

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

Personal testimony
of Ethan Smith

My name is Ethan Smith. I was born to Scott and Amy Smith, who were already saved by the time I was able to remember anything. I could start my testimony at that point, but to do so would ignore all that God had done to get me to the truth. I recommend reading both of their testimonies, but I'll summarize what I can. My parents grew up very religious, but by the time I was born, my parents were tired of false religion. My dad had grown up in church, given his life to it, but was never satisfied, eventually leaving it altogether. God could have left him there, and never started the chain of events that would've brought my whole family to the truth, but God in His mercy chose to bring us to the truth, and end the slaughter. He allowed him to meet my mom, and eventually get married, where they just wandered from place to place, looking for anything at all in every church they visited. God could've let them be satisfied with dead religion at any point, but through His grace He kept them dissatisfied. They had been hurt by churches in the past, and were fed up with it all, to the point my dad had decided they would never visit another Baptist church again, because they were all dead anyways. My mom and dad, and my mom's family, had all decided they were going to leave for middle Tennessee, to avoid Y2K (at the time this was a really big deal and not ridiculous at all). If God had let them leave, my uncle never would've met Josh and Stephen Moffitt. It's something so small, but it spoke to my mom and dad that my uncle had found friends in the neighborhood who were just nice to him. My parents and grandparents decided to visit the church where Josh and Stephen's dad, Bro Greg Moffit, was the pastor. It was a Baptist church, so they did not plan on staying. My parents did not like the singing, and bro Greg was very passionate and loud. There weren't big elaborate worship bands, or altar calls. It was very different. But what they couldn't disregard was that the people really did seem to love each other. God could have let them walk out the doors, and keep searching for something they would never find. But pretty quickly, God saved my mom, and eventually my dad, and both of my grandparents. If it weren't for those small graces shown to my parents, and the grace to see that grace, my family never would've known the truth, and I wouldn't have this testimony.

So, we now belonged to Lighthouse Baptist Church in Arlington Tennessee, which is where I spent my whole childhood and most of my teenage years. I grew up around people who truly knew, worshiped, loved, and lived for God. The grace of God was very prevalent in every area of my life. To me, it was just how things were. I "knew" it was God, but growing up in it, I didn't know anything different to contrast it against. I never really struggled with believing God was real, because it was just a fact to me growing up. I would occasionally feel God move in a service, but never thought about it too much a few minutes afterwards. There were a few times where God would move really heavily in a service, and I would cry and get emotional. At that age, it was just God letting me feel His presence.

Growing up, I had a few really close friends who were my age, besides the ones I only got to see a couple times a year at a church camp in Pontotoc Mississippi. The first were brothers, Dillan and Devin Pelfrey, who I did everything with. God eventually led their dad to move to Texas, where Pioneer Baptist Church is located, to help with what God was doing there. I was only 9 or 10 at the time, and to me, I couldn't see why God would do that and take away my two best friends. My dad explained why they were leaving, but it still made me really upset. Soon after, another family started coming to camp, and eventually Lighthouse. I was quickly attached to their family, and spent nearly every Sunday with them. David, Aaron, and Moriah were my closest friends for years. However, around the time I was 14, their parents separated, and their mom moved back to Florida, taking all three of them with her, leaving their dad and a couple of their brothers behind. I was absolutely devastated. I never talked to anyone about it, but I partially blamed myself for them not wanting to stay with me at Lighthouse. I thought if I was a better friend, they would have chosen to stay with their dad, and with me. I see now

that that situation had so much more to it than that, but as a young teenager, it really affected me. Also at that time, Dillan and Devin, who still came to camp for the time being, started to turn away from the truth. Everything slowly started to turn from just being sad, to questioning everything. Why would God keep taking my friends away time and time again? Was this even worth staying for? I started to tug at the rope God had tied me down with, and wondered what would happen if I left, although it terrified me. God put a fear in me to not push the boundaries I could have, as I watched people around me get away with things I knew I probably could have as well. I still wanted those things, and I started drifting away in my mind from God, although physically I was still in the church. I started to close myself off from people, and started to question everything, looking at the flaws in people, wondering how I knew this was true, or if it was all just made up. Maybe this was just a slightly better version of what everyone else had, but still make believe. I thought He didn't care about me, if He was real. Maybe God was just there, and everything that happens, happens because He doesn't intervene. I could go on and on just with the thoughts that crept in to chip away at my belief in Him. Over time my heart had just grown cold towards God and His people. I sat through services, thinking the entire time "God, if you're real, talk directly to me". I don't know what I was expecting to happen, just something that I couldn't deny.

