

My Journey from Unbelief to the Truth

How Jesus Christ showed mercy to Thomas Daniel Ross

“What is the truth—is there truth? Does God exist, and if so, who is He and what does He want?” These, and similar questions, were matters of concern to me as I was growing up; I had no idea what the answers were, nor did I know if anyone else did. Some folks said they knew absolutely that there was no absolute truth, nor any God—others said they knew for sure that nothing could be known for sure—and many did not really seem to care but just wanted to do their own thing. However, in October, 1995, during my freshman year at college, I discovered the Truth—the One who is Truth—and with this, found peace, joy, and the reason for life.

Growing up in San Francisco, California, I had very hazy notions of God, only slightly supplemented in my early schooling through a smattering of often inaccurate information about Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and other systems. I grew up in an essentially non-religious home. I thought mankind was inherently good, and God (if He existed at all) would accept anyone who tried to do good, or perhaps just forgive everybody. I was taught that the Bible, like other religious books, was a piece of literature filled with symbolic language, so I did not pay it much attention. Through the influence of friends and of the media, I vaguely associated the term “born-again Christian” with “weird fanatic,” but, not knowing any of these strange people personally, nor having ever been given any sort of literature by any of them, I just left it at that. Generally God was mentioned by those whom I knew only as a curse word.

When I was around twelve years old, I decided to start going to church. I began to walk every Sunday for about twenty minutes to get to St. Vincent de Paul’s, a Catholic church in my neighborhood. I continued going there faithfully until I went to college. While I enjoyed singing the songs, I still did not know if God existed. I wondered if atheism was correct, and I feared deeply that Christianity was merely a cultural tradition built upon a sweet, but false, illusion, and that death ended everything. I saw, however, that life was unfair and utterly meaningless if there was no God. I wanted to find God’s presence, and prayed that my quavering would disappear, replaced by true and firm knowledge of the truth.

I eventually noticed a Bible, with an intricately designed mother-of-pearl cover and gold leafed pages, in my house—someone had given it to my mother as a present years earlier. I

thought that the Bible would be a good place to find out about God, if He was there, so I wiped the dust off from it, put it by my bedside, and resolved to read one chapter every day before I went to bed. I began in Genesis chapter one and kept on reading the Bible and praying through my years in high school—and the more I read, the more questions I had. I grew to see the nature of God’s Law, His just and universal judgment upon sin (which was any disobedience to His commands, not just doing “really bad” things). I saw His absolute holiness, His utter separation from anything not perfectly pure and righteous. Some time later I concluded that, at one chapter a day, it would take me forever to get to the the New Testament, so I started reading that as well. The words and works of Jesus Christ recorded there were amazing and self-evidently true. Some who heard the Lord speak declared that “never man spake like this Man” (John 7:46), and I had to agree. Although I was still not sure of anything, I began to consider that the Bible might be more than just a book of nice stories, but exactly what it claimed—the perfect and error-free revelation of the one true God. (Although I did not know it at the time, there is overwhelming evidence that the Bible is the Word of God—when one knows the facts, to reject Scripture is intellectual suicide.) My reaction to the Bible was the exact opposite of my feelings when I later read the Hindu holy book the *Baghavad-Gita* and sections of the Islamic *Koran*; these simply did not even begin to compare with the Bible, and I rejected their claims to be revelation or truth.

As I began to consider the Bible as the Word of God, I was shocked and amazed by the stringency of some of the commandments it contained. I read the Sermon on the Mount, where Christ had said, among many other things, that unjust anger in the heart was like murder (Matthew 5:21-22), and that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). I heard Him say “resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also . . . love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:39, 44). He even said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)! Furthermore, He declared that these commandments were not empty platitudes, but the standard by which God would judge me. He said “except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees [the most religious and moral people of His day], ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). He warned that “if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:30). Seeing the justice of these commands, I

rejected the humanistic and atheistic indoctrination of my high school and grew quite religious. I continued so when I entered a university in 1995— I prayed before and after meals, as well as in conjunction with my daily Bible reading, strove to obey what I understood of what I read, and never missed Sunday church services. While some in my college dormitory, relishing their new freedom from the constraints of family, committed and supported all sorts of immorality and wickedness, and others argued for a variety of anti-Biblical philosophies from communism to nature worship, I put the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12, on my dormitory room door and defended the Scripture and Christ against those that mocked and hated them. My intellectual commitment to the Bible grew as I saw the inability of other religions and philosophies to make a coherent and decisive case for themselves. Having read that God demanded perfect righteousness to be saved, I also sought to keep the Law as best I could.

However, I grew increasingly disturbed by my utter failure to meet God's standard. Those holy commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, were ones which I had not kept, was not keeping, and really had no prospect of keeping in the future—but the penalty for disobedience was death and hell. I found I had no ability within myself to keep the Law. I would confess my sins, but even while confessing them I was disobeying the greatest command of all, to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37), the second greatest command, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39), and numerous others; even in my acts of contrition I was disobedient. I began to see that, while others might think I was good, before God I was a great and horrible sinner, and I could neither atone for my sins by righteous acts nor change my inward bent towards evil. I looked at what God demanded, and what I was—and I began to understand that if the Bible was the Word of God, and I needed to keep its commandments to enter heaven, I had no hope whatsoever of being saved.

