to continue in “willful” sin and believe I was trusting in the Saviour at the same time (Heb. 10:26)**. I found it very easy to practice this hypocrisy, because for all I knew, I was still going to heaven - God is a God of love after all, isn't He? I say these things to express the intensity of “dead works” a Pharisee can accomplish without the Spirit of Christ.

I would like to make some highlights now of Dylan's life, one of the fiery men aforementioned - a man greatly used of God in his time. Dylan had a very great amount of zeal, even right after he had gotten saved. He had never loved reading and was even considered to be ADD in school while he was growing up. Now that he was saved, he could not stop reading, especially the Bible. He quickly became an avid reader, spending much time learning (even memorizing whole books of the Bible) and trying to figure out what was being said in the Word, as it is written: *“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word”* (Psa. 119:9). He would spend hours contemplating a few scriptures, and the meditations he would share were astounding! His love for the Word did alter his view on formal education, producing in him sound convictions he held for a time against seminaries and Bible schools. He believed the clear teachings of Paul in 1 Cor. 1:17-31, of how God despises the wisdom of this world and has rather chosen the foolish ways of the cross to shame those who are worldly wise. Truly, Dylan was an inspiration for the despised ways of Christ in a world of compromise. One time, Dylan was given opportunity to testify of the grace of God in truth at one of these schools' functions. He was given five minutes to introduce the keynote speaker. The Lord came upon him in power and they were oblivious to how much time went by. By the end of his speaking, there was conviction upon many who heard, and I believe the things that came from his mouth came with more power and authority than the keynote speaker of the night. At this function, a man came to Dylan and offered to buy an education for him at one of these Bible schools, and he at first refused the offer, fearing he would forfeit the light he was receiving from the Word of God only...but eventually, against his strong convictions, he became as Samson, yielding the secret of his strength, being vexed in the day-by-day allurements of Delilah and her harlotry as he began to fellowship with all the other adulterers of the time (James 4:4-5). Like Samson, he was stripped of all his strength and eyesight and has now, sadly, become enslaved in the Philistine prison house of an ecumenical seminary. This danger is described clearly in 2 Peter 3:17: *“Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.”* Dylan, my old friend, sadly, now has a “good life”, a beautiful wife, the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things such as affluent friends and much esteem amongst religious hypocrites. All of this is the cheap price for which he sold the living Lord he once loved, the cross he once carried, and the grace that once labored through him to turn men to holiness. *“Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me, as the pangs of a woman that travaileth: I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it”* (Isa. 21:3). He can no longer say with Paul: *“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God”* (1Cor. 2:4-5). Dylan began to rebuild again the things he once destroyed (Gal. 2:17-18), by allowing himself to be overtaken with carnality, this manifested in the leaven of modern theology books, self-help books, movies, and the leaving off his careful devotion to the Word of God.

As the days went along, I found myself trying to be a good student of the Word of God, and I came across a fearful passage: John 5:42 – “*But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.*” I had found this passage to stand out every time I read the book of John, and I did not know what to do with it. I found myself on my face asking the Lord what it meant. Surely it was Him who had said years before, “I want you to know me, Chris”, and I was foolishly convinced that all the changes I had seen were resultant of His works in my life. I was startled at the statement I believe the Lord to have made towards me. I began to think that God Himself was telling ME that I had not the love of God in ME...but how could this be? Early in my friendship with Dylan and Cory, they had much fear for my soul because of my continual and truly unrepentant sin, though, sadly, they never came to the conclusion that I must not have been born again. However, as time went on and Dylan began to backslide from the faith he had once embraced, even as I was facing these fierce warnings by the Word of God, Dylan forsook his former concerns for me and began to turn my conviction around by using “hermeneutics” and “careful exegesis”. To my dismay, Dylan was used to make null and void the merciful work of the Holy Ghost attempting to wake me up, who came to reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment to come (John 16:8). “*For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*” (Heb 4:12). Note: please don’t misunderstand me; we (the Church of Wells) are not against “hermeneutics” or “careful exegesis”, but under the guise of these lofty terms, modern “Christianity” dilutes the sharpness of the Bible and broadens the narrow way. The crux of the matter is that you need the Spirit of God to understand and interpret the scriptures, which Spirit Dylan (by this time) was subverting by these terms (*Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye cannot hear my word...He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.* John 8:43, 47). (NOTE: We at the Church of Well’s are not against all Bible Schools or Seminaries in the sense that they are all heretical, without the gospel, and true converts. However, we disagree with any para-church organization and believe true, complete, and flourishing knowledge in God can only come in the context of a local church. But please understand, most modern seminaries are called cemeteries for a reason, and we do affirm that almost all of them are very dangerous and deadly to spiritual health and life in Biblical Christianity. All the reasons for this belief I cannot detail now, and such a defense would require many pages of writing. Let this suffice the matter for now: Reader be sure of this- God cannot be learned like a chemistry book, and the classroom setting is not what sets men apart for the ministry, but rather the Holy Ghost. Knowledge that can be gained by the flesh can and is regurgitated by the flesh in pulpits across this nation, but the knowledge of God cannot begin without prayer, nor given without prayer, but now we have prayer-less seminaries, preachers, sermons, and "saints" - who lightly and proudly handle the hallowed. Therefore seminaries have become organizations of men, governed by men, whose education does not begin nor grow under the government of the Holy Ghost of God, who is the churches One True King & Preacher. - Pastor Sean)

“Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isaiah 29:13). The next couple of years would bring in much room for compromise and realization of my own hypocrisy. For instance, in the course of time, my heart began to desire a young lady who was a practicing Jehovah’s Witness. I fought off the desire to be with her for many months, and when I would confess my troubles of this conflicting interest, was even reproved for this unlawful longing. Eventually, however, my lust got the better of me

(James 1:14, 15), because I had not the power of the true gospel, and therefore I was almost destroyed. All this time that I had professed to be a Christian, I had known that those who follow Christ should also follow righteousness and have power over sin. Crushing, I found that the result of all my learning of the Christ I thought I knew was me chasing after the devil disguised as a beautiful lady. O! How much shame this brought to my heart! How could I keep this up? At this same time, I was beginning to see much hypocrisy in my church and the twisting of many scriptures (i.e., making the strait gate broad, and using the world's wisdom to solve its problems). Also, my friend Cory had gotten married and had moved to the church of Arlington (now the Church of Wells), and was adopting doctrines that make a man fear God in truth and see sin with the grief wherewith God sees it. Such doctrines I was strongly opposing in my own heart and with my mouth, even to the extent that on one occasion I refused to allow these true brethren in my own home. Cory, not long after this, made a return trip to Houston, where I was, with a desire to seek me out to seek clarity on these matters. He was very afraid for my soul. My pastor at this time had banned him from my church in unrighteous rashness, because under the preaching of Cory different persons were seeing themselves in light of the clear Word of God to be lost sinners and hypocritical Pharisees. This pastor (Billy Bernhard) and his church (ACTS Community Church) were offended at these things and deemed Cory's doctrine unbiblical without a proper hearing because they didn't understand them. He treated Cory, like the Pharisees shamefully treated Jesus (whom they didn't understand), and sought for ways to prove him as a blasphemer and lawbreaker without the use of proper reasonability or scriptural integrity. Surely, *"The wicked watcheth the righteous, and seeketh to slay him"* (Psa. 37:32). *"An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire."* (Pro 16:27) Despite much persecution, Cory sought me out to reason with me in love for my soul, and I did meet with him a few times. I did not turn him away, because for some reason, despite the slander I had heard, I still had a love in my heart for him and believed him to be a rational, truth-seeking man.

At this time, Sean Morris (a pastor from the Church of Wells), believing God was burdened for my soul, preached to me 2 Corinthians 6:17, as he compared scripture with scripture in the power of God (*"come out from among them and be ye separate"*). Then my heart began to be unsettled. He sent me a text message, also, that prompted the preceding preaching which goes as follows: *"Dear brother Chris, I do hope to spend some meaningful and eternally substantial time with you while down here in Houston, even that I could meet you in the woods and strengthen your heart as Saul and his kingdom seeks your life. 1 Samuel 23:16"* This prompted me to contact Cory to find out how long Sean was going to be in town, and I set up an appointment to meet with him. His intention was to plead with me, through scripture, on the necessity of inward and practical holiness and the dangers of false doctrines that pervade professing Christianity today. I was greatly troubled...I was seeing sin like I had never seen sin before, and so I was drawn to visit the church in Arlington. As a result of this initial meeting, I contemplated leaving family, work, church, and roommates (as I knew that would be the cost to follow this Jesus). The differences between this church and their Jesus versus other contemporary churches of our time, as far as I know, are so drastic (like light and darkness) that I could not help but consider this cost and prepare for it (e.g. the severity of with which sin is taken, the necessity of holiness, being faithful unto the end, boundedness to the Written Word of God, etc.). Sean shared with me Mark 10:29-30, as a plea to not only consider the cost of following the Biblical Christ and His Holy Spirit (who at this time was mightily striving with me), but also the reward of eternal life only found in obedience to the true Jesus. Note: it is not that salvation is in joining a church, but that salvation is in obeying the living Jesus who can lead men to a church.