Despite having these doubts and lies constantly in my head, I never told anyone. It was much easier to just smile and nod, and not let anyone know what I was struggling with. Although I thought about it often, I never seriously planned on leaving the church when I was old enough, only because of the consequences that would have come with that. I'm a people pleaser, and I was afraid of disappointing people, especially my parents at that age. I wanted the good things I had because of God, I just really didn't care if I had Him or not. If God had let me continue down this path, I eventually would've left the truth, looking for things to satisfy me, apart from what He had given me.

I went on like this for about a year, until June of 2014; one of the week long camp meetings we have. One night, Bro Mike preached a sermon on God's love for His people. I don't remember very many specific things about the sermon, but it had shattered all of the shallow questioning I had built up in my own mind about God up to that point. God let me see just a glimpse of how much He loved me in how He had orchestrated events in my life. I cried throughout the entire service, mad at myself for questioning everything and doubting God. I talked to Brother Greg about how angry I was at myself for doubting Him, and He simply said God didn't reveal all of that to me to get me to look at myself, He did it to show me how good He is. That consoled me a bit.

The next night, Brother Terry preached a sermon about filling the low places and bringing down the high places of your heart to prepare the way for the Lord. He said some people have valleys, where they need God to fill in the hurt and ruined places, and some have high places of pride and self righteousness that must be torn down. I knew that as much as I wanted to be a victim, I wasn't a valley. So since I was such an intellectual, I wanted to show God how much I knew I wasn't humble, and I guess show God I already knew how awful I was, so He didn't have to tell me. So I went to the altar and started apologizing to God for how terrible of a person I was, and how I was such a sinner, and thanking God all in the same breath for anything and everything. I had no idea what I was doing, and I didn't feel anything from God, which started to scare me. I thought if I just convinced God of how pathetic I knew I was, He would say "well I'm glad you finally figured that out" and save me. I expected something to happen at least, but I got up with no God on me at all. Brother Greg was busy counseling after the sermon, so I went instead to my dad. I told him what had happened, and said I felt like I did

what I was supposed to, but nothing happened. I started to become scared that maybe God just didn't want me, and that's why I couldn't feel Him. I was freaking out so much that I was hardly listening to anything my dad had to say, but eventually he told me that God wanted me to know something, and I needed to hear it if I would just calm down. He simply said "God wants you to know you're going to be okay". I was so relieved to hear that that I thought maybe I had gotten saved. It didn't take long to realize I wasn't, but those words stuck with me. I went on for about a month trying to listen and comprehend the preaching, but eventually the high of camp wore off, and I was practically sleeping through every sermon. The truth God had given me helped fight those thoughts that inevitably made their way back in, but they never got a hold on me like they did before.

That lasted until February of 2015 when we started hearing about a small group in Florida that needed a pastor. One of the people living there had gotten saved over a meeting, but she was unable to move to a church that preached the truth, and we believe God doesn't leave His sheep without a pastor to lead them. Through several meetings with the other pastors of the camp, God started to work in their hearts to start a church here in Florida. After coming back and telling their churches, eight men were ready to give their lives for these people, and they all alternated weekends to travel down to preach just to see if they could find God's will on who was meant to be their pastor. I had this nagging thought that it was definitely going to be my dad, and I was not happy about it. We visited the first time over a weekend, and the theme of what dad preached was that God was going to put His name in this place, and bring out a people that will know Him and His ways. It sounded really sweet, but I did not want to be the one involved with it. I didn't particularly dislike Florida, and I liked the people who were here, but every plan and goal I had for my life was in Tennessee. Also, I really liked this girl, and I had convinced myself that if I wasn't there, someone else would come in and take her away. She's now my wife.

We got home, and I was dreading the decision that would be made in a few weeks. My dad and I attended a meeting at Faith, where God confirmed in my dad he was supposed to be the pastor. He cried through the service, and I knew what that meant. On the road home, my dad pulled over to talk to Bro Greg in his truck while I stayed in the van. When dad finally got back in the car I said "well I guess that's it then". A couple of days later he told me and my siblings that that's what God convinced him of, and we were going to start traveling every weekend to Florida for dad to preach until we were able to move.

I didn't express it to anyone, but I'm sure it was noticeable that I was not excited. I felt like my entire family was overall positive about moving, but I was the only one who didn't want to leave Tennessee. Once we started making the weekend trips, I just found myself missing home on Sundays, and wishing I wasn't leaving. One annoying thing about it too, was that even if I waited until I was 18 and left the church like everyone else, and went BACK to Tennessee, I wouldn't have a relationship with any of the people I left, including Morghan. I felt like I was left with no choice. Looking back on it, God very easily could've let my heart harden, and never spoken to me. He could've done all that He's done at Hope right in front of me, and I could've sat through it all, only to leave like all of my closest friends. By His grace, it was impossible to ignore it. God LOVED these people. He moved seven of us down, so that He could preach to four. I immediately felt tied to Bro Harold, Mrs. Deena, Mrs. Mary, and Mrs. Kara. I couldn't help it, I just loved them. I started to see some of the positives, for one thing it was a new experience, which is fun, and there was a potential to meet new people, in a pretty cool place. But above all of that, God was just more real to me than He had ever been. Church wasn't just something

we attended anymore, it was something we were losing our lives for. I started to almost want what was happening, more than just being okay with it.