While, if anyone asked, I would have certainly told him that I was a Christian, I still would sometimes doubt if the Bible was the Word of God, although I saw no contradictions between Scripture and genuine scientific facts; I struggled over the justice of God in condemning me for my sins. Part of me thought that this was unfair, but the other part told the struggling part that God was God, He was the King of everything, and I was nothing, so He could justly do with me what He wished. Nevertheless, this answer brought me no great satisfaction, for if I got what I deserved I would certainly be damned, although I might redouble my efforts to keep the Law. All this was tumbling through my mind as I started to attend

meetings of the college Christian Fellowship through the influence of some friends of mine, and was eventually invited out to a gathering of people from several universities off from my campus. I decided to go, hoping I could get some of my questions answered.

When the night of the mult-school meeting came, I squeezed into the backseat of the car of the head of the fellowship with two other people. Since I had wanted to get some of my questions answered, during our ride I asked the driver what the relationship should be between the Christian and the Law, and was referred to Galatians 2:16—a verse that God used to change my life and eternity! In the dim light in the back of that car I read:

“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

Upon reading this, God opened my eyes, and with all my being I believed in Jesus Christ, and was saved! In that instant I understood God’s way of salvation from sin, trusted Jesus, who died for me, and was forgiven of all my sins—there was both joy in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10) and rejoicing in my heart, as I had at length found freedom from sin’s power and penalty, and peace with God, whom to know and to serve is the meaning of life and the blessedness of eternity. My doubts about the truth of the Bible and its God immediately vanished, for He had saved my soul and made me a new creation in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Before that moment I had known, from reading the Bible and through receiving teaching, certain fundamental facts. I knew that the Scripture was God’s error-free Word, that there was one God in three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that Jesus Christ, God the Son, became a Man, lived a sinless life, and then died on the cross, where the Father punished Him for the sin of the world; I knew that He had been buried, rose again, ascended to heaven, and was coming again. Furthermore, I knew that I was a sinner and deserved hell, and I desired to be saved from my iniquities and to know God—but I had not seen the way. The Bible declared that God demanded perfect righteousness to enter heaven, but, I had thought, as most people do who do not know God, that the way to get to God was by trying to do good works. I thought I could simply keep trying to myself perfect and so meet God’s requirement. However, I perpetually fell miserably short of the goal, so all my strivings merely left me closer to the lake of fire than I was when I started. When I read Galatians 2:16, God brought me to understand the simple truth—proclaimed throughout the Bible, although I had missed it for years—that a man is not saved by his own works, but by the work of Jesus Christ, whose death and shed blood on the cross was

sufficient to forever satisfy God's wrath against sin. I deserved to suffer and die for my sin, but Christ had suffered and died in my place, as my Substitute, and if I stopped trusting in my works to save me, but trusted in Him and His work instead, His death would satisfy the Law of God instead of my death, and God would treat me as sinless and righteous for His sake; instead of accounting me as one who had broken His Law and deserved condemnation, I would be "justified," so that the righteousness of His Son would be counted to me, and I would have perfect standing in God's sight and enter heaven. Through the righteousness of my Savior Jesus Christ, Divine justice, which had previously cried out for my damnation, now joining with mercy to demand my pardon (Psalm 85:10). "For He [God the Father] hath made Him [Jesus Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him [Christ]" (2 Cor 5:21)—and so God could be just, and yet take sinners to heaven! Seeing myself as ungodly, I rejoiced to learn that "to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom 4:5); the Lord Jesus Christ, against whom I had sinned so greatly, had loved me so much that He had died to pay for my sin, to be punished instead of me, that I might receive eternal life because He merited it. Rather than my worthless attempts to try to earn salvation by my works, I could stop working and simply trust in or rely on the perfect and completed work of Him who had satisfied the Law in my place. I did not need to trouble myself about being good enough to be saved, but now had peace with God, knowing that Christ was good enough. The moment the Holy Spirit made me sensible, through reading Galatians 2:16, of God's blessed plan of salvation through Christ, I trusted in Him and was made new—what, in earlier years of foolishness and ignorance I had before despised, I now was: a born again Christian!

The Bible says "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). Now that I was saved by God's grace, I had not only a real desire to serve God, and a previously unknown thirst to know Him, despite my religiosity and seeking, but a new and genuine ability to gain victory over sin. Having been saved "not of works," I was now "created in Christ Jesus unto good works." I read the Bible more than ever, and could now understand what it said as I could not before (1 Cor 2:6-16). Things I had before known were sin, but I did not have the ability to overcome, I could now stop doing. The Holy Spirit also gave me a new heart and conscience, so that sins that I had earlier not recognized as wrong I now saw as

unBiblical and avoided. My college companions saw the change in both action and attitude.

Best of all, I now had Christ, and with Him I had everything necessary for time and eternity. Through the Word of Truth, and enlightened by the Spirit of Truth, I had found Jesus Christ, who is the Truth, and was immediately satisfied knowing Him. As time has passed, and I have been able to grow in Christ, find and join a Bible-believing and practicing church, and serve my Savior and Lord, He has grown all the sweeter. Friend, what is the case with you? Do you know the truth? Would you like to know it—Him? Have you been born again?

Post Scriptum:

The miserable sinner saved by the free mercy of Jesus Christ in the manner described above, subsequent to his conversion to Christ in 1995, was called to preach later on in his college years. He consequently sought training at a variety of Bible colleges and seminaries, and received an M. A. and an M. Div. from Fairhaven Baptist College and Great Plains Baptist Divinity School, respectively. While working on his doctorate, he teaches college and seminary Greek (among other things) at an Bible college under the authority of an independent, fundamental Baptist church.