

Ronald F Childers
My Personal Testimony

I was raised by my maternal grandmother in Selma, Alabama as my mom, being very young and seeking to make a life for us, thought better to leave me with my grandmother. Neither was my father in the home and from the absence of them both, emanated many insecurities within me that – for the most part – I was oblivious. My grandmother did all she could to raise me and my brother (along with numerous cousins) the best she could and always made sure that we attended church every Sunday. As I recount now, this provided me with head-knowledge about God but no real relationship with Christ.

There were several occasions in my early childhood where the insecurity I wrestled with would manifest itself in feelings of not belonging or a sense of being “out-of-place” and this set me on a long journey of trying to fill the void that I felt within. Upon graduating high school, I attended college at The University of Alabama and being in this totally new environment only exacerbated the feelings of loneliness and disillusionment with which I had to contend. For this reason, I sought out people, places, and things in a vain attempt to find peace – to belong. I, subsequently, joined a fraternity that was known to be the most popular and sociable group on the campus and, surely, I thought this affiliation would serve as a cure-all for everything I was experiencing internally and externally.

I was wrong! This new allegiance, for me, was a gateway into a lifestyle of partying, drinking and drug use. More poignantly, it was the catalyst of a 20-year struggle with alcohol and drug abuse that threatened to end my life on several different occasions. It had all started out as fun-n-games, escalating to selling drugs to earn money, as I was now on my own and responsible for supporting myself, graduating to becoming physically dependent on the drugs I was selling to others.

I met my first wife, within the paradigm of this nugatory existence, in college and we both lived a lifestyle that was doomed for failure at the onset. Over a period of several years we had children, moved to various places, but resolved to get a divorce after approximately 13 years of marriage. In the “end,” life had become unbearable and I found myself in a state of disillusionment and depression that made the thought of taking my own life more appealing than ever before. I recall sitting outside of my grandmother’s home in Alabama contemplating the manner in which I would end it all. It was at this moment that God miraculously intervened and saved me yet again.

While sitting on my grandmother’s patio, I received a vision of my sons, all sitting on an old wooden bench with the most beautiful and radiant smiles on their faces. Until someone came along, leaned down to whisper in one of their tiny little ears, words that I could not hear. At that moment those radiant smiles – that had so lighted my heart – turned into complete expressions of sadness and grief that I could hardly bear. I asked God what was the meaning and purpose of this vision and the Spirit of God revealed to me that the person who had whispered in my children’s ear, had actually said, “Your father has killed himself!” Witnessing the brokenness of the hearts of my kids at this news, I recalled that my other grandmother, who had lived in Chicago for over 30 years of her life, had always tried to implore me to go to Pacific Garden Mission. She would always say, “Baby, you need to go to Pacific Garden Mission – you can find Jesus at the Mission!” It was at this moment that I decided to go to Chicago on a search for this Jesus that she would always talk about.

After a series of events, I arrived in Chicago in October of 2011, and was directed to a huge dayroom with approximately 200-300 other men. After a few days there I heard a young man preaching with conviction about the Jesus I was looking for and a Bible program for men to learn about Jesus and discipleship. He seemed to truly believe what he was saying as though he knew it to be the truth and I had to talk to him to see what it was that he was so sure about. Through subsequent conversations he explained to me about the program and asked me what brought me to Chicago as I explained that I wanted to kill myself. He responded, "That's where God wants you to be!" At first, I didn't understand what he meant until he explained that, I wanted to take my life, but God was telling me to not take my life, but give it to Him. And that's what I did! I prayed for Jesus to come into my heart and promised to serve Him for the rest of my life as I enrolled in the Men's Bible Program at the Pacific Garden Mission.

I graduated the Program in January of 2013 and I tell everyone that since that time, everyday has been more exciting and fulfilling than the last – and this has continued for over 11 years. I was subsequently hired on as Guest Services Manager at the Mission where I head up a team of ministers whose sole purpose is to help the homeless population within the Chicagoland area to "become fully-functioning followers of Christ." I am able to share hope with individuals in the darkest of their life experiences – also to be able to share that hope with conviction – as I was once there where they currently are. I have been in my position at Pacific Garden Mission for over seven years now and am slated to receive my Master of Divinity in Pastoral Studies degree from Moody Theological Seminary in December of 2022. I have remarried to a beautiful woman and we are currently in the process of moving into our new home. I have been elected to the elder board of our church home where my wife and I have led small group studies for approximately six years. Lastly (if I can adequately use that term), I have been asked to serve as Lead Church Planting Pastor for a new Chicago church plant.

When I think of the glory of God in my life through the salvific shed blood of His Son Jesus the Christ – two verses of Scripture come to mind: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36) and "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). I now know the truth of these verses as well as the remainder of the promises of God and my purpose in life is to share that Truth with the world and those the Lord would send me to in the neighborhoods of Chicago.