One Sunday a few weeks later, we had to stay in Tennessee and forego our trip to Florida for the weekend. Bro Stephen Moffit had taken over the youth from my dad, and I honestly don't remember all of what He preached. But I remember him talking specifically to me and my sister Abbey, about how God wants us in all of this too. It's important that we want to be a part, and that we're with our parents. Later that night, I was riding with dad to the store, and just told him about what Bro Stephen had said. And I don't know why, but I felt compelled to just tell my dad I was with him. Not that I thought I could be some huge help to what was going on, but I didn't want him worried about me.

A couple of weeks before the big move to Florida, Lighthouse was coming up on their birthday celebration, a short meeting they have once a year to celebrate God "birthing" the church. My attitude about it the entire time was "well I'm not a part of Lighthouse anymore, so I'm not getting anything anyways." But as I was sitting there Sunday, I felt God drawing me to listen, and I thought I would, just in case something was said to me. Brother Greg preached that before a celebration in the old testament, the priests brought the law forth to show the people where they were wrong, so they could repent and be able to celebrate freely. I remembered from countless other sermons that Godly sorrow is not a conglomerate of everything you've ever done, that it's something specific God wants your attention on. So, I went to the altar and started to ask God what He wanted me to repent of. As soon as my knees hit the altar, all I could hear was "unbelief". I stayed there for a long time, trying to get God to tell me something else. Surely out of everything that was wrong with me, unbelief wasn't my biggest issue. But I didn't hear anything else, so I just thought to myself, "okay, I'll believe you." I didn't cry, or scream out to God for forgiveness. It was very weird, because it wasn't what I was expecting.

It was around the time we were packing up that God was really dealing with who I was. I was really down in it the night before the move, mixed with the sadness of leaving Tennessee the next day. Dad had to run to the store and told me I could ride with him. As soon as I got in the car I started sobbing, and dad asked me what was wrong. I said that I didn't want to talk about it because if I told him everything God was dealing with me about, I was afraid he wouldn't love me anymore. He told me he didn't love me because I was perfect, he loved me because I was his son. So I told him what was going on, and much to my disbelief, he told me I wasn't the special case that I thought I was, and God could even save a sinner like me. I didn't quite believe that at this point though.

We finally left for Florida the next day, and a lot of the members of Lighthouse came with us to help with the move. That Sunday brother Greg preached about how much God must care for the people down here. So much so that He sent an entire family to them. I was thinking, "well this is great for them, but not so much for me". I didn't see how this could be better than what I already had in Tennessee. I was also in a mess from before, still not able to get my mind off of myself. I didn't think God would ever want anything to do with me, and that I was just kind of tacked on to my family moving here. God didn't want me, I just happened to be around the people He did want. But then almost every sermon after that was how much God loved me. He showed me how his death on the cross was for me, and how my righteousnesses are filthy rags and what he was offering was His righteousness. He showed me how He had removed the enmity between Himself and man through the cross, and how my sins were what had separated me from Him. The longer it went on, I also felt my heart growing closer to what was going on in Florida, and although there were times I would be sad

and miss what I had, God was constantly showing me how much He loved us and the purpose He had for us here was good. I felt for the first time ever I was actually ready to hear from God before I got to camp, which was coming up at the end of the month.

The first sermon at camp was from brother Terry, about looking at how good God was to everyone around us, and how much he cared for His sheep. Again I was looking at it like, “well this is really great for everyone but me”. During the break I was talking with some of my friends, and we all agreed that we would try our best to keep each other’s mind on the preaching as much as possible, which ended up helping a lot as the week progressed.

Next up to preach was brother Larry, the pastor of Liberty Baptist in the Philippines. He was reading the story of the woman searching for the one coin she had lost, and her desire to recover it. He preached on the shepherd seeking to find the one sheep out of the ninety-nine that he had lost, and went into great detail explaining what he did to recover it. He gave us the picture of the shepherd reaching into the briars and thorns to save the sheep from the trap it had gotten itself into, and how his arms were being cut and torn to save it. Once I started to see that sheep as myself, I immediately went cold. Unbelief had gripped me again, and I didn’t feel anything the rest of the sermon. I talked to dad afterwards about what happened, and he asked me if I believed God picked me specifically to be in the truth. I told him that I didn’t, and that I kind of felt like a tag along. He told me that wasn’t the truth, and that if God wanted to, He would stop the whole camp just to save me. I didn’t fully believe it, but God was slowly starting to work in my heart to convince me.

