

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

Personal testimony
of Ethan Smith
Saved July 22, 2015

I guess this is the story of God became the friend of a hopeless sinner.

I was born in September of 1998, and at that time my parents were part of a non-denominational church. But one day, through God's grace and mercy, my uncle Casey Hoskins, met a couple of young boys down the street, Stephen and Josh Moffitt. Their dad, Greg Moffitt, was the pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church in Arlington, TN, which was a few doors down from my grandparent's house. Eventually my uncle got my parents and grandparents to visit the church just to check it out. According to my dad, the first thing he recognized was the love the people had for one another. From that day on they decided to stay for a little while. Later on, my mom got saved, along with my dad a few months later, and we've been a part of Lighthouse Baptist ever since.

I grew up surrounded by people who loved me and genuinely cared about me, and each other. But I don't remember a time that voices in my head weren't constantly shouting at me, telling me how filthy and worthless I was. I remember the first time God really spoke to me, when I was about 11 or 12, and dad took me to talk to Bro Greg. I don't even remember what it was about, just that God was moving in me, letting me feel His presence. From then on I would start trying to pay a little more attention than before.

Fast forward to when I'm 15, and I started thinking about things way more than before. There were more distractions, and I was questioning things. I tried to deny that God even existed, and if He did, then He didn't care. I passively listened to the sermons, just to see if something supernatural would happen, like a booming voice from above or some kind of miracle. Then June Camp of 2014, Bro Mike preached a pretty lengthy sermon on God's love for us. I don't remember many details, other than it shattered all the junk that I built up in my head up to that point. He finished, and I sat down in line to talk to Bro Greg. I was FURIOUS with myself, to the point I was passively clawing my arms, because I had hated God and didn't take advantage of all that He gave me in my life. I told Bro Greg, and I don't remember every word of what he said, but it was mainly that God didn't tell you this so you could feel bad about it. He's just showing you who you are and how good He is. I walked away with a little bit of hope, but it didn't help me much the rest of the week. I didn't understand half the preaching because I had never listened that intently my whole life. Bro Terry preached on bringing your mountains of pride down and filling your valleys of self pity and hate for yourself. I jumped to the altar, telling God how sorry I was. In the same breath, I started telling Him how much I loved Him, and how sorry I was for a bunch of random things that weren't even related. I didn't feel God on it at all, which scared me severely. After Bro Terry finished, I went to dad and told him that I thought I did everything I needed to, but I knew it didn't get me anywhere. I was scared. Dad told me to calm down, so that he could tell me the only thing he felt he needed to. So I took a breath, and tried to stop crying long enough to hear God promise me one little thing: "It's going to be ok." Those simple words have stuck with me to this day. I went into another sobbing mess, this time happy, and thought I had gotten saved because I thought I had believed it. The next day I found out relatively easy that I wasn't.

I went on for a few weeks trying to listen, but it eventually wore off, and before I knew it I wasn't even remembering what was preached as soon as I left the building. Nothing really started affecting me again until February of 2015.

We started hearing about a small group of people down in Florida who desperately needed some Hope. So God picked my dad to help give it to them. Before I knew it, we were getting ready to move

down to Florida and leave all I had grown up in, which terrified me. Little did I know that grace that was about to be dumped on me soon after the move.

Right before Lighthouse's birthday celebration, Bro Greg preached on before the celebration, the priests brought the law forth to show people where they were wrong. Then they could repent and be able to celebrate. Well I had been told before that godly sorrow is a specific thing, not just a collage of everything you've ever done. So he told us to go home, come to the altar, or do whatever you wanted to do, but we needed to get right. Right after he finished, I went to the altar. I knew if I waited to get home, I wouldn't care. For about 5 minutes I was just asking God to tell me directly what I needed to repent of. I think it was the first time I can remember really opening up to God to let Him tell me, not me try to figure it out. Then, I think it was the clearest time I've ever heard God talk to me up to that point. The only word I could even think was "unbelief". Out of EVERYTHING wrong with me, unbelief was apparently my biggest problem. I don't even remember specifically saying the words "I'm sorry." I just thought, Ok, I'll believe you. That night he finished the passage that when they repented, then they were ready.

Birthday Celebration passes, and I barely remember anything about it. I felt like the whole time it was for Lighthouse, and I was leaving anyways. But it was pretty much a giant lie because I could have heard something if I was listening.

