

Top Warrior Testimonies 2024

Justin Hatchett

Kelly Hobbs

Carla Lawrence

Jamila Stiller

Dawn Pehl

My Testimony

By Justin Hatchett

“Pain will drive you like a nail to the cross”-anonymous

I was not raised in church. I attended the occasional midnight mass or service at a Lutheran church where my sister was enrolled in the accompanying school. I remember a small bus that used to come through our apartments that pick up kids for church on Sunday that I almost rode once, but never went. When I was a freshman in high school my stepfather gave me a study bible and insisted that we spend an hour reading every evening. I do remember some of those conversations being fruitful but ultimately I rebelled because I was being forced to do something I didn't want to do. Looking back, that may have indeed turned me off to the idea of religion.

My parents divorced when I was four years old. My sister went to live with my mom and I went to live with my dad. As an adult, I look back at this and recognize it as a critical moment in my childhood. With little or no explanation my father came into my room and silently surveyed my belongings. We packed up a few small items and we left. He and I moved into a house that a friend of his was renting that had extra rooms. My sadness and confusion of my mother's absence was met with rebuke. This would be my first lesson in stuffing my emotions. My dad would express anger at my emotions and tell me to stop crying. So I stopped sharing my feelings with anyone. Looking back I realize now that my father was also having a difficult time dealing with the divorce, but for many years I had a resentment toward him for this. I would witness him use cocaine as a way to cope. At the time I didn't know what drugs were but something about it seemed very wrong.

My mother would eventually move to Austin while I remained in Houston with my father. We moved in with an old high school buddy of his and lived in a couple of different apartment complexes for my preteen years. For the most part, these environments were conducive to playing with kids my age. Riding bikes and swimming at the local pool were normal activities for us. During this time, I would be introduced to pornography. In the mid-eighties, Playboy magazine seemed to be the normal fair on a lot of people's coffee tables. It felt commonplace. In the age of the VCR, we found tapes with no "labels". We were introduced to a world that we should not have been in. It was a strange parallel of feeling taboo, but also feeling exciting. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this would have an effect on me later on in life.

At the age of thirteen, I would move to Austin with my mom and stepdad. Leaving behind the apartment environs that were becoming less healthy and more dangerous. Austin was a breath of fresh air. The ability to ride bikes through town to comic book stores, play ball at the parks, and go to swimming pools made for a healthier environment. In high school, I would meet my future wife, find my love of music, and ultimately meet my core group of friends that I am still friends with to this day. During this time as most teens do we started smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. When you're young none of this really seems to be out of bounds. We never got into any serious trouble. I would smoke marijuana for the better part of my adult life and it would be an emotional

crutch that continued my emotional immaturity that started when I was young. Marijuana helped me keep my emotions at bay and helped ease any social anxiety that existed. This would become a detriment in my marriage later in life.

After high school, my future wife and I dated and lived together. She had been raised in an alcoholic household and coming from an unhealthy relationship where she was introduced to drugs and sex at an early age, we would both bring our dysfunction into our relationship. When you're not married and don't have kids, partying and drinking don't seem out of place. During this time she would get pregnant on two different occasions and both times we elected for abortion. Being emotionally immature I had no idea how this would affect her mental health. We both continued to numb with drugs and alcohol. We vowed never to have an abortion again and when she got pregnant a third time, we chose to have the baby. Our daughter would be six months old when we were finally married.

As I have mentioned previously, when you're young, drugs and alcohol don't seem out of place. It's when you get married and have kids that it starts to shine through and be a problem. She would struggle with drugs and alcohol and I would numb with marijuana and remain emotionally immature and unavailable. My issues with pornography would surface and would be a detriment to our relationship. This would be our cycle through our second child and beyond. In 2012, she got sober and would stay that way for six and a half years. During this time she would earn a college degree, become a certified personal trainer, and start a Celebrate Recovery ministry at church. I was not attending church at this time. This became a point of contention in our marriage. She was getting healthier spiritually, physically, and mentally and I was not.

Begrudgingly, at the threat of separation and divorce, I started attending church with her and the kids. Still using marijuana regularly, spirituality was difficult for me as I was still emotionally immature and a heavily logically-brained man. What she was craving from me was a more emotionally intimate connection and I was not yet able to comply. With her unhappiness in our marriage and suffering from burnout in ministry, she would relapse. Six and a half years of sobriety would suddenly be shattered and all stability in our relationship along with it. That night when she came home after having been drinking, that was the first time I ever dropped to my knees and prayed. I didn't know what to say and I didn't know what to do. I felt fear like I had never felt before, and out of desperation I reached out to God. This would be the beginning of my spiritual journey. Pain drives you like a nail to the cross.

