

My testimony

Feb 2023

For a long time I was ashamed of my testimony. I didn't believe that I had one, or at least one that was worth telling. Jesus has never appeared to me (whether physically or in a dream), I've never heard the audible voice of God, I didn't have some dramatic moment of conversion. While all that is true, the fact is that Jesus saw me walking down the path to destruction and He saved me from it. He brought me into His family, and that story is worth telling.

One of my bosses once said to me: "Of course you are a Christian! You were born into an upper-middle class family in Singapore, your parents were Christian, you went to a mission school, you have done well in life. It makes sense that you would adopt a Judeo-Christian worldview." It is certainly true that children born in Christian households tend to identify as Christians. But (i) this is by no means deterministic, and (ii) the presence of a general pattern does not make it a *fait accompli*. God still has to work to bring each child to Him (sometimes using the influence of their heritage).

Both my parents were Christian. In a very real sense, my testimony doesn't begin with me but with my parents. Both my dad and my mom were the first Christians in their families. Through the [Boys' Brigade](#), a Christian youth organization, my dad began to attend church and found faith there. My mom was first brought to church sporadically by a grade school teacher. She believed, and later became a regular churchgoer through my dad. My dad's parents drove them out of the house when they were baptized, but they persevered in the faith. They believed that Jesus was worth pursuing even at the cost of being disowned (which is a big deal in Asian culture), and for that I am eternally grateful.

Growing up, we attended the Methodist church that my dad found faith in every week. We grew up reading the Bible, memorizing verses, even winning a few inter-church Bible quizzes. But churchgoing and Bible knowledge do not make a child a believer. I know this from my story and from observing those around me. Some of the boys I knew were more interested in modifying lyrics during worship for laughs ("into my heart" -> "into my fart"). At some point they skipped out of the service entirely, going to the church's roof to play soccer instead. My best friend at church stopped coming altogether. I never did any of this because of my strong sense of morality and duty and the fear of being caught. But based on my friends' reactions, I wondered whether the Christian gospel could really be good news. When I was 15, I remember thinking: "The only reason I'm coming to church is to man the sound system for the children's service, and if that is the only reason, then it's not worth my time to show up at all".

You went to a mission school. My parents sent my brother and me to a Methodist school, believing that it was important for us to be surrounded by Christian influence. We would have daily devotions during assembly in the morning, and there was an hour-long service (we called it "chapel") on Mondays. Don't misunderstand: I think these things are important, and I believe that God uses such times to touch lives. (I remember a chapel service where the speaker shared that during a crisis in his life, God reminded him of a chapel service from his

childhood that brought him to faith.) But I confess, perhaps to the consternation and disappointment of parents and school administrators, that I remember none of the daily devotionals and only two chapel services. One I have already mentioned; the other? A seminar on time management. I remember rolling my eyes inside: “If the gospel is time management, what are we doing here?”

Before we get all down on mission schools, God planted a seed in me during my time there. Because of my dad’s influence, I joined the Boys’ Brigade, the same organization that led my dad to Christ, when I was 13. There was a 3-day 2-night orientation camp for the freshmen organized and run by the seniors, and on one of the nights, there was a worship session that left a mark on me. The Spirit was moving: there was such a weight in the atmosphere that we were all on our knees. What really stood out to me was a group of seniors at the front of the audience, lying prostrate and crying their hearts out to the Lord. I thought to myself: “They have a real relationship with God, and I want that.” It would be a few more years before I experienced it for myself.

You have done well in life. I have always done well in school. More than that: I have almost always done well at anything I put my hand to. Here is a sampling of my achievements from my school years:

- Won a national government scholarship that paid for my college tuition.
- GCE A Levels: 4 As, 2 S paper distinctions, A1 for GP.
- GCE O Levels: 8 A1s, 3 A2s.
- Math: Represented Singapore at the International Math Olympiad (IMO) for 3 years. 1st in several national math competitions.
- Music: ABRSM Grade 8 in piano, violin and music theory. Played in the school string ensemble.
- Sports: School swim captain in primary school. Represented my secondary school for track & field.
- Uniformed youth organization: Held top leadership of the Boys’ Brigade in my school.