The Sunday before Memorial Day, we just "happened" to stay in Tennessee. Bro Greg told us we were getting lax in following God, so we needed to enter a covenant; "I will follow God." That was a serious oath that I KNEW I was going to break at some point. But when Bro Greg looked over at my row, he looked right at me and said "What about some of you young people?" Then "I will follow God" jumped out of my mouth before I could stop it. It wasn't some big powerful shout or anything, but it was the clearest my voice had ever been saying something out loud like that. I thought it would be better to do it and try my best and apologize when I didn't.

This is about the time who I am really started weighing on me. The night we were loading everything up in the truck to move to Florida, I was really down in it. Dad saw me before he had to leave to get something from Kroger and asked me what was wrong. I just cried. He told me to go to the car and I could ride with him. So I get in without dad and literally started screaming, asking God to kill me. I was just so tired of having to deal with the voices in my head and the burden I carried around. Dad got in and it took me about 10 minutes to even talk. He said "look, I don't love you because you do everything right, I love you because you're my son." Then I just told him everything, never looking at him the whole time because I thought he'd be mad, or worse, disappointed. Boy was that cleared up fast. He told me to look at him and I did, despite every muscle in my body fighting against it. All I saw was pity and understanding. Afterwards, I stayed in the car, and thanked God for not killing me.

We finally moved to Florida the next day. The next Sunday Bro Greg is the one to preach, which was how much God must care for the people down here. So much that He sent an entire family to them. I felt like, "wow this is great" for them, but not for me. I was also in a mess from before, still not able to get my mind off of myself. I didn't think God even wanted to look at me. So literally every service from then on was how much God loved ME. One sermon, a few weeks later, dad brought up the death of Christ on the cross, and the words "thank you God" jumped out of my mouth and I really felt it. In another sermon dad explained how God didn't just patch our ragged clothes up, but removed our

righteousness, which is filthy rags, and gave us His righteousness through the cross. Another was how God removed enmity between man and God through Christ's death. Another message was how if you'll just stop pulling against the chains of rules and regulations and look at who's holding you back, it won't be someone frustrated with you or upset, you would see love in his eyes, but that look wouldn't last forever. At some point he would let go and let you run wild.

Then June Camp came up, and this was the first camp I've ever been ready for BEFORE I got there. First Brother Terry's sermon came up on looking to the left and right. Just look at how good God is to the people around us, and that it's beautiful. That was a really happy sermon for me, but I was passively looking at it like God loves them, but not ME, of all people, specifically.

After that sermon, me, Daniel, Devin, and Zach promised each other that we would actually talk about the sermons and try our best to not get distracted. So that helped us a lot. Next day, Bro Larry preached about the good shepherd that would leave the ninety and nine to go after the one, and how the woman who lost the coin turned the whole house upside down to find it. About twenty minutes in he described what it was like when the shepherd was searching for his lost sheep. His arms were getting torn and scraped and blood was gushing from his wounds, but he was only worried about his sheep, which was stuck in briars and thorns. As soon as he was describing pulling the sheep out, I just went cold. I had started to think of that sheep as me, and unbelief gripped my heart. Notice how everything God told me, unbelief was always in my way. I hadn't really seen that fact until afterwards.

I went outside with dad later that afternoon and told him where I was at. I told him how I saw that it was beautiful, like absolutely amazing, but separate from me. It could be a beautiful work for someone else, and I could appreciate that, just not for me completely. He asked me "Do you believe that God picked YOU specifically?" I told him that I felt that it was blanket coverage for everyone because of where I was, but he told me that if God had to, he would stop the WHOLE camp if it would save me. I still had a little trouble believing it but it helped. Next day, I think Bro Claude preached on godly sorrow and how it worketh repentance in a man's heart. Then that night, dad preached right where I was, how we need to forsake our unbelief and observe the things around us. Use those things we know to be true and compare them to our own lives, and that that would increase our faith. The next night, Bro Mike preached on the wrath of God, and it SCARED ME TO DEATH. He used the example of the Hoover dam and that your sin is like the water. The only thing separating you from the wrath of God is that wall. I was shaking uncontrollably, and I didn't even pay attention to the part when Bro Terry talked about mercy. Even when they were praying, I couldn't even close my eyes because I was afraid that I wouldn't ever open them again. Then Bro Terry prayed and told us that if we'd just look up at Him we'd see. So I went directly to dad, and pulled him into a room and started bawling, telling him how scared I was. He asked me what I'm afraid of, and I said I just can't look up, like Bro Terry said, to which he replied again, well why are you scared? Again I avoided the question and said "I'm just ashamed." He said "there's a difference between being afraid and ashamed. What are you scared of?" So I finally said "I'm just afraid that if I look up, I'm going to see disappointment." I really felt that if I looked at God that second, He would kill me. Then dad grabbed his Bible, and I'm still shaking when he comes back. He goes to Psalms I think and told me something about how God wasn't ashamed of me. He wouldn't be because of his Son. Then he told me the story of the prodigal son and how the Father didn't wait for his son to come back, then tell everyone he was right and embarrass him. He RAN to the son because he couldn't wait for him, and accepted him into his arms. He gave him a robe to cover up his scars and his sin, put shoes on his feet to hide where he's been, then put a ring on his hand to show everyone