This is when God stepped in. We would spend the next years of our marriage digging out of this dark place with God's help. Through meetings with our pastor, bible study groups, marriage conferences, and marriage counseling we pieced our marriage back together. I stopped using marijuana and became sober. With God's help, I had a shift in heart posture change which made me more emotionally aware, which in turn had a very positive effect on our marriage. With our marriage on the mend, our parenting improved which helped our children to prosper. Our testimony would become a celebration of victory and a testament to God when we invited him into our mess. Having walked in darkness and come out the other side, we were able to share our story

with other couples going through similar struggles and point them to God. We could be an example of how any marriage can be transformed if you put God in the center of it.

Our story is not over. We are still human, and we still make mistakes. Our relationship has its ups and downs just like any other. But with God in the mix, we are able to recover more quickly than before.

Strength at Key Points

By Kelley Hobbs

Have you ever thought back on your life and wondered how it might be completely different if not for a few decisions you made along the way? I think about this a lot as I consider the journey of my life. Sometimes I was strong enough to make the right decision, other times I was only able to not make the wrong decision. Below I would like to share six key inflection points where God was waiting to walk with me and guide me in this life and prepare me for the next life.

I was born in Dallas TX, as the oldest of two children. We moved to a suburb of Chicago within a year. My parents were not Christians, and they did not attend church. My Dad has a Baptist background and my Mom's mother was heavily involved in Christian Science. Neither was practicing religion when they got together. Somehow when I was 4, they started attending a small Bible church with their next-door neighbors and came to know the Lord. From then on, I was raised in a Christian home.

I was never comfortable with who I was. I was always wanting to be someone else. I was a very smart, non-athletic small person. I didn't like it and purposely didn't try hard in school so my grades weren't too high and I wouldn't stand out. But I could make people laugh by being a disrespectful smart-ass. This got me into a lot of trouble, but I gained acceptance from my peers. As the oldest child, I guess I didn't want to disappoint my parents, so I lived a dual life; Home/Church and School. I never cussed at home, and I always cussed at school. I am not even sure how I did it. Fear is powerful, I guess. By my senior year, I was tired of it and felt like I had to make a choice, and I decided to live for the Lord. This was inflection point #1.

I struggled. I went to the University of Illinois, but I did not get involved with believers, fell away, and joined a fraternity in year two.

Inflection point #2. At the end of my time as a pledge, we had to go through Hell Week to join the fraternity. If I went through with it a lot of life decisions would have been made. I knew in my soul I couldn't do it. This decision would determine the path of my life. I was not strong enough to make the right decision, but I did avoid the wrong decision.

My second semester of year two spiraled downward into poor grades and partying, which ended up forcing me to change colleges. Fortunately, I was able to transfer to Baylor University.

Inflection point #3. I did not qualify for Baylor due to my grades, but I was able to convince the admissions advisor to take a chance on me.

Inflection point #4. That same summer my parents got divorced. Nobody saw it coming. I believe that shook me up and sent me down the path of becoming who I always was, which finally happened at Baylor. I wanted Lordship in my life. I got involved in Campus Crusade for Christ, grew in my faith, had people in my life who disciplined me and grew in faith and wisdom.

Inflection point #5 – I was dating someone from my hometown while at Baylor, but then I met Ginger. God’s plan was in full force here. This was God showing me without a doubt that If I surrendered to him he had such great things for me, beyond what I could imagine. 33 years and counting!

Inflection point #6 – I had a bad job situation in Milwaukee and God put it in our hearts to move to Texas. So we did. Interestingly Saltillo tile in a house is the only reason we live in Georgetown and every part of our life was affected by this (Church, friends, school, kids’ lives). God can use ANYTHING to render his perfect will.

Ephesians 3:20 says “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” which really illustrates what I have seen over my life.

With all my experiences described above, the only conclusion I can make is that God loves me, God is in total control, God knows everything that is going to happen, and God is there to love us, help us, and guide us. I am so grateful that he gave me the strength at key points of my life to nudge me to Himself!

