

For God So Loved!

“His Compassions fail not.

**They Are New Every Morning:
Great Is Thy Faithfulness”**

(Lamentations 3:22-23).



Gary & Victoria
Westgerdes



“And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins: Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lust of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Ephesians 2:1-3).

HOWEVER: “The Lord ... is ... not willing that any should perish ...” (2 Peter 3:9).

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). www.thekeysofheaven.com

At the age of seven I was being taught about heaven and hell in my Catholic Catechism class, I was fearful and convicted of my sinfulness, I feared God and the destiny of my soul. After being in this frame of mind for a few days or weeks our teacher shared with the class, the compelling bible verse John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” With childlike faith I took this verse to heart and believed Jesus died for me that I might receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life. The moment I believed, God’s assurance of my salvation and the joy of the Holy Spirit filled my heart; I wanted to obey Jesus, be like Him and be the nicest little boy I could possibly be.

Not sure how long, maybe several months, my parents were having our home dedicated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, a church leader or Priest bent down and asked me why I was so happy I told him “because I’m going to heaven when I die” he stood up, stepped back and just chuckled and laughing said “Oh No! You can never know for sure if you’re going to heaven or not until after you’re dead, because you can never know for sure if you’ve been good enough or not.” I was in shock! After his visit I remember looking at my five brothers and sister running around the house screaming and Mom scolding one of them and thinking “if you have to be good enough to get to heaven no one in this family is going to make it!” However, my religious upbringing taught that eternal life is something that you must work towards through the church, with good deeds, the sacraments and devotions.

I always hoped the church was wrong and God’s word was true, but I had nowhere to turn, I was a good kid growing up but after high school, and then during my tour of duty in the Navy, I began conforming to the world’s pattern. After three years I was moving up. I was having a good time and my daily jogging had me in excellent health. (I had received a few witnesses about Jesus, and took them to heart, but I didn’t really do anything about them, I felt my life was altogether.) I remember telling God jogging is what I wanted to do with my life. That very week I was given a desk job and began having pain in my leg. The pain continued and increased and three weeks later I found myself hospitalized with a blood clot in my lungs which had passed from my leg and through my heart.

With my life at age twenty-three coming so close to death I began to reconsider my life and its direction. After recovering from the clot and being placed on limited duty, I began to think about my sin and my accountability towards God. I started going over to the library to read God’s word and God began to work on my heart. A friend asked if I was worried about my leg, and I said, “No, because I knew God could work things out for the best.” He asked if I was a Christian, and I said “I did not know,” he then invited me to his church. I went and after the service I went forward to pray and seek God. Afterwards my friend encouraged me to read the Bible.

That week as I was reading in First John this verse hit me hard, “HE THAT COMMITTEH SIN IS OF THE DEVIL ...” (1 JOHN 3:8). I had always thought I was a pretty good person, but suddenly I knew I deserved and believed I was headed for hell. I was shattered. God placed His finger on my sin and I could not deny it.

I went back to the library to read 1 John again the next two days, with the same results. I knew my life wasn’t worth living if I was just going to die and end up in hell. I cried out to God about my struggle, but did not communicate this to my friend. That following Saturday my friend helped me pick out some Christian books. One of the books I read shared the simple gospel message that I had always hoped was true back when I was seven, **(CLAP YOUR HANDS! A Young Catholic Encounters Christ).** There is nothing of myself that I can offer to God for my sins. My sins deserve the eternal punishment of a Holy God. But God’s love reached out to me through Jesus Christ. Throughout the week I had acknowledged my sinfulness to God. I then read, **“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” (Ephesians 2:8-9)** and realized that **eternal life is given as a gift to all who believe in Jesus.** It was then that God’s mercy, grace and peace flooded my soul with understanding and forgiveness. I knew that what I was told at age seven by the Priest or Church leader was false. My joy returned as my eyes were opened to the truth of God’s Word that salvation was through faith in Jesus and His atoning sacrifice on the cross.

I had experienced Emmanuel “God with us.” Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14.

1 John 5:13 “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.” **Romans: 6:23** “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” **Matthew 7:14** “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” **Ephesians 2:4, 5, 10, 13** “But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) ... For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them ... But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the **blood** of Christ.”

Larry Tomczak sharing the Gospel with his Father

“These things I am writing to you that you may know that you have eternal life - you who believe in the name of the Son of God” (I John 5:13, Conf. Version). “Let me see that.” Dad reached for the Bible. He focused on the verse I had underlined in red. “Hey! You’re right! It does say that!”

“Let me ask you another question,” I began. “Dad, suppose that you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ what would you reply?” Dad mused over the question for a few moments and then said, “Well, I’ve tried to be a good Catholic ... lead a decent life and obey the Ten Commandments. I’ve never intentionally missed Mass. I don’t think I’ve been too bad.” “Anything else?” “I’ve been an usher for a number of years and helped out in a lot of parish projects. I’ve always given my Sunday offerings, too!”

“So you’d say to God: ‘I’ve been a good Catholic, led a decent life, obeyed the Commandments, attended Mass, served as an usher, helped out in the parish, and faithfully given a weekly offering, right?’ “Right.” “Dad, I’ve got some good news for you! Heaven is not something a person earns, or deserves, or works for. According to the Bible, heaven – eternal life – is an absolutely free gift.” “A free gift?” “Yep, the Bible says that eternal life is a free gift, unearned, unworked for, and undeserved. Free!” “Oh, go on, nothing’s free!”

I sat down next to him on the couch. Opening the Bible to Romans 6:23, I pointed to the verse so that Dad could read for himself. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is life everlasting in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Conf. Version). “Hey!” Dad exclaimed. “I never knew that!”

“Dad, when the Gospel is read at Mass, do you remember hearing the words of Jesus, ‘How narrow the gate and close the way that leads to life! And few there are who find it?’” (Matt. 7:14 Conf. Version). “Sure.” “Well, if only a few find this gift of eternal life, wouldn’t you like to be one of them?” “Of course!”

“The first thing we want to look at is what God says about man.” Flipping the pages of the Bible, I found Romans 3:23 for Dad to read: “all have sinned and have need of the glory of God.” Dad looked up from the page. “So what’s new about that? In the Mass we say, ‘I confess to almighty God ... that I have sinned through my fault.’ I know that everyone is a sinner.” “Well, because man is a sinner, and a sinner can do no good thing of himself anyway, it is impossible for him to earn his way into heaven, even if it weren’t free, which we’ve just seen that it is. The Bible states this very clearly: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not from yourselves, for it is gift of God; not as the outcome of works, lest anyone may boast (Eph. 2:8-9, Conf. Version).

“Hold on a second,” Dad said. “Let me read that last one again!” His face appeared slightly pale. “Larry,” he finally said, “I want to receive this gift of eternal life. What do I do?” “See Dad,” I said, **“faith is the key that opens the door to eternal life.”** ... I tried to live a decent life. I tried to obey the Ten Commandments. I, I, I, I, I was really trying to be my own savior. (pages 134-136)

Tomczak, Larry, CLAP YOUR HANDS! Plainfield LOGOS International 1973. (Pages 134 – 136)

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