The next day brother Claude preached on Godly sorrow, and how it works repentance in a man’s heart. Later that night, dad preached right where I was at (unintentionally, of course). He said we needed to forsake our unbelief and observe the goodness of God in our lives, using the things we know to be true, and that that would increase our faith.

I honestly don’t remember what was preached the next morning, but that night brother Mike preached a heavy sermon about the wrath of God. He gave us the example of the Hoover Dam, and how our sin is as great as the water, and the only thing keeping the water from destroying us is the wall, which is God’s grace. I chose to ignore that the very fact that God was keeping my sin from taking me was grace itself. Instead it scared me to death. I think most of the lost were in the same place. Brother Terry said afterwards that if we just looked up, we would see that God wasn’t upset with us, and He wanted to show mercy. Afterwards I pulled dad into one of the offices, and he asked me why I was so scared. I said I was scared of looking up because I was afraid that all I would see when I did was disappointment. He told me that God wasn’t disappointed because Christ is where my righteousness comes from. He then read the story of the prodigal son to me, and how the father didn’t even wait for his son to reach the porch, but that he ran to meet him. He didn’t humiliate or punish his son, instead he gave him a robe to cover his scars from sin, a ring to show everyone “this is my son”, and shoes to cover where he had been. He also said that if I really looked at that dam, I would see that not a drop of that water was left because Christ bore all of it on the cross. I broke, seeing for the first time that God actually did want me. I was overwhelmed by seeing the love of God, but my heart still couldn’t grab a hold of it completely.

The next day, I decided to do what dad had preached a couple days before, about looking at the people around us and seeing the grace in their life. I asked Will Biddinger, another saved young man

from Lighthouse, to tell me his testimony. Honestly what I was looking for was to see if there was something special about the day he got saved, but that was the opposite of what he told me. He said he wasn't even in, what he would call, a "perfect mindset to get saved". It gave me more hope that God really could save me whenever it was the right time, and I couldn't be the judge of that. All I could do was be ready to hear.

That night, we started the worship with the song "Show Us Christ". The verse that says "help our unbelief" was right where I was. It was my heart's cry that I could just BELIEVE.

Brother Greg stood up to preach and looked distraught. Fear crept into my heart that I was going to hear another hard message, and that God didn't want to save me after all. He prayed, asking God to help clear his mind. When he finished, He simply said "Jesus is a friend of sinners". It felt like God had struck a chord in my heart. Brother Greg repeated it again and again, and I felt like I kept getting right to the edge of the diving board, but wouldn't jump in. I felt God calling me to come to Him over and over again. I was crying, and happy, but I slowly started to fear that I would miss it again. I sat there, wondering if I should go to the altar. I didn't know if God would leave me the second I got up, and I would have to go home again without Him. At one point, I felt like God started to take the pressure off and felt like I was about to miss Him again. Bro Greg was repeating the same words over and over again. I don't know what changed, but I was not going to miss God anymore. I got up from my seat, and in that moment felt like I was running into His arms. As soon as I laid down at the altar, it's like peace just washed over me. At the time, I felt like I still had more to do, or I needed to repent of something else. I told God that I couldn't do this myself, I needed Him to save me, but there was no doubt in me that He would anymore. I saw how long He had waited for me to come home. I laid there, wondering if I needed to do something else. I didn't feel like God had left me as it had felt before, I didn't really feel anything but happiness at what was being said. Brother Greg then turned to the story of Zacchaeus, and how when Christ saw Him, He told him to come down, and that he wanted to go home with him. He wanted to be with a sinner! God wanted to come home with me! I started thanking Him that I didn't have to be without Him anymore, and I didn't have to go home alone. At that time, I felt that even if I wasn't saved, I had enough faith that He would save me. I believed what Bro Greg was saying. It felt like He was there, embracing me in His arms because I had finally come home.

After the service, I didn't even let myself think. I didn't know if what I had experienced was salvation, but I knew something happened. If anything, I believed that God wanted to save me. I sat there, and went to talk to dad as soon as the service was over. All I could do was weep, because of how much He loved me. Dad asked me, "well, where's the condemnation?" I told him I wasn't sure, but it's not with me anymore.

It took some time for God to confirm in me that it was a finished work, because at my core, I'm a very overthinking person. I was terrified of admitting I was saved, and if I looked at myself, not much was different. I was still Ethan. But anytime I got my eyes off of myself and looked at Him, my soul couldn't help but agree with every word that He said. Any word that was preached, or song that was sung, there was something in me agreeing where there wasn't before. He truly is a friend of sinners.