

Testimony

Dave Yauk Tells His Story

I GREW UP IN A MINISTRY FAMILY—AND I HATED IT



As I poured out my anger on the world, Jesus was waiting to pour out his perfect love.

I was born and raised in a Christian home. My great-great-grandfather was Louis Talbot, a famous author, one of the founders of Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, and a preacher who worked closely alongside Billy Graham.

Yet despite this lineage of faith, I grew up as a "moralistic therapeutic deist," in the language of sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. I believed loosely in a divine mind that created the world, and I believed that this being would want us to be good and nice to each other. But I knew this "thing" wasn't especially involved in my life.

I attended my family's church until I was 11 years old. In that time, I acquired a certain cynicism about religion and ministry. The word religion, at its root, means "to bind back," and I witnessed person after person trying to somehow work back to God through good deeds and moral effort. In many ways, ministry became an idol in my home, and it often kept us from being a close family. Good things, like serving others, inevitably became "God things." Our home life was emotionally arid and devoid of intimacy, and I grew to hate whatever god would allow this.

Anger and Depression

By the time I was 12, my mother sought to get us plugged in with the local Baptist church youth group. She desperately wanted me to be around Christian friends. I went to youth group begrudgingly, all the while growing increasingly bitter, angry, and repulsed by the idea of a god. My anger drove me headlong into pornography.

Around age 17, I began my first serious romantic relationship. But this girl quickly became my idol. It only took a few months before I was pouring my anger onto her. I became what I had vowed never to become: an abuser.

My life went into a tailspin. I entered a 10-month depression. It was truly a dark night of the soul. Not a day went by without thoughts of killing myself. Yet during this time, I started reading voraciously on the concept of love. I was desperate to learn how to love and be loved. So I studied psychology and read ancient holy books.

Soon enough, there were books piled from floor to ceiling around the beanbag chair in my room. One remained unopened: the Bible.

At this time, I still considered the Bible something close to lunacy. I'd already tasted my family's religion, and it wasn't any good. I was a narcissist, a self-styled "evidentialist" and a pragmatist, and Jesus just didn't make any sense to me.

But one day, I opened a book—I can't remember which one—that posed a question I couldn't answer. The author asked, "Do you have a desire to be perfectly loved?" Of course, my answer was no. That's impossible! No one can love us perfectly. And yet the author probed deeper, acknowledging that we still desire this sort of perfect love, even though no one on earth can provide it. We desire to live happily, to never be hurt, and to be loved for who we are.

This was the first moment I ever entertained the possibility of a personal god. The book followed up with a famous quote from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

As the truth of this insight sank in, my anger and pragmatism were shaken. Desiring a perfect love is pointless if finding that kind of love is impossible in this life. The persistence of my desire meant that something perfect must exist out there, somewhere.

I finally opened my Bible, and almost instantly I came upon John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Suddenly it all made sense. I understood how Jesus differed from all the other religious leaders I’d encountered in my reading. I had pictured a mountain with Buddha, Gandhi, and all the others at the bottom, trying to “bind back” to “god” through their works. But Jesus claimed that he began at the top of the mountain and sacrificed everything to come down to us!

In that moment—immersed in that pile of books that contained the world’s wisdom—I finally met Jesus. My life changed instantly. Soon I began touring in a band devoted to sharing the gospel.

Tested by Praise

Becoming a Christian didn’t make my life any easier. In fact, life got a hundred times more difficult. Immediately after Christ entered my heart, he started dealing with my sin. He led me down the dark and harrowing path of confronting my horrendous addictions, which had by that time reached new heights of destructiveness. He revealed a stubborn tendency toward lying and deception and a violent temper burning with white-hot flames.

He also blessed me with my first assignment as a church planter and an intensely joyful marriage, one that’s now lasted over 13 years. I hit the ground running as a pastor and husband, and for about two years everything went swimmingly. I was praised as a leader “with wisdom beyond his years.” Everything was growing. My ministry was thriving, and my marriage couldn’t have been better. Until everything went wrong.

According to Proverbs, “the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but people are tested by their praise” (27:21). Foolishly, I had believed the hype and allowed my pride to carry me away. The ministry started going downhill, for no reason I could ascertain, and my various struggles and patterns of deception began to affect my wife more directly. Once again, I sank into depression and battled suicidal thoughts. This was a painful time, but by God’s grace, it helped me get a handle on the wickedness of my heart. I learned the truth of John Calvin’s observation that human nature is “a perpetual factory of idols.” At heart, I was still an abuser, and I had rooted my identity in ministry to try and escape that fact.

More and more, I came to understand why I needed Jesus’ love. It was one thing to receive the perfect love that every human being desires; it was quite another to know he had offered this perfect love while I was still a wretched sinner. When I contemplated the weight of the horror my sin had caused, it drove me to a deeper humility. The more I understood my status as a beloved son of God, bought by the precious blood of Jesus, the more I learned to welcome the Holy Spirit into my life as my comforter, counselor, convicter, and confidant.

Thankfully, the local church has been a strong tool in God’s hands for bringing about healing and sanctification. Secure in the presence of many wise counselors, I’ve felt the freedom to open up and talk through my deepest struggles, while also walking alongside others in their own. I’ve also found the resources to strengthen my marriage. If the church is indeed the bride of Christ, then I can only learn how to love and cherish my wife by observing all the wonderful ways in which my Savior loves his.

Every day, the church is helping redeem my imagination and reshape my view of the “good life.” I’ve found deep joy and wisdom in Jesus’ model of visiting others in their homes, eating meals, walking with them, and enjoying their gifts and talents. Everything created points back to the Creator, and each and every person tells God’s story in a unique way. The beauty of fellowship teaches me to set aside lesser loves and thirst after that which truly satisfies—ultimately, Christ himself.

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