My Testimony

By Carla Lawrence

I know that I have always loved God and that He has always loved me for as far back as I can remember. When I was young, I went to a Presbyterian Church a few times with my grandparents, and I attended Sunday School while they worshipped. That was the first time I remember attending church. Even though we didn’t go often, seeds were planted.

I bought a small New Testament bible at our local drugstore with my own money. I believe it was 99¢ at the time and I was so happy to have it. I would read from it every night. I loved that little bible and hope that I find it again one day.

My mom's brother, Uncle Bo, married an amazing Godly woman, Aunt Fran. Aunt Fran was the Godliest, most Christian person I had ever known. She was so wise and loved the Lord with all her heart. She would sit down on the kitchen floor with me and just pour wisdom, love, and prayers into me. She spoke of Satan and some of his evil plans. She helped protect me and was "my person". She and I were extremely close, and I got to visit her one last time in the hospital on February 16, 2019. She passed the next day. Her words and her teachings will never leave my heart. She was the best letter writer and would write to me often- always encouraging, loving, and uplifting. I so look forward to seeing her in heaven!

As I got older (junior high age), my mom got divorced from my first very abusive stepfather and we moved to a townhouse of Dairy Ashford in West Houston. As a result of the divorce and move, we discovered that we had never been officially adopted by our stepfather and had to change our last names back to our biological father's name. This was a very confusing time for all of us. I was in the eighth grade.

We began attending West Memorial Baptist Church, where I officially accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and was baptized. I was so excited! We continued attending this church until Mom told us we couldn't anymore due to "politics". I loved participating in the youth group activities and became active in Young Life.

I went to high school at Stratford which was a very affluent high school of rich families, kids received a car and a gasoline credit card on their 16th birthdays, drugs were everywhere, and the teachers turned a blind eye to all of it. By the time I was a junior, I had decided that I had had enough and made a plan to graduate a year early. I lacked only two classes for graduation requirements, so I took those at night school during my junior year. I did not participate in graduation and my mom was so ashamed of me and sad that I "robbed her" of that joy.

I attended my first year of college at Houston Baptist University. After that, I transferred to Sam Houston University in Huntsville, and like so many college kids, put God and my faith on the back burner. I dated, I partied, and during my junior year, met and fell in love with my husband Gene, on a blind date. We were crazy about each other and were very promiscuous. We made some really bad decisions together. We never discussed God. I didn't know if I was involved with a man who did or did not, believe in God. We got pregnant in May of 1983. We told my mom and dad on July 4th, that we were pregnant and getting married. We did not need to buy fireworks that year-we had our own! My stepdad (who I claim as my earthly father), accused me of getting pregnant on purpose, and my mother covered her face with her hands and said, "Carla, Carla, Carla". She did not speak to me for two weeks, was not going to attend the wedding, and would not let me invite any of her friends. She was so ashamed. Mom changed her mind after Gene and I attended pre-marital counseling at the church where we were to be married. We were married on July 30, 1983. My dad walked me down the aisle, and my mother did attend the wedding, as well as both sets of grandparents, and Aunt Fran and Uncle Bo. I was so grateful to have them all there. It was amazing. Everything happened so fast, we paid for the wedding with some of my retirement funds from ERS, from working at the state park during college. There was no honeymoon, one night in a nice hotel, a gift from my sweet sister-in-law. We quickly fell into a new life, and a new apartment, and were blissfully happy. Mom came around every once in a while to make sure we had food in the refrigerator and pantry.

My mom went into a coma after surgery on October 28, 1983. She was in that coma for almost two weeks. I went to work every day and then to the hospital to "visit" her. She had to learn how to do everything all over again, eating, talking, everything. She has been in a wheelchair ever since.

Our precious baby girl, Jennifer, was born a month early on January 16, 1984. My mom was over the moon. We named her Jennifer Anne, after my mom. There is a really long but wonderful story that only God could have planned and pulled out_ that relates to my mom and daughter, but I don't have the room here. Jennifer had jaundice and had to stay in the hospital longer than I did. We had to go home without our baby and that crushed me.

On September 7, 1986, we had our precious son Christopher. He came late and was like a football player. We were so blessed with a boy and a girl. We had a sweet little family. We seemed to always struggle financially, but other than that, things were pretty good.