To help illustrate for you the reality of Sean's legitimate concern that my eternal soul was in danger, the next morning I was at my church in Houston and saw the *lightness* with which my pastor (Billy Bernhard) handled the Word of God. False teachers, God says, "*cause My people to err by their lies, and by their lightness*" (Jer. 23:32), and that they are "*light and treacherous persons*" (Zeph. 3:4) – but Paul "*ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears*" (Acts 20:31). After the preaching, I attended a formal meeting. This meeting included all those in leadership, and we discussed how we would handle certain troubles in the church. I listened as they proposed to deal with abuse cases simply by submitting them to a social worker; I further listened only to find that the devastating epidemic of internet pornography within the church was a *light thing* to handle without necessarily consulting the divine Word of God. Obviously, I had trouble in my conscience at the idea that the church had no power to deal with these issues. Yea, I was appalled at this, for I had enough light to know that these matters could only be dealt with by and through the Word of God alone, the Lord using men empowered by the Spirit of God. After this meeting ended, I had lunch with my family. Following lunch, my mom, dad, and I discussed some of these matters, and specifically what the Bible says concerning salvation and being lost. I received no help from my parents either, but on the contrary, harm. Because I loved them, I was beginning to draw back from the resolutions which were forming in my heart based upon light granted me from the Word of God to leave everything (in heart, and deed where necessary) and follow the God of the Bible (in absolute surrender and self-crucifixion). Moving on, the day following, I spoke with Cory, and as he heard my case, he was fearful for me once more. I also received another text from Sean (also concerned) which contained only the following reference: 1 Kings 13:24. As I was receiving these texts, I was very confused; I did not know why these two times I would receive messages about my life being in danger – though the conflicts of spiritual life and death were all around me. Truly, though this grave mindset pervades the Bible, this kind of urgent and eternally concerned speech was not used among any of my friends, family, or pastor, and so I began to wonder what I should do about it. All the years that I had spent reading the Bible had left me thinking the Bible to be only a written work, not one *that still speaks*...proving that I was spiritually deaf, dumb, and blind. I was an unconverted man, and as such, the Bible was not living and active, but to those drawn to Christ and in Christ, it is alive, and the men in it "*being dead yet speaketh*" (Heb. 11:4). Very well did Abraham warn us all, and especially hell bound men, that the writings of scripture DO SPEAK NOW, and we must "HEAR THEM" (Luke 16:29). I did not know that I did not believe God speaks through His Word today, my heart had deceived me. Thus I was troubled at this reality that I was beginning to see, through these messages sent by God's heralds, that it was evident that my life was in spiritual danger. The verse Sean sent to me was as follows: "*And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him: and his carcase was cast in the way, and the ass stood by it, the lion also stood by the carcase*" (1Kings 13:24). I was fearful for my life in the flesh. I stayed the night with Cory with these things on my mind and knew I had to flee from sin to the scriptural and living Christ. The only place I could think about that could help me find this Christ was that church in Arlington.

