

## **My Hope Story**

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### **1. The Beginning:** What was life like before Jesus?

Life before Jesus was at the human level: doing what my parents and I thought best for the use of time: eat, sleep, cooperate, play, study, dream.

### **2. The Middle:** What happened when Jesus saved me. What drove you to turn to Him? What people were involved?

My introduction to God came around age 6 when my mother talked with me at bedtime before we prayed. Our prayers concluded with “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.” As she was leaving, I would ask her to keep the door ajar, giving me light for fear of the dark. I would continue to talk to God.

After learning more about Jesus from the Bible during Sunday School beginning at age 8, I visualized God as Jesus. During worship I thought the man in the pulpit in a black robe was Jesus. He told stories and applied them to us today.

There were other sacred encounters in my youth/young adult years: when I knelt to be confirmed at age 13 with my sister next to me, as the minister placed his hand on my head.

Soon thereafter, between Sunday School and worship in a crowded hallway at church, two men – whom I did not know – asked me, “We’d like you to consider becoming a pastor.”

At age 17 I made a commitment to serve the Lord in fulltime ministry during a conference at the Zephyr Pt. Presbyterian Conference Center, Lake Tahoe, CA. I was by myself facing west as the sun was setting over the lake one evening.

Like Jonah I had put off preparing for ministry as long as I could after high school with college and three years of active duty in the US Air Force before applying to McCormick Seminary, Chicago. I met my future wife, Anita Fay Cone, there. We were picking up our huge pile of books at the bookstore. Too heavy for a fair maiden to carry, I offered to carry them for her. We were married in 1964.

My ordination in 1965 was at my home church, the Presbyterian Church of the Redeemer, Richmond, CA, with my boyhood pastor, Rev. Dr. Warren W. Prall, returning to assist. The solemn moment: when hands were placed on me, including Elder Darrol Davis’s, to be set apart to serve Jesus as a minister.

The birth of our first child. Would we have a boy or a girl? Surprise, the first child was twins. God gave us another daughter and son over the next 4 ½ years.

After serving as a pastor for 7 1/2 years in Lawton, IA, then 8 months in Portage, WI, I began to doubt my effectiveness as a pastor. It was not fair to God, the church or myself to be receiving a

monthly check. To begin with I thought I'd better find the right program or become a teacher or social worker. My sermons had been like dry bones, without personal life experience to connect with the people.

Membership in both of my churches was flat. Confirmed youth and letters of transfer replaced the dying and transfers out. Did I actually persuade anyone to become a Christian? I rationalized that I was among those who planted seeds or cultivated them after sprouting. I wanted everyone to like me. Very naïve.

My most effective work was praying in worship or during a home or hospital visit. One day in my first church, a person said to me after worship, "Pastor, I get more out of your prayers than your sermons." My most effective work was at the time of a funeral.

3. **The End:** Describe the difference Jesus made. How does the experience shape how you do life with God now?

In 1974 I was given a book, Prison to Praise by Merlin Carothers, by a woman from a nearby Presbyterian Church. The title put me off, thinking it was a Vietnam POW story. But when I began to read it in early August 1974, I was inspired. He saw God answering his prayers with others within a few days. His was a praise theology: praising God for answering his Spirit-led prayers after saying "Amen" to them. I was pumped!

At 4 am the next morning I was awakened and drawn to the other end of the manse to continue reading his testimony. Within a few minutes I was on my knees, recommitting my life to Jesus, asking Him to do for me whatever He had done for this pastor.

A brilliant, white light appeared in front of me, so powerful that I had to close my eyes and put my hands over them to hold the light out. Then I sensed that someone was standing behind my left shoulder. I then heard (not audibly) these words: "My son, I'm pleased that you've turned to Me." And He didn't rub it in by adding "Finally."

It took six months to realize the power of those words: He had adopted me as His own son. My own father left us when I was 8. His last words were, "You are the man of the house now. Take care of your sister." Marijean was 6.

I was invited in 1979 by the founder of Presbyterian Reformed Ministries Int'l., Rev. Dr. George C. "Brick" Bradford, to be his first Associate Executive Director. I did not apply for the position, believing I was not qualified. After Brick Bradford retired and Rev. Dr. Brad Long became the Executive Director in 1990, the ministry moved from Oklahoma City to Black Mountain, NC, in 1991. For 20 years I had a front row seat to observe what God as Holy Spirit was doing in North America. I was blessed to learn and be mentored by some of the finest clergy and laity I have ever known.

After Anita died in 2009, God brought Kay Pyron into my life. We were married in 2012. With Kay's daughter, Kate, my family grew from four to five children. And my family grew from nine to thirteen grandchildren and five great grandchildren.

Reflecting on my nearly nine decades of life, I realize I've been so blessed by God's goodness, grace, gifts and forgiveness...that tears of gratitude so easily flow. He does it all for those who trust and obey. We are His vessels to let the Lord have His own way. "Fill with Thy Spirit 'til all shall see, Christ only, always, living in me." Glow-ry!

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