As the kids got older, God placed some amazing neighbors in our lives. The Entrekins and later, the Vegas. Both families had kids the same age and were responsible for getting us into church. I would go to church with the kids. My husband stayed home. He'd clean the house, vacuum, empty the dishwasher. This eventually caused a big problem with our son. He didn't understand why he had to go to church if Dad didn't. One day I came home from church and very clearly told home that emptying the dishwasher was not going to get him into heaven, and that the kids and I were going to be in heaven one day, and we'd like for him to be as well. So he started "going" to church with us, but he would sit in the car and read the Sunday paper. Closer, but still so far away. He finally began to accompany us to church, and we got involved with "Peace University", where we met people that are still our friends today. Our children benefitted and blossomed in the youth ministry, and backyard bible clubs and made many mission trips to Mexico, Whales, and Thailand.

Our children are now grown, married, and with children of their own. God has blessed us with five beautiful grandbabies. The oldest two were baptized earlier this year, and the three youngest have been dedicated. The three youngest also attend a Christian preschool, Solid Foundations where they are absolutely building solid foundations in their faith.

My husband has grown so much. He will actually pray with me before meals, before we leave the house for the day, and will read scripture out loud in real-life groups. Things I didn't know if I'd ever witness. I have always pictured God up in heaven, saying, "Oh, I need to bring this person into Carla's life", or, "I need Carla to help this person." and He moves us around like chess pieces, making sure we are exactly where He wants us and when. I have experienced this dozens of times in my life. Like meeting Judy at a ladies' bible study. She was intentionally placed in my life by God so that I could learn from her and be nurtured, furthering my Christian Walk. She introduced me to Warrior Training, which I am so grateful for. This has been a challenging, yet amazing course. My husband is so proud of me and growing a little as well as a result of WTS. On April 12, 2024, while I was working on my WT homework, he said to me, "Thank you for keeping our family in line to be saved. I wasn't exactly the head of the household for that."

I pray that God will continue to use me as His servant to lead others to Himself. To be encouraging and uplifting to those around me, especially my husband, children, and grandchildren. To sing His praises and experience His many blessings. To pray for complete strangers when they approach me when I'm wearing one of my Jesus shirts.

God has always held me and my family close. Even when we were not doing His will, He hung onto us and hasn't ever let go. I know that God has always loved me and that I have always loved Him! How have you felt loved by God? How do you show God your love for Him?

What was the best purchase you've ever made in your lifetime? Was there a "middleman" involved? Many discount warehouses advertise they have the lowest prices because they purchase directly from the manufacturer, eliminating the middleman, and therefore can pass additional savings directly to you. Economically this might be true, but can eliminating the middle man be done in the spiritual realm to get you the "best deal" as well?

I was born and raised in the state of Utah. My father was a non-practicing Buddhist and my mother was a converted Catholic from Buddhism. My parents agreed to raise my brother and me as Catholic. I attended private Catholic schools from 1st through 12th grade. (Yes, I did have Catholic nuns and priests as teachers throughout my primary and secondary education.) I attended mass every Sunday barring times when my mother was ill. My spiritual life comprised mostly of rote prayers (The Our Father, Hail Mary), and traditions of the Catholic church (communion, confession & penance, attending mass on holy days of obligation). Heaven was assured just by being Catholic and following the traditions of the church. Around the time I was in 5th grade, I came to believe that the priest was God's intermediary. If we sinned we had to go to confession. Who was able to absolve our sins? The priest. Who provided guidance to the church congregation on Sundays through the homily (Catholic church version of a sermon)? The priest. Who was the only authority to read scripture and provide its' interpretation? The priest. Who played the role of "middle man" to God? The priest.

In 6th grade, enter praying to those other than God the Father. We were taught about prayers to Mary and other saints as intercessors to God on our behalf. In late junior high, I learned of the doctrine regarding the "infallibility of the pope". Yet another "middleman" layer was added to my belief system. I was never challenged to think otherwise by any of my LDS or Protestant friends.

It wasn't until I was in college did I started to ponder and question why I believed in the Catholic faith versus the LDS (Utah's predominant religion) or any of the other Protestant faiths. I continued practicing Catholicism in the remaining college years, but I felt a growing void in my spiritual life, especially my prayer life. There were too many unanswered questions as to why everything seemed to have to go through the priest or pope, and why the Catholic church seemed to put Mary at the same level as Jesus. I began to seek answers.