The Lord pricked my conscience with these scriptures, and I went and spent a few days in Arlington, TX, to meet the church and seek the Lord. While there, some of the members of the congregation asked of me my testimony (for there was some uncertainty on whether or not I had truly been saved). I shared it with them readily, having the weight of my sin, the hypocrisy of my old church, and all the confusion created thereby swimming in my mind. When I had finished, the last words that came out were, "I may not even be saved; I am willing to admit

that.” To say the least, the brethren there were very concerned at that point for me, and so they began to open up the Word of God and preach to me about saving conversion, that I might compare myself to the biblical fruits and descriptions of scriptural Christianity. It was then that I began to be persuaded that I was truly lost (in my mind but not yet in my heart). I stayed with them for one more day with a mind to return, but I had to tie up some loose ends in Houston. I had purposed in my heart to leave all and seek the Lord in Arlington, believing through the written Word of God and the Spirit this to be God’s obvious will. As I was headed back, I began musing within myself and caused my heart to believe that I had always been saved and just had some misunderstandings. I ran into Cory and talked with him about what had happened and about my thoughts as I was returning to Houston, and he was, for the third time, deeply concerned for me. Some of the brethren from Arlington drove down to seek me, and with much fear and trembling helped show me (again) through scriptures what true salvation looks like, so that I might see that what I had was not a true work of God aligned with His Word. Truly, I needed men, who had spiritual eyes to see, to lead me by the hand to the Christ I had never met, for I was blind – *“Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?”* (Luke 6:39) Though I knew a lot about the form of the Bible, I began to see that I had never had the saving power of Christ; I had only used my intellectual Bible knowledge to bandage my bleeding conscience so I could sin more and presumptuously believe for heaven while I was still bound for hell. I was afraid and did not even know where to begin to search these things out in the Bible. The Lord did convince me, though, to follow these men, because they and not another had been used to show me I was lost (and more importantly, they had the Holy Spirit and pointed me solely to the Word of God). The Bible tells us to obey the voice of God and to believe His prophets (preachers). Accordingly, I moved to Arlington about a week later to seek the Lord under the preaching of these men because – *“It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe”* (1 Cor. 1:21).

III. A Lost Man Seeking God in Arlington

“And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.”
(Jer. 29:13)

“Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” (Luke 13:23-24)

While amongst the Church in Arlington, I began to understand that it is far easier to believe things with my mind than with my heart. The Lord desired much to convince me of sin, but my heart was so hard. An example of God attempting to convince me of sin, and the hardness of my heart, happened one evening when two of these brethren came to preach to me and one of them shared his testimony. After he finished, the other turned to me with such a look of holy fear in his countenance, and with such God-given solemnity in his words, that I knew something was wrong and that I had to seek the Lord. Sadly, however, this knowledge was only in my mind, and I stayed awake most of that night perceiving *only a bit* of what was preached; my heart was still very hard – *“Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets”* (Zechariah 7:12). That holy fear in the face of this brother truly horrified me (in my mind), that he could see the realities of the day of judgment spoken of in 2 Cor. 5:10-11 that I was blinded to. I knew to a measure that I was proud and I went before God with loud cries trying to get

through to Him...but I could not. *“And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron”* (Deu. 28:23), or in other words (spiritually speaking), *“He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: He hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer... Thou hast covered Thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through”* (Lam. 3:6-8, 44). I came to find that I was as Saul - *“The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God”* (Psa. 10:4). All my life I had read the Bible and not profited anything, and because of this, I was unable to perceive the reality of the fear of God that was being preached.

I also had much confusion working in myself, for I was trying to use all my false knowledge of God to help me while trying to hear what was being preached to me. With me was *“confusion and every evil work”* (James 3:16), because my “god” was a god of my own making, one who would let me love sin while believing I was serving Him. It is hard to seek the Lord in this fallen and backslidden generation, as I found out. So much has got to be unlearned in order to let “these words sink into your ears”, that Christ might speak, and the Word not fall on fallow ground. Coinciding with my hard heart was pride as a thick layer of fat over my stony heart, which kept anything from penetrating me. The Bible speaks that we should *“lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save our souls”* (James 1:21), but none of these things can be received into a heart that has not the beginning of wisdom, which is the fear of the Lord. I tried fasting, praying, reading the Word, and all I found was that I did not know how to seek the Lord. He was requiring humility within me and understanding from my heart that I had sinned against Him, which thing I could not find. I needed God to break up my stony heart and truly to give me a heart of flesh. I was an astonishment and something to behold. A child could lay hold of these things concerning salvation faster than I could have, as truly Christ says: *“Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matt. 18:3)