"This is my son." If you look up at that dam, there's a giant hole in it, and there's not a drop of that water left. Christ took it all on the cross. Then I broke. For the first time ever, I actually almost completely believed that God actually WANTED me. He said some other things that honestly I barely remember. I was just so overwhelmed. So I went back to the dorms, head directly to bed, and woke up the next day ready to hear. The next day we went into the morning service and Bro Terry preached on keeping your priorities in the right order, which helped me focus more. After lunch I decided that I needed to do what dad said that last night and look more at the things God did around us. I grabbed Will and asked him to tell me about the day he got saved. Honestly I was looking to see if there was, I don't know, something special going on that day to give it away, but that was the exact opposite of what he told me. After he finished it really did give me more hope that God could save me. So that afternoon I took a nap, afraid to fall asleep later on and that I might get distracted.

Then the night service came, and we started the singing. The song "Show Us Christ" was one of the best songs I could've heard at that moment, especially during the part where it said, "Help our unbelief." I felt like that was where I was. It was my heart's cry that I could just BELIEVE.

Then Brother Greg stepped up, and he looked really distraught. Fear creeped in again that I'm going to hear another hard message. But while he was praying, he mentioned that it was just things in his head distracting him. He turned to the passage and said "Jesus is a friend of sinners." He repeated it again and again. God just wanted me to see how much he just wanted to be my friend. At some point everything faded in me, all the emotion just slowed down. I felt like if I went to the altar, God would save me. It honestly felt like God was just sitting right next to the empty spot on the altar, telling me to come to Him. So for about five minutes I sat there, scared it was just me trying to make something up, but I couldn't feel anything after that. Even my pride was starting to get in the way. But I didn't want to lose another chance, so I jumped out of my seat and fell to the altar, trying to love Him back. I felt like I was literally running into God's arms, and He wasn't letting me lose sight of the fact that he wanted to be my friend. Then I just felt like all the crying wasn't really going to get me anywhere. It was just a result of realizing how good God was to me, so I just made myself calm down. I don't know if I said it in my head or out loud, but I said "I can't do this myself." God just wanted my heart. I just couldn't stop loving on Him and seeing how much He wanted me and how long He'd been waiting for me to come home. Bro Greg then got to Zacchaeus, and how he climbed that tree, and Jesus saw Him, and went home with him. God was telling me that He wanted to come home with me! So I just started thanking Him that I didn't have to go home by myself anymore. From that point on it turned from sobbing to laughing. It's like He was there, embracing me in His arms because I had finally come home. So he finished, and I stood up, smiling the whole time, barely being able to wait to talk to dad.

As soon as the service was finished, I stood up and then dad started talking to Abbey. I was just sitting there shaking, this time for a good reason. He finally he got finished and I was fully expecting to just tell him what happened and see what he thought about it, but I couldn't help it. I just fell into his arms and told him "GOD HAS BEEN SO GOOD TO ME" and I just broke down. When I finally stopped laughing and crying I told him a little of what happened, and he asked one simple question: "Where did the guilt go?" and I said "I can't find it." That sent both of us into a fit, which drew attention to ourselves. I wanted to just wait and see if I really did get saved, but everyone started hugging me and praising God. I thought that if it wasn't though, God still deserved glory regardless, especially since I wasn't the only one saved.

So Camp ends, and we head back home. I slowly started doubting that it could've happened. I have a knack for looking at myself too often. That was all that really kept me from saying I was saved though. I had no legitimate reason why I couldn't be saved, and to this day feel nothing but God's love towards me. I just wanted something my faith could latch on to. A good MONTH after camp, dad preaches on how God has evaluated us, like someone appraising a gem. He looked at me, and saw all my impurities, but still placed value on me. Dad then brought Jonah up and told us he's calling us like children. God reminded me of when I was ashamed to look at dad when he knew what I'd done, but when I looked up, I didn't see anger. God just told me to look up, get my eyes off myself, and look at who saved me. It wasn't anything I had done, it was everything He had done in my life, all just so He could be my friend.