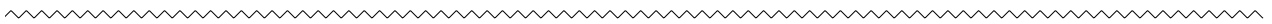
After graduating from college, a job opportunity in Houston, Texas provided the start to the journey of finding the answers to my questions. The cultural shock I experienced when I moved to Texas was profound and provided additional motivation for my search. There were more churches (denomination and non-denomination) than I could ever have imagined. A couple of weeks into my job our administrative assistant asked me if I had attended a church. I told her that I was disillusioned with the Catholic church and was exploring other churches. She invited me to visit the non-denominational church she attended. I accepted her invitation, and her family picked me up at my apartment the following Sunday morning. Upon entering a strip mall parking lot, my paradigm of what a church should look like was immediately challenged. Expecting to see a building with stained glass windows and statues outside the building, I was met with an empty retail space with a sign over the door, "Lord of Hosts Church".

My worship experience paradigm was next to be challenged. Drums, guitars, keyboards, and bass were on the stage and used to play contemporary praise music. Quite a bit different than the organ, choir, and hymnals that I was used to hearing. This was followed by the question in my mind "Where is the altar?"

After praise and worship the pastor, not the priest, led us in prayer, then asked us to open our Bibles to the book of Acts. Another paradigm was shattered. We are supposed to bring a Bible to church and actually read it?!?! The sermon was in-depth, relying on the scripture, and applicable to the current day and time. Over the subsequent weeks, my desire to seek more knowledge about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, theology, and Biblical truths multiplied. I was like a sponge soaking up as much information as possible. The topic of eternal life (heaven) quickly came to the forefront. My previous belief was that by being baptized Catholic, doing good works, and being a good person was sufficient to make it to heaven. That paradigm was destroyed when the pastor said that, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast”. This was the pivotal moment where the path of my spiritual journey became clear.

Ironically our ultimate purchase, eternal life, isn’t something we can buy. It’s actually a gift from the one and only true “middleman”. It was already purchased through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We simply have to accept the free gift that is offered to us. Jesus Christ is ready to be anyone’s mediator with God the Father. All that is required is to believe (have faith) that Jesus took everyone’s sins upon him and that there is nothing anyone can do to earn their place in heaven.

The best deal you will ever make this side of eternity is one that costs you nothing but relies solely on the completed work of a “middleman”. That middleman is Jesus Christ. There is a saying that Christianity is a relationship, not a religion. Once you have that relationship with God the Father established upon your acceptance of the free gift of grace, paradigms of relying upon earthly middlemen will be replaced by relying upon the one true middleman that spans now and eternity. Who do you know that needs to know about the best deal of a lifetime?



God’s presence is ever present!

By Dawn Pehl

In every breath, in every step, God’s presence is a constant, an unwavering light.

Amidst the shadows of trials and the silence of death, the trail blazes on, guided by an unseen hand. Not always recognizing the presence of the unseen hand at the moment, its unwavering presence has always been evident when I have taken time to look back and think about those events in my life. A span of five decades is filled with countless experiences that have revealed the presence of the unseen hand.

My mother started taking me to church as a child. Since I can remember I have been a member of a church and attended church regularly. I was very active in church youth and church camp growing up and was raised surrounded by Christians. Though I dedicated myself to God on August 4, 1985, the road to where I am now has significantly changed and I did not always live my life focused on him.

During college, I definitely strayed from attending church and found myself in the wrong crowd and letting any connection to God take a back burner. Leaving my strict and sheltered home and heading to college with the freedom to do and live how I wanted was an open canvas to have fun! And that I did! After my first semester of college, let's just say that my theory of having fun was evident in the grades that arrived on my report card back home. Prepared for the discipline and wrath from my parents for those horrible grades, I was ready to beg them to not send me back to college. However, what I received instead was love and support to try again. I was the first person in a large family of 20 aunts and uncles, and 32 cousins to go to college. My parents said this was a training semester for us all, and sent me back with the belief that I could and would finish college and I did just that. However, I still did not turn back to God during those years. But, looking back, the unseen hand was present holding me tightly, he protected me from many situations that could have led to major destruction. Genesis 28:15 "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go"

