

TESTIMONY



Photo by August Miller

How I Escaped the Mormon Temple

After being in the LDS Church for 30 years, I began reading the New Testament. What was there shocked me.

Lynn Wilder/ NOVEMBER 22, 2013

On a Friday in January 2006, at home in Alpine, Utah, I received a phone call from my third son, Micah, that changed my life.

My family and I loved living in "Zion," the result of a decision that my husband, Michael, and I had made as young adults to join the Mormon Church. For eight years, I had been a professor at Brigham Young University (BYU), the flagship school of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Michael was a high priest, a bishopric member and high counselor, temple worker, seminary teacher, and Sunday school president. Our first son, Josh, and second son, Matt, had served the church's obligatory two-year evangelizing missions. Our daughter Katie pleased church leaders as well with her faith in Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith.

I looked down on Christians who followed the Bible. They had part of the gospel, but I had the fullness of it. I kept the laws and ordinances of Mormonism. When I took the sacrament of

leavened bread and water each week at our Sunday meeting house, I was letting the sin janitor sweep away all iniquity. I believed the Mormon Church secured my eternal life.

Life in Zion

My husband and I had joined the LDS Church at age 25 after Mormon missionaries knocked on our front door. We had both attended Protestant churches growing up, but we rarely if ever read the Bible. We assumed that joining was a Christian option (85 percent of LDS converts come from biblical Christianity). We were unprepared to counter the missionaries.

Immediately and always active in the church, we raised our four children in the faith in Indiana. Serving untold hours in church callings, reading Mormon scripture, tithing, attending meetings, keeping a health code, and doing genealogy so we could redeem the dead in the temple—these were a few of our offerings to the Mormon God.

In all the years of serving the church, I thought I knew Jesus. We believed he was born first as a spirit child to Heavenly Father and Mother, and came to Earth to receive a body. He atoned for our sins in the Garden. Like the Pharisee in Luke 18, I thought I knew him better than others through the exclusive instruction I received in the temple.

In 1999, I completed my doctorate in education and was hired at BYU. We moved to Zion.

And life was *good* there. On Sundays we sang:

Great is his glory and endless his priesthood.

Ever and ever the keys he will hold.

Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,

Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.

Sound like Jesus? Nope, this hymn is about Joseph Smith. Here's the first verse:

Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!

Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.

Blessed to open the last dispensation,

Kings will extol him and nations revere.

Like Heavenly Father and Jesus before him—like Smith himself—Michael was working to become a god. This is one reason we attended the temple regularly.

Expulsion

Then, something unexpected interrupted our perfect Mormon life.

Three weeks before the end of his two-year mission, Micah called to tell us he was being sent home early—a horrific disgrace in Mormon culture. He had been reading the New Testament. There he encountered a different Jesus than the one I was taught about in Mormonism—a God of grace, not of works, so that no one can boast. Micah was riveted.

To a roomful of missionaries at his parting testimony, Micah had professed faith in Jesus alone and not the Mormon Church. He told them he had found a deep and genuine faith—one that didn't include Mormonism. It did not go over well. Church leaders told us that Micah had the spirit of the Devil in him, sent him home, and subsequently, back in Utah, invited us to bring him before the high council. To prevent excommunication, we put Micah on a plane out of Utah. His expulsion put our family in turmoil.

When he boarded the plane in Utah to begin a band and ministry in Florida, Micah pleaded, "Mom and Dad, please read the New Testament." We commenced. As I read, I became increasingly consumed by reading about the God of grace. I barely ate or slept. It's all I wanted to do.

After Micah's expulsion, questions about Mormonism that I had harbored for years—about my patriarchal blessing, about the church's history of racism, about the scope of Christ's atonement—kicked into high gear. I heeded Micah's advice, and began reading the Bible in translations easier to understand than the LDS-authorized King James Version.

In John's gospel, I read, "These are the very scriptures that testify of me yet you refuse to come to me to have life." Salvation did not require the Mormon Church, only Jesus. I began to see clearly that Mormonism taught a different gospel than what the Bible taught.

When I read what Jesus said in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them," I knew I was being drawn—sucked, pulled, conveyed, transported. In physics, an event horizon is a boundary beyond which the gravitational pull is so powerful that there is no escape. This was my event horizon. As I read the Bible, my appetite for God grew exponentially. I felt myself drawn to him at an ever-increasing speed.

Then, on a chilly October evening in 2006, Michael and I settled in with Katie in our basement to watch the movie *Luther*. My heart pounded as I learned of the reformer's struggle against the Catholic Church. I seemed to be facing a similar struggle: Did I believe the Mormon system of obedience to laws and ordinances would secure my forgiveness? Or did I believe what the Bible taught, that Jesus alone was the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

That night, speeding toward the point of no return, I lay face-down on the carpet, arms extended, and cried out to Jesus, "I am yours. Save me." Instantly I was sucked over.

From that point on, God became personal. I talked with him. He sometimes answered. I had stark dreams. Once I surrendered my will to his, he seemed to be gently leading me somewhere. He showed up at unexpected times and taught me through other people and through circumstances, through the Word and during prayer. It was bizarre at first—unnerving. I'd never experienced anything like this. Some days I pulled back to catch my breath. He got me a job I hadn't applied for so I could leave BYU. He sold our home the day after we resigned from the Mormon Church. This must be what Christians call a personal relationship with Jesus.

I discovered this Jesus could not be confined by the laws and ordinances of a religion. Jesus *is real*. This palpable relationship transformed me.

Comforting Blood

About a month after Katie came to Christ, she dreamed of a stone courtyard in the shape of a circle. She saw herself as a small girl, led by a man through the one entrance, which looked like a

sheep gate. There were small pools of blood on the ground, but she wasn't afraid. This courtyard was where Jesus had been beaten and whipped until near-death. The blood was his.

Katie looked right at the man, who was wearing a cream-colored robe and a shawl over his head, and immediately trusted him. He knelt in the dirt to gaze at her, directly at eye level. Taking the shawl off his head, he touched it to the bloodstained ground and gently began to cover her with the blood, starting with her forehead. He smiled at her as if she were the *joy* set before him.

This is the Jesus my family and I now know. He loves me personally. I devour his Word and find him there. He knows me and teaches me. I do not need the laws and ordinances of the Mormon Church to be saved. Only my beloved Jesus.

Lynn Wilder is the author of Unveiling Grace: The Story of How We Found Our Way Out of the Mormon Church (Zondervan).