



A New Life

By John J. Smid



Psalm 116:1-2

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live*

“John, you need to know Jesus! We are Christians and we want you to know that you need Him. I know all that you have been involved in and that doesn’t matter, all that matters is that you accept Jesus into your life.”

My head spun around several times while listening to these two girls. I had known them for a long time. We graduated from high school together. It was two o’clock in the morning and I had stopped by the local pancake house with my friends after our night at the bar but I wasn’t ready for what I heard that night.

This was a different experience for me. I had never heard anyone speak about Jesus that way much less from these two girls. What had happened in their life to bring about such a dramatic shift? Well, I didn’t really take the time to find out—I just wanted out of there. I went to a table where my friends were and they had all gone. I felt abandoned and insignificant since they didn’t tell me they were leaving or even to say goodbye! Maybe they heard some of the conversation and were scared too!

This was the first time for me to experience what many call “evangelical Christianity” but it wouldn’t be the last. I guess this was the hammer and chisel that would start the crack in my hardened life to spread. A short time later I changed offices at my job and found myself sitting right behind another lady. She was quite friendly and very energetic about life. It was apparent that she was connected to most of the other people working near us as she laughed with them, talked with them and yes, she was also very excited about something else – Jesus!

Pat took a different approach than I had experienced in the pancake house. She was friendly and interested in other people’s lives. She quickly found out that I was recently divorced from my first wife and was living a pretty active party life. I talked about going to the bars, being out with friends and that I was pretty happy with my new found freedom from my marriage. Oh, I told her about my two children and tried to seem excited about that too but in reality, I didn’t know much about what was happening with my daughters because I had other priorities.

Pat had things all over her desk that were evidence of her priorities. She talked about her own divorce, her past life of alcohol and partying around. She talked of her upbringing in a Catholic family. I related to that quickly as I too had grown up Catholic. We now had common ground. Her experience with the bars and such as well as our religious background became common conversation.

Now, about those things on her desk; magnets, books, pamphlets, and a worn Bible were all very present. A worn Bible? What is that? I thought you needed to protect them because they were special. Pat told me otherwise. I remember her telling me how she wrote in it and used it every day. That seemed so foreign to me that I kept asking her about this Bible she seemed to feel so special about. She gave me answers as she could.

But I mostly remember that Pat didn't seem to be all that interested in my weekend life. She also didn't seem shocked by it—seemingly since she had been there herself.

After a few months and our relationship became more comfortable, she said she wanted me to meet a friend of hers. His name was Jerry. I don't remember where or how we met but it seemed that Jerry was a lot like Pat. He too was friendly and was up front about having been through a lot of stuff in his life like I did. Like Pat, he seemed to be real, and easy to talk with.

“John, there is a group at my church that I'd like you to meet. They are a singles group and this weekend they are having a social time. There will be food and these people aren't scary. Why don't you come?”

I was curious by this time. I was also not doing so well myself. I had experienced many painful disappointments in my relationships that I wasn't really sharing with Pat, or her friend Jerry. I didn't want to admit that my life wasn't going so hot. But, in reality, I was looking for something different.

I didn't go to the group that she was talking about but it remained in my memory as an option if things got worse, which they eventually did. Instead, my first attempt to get help came through an invitation to an al-anon group. My friends said there were “better” people there than I had been hanging around. Well, my lust and pain came together and I was motivated to attend this group.

“Hello, my name is Cindy, John. I can relate to what you just said. I have been there myself and I understand. I found help in praying the Serenity Prayer.”

What? REAL help in praying? Well, I needed real help. Cindy's expression of common ground once again motivated me. She understood! Maybe I should try her prayer! The next Sunday I was going through the lowest of lows and feeling suicidal. I got out the prayer she mentioned and began to repeat its words. Something grabbed me that day; something very different. I felt relieved of some of the pain I was feeling. Could it have been the prayer? Could God have been listening to me? Is He real?

One particular night on which I was struggling, Pat called to talk with me about something. She heard my struggle and said, “Jerry and I are coming over”. They came to my house and talked with me for a while and offered to pray with me. I remember how accepted and loved I felt that this lady and her friend cared enough to go out of their way to show me their concern and their support.