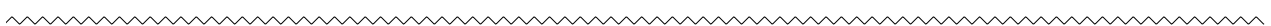
After college, I started to attend young adult fellowships at the church I grew up in and started to bring God back into my life. On July 27, 1997, I married my first husband, Greg, a Christian man that I had known for years and met through church camp years prior, he also attended the young adult fellowship. We began to search for a church home and worked as counselors at a church camp for a few years together. In 2000, our first child, Colton, was born after many years of trying, and success from a fertility specialist. To say we were excited and blessed was an understatement. We found our new home church and had our son baptized there, and the perfect "picket fence life" was in motion, just like I had always dreamed. Four years later in April of 2004, eight months after moving into our dream home in Georgetown, Texas our lives were turned upside down. Greg was diagnosed with a rare cancer that had no cure. Treatment would only buy us extra time. Our new church family in Georgetown only knew us for a short time and treated us like they had known us for years. The amount of support, love, listening ears, prayer warriors, and assistance was unbelievable. The pastor took me under her wings and showered me with love and guidance while I cursed God and asked why and how he could let this happen. On New Year's Eve 2006, at the young age of 34, I became a widow and single mother to a six-year-old boy. Life stopped, all my dreams came crashing down, and darkness and silence took over my heart. That night while waiting for hospice and the police to finish all their work, my son said "Who is going to take care of us now?". Then, I wondered the same thing, but once again looking back, the unseen hand had a grip on us both. Psalm 23:4 "I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me".

The following years at church, our family ministry soared and the connections between us all grew immensely. I finally started feeling connected to my faithful roots again and felt like my upside-down life was making a turn in the right direction. Our family Sunday school class was created and we named ourselves GWIP (God's work in progress). Through this class, I learned that we are constantly growing and improving in our walk with God, and my walk with God was really just beginning. I became an elected Elder at my church and was over our Church finances. Being a servant leader for the church pushed me even more in my spiritual growth. Not only ministering to

our congregation, I was also trying to get others to attend our church; I even invited my neighbor to attend. Once again, the hand was present. A friendly relationship with my neighbor blossomed into romance and in May of 2010, I had a new spouse and family. Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life: in your presence there is fullness of joy: at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Navigating new beginnings and challenges of a blended family were at the forefront of our lives. It was important for me and Michael to weave God into our daily family life. We even started that before we got married. We wanted our kids to grow up feeling His presence in our home. We not only included prayer but also bible studies and family meetings centered around God. The enemy was trying hard to make a stronghold on our family. The ex-spouse did not want to co-parent and had married an openly agnostic man who did not want God in the home. She constantly bad-mouthed our home, beliefs, and family values to the children. Through faithful prayer from our church family, GWIP friends, and us, we battled through some difficult journeys with our blended family and managed to stay married and focused on Him. God’s hand was holding us tight and kept us from drowning in the enemy, he wanted to break us up! Psalm 59:1 “Deliver me from my enemies, O God; protect me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from evildoers and save me from bloodthirsty men”.

The enemy continued to be at work and our family was in serious warfare with him. Not only was our home life filled with difficulties, but our church that we so loved was in upheaval as well. Our long-time pastor retired and the interim pastor had different plans and ideas of what our church home should look like. After about a year of trying to work with the new pastor and having all but one kid out of the house, we decided it was time to start looking for a new church family. With God’s hand leading us, we landed at Hill Country Bible Church and immediately joined a small group at church. Our small group is filled with seasoned believers who have a deep understanding of their faith. Immediately I began to learn from them and looked forward to our weekly bible studies. Over the past eight years, our small group has encountered numerous experiences, but it’s my faith that has seen the most significant growth. As the years have passed, I have become more involved in activities at the church. I have been more willing to step out of my comfort zone and trust in his guidance and nudges. The most recent being a step in faith to enter Year One of Warrior Training through the RFG Network, which has helped me connect and understand the twelve Christian disciplines, embrace my spiritual gifts and understand how they fit into my life, and be more in his word daily when fighting off the enemy. My 52 years of life have not been the easiest, but who is it - we live in a broken world. Family, co-workers, friends, and church family have loved us and guided us through it all, we are certainly blessed and grateful. The beauty of God’s people at work is glorious! But it was the unseen hand constantly guiding me in every breath and in every step. God’s presence has been constant, an unwavering light in all our lives, even when it was at the darkest. Hebrew 13:5 "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."



