

Testimony by Joshua Yikona

Good evening, One Voice Family. In three days, I will get on a plane headed to Los Angeles, California to go to college. Before I go, I have the privilege of sharing my testimony with you. I'm excited to share how the Lord worked in my life and continues to help me. As I reflected on the last 22 years of my life there was a lot to think about. What I can see now is that the God we serve will never leave our side. But there is more: God will never let go of us, even if we try to let go of him. I was born in a Christian home with two amazing parents and two siblings. I had what seemed to be a normal life for a child born into the church. I went to church every Sunday, followed by Sunday School, and attended a private Christian School during the week. None of this seemed strange to me. I did not understand then the intentional love of God that placed me in the church. When I was in 3rd grade, I moved from private school to public school. I made a lot of new friends. But I also allowed myself to be easily influenced by those friends. By age 10 I picked up the habit of cursing and was introduced to pornography. At this time, the church seemed like a random building that I went to every Sunday. I didn't care much about my faith. But even when I didn't think much about God, He was constantly pursuing me. Even when I felt miles away from God, now I know he was always there with me

Ephesians 1:11 says:

11 "because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God;
for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan."

The fact we were chosen by God is very powerful! It helps me see that God had a purpose in the way he orchestrated my life. One of the big hardships in my life is my battle with hatred. Specifically, hatred towards my older brother Josiah. I remember one day in May 2014. I came home from middle school, and learned my brother was in trouble for using drugs. From that day forward, there was a lot of fighting in my house. There were constant arguments and loud screams, and my brother was often put out of the house. I was only 14 years old, so I wasn't mature enough to be in these conversations. If I tried to say something, they told me to go away. I know my parents needed to talk with my brother alone, but it felt like rejection. I couldn't control my emotions and I felt very alone. I often isolated myself from my family and friends. I had a lot of anger inside, that I poured out onto my brother. We said hurtful and morbid things to one another. Eventually my brother and I stopped all communication for two years. During these two years my hatred didn't disappear or even stay the same. Instead my hate spread, and it affected my relationships with a lot of other people. I did not have empathy for other people. I said terrible things to them and I didn't care how they felt, even if I hurt them very much.

Eventually, the Lord opened my eyes to the hate in my heart. When I saw the ugliness of my heart then I began to hate myself. I wish I could say that I repented of my actions at that moment, but I didn't. To fill my emptiness, I turned away from God and ran toward vaping, smoking marijuana, and self-harm. I felt unclean and unworthy to go to the Lord, so I rebelled against him instead. On the surface I was using unhealthy things to deal with my pain. But if you look a little deeper, I know I was actually saying: "Lord, I don't need you, I don't want you. Most of all Lord, I don't trust that your love is enough to fill this hole in my heart." My mental health was getting worse so I started to go to therapy, and I learned a lot about my mind. I learned how to process my emotions, how to respect and care for others, and how to improve my weaknesses. I thought then I had all the tools to fix my problems. I often thought, "I know how to manage my own life and mind, so why should I pray for God to give me strength every day? I can be my own strength." Everything I was learning was intended to defend against my mental health problems. If I needed to defend myself that meant that I was in a battle against something, right? In other words, my biggest problem was still there. That big problem was the hole in my heart. Nothing I learned in therapy could fix that problem. Nothing I could do in my own power could fill the hole in my heart. I needed help from outside of myself.

After about a year, I heard that a class called "Sonship" was starting at our church. The class helps people understand what it means to be a son or daughter of God. It is a relationship full of beauty and also brokenness. To appreciate the gift of salvation and adoption into God's family, we need to see what we are saved from. This required me to look again at my past actions, from a new point of view. The Lord shined a light on the hole that remained in my heart. Because of my hard heart, I still couldn't repent and ask for forgiveness. It wasn't like before when I felt I wasn't good enough. This time I didn't repent because I thought that I was too good for God. It's difficult for me to share that in front of you, but it was the reality of my heart. Instead of putting my pride aside and asking for forgiveness, I demanded that God prove himself to be worthy of my trust. This period of questioning and doubt lasted from when I was 19 until earlier this year at age 22. I want to read some verses that helped me a lot, from Hebrews 2:14-18.

14 "Because God's children are human beings--made of flesh and blood--the Son also became flesh and blood.

For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death.

15 Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.

16 We also know that the Son did not come to help angels; he came to help the descendants of Abraham.

17 Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God.


Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people.

18 Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested."

I wish I could give these verses to myself when I was 17 years old and I did not want to repent. It is powerful to read that it was

necessary for Christ to be made like us, so he could be our merciful High Priest. I see now that I don't need to make myself clean because Christ lived a perfect life in my place. I thought I had to ask God for help, but his hand was already reaching out and holding onto me. As I look back at my life I see something amazing. Despite my hatred, pride, stubbornness, and hardness of heart, my friendships in the church remained intact. They were and continue to be my strongest relationships today. Even when I rejected the Lord, those relationships stood strong and firm. In other words, when I tried to run far away from the Lord, He kept his hand on me through my Christian friends. When I talked with them about my questions and struggles I realized how far I had gone from the Lord. I saw how the life I made for myself wasn't truly self-sufficient, and it was actually self-destructive. The Lord graciously shattered my heart of stone and gave me a heart of flesh. He gave me a heart that hungers to know him. In my life I attended church almost every Sunday for 22 years. But only now do I understand and enjoy the love that the Lord has for people who run to him. I still wrestle with pride, stubbornness, and lack of empathy. Sometimes it feels like more of a challenge than before. The difference today is that I know God is bigger than any challenge that we will face in this life.

Lastly, I want to say thank you to all of you at One Voice Fellowship for being an amazing church family. It warms my heart to see the love and care that we have for each other. This church is an amazing reminder to me of the love that the Lord has for us. I'm going to miss you all as I go off to school later this week. But I will keep you in my prayers and God willing, I hope to visit again soon. Thank you for listening to my testimony. I hope it was an encouragement to you and a reminder for days when you feel covered in sin and broken beyond repair. Remember that the Lord is not only following behind us and watching over us. He is also calling us each by name to come to him and rest, because we are his children who he loves.

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