The brethren of this church would come and preach to me, believing that God works through the preaching of the gospel. Certain things gripped my heart that I had never seen in scriptures, but now they were shining brightly. I had never known that Jesus would pass people by, as I now found to be taught in the Word of God and of which the old hymn “Pass me not o gentle savior” expresses. I knew that God loved people; however, this knowledge I had was never in view of His holiness and judgment, and therefore I had come to believe that many would be saved instead of the scriptural truth that few would. I became afraid for my soul, because I could not produce that kind of righteousness in my heart that according to the written Word of God (rightly expounded), was required of me. I even came to fear that I would miss salvation, but I strove on. I also found that faith is a gift from God and He has to give it in order for a man to possess it; a man cannot will himself to have Biblical faith. God alone is able to call things into existence that formerly were not. Therefore I discovered that the modern, man-centered gospel, which says you may choose to believe anytime you would like and God comes at that moment and saves you, is foolishness in light of a true understanding of grace. The Biblical pattern is that many will seek to enter the strait gate and will not be able to (Luke 13:23-24). And Romans 9:11-16 says, *“(For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth*

mercy.” My view on God was changing as I was humbled by the truth that God has a free will to do what He pleases and could choose to pass me by or save me. I saw, in spite of this, God to be just in all His ways, and it was my sin and inward hardness of heart toward Him that kept salvation at bay.

In light of these things, one day I was encouraged to listen to a sermon by Jonathan Edwards entitled: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, where his key scripture is: *“To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste”* (Deu. 32:35). A picture is painted in this message that men in this life are placed on a slippery slope and are falling, falling, falling into destruction...hell. He speaks on hell, as I understood it to be, as a place with no exits, no getting out, no hope, no ladders, no bottom to stand upon; just an endless abyss waiting to swallow men up. Edwards, unlike any modern preachers I had ever heard besides the brethren from Arlington, spoke on the anger of God toward sin and sinners, that we hang over hell as if it were by a spider’s web, and all God has to do is let us go and we perish eternally. I learned through Edwards and the church that hell is the best way to describe God’s infinite hatred for sin - a place of endless torment. This is why this church was rightfully fearful on my behalf, because they believe the Biblical truth that a man outside of Christ is on the cusp of hell. Therefore, when a man is born again, he understands the fear of God, and he turns from sin. He is then regenerated and given a heart that does love God, and therefore loves obedience, unlike his old heart. As a sinner seeking God, I was, rightly so, most captivated by the fear of God, and I recognized I had never truly feared Him or loved Him. I listened to another sermon also, which was called “Watching Men Die,” by Rolfe Barnard, and I learned that the God of the Bible kills people. My whole world was turning upside down! The Lord was allowing me to see how fragile we are - our lives are like a vapor that is only here for a moment and then vanishes away.

It was not until I believed God was nearly done with me that I began to see that my whole existence was fashioned around lies. I did begin to fear the Lord then, because I was starting to understand how much He hates sin. I was covetous, an idolater, an adulterer, an aggressive blasphemer, a God-hater, and much more than this. I had never known God, neither had I loved Him or desired to do so. Heaven did seem like it was closed to my prayers. God was offended with me for all the years that I had named the name of Christ while secretly delighting in my sin of heart adultery, and He was proven to be righteous in all His dealings with me. It was as I began to understand His righteousness in view of my sin that I began to fear within my soul. If we love God, would we not be careful to obey all of His Word, will, and law? This greatly affected me, for as I saw my life in review, I found that I was altogether a lawless man and not the “righteous man” I had prided myself to be. Truly, with my sin before my eyes, my heart condemned me - and I knew that I hated God in my heart (Rom. 1:30). My manner of life proved that this was true also, and God was desirous to show me these things and to leave me with no more excuses for my sin. *“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God”* (Rom. 3:19).

It was the Lord that revealed this to me as I sought Him. Who, among men, really knows the inward workings of the heart of man? It is God who searches these matters out, and I found Him to be pleased to give me the truth if I were to seek Him for it with all my heart. With all these things before my eyes, I was still in no better standing before God in the Christ-bought