The Lost Sheep

By Jamila Stiller

Most people don't realize they are lost until they're found. At least that is true in my story. I wasn't raised in the Church, but I had a lot of different religious and spiritual influences growing up. My mother is Judeo-Christian (formerly Catholic) and my father is Muslim. My grandmother, who watched me during the day as a child, was a Jehovah's Witness. At an early age, I remember sitting with my grandma during Bible study or going door-to-door preaching The Word. While my grandma only spoke Spanish, and I only spoke English, she was still the most consistent religious foundation I had growing up. My parents wanted both my sister and I to "choose" our own religious path. But rather than teach us about their beliefs, we were left to figure it out on our own. In my teen years, I sometimes attended a Methodist church with my best friend, but that was more of a social gathering. In college, I began to explore Buddhism which I was drawn to because of the simple philosophy of kindness. It wasn't until January 2021, that my entire spiritual life transformed.

In January, we were less than a year from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rob and my entire family had COVID over Christmas and my parents, who had been visiting, had also gotten COVID. My dad bounced back quickly, but my mother was sick for weeks. Overall, my mother had a relatively healthy lifestyle except for being diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2012. After about three weeks of being sick with COVID and three rounds of antibiotics, we noticed an extreme shift in my mother's personality. My mom has always been the rock and foundation of our family. She usually has a very quiet demeanor and is very calm and level-headed. While sick with COVID, however, my mother became noticeably agitated and erratic. She described hearing voices, seeing demons, and feeling dark entities around her. She called me at all hours terrified and crying. She would experience flashbacks from her childhood that would send her spiraling into uncontrollable sobbing, regret, and remorse.

My entire family drove down to visit my parents. When we arrived, both my parents were emotionally exhausted. My mother was still experiencing paranoia and hallucinations and was sobbing uncontrollably. She was unable to have a coherent train of thought and her reality kept bouncing from past to present. Years ago, my aunt (my mother's sister) had been diagnosed as bipolar schizophrenia. My fear was that my mother may have the same diagnosis. After several days, I made the difficult decision to admit my mother into a psychiatric facility. When we got to the facility, however, they told us to first go to the hospital to make sure she was not experiencing any underlying health issues. If she was medically cleared, they would admit her to the facility.

At the hospital, it was apparent my mother was not well, and they admitted her for further testing. During this time, when the doctors were in the room running the tests, my mother was lethargic, incoherent, and crying uncontrollably. However, when the doctors would leave, and I was alone with my mother, she would suddenly become very clear and lucid. My mother would have these brief moments of clarity where she *seemed* like her old self, but looking into her eyes I could tell it wasn't her. During these episodes, my mother began talking about herself in the third person and she would tell me that my mother was okay, but that I needed to pick up the Bible and start reading. She would tell me that she was not telling me what decisions to make, but I just needed to read to find out the truth. My "mother" would also talk about an unseen war that was always happening around us. (Looking back at this time, I realize she was talking about spiritual warfare, but at the time I had no context or understanding of this). The moment anyone would walk into the room, my mother would return into a lethargic and incoherent state. I was completely dumbfounded and had no idea what to make of the change in my mother's personality. I began to reach out to anyone who could help me understand

what my mother was experiencing. I called Aunts and Uncles, my mother's pastor, my sister, and anyone who could help explain what I had just witnessed.

A few days later, my family and I came home. After a restless night, I checked the mail and received a handwritten note from a stranger. Christy Stokes was a Jehovah's Witness and had written several people in the neighborhood in the hopes of spreading God's Word. At the bottom of the letter, she included her personal cell phone number. On a whim, I decided to call her and tell her the bizarre situation that had been my life for the last few weeks. After listening intently, she simply said, "Well, it sounds like someone is telling you to pick up the Bible and start reading." She offered to be a resource if I had any questions. I also told my neighbor about my experience, and she also offered to come over for a weekly one-on-one crash course Bible study. Shortly after beginning to read the Bible, I found a church and began to actively seek God. I had so many questions and doubts, but along the way, God led me to people who helped gently encourage me to seek God for clarity and salvation. It wasn't until many months later that I read the Parable of the Lost Sheep, that I fully recognized that my experience was God's divine intervention to actively pursue a relationship with me.

As for the official medical explanation for my mother, the doctors concluded that the antibiotics prescribed to treat COVID negatively reacted to her thyroid medications which caused hallucinations, paranoia, and erratic mood swings. Once the doctors regulated my mother's medication, she returned to her old self. When asked about what happened during that time, my mother says she felt that she was in a dream and fog, and she doesn't remember much. But I know in my heart, that I saw the Spirit of God alive in my mother that day, and I truly believe that God left the 99 other sheep to find me. It was at that moment, that I realized that my shepherd would go to any lengths to save me.