I started to ponder the events I had experienced concerning God, Jesus, religion and my life. Maybe there is something to this Jesus thing that I heard at the pancake house. These people that I had met seemed energized about their experiences with Jesus. They also have had trouble in their lives and they didn't seem as afraid to talk about it as I was.

“Pat, maybe I'll go to one of those “social events” you spoke about. Is there anyone there like us?” She gave me directions and I went to someone's house and there were lots of people there eating, laughing, and talking. I felt really strange there largely because I didn't know anyone. But, Pat was right, they were having fun and it was apparent that their life was different than mine and yet, the same.

I went back to my life and friends and tried to make it again. I was determined that I was going to succeed with my plans. After all, I didn't give up a family, marriage, and my children for nothing. I was invested in my decision – and being right! For a while it went better but not for long. I found more pain, more discouragement, and my pride wouldn't let me go further in talking about it openly.

Pat had often invited me to her church. She explained that it was different than maybe the ones I had experienced. There was hand clapping, lively music, and it wasn't like our common Catholic background. She also said that I wouldn't have to go alone and that she would meet me there and maybe Jerry would be there as well. Well I was up for something new and interesting so I finally decided to go. The day before I had bought some new shoes and clothes for a special "date" with a new friend I had gone on. I got these new clothes out to wear to church. Hum. That sounded weird, church. I am going to church!

I sat on the aisle and before the service, the pastor, John Walker, was walking down the aisle and stopped at my seat. "Hello, I am Pastor John Walker, you have a beautiful yellow sweater on. What is your name?" Oh, if he'd only known what happened in that sweater the night before. But, I enjoyed the compliment and that he took the time to introduce himself.

I wasn't ready for any more church for a while. I had to process what I had experienced. I enjoyed it; well as much as I could, considering how strange it was for me. At the same time in my life there was another person who was excited about Jesus. Jeannie was the sister to someone that I had been involved with.

My friend told me Jeannie was a "Jesus Freak" and that she lived differently than we did. After all, I was engaged in immoral sex with my friend and Jeannie knew that was the case. She didn't seem to make that a big deal. We would eat at her house and enjoy her funny sense of humor and friendliness.

One week, Jeannie called me to invite me to her church. She said they were having a revival. What? What in the world is a "revival"? Well, here we go again, something strange to experience. I guess I'll go. I didn't die from the last church experience I had. Maybe this will be equally interesting.

I surely wasn't prepared for what would transpire this night. I went in, sat down with her and entered into one of the most life changing events I had ever had. I do not know what was said from the front or who I was sitting next to but I clearly heard something in my head. "John, you don't have to live this way any longer." What? Who said that? Well, it wasn't quite that shocking, but it was life changing, no doubt.

The voice continued on, "John, go and ask Laurie to go to dinner with you." Laurie was a friend from a community theater I was a part of. I didn't know her very well but she was a nice girl and really friendly. So, that night I went home and called Laurie. She said yes! So, Friday we're on for dinner.

In our discussion Laurie was as friendly as I had hoped. She was also honest about her life. Well, you guessed it, Laurie was also a Christian. There were other things we had in common. Laurie was also divorced. But there was something even more important that came out that evening. Laurie's first husband was gay. If you haven't guessed it already, so was I. I had made quite a deep investment in a decision to leave my family and live out my life as a gay man with other gay men. I was searching for common ground, understanding, and for sure I wanted to feel heard by someone who knew what it was like to have life like mine.

This was quite the shocking experience. God must have known. Did Jesus really see my life from the inside out? Even more significant, did Jesus hear the cry of my heart? I can't make sense of all of these people who I met with excitement about this Jesus, but is it true? Can something about my life significantly change? The voice said that I had a choice. That voice said I could live life differently and that the deep pain I had been experiencing could go away.

The girls, Pat, Jerry, Jeannie, Laurie, all had something in common. They seemed to have a relationship with Jesus and weren't afraid to talk about it. But they had something else in common. They freely talked about their life stories. They told me about the mistakes, the pain, the choices, and the freedom they had all experienced.

They were all real people with real life issues and seemingly had found a real Jesus that understood and accepted them.