worthiness of salvation. I was fearing God more, however. I wept over the sheer impossibility I was facing at the demands Christ placed upon my soul which I could not meet. He said that I must be born again or I would not see the kingdom of God and I said, just as Nicodemus had said, how can a man be born again when he is old? I was as foolish as he. I felt as though I were pressing against an immovable force, trying to receive from the Lord something that was ever so precious to Him...but I was swine and I knew it. How could the Lord entrust to my care His precious salvation if I would only trample it under my feet after the manner of life I was accustomed to? Can a leopard change his spots or an Ethiopian his skin? Neither could I, and my new awareness of my sin only caused my heart to grieve all the more, seeing the preciousness of the blood of Christ which alone can cleanse a man. I had heard that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, and I found myself pressing hard after Him, supposing that He may have mercy and turn from His wrath. The demands of God could not be shaken from my soul, and I continued to wrestle even against these impossible odds. What I needed was humility...but all my attempts to humble myself proved fruitless. The Lord eventually brought me to a place, which is spoken of in scripture, where the people genuinely humbled their hearts through fasting, but this was different from what I had been doing. I had been trying to show God my humility in the flesh, which was vanity; but I found that I now found that I could humble my own heart as the people of God did through fasting, when it was being led of the Lord.

IV. The Day of Glorious Redemption

“But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost...” (Titus 3:4-5)

The next morning after I began this God-inspired fast, I awoke to a noise which sounded like a trumpet call. I began to think that God was coming down and calling all of His elect home, that the end of all things was drawing very close - but I still found no place of heart repentance. This terrified me very much: I was beginning to see the fear of God and that the Lord is dead serious in His holiness. My heart began to break that day, and I wept and wept - the Lord was allowing me to draw near to Him, and I began to understand things about the fear of God and the gospel call that I had never known. *“Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”* (Job 28:28) That day when the preachers came, I was still very much broken up by the thoughts of missing the Lord, and therefore, the impending judgment at hand. They preached, and then left me with a question: “Is there anything you are not willing to give up for the Lord?” I began to beg God as they left to search my heart and tell me what He required of me. At this time there was an unbelievable willingness and strong desire (by the supernatural drawing power of the Holy Ghost) to do whatever is required from the Lord to the end that I might be saved. I did not know how significant this surrender of will was at the time (i.e., God-given repentance and faith in Jesus), but God knew it, beheld it, received it, and all of a sudden - He began to speak to me through His Word things like Jeremiah 33:3 - *“Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.”* I marveled at such a phrase, and so I did it - I called upon Him! He spoke again: *“Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me”* (Isaiah 43:10). I was astonished and did not know what to do. I was thinking that the Lord was

speaking to me THAT I WAS HIS SERVANT, and that He was calling me HIS VERY OWN. It was hard for me to believe, but I couldn't help but believe it – I could not resist Him. Hidden from my eyes but not from the eyes of the church was that the Lord had done something in my soul, and the brethren were encouraging me to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation (now that it was not built upon presumption, but upon the living Word of God revealing Himself in me). They, much more spiritually mature than I, understood the mysterious working of faith rising in a dead soul for conversion. “*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8). These men, in harmony with the scriptures, don't offer such encouragements to the proud (whom the Lord resists), but rather they believe that “*The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit*” (Psa. 34:18). I continued to seek the Lord and began to be persuaded that God had found me...by many proofs in His Word, which coincided with fruits manifested in my life - the Lord had caused this proud, self-righteous heart of mine to be converted! Indeed, the Holy Spirit was making me live a holy life, and my imparted righteousness, *who is the Holy Ghost*, was ALIVE! “*The Spirit is life because of righteousness*” (Rom. 8:10). Further, I knew that upon receiving the Holy Ghost (imparted righteousness) by God-given faith through grace alone in Jesus Christ alone, a man is also granted imputed righteousness through the legally meritorious propitiation of Christ's shed blood.

In all the world, there are few places I have heard truth spoken. I have been to Turkey, Sudan, Panama, Ethiopia, and many states in the U.S., and I believe the scriptures speak about God establishing a people and gathering them together who fear Him...and I have only found them corporately in one place thus far, though there may be remnants scattered on the hills that fear God which I know not of. Truly, through it all, the Lord caused me to wonder at Him, and stand amazed at His salvation even unto this day. He killed me and made me alive in Christ Jesus my Lord in a moment's time. Blessed be the name of the Lord! Amen.

*All praise to Him who reigns above
In majesty supreme,
Who gave His Son for man to die,
That He might man redeem!*

What will you do when the charges of Christ are presented before you and pressed upon your conscience? Will you let Him have dominion over you and gain the glory that is due to His name? By God's grace, I pray you will.