I don’t list these out to boast: I list them out as Paul does in Philippians 3, to count them as loss. In Singapore’s performance-oriented culture, my CV is a parent’s dream. I should have been proud and satisfied: I succeeded! But achievement is a cruel master: it always demands more. “8 A1s and 3 A2s? Why not 11 A1s?” “Silver at the IMO? Why not gold?” “Second in the 400 hurdles? Why not first?” Each time I won a math competition, perfectionism demanded that I had to be first the next time around, if not I would lose my “reputation”. Each medal around my neck only served to pile on the burden I felt I had to live up to. Instead of peace and pleasure, I faced a torrent of internal condemnation, shame and despair.

Success not only burdens, it also alienates. In working hard for success I had to sacrifice my time and energy for other things, and one of those things was friendship. After school each day I was immediately whisked away to a battery of enrichment classes, leaving no time to play with my friends and develop deep bonds with them. I often felt like I was on the outside looking in, wanting to belong and be accepted. Attaining success did not make belonging any easier. In my interactions with others, often all they could see were my accolades (“you’re the math guy”, “you’re really smart”). This led them to make assumptions about me (e.g. “you must really like chess”, “everything must come easy for you”), preventing them

from seeing me as the child in front of them. Others were intimidated, and either felt that they could not relate to me, or believed that I would not be able to relate to them. All this made me feel very isolated and alone.

God works to bring His children to Him. In December 2002, I was ready to tell my parents that I no longer wanted to go to church. However, the week just before I was about to do so, my parents moved us all to a different church. It was a large, charismatic megachurch, with some theology that would be considered “prosperity gospel” and which I now have issues with. But this was where I discovered God’s heart toward me. Through the sermons, I learned that God is not looking down on me with a slight frown of disapproval and disappointment. Quite the opposite: He smiles at me, delights in me, and longs to hug me.

The real problem is not that God hates me and doesn’t want to be with me: it’s that even though He wants to be with me, the gulf between us was too great. I knew that while God is love, God is also just: He punishes wrongdoers. (If He didn’t exact justice, would He be a worthy God?) And I was a wrongdoer! No matter how hard I tried to be perfect, I would always mess up in some way (we call this “sin”), often hurting those around me. How could I find my way back to a loving God when I was on the wrong side of justice?

The sermons taught me that while I could not find a way back on my own, God made a way for me. He came in the person of Jesus and died on the cross, taking the punishment that stood in between us. All I had to do was believe that it was true (“receiving by faith”). Wow! I believed it, and felt a joy and a freedom that I had never felt before. This joy and freedom is also available to you once you believe!

God’s love and rescue is never just intellectual knowledge: it is also experiential. Other than feeling the burden of expectations lifted, I also felt God’s love tangibly through this church’s youth ministry. The first day I went I happened to be an hour early. Almost immediately someone from the “befriender” team came up to me and talked to me for the whole time, making sure that I felt at home. She would be the first of several youths to invite me into their community with open arms. They weren’t overawed at my achievements (many didn’t even know about them), but saw me as a fellow youth in need and in search of Jesus. I am so grateful to these people for giving me a taste of Christian community, where people are loved and celebrated for their presence rather than their accolades.

That is not to say that my struggles with perfectionism and belonging ended there. They are dragons that require slaying over and over again. I often forget the truth of God’s love toward me and end up tangled in my web of despair and abandonment. But each time, God has been faithful to rescue me, to bring me back to Him and to clean me up. It is in His faithfulness that I can rest, knowing that He holds me in the palm of His hand. There is nothing that I can do to forfeit His love, and there is nothing I need to do to earn His delight.

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom 8:38-39