After meeting with Laurie I had experienced enough of this Jesus that I began to look into this phenomenon. Pat gave me a \$3 paperback Bible. I began to read it. It was really quite interesting, since I was reading it for the first time like a book, rather than chapter and verse references. I began to understand my life was broken from the beginning and I was in need of someone greater than myself who could rescue me. I found out that the gospel was not a religion, but it was a gift to John Smid from a living Savior to offer me eternity with Him.

My life did in fact begin to change. My priorities were different now. The change was slow and clumsy. One of the first decisions was to find another man that would love me that also was a Christian. That wasn't hard. I met a man named Paul that fit the bill. On our first time together alone he told me he loved me and that he was a Christian. He taught at Christian school, no less. He was a great guy. But I wasn't so great. Our relationship became as tumultuous as all of the others because I was so conflicted and torn I didn't know how to relate to this guy.

The pain continued as if my life were on a pendulum swing. Up, down, up, down, up, down—and I was becoming even more troubled. What should I do now? I had been praying a simple prayer daily.

"God, get me out of this." On February 10, 1984 I made the best decision of my life. I called my current partner at the time and told him that I was leaving the relationship – for good. We had broken up many times before but this time something was different. I really meant it.

The next week I attended the weekly gathering of those single folks that I had met the year before. I thought maybe they could help me and replace the friends that I was leaving behind. They did. They came through with flying colors. I continued on with their weekly group and I even went to that church every Sunday. It didn't seem so strange to me anymore. I grew in understanding of their faith, their relationship with each other, and their Jesus. I had become like those girls four years earlier. I was now excited about what I had found in Jesus.

That was a long time ago. A lot has changed in my life for sure but it began with a few people who were willing to share their life with me. These folks had something in common that has stuck with me through the years. They were vulnerable, honest from their hearts, and weren't afraid to tell me about their lives—including their mistakes and shortcomings. I wasn't a project to be completed; rather I felt like a person they desired to know. Someone they cared about but weren't trying to control or condemn.

It isn't so strange that I would feel the burden to write about some core relationship values that might help us reach those that are hurting or lost. The values in "The Journey of Thomas" reflect what helped me in those trying years of my life. The people who reached out to me practiced them unknowingly. They weren't using a systematic approach to reaching me. They were just being themselves. With God's help, they didn't hide underneath a false religion. They didn't separate themselves from me as though they had arrived to some higher plane of living. Each of them knew their shortcomings and they lived in the grace of a loving God. They just wanted me to know the Jesus they had met because He had loved them "while they were yet sinners".

I am thankful that the Lord allowed me to marry again. I was married to Vileen in 1988. My two daughters have grown into mothers and I have three grandchildren. As I look at my grandkids, I recognize each day that the gifts that were shared with me those many years ago have now transcended into a second generation of life! I certainly wouldn't have been married to Vileen if it weren't for those loving people who cared enough about me to share their Jesus with me. I do not believe I would have hardly any relationship with either my daughters or my grandkids if it weren't for Christ saving my life and changing my path.

I am not sure I really know how to thank each person who has had an effect on my life through their own honesty. The numbers are far too great to share with each one of them. Some of them have gone on to other places and I am not sure I could even locate them. I do have friendships with some of them and I try to often tell them how much their lives have meant to me. I may have some that I haven't adequately thanked.

This is my new life that remains new every day. His mercies are new every morning for sure. I need Jesus today just like I did all the years before but didn't know it. The only difference is that I know Him now and can call upon Him freely. I also recognize His grace not so much for the sins I commit every day because I know those were forgiven before I even thought to commit them. I recognize His grace for my humanness! The fact that I was born into a sinful, broken world requires His sacrifice at the cross for my eternity.

In the end, my greatest thanksgiving goes to Jesus Christ for His salvation that came upon our brothers and sisters from the beginning that is passed down generation to generation. This is my story. Well, part of my story. There isn't enough paper to contain all of it. Each time I think back over my life, there are many more things to say about Jesus and me.

As you can imagine, Jesus drew me to Himself through letting me know that He heard me. He understood my plight and joined with me for life. He forgave me, freed me from bondage, and continues to work with me to change my life one day at a time.

© 1999 John J. Smid Permission to reprint contact: jismid@gracerrivers.com
www.gracerrivers.com PO Box 382277 Germantown, TN 38183