

I was raised in church from the earliest days I can remember. My parents gave me and my brothers a good foundation by their godly instruction and example. Some of my childhood friends didn't have the benefit of godly parenting, and I was often involved in boyhood mischief to outright sinful behavior. At age eleven I was half listening to the gospel filmstrip series during a Sunday night church service when I was convicted of my sinfulness and scared of going to hell. I had paid enough attention during Bible classes to know I didn't want to go to hell. Remembering what I had been taught I believed that Jesus could save me. I understood "remission of sin" as a vague concept of forgiveness but the gift of the Holy Spirit was not even mentioned as a doctrine or promise. I was questioned about whether I understood what I was doing. I said I did, so I was asked to give my confession of faith in Jesus and was baptized.

Everybody at church congratulated me for my decision. The very next day I was confronted with another decision—choose to follow Jesus or have a cigarette. That was the way it was put to me by my older brother who though not a Christian himself, knew enough to challenge my baptismal decision by questioning my actions. Even at that early age I had a nicotine habit, so I chose a cigarette. The consequences of that choice weren't so clear at the time. I mean, I didn't think of it as giving up on Jesus. But my discipleship suffered with that first bad decision after my baptism. Decisions based on fear can take us only so far. My decision to be baptized was out of fear more than it was out of love for God. And yet still I was being obedient. The church allowed, even encouraged me to participate in communion services and other activities, but by the time I was 14 and my mother was so sick that she couldn't go to church and my dad stayed with her as her caregiver, I didn't go to church anymore.

My experimenting with alcohol and drugs escalated as I got older. I was seventeen when my mother died. I was angry to the point of denying the existence of God which surprised my friends for me even mentioning it. It surprised me too, because God had become a distant memory of a past that was being replaced by a culture of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll. My lifestyle was intersecting with the occult. I watched the devastating effect of friends sleeping with other friend's husbands/wives. I saw people beaten nearly to death. I was slowly realizing that the drugs I sought for escape were stealing my health. My father's fall into alcoholism was destroying my relationship with him. My closet friends would ultimately go to prison for armed robbery; something I avoided because God brought me to a crossroad. After high school I planned to leave the broken and occasional home I had and just drift aimlessly. But God

was gracious! He brought me to the point of decision again. I knew evil existed, I just wasn't sure good existed or what it was if it did exist. On a chilly autumn night, I contemplated my life. Scared, not of going to hell, but of the hell I had experienced, I opened my heart to the possibility of the existence of God.

I got on my knees and tried to pray but couldn't speak a word. I had denied God's existence only a few days earlier. Now I was confronted by a decision to either affirm or deny his existence. By faith, I acknowledged God as I prayed this simple prayer, "I believe!" At that moment I experienced grace! I can only explain it by saying I felt the acceptance of God as if he was actually embracing me saying, "Welcome home!" The challenges have been immense and varied but God has been faithful to walk me through them all. After more than forty years he continues to be faithful which only strengthens my resolve to choose Jesus every day; not for fear of him, but because of my love for him; for by my simple faith I now know his amazing grace!