

## **CHAPTER 7: Souvenirs of My Awakening - Part 1**

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n my life, if ever there was a work to be done, if ever there were great lessons to learn, and if ever there were heroes to walk with, it was in the days that I served a mission for my church.

The mission was a testing ground for me, for who I thought Christ was, and what he expects of me. He says if I am in despair, he will lift me up; that he will be light so that I can remain unmoved. During my mission, I would be overwhelmed, broken down, and built back up; a new, different person would emerge. Through it all I experienced many moments when love shone through, people chose to overcome their circumstances, or strangers touched my life and turned me in a new direction. I called these my experiences with heaven, or eternal moments: instances in my life when the world seems larger and I sense something more than myself; times when everything that can cloud the truth is stripped away. This was a time of My Awakening.

I long to experience these kinds of moments, the moments of truth, power, even discomfort; and I valued these moments more than anything I had ever known. I will spend the rest of my life searching for more of these moments in my interactions with people and in my searching alone. These are the “souvenirs” of my journey: moments of truth and light; lessons and experiences I have held as if they were treasures I picked up on the road.

### **The Roots, and the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah**

When I converted to Mormonism, I didn't think much about the change. The LDS church was my new environment; I became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in large part because my parents did. During my first few years in the church, I count a few moments as deeply significant: my dad and I bearing our testimonies on our first day in the San Clemente Ward, the parochial blessing, and our baptisms. However, I was very young. I was religious by default, more than because of any sense of experience or knowledge of spiritual things.

By the time I turned eighteen, I began to consider the first big faith decision I would make for myself: the mission. For many young men in the LDS Church, serving a two-year mission--proselytizing somewhere away from your home and family--is a natural thing to do.

Your church community assumes you will go. It is as normal and expected a thing to do as going to church every Sunday, or celebrating the birth of Christ.

However, I was not so long-term in my thinking through much of high school. I went to church on Sundays, but sometimes came home drunk, and fought with my father. I had great conversations with Dean Clark about the future, and what career avenues I could follow, but I was not taking school seriously. My grades were slipping. I was dissatisfied and directionless. Then, my senior year came, and the prospect of a mission was suddenly on the horizon.

I began to take seriously the idea of serving a mission. Dean Clark and Bishop Gary Hadley counseled me closely during this time. Both encouraged me to prepare myself and go serve, especially Gary Hadley. He felt it would be good for me: that the responsibility, independence as an adult, and spiritual significance would bring change and meaning. “You will have compassion, you will act, but in the end you will get so much more than you could ever give,” he said. So, I began to slowly move toward the mission as if following a compass northward. I made the decision: after one semester of classes at Southern Utah University (where I was helped, often secretly, by the Clarks, Bruce Mackay, and many other people in the ward), I would go wherever the church sent me.

At the end of my fall semester at Southern Utah University, my family and Joyce Clark joined me in Provo, Utah to send me off to become a missionary, and then my mission. For the next few weeks, I would inhabit The Missionary Training Center, a massive red brick building at the foot of the sharp-tipped mountains. I knew for two years I would have little contact with my family: one hour of access to email, once a week. I had received my “call,” and I also knew I would be going to Washington, D.C. For those two years, I would not be face to face with anyone I had known in my entire life until that point. My goodbye to my family was quick—you remember when I told you about Joyce Clark, who was like an American mother to me, and how she left me to be alone with my family at the final goodbye. Then, I stepped through the doors into a long, white-walled hallway. I left behind most of my things, carrying with me only a few collared shirts and pants, shoes, my scriptures and C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*.

The Missionary Training Center is a place where young men and women are prepared to represent the Church and share the message of Christ. I had only been in seminary for a few years, so I focused intently during the lectures, hoping I would feel prepared. I and the other missionaries learned safety protocols, codes of conduct, expectations, cultural training for our destinations. Each person was also paired with a mission partner, in the hope that both persons would connect and develop into a team.

We received training for how to handle unfriendliness, cultural differences, and rejection. The vague pressures of our coming mission, which we had only imagined before, began to coalesce into more concrete expectations. We all knew that we would leave our individual styles and identities behind for a time, and exchange them for the suits, ties, polished haircuts and shiny nametags of missionaries. Loneliness and homesickness affected everyone in different ways.

One day, my mission partner announced he was going to the restroom, and left our class. He called his girlfriend, who came to the curb outside and picked him up as he walked out of the building. If I said I did not feel anxious too, I would be lying. However, he had let me down without any warning, and, at the time, I felt as if the work I had put into our friendship was wasted. Now, the class formed an odd number, and I would be assigned to travel and work with a pair of missionaries instead.

I was disappointed in my mission companion, and I felt he had abandoned me to some degree, just at the time I adjusted to the first stage of mission life. In the MTC, our schedule was tightly constrained because we had so much to learn in so little time. In addition, we barely left the same block of the building: wake up, go down the hallway to class, back up the hallway to eat, down the hallway for another class; then up the hallway, a curfew, and bed. Our meals were provided for us, and even our roommates were our assigned companions. I had

voluntarily given up my freedom to choose those kinds of things.

However, my companion leaving with his girlfriend made the cost more real, and I am sorry to say at that time, I did not embrace the austerity cheerfully.

In November, after what felt like much longer than a few weeks, we departed for the east coast in freshly ironed white shirts, with thick scarves ready to protect our necks. I was excited to leave the MTC; although I only knew the simple basics, and still had a lot to learn, I would be in the action now. This was the part I had signed up for.

### **The First Three Months of the Mission**

Washington, D. C. was grey and cold when we arrived in early November. Our mission home was a plain apartment with very little decoration, except a few signs made of printer paper with instructions and rules written on them. We were borrowing the space, and we knew it. I was certain the blank grey rooms would never feel like home.

Almost immediately, we were on the streets, riding from neighborhood to neighborhood and knocking on doors. I was excited to be working, meeting people, and initiating conversations about Christ. We were still studying, but now I was practicing, teaching the first lessons, learning to use Bible verses to explain ideas. We were asking thought provoking questions and seeing some people respond by truly engaging with us. Everything felt important and exhilarating; it was new. At first, I didn't even mind the ten or twenty degree temperatures,

and the thick fog that rolled up from our mouths. Even the cold mountain winter of Utah had felt warmer than this!

Within a few days, I hurt my chest exercising, and my muscles swell and made breathing difficult. I was already working hard to keep up with my mission companions. I was issued bike to use for the first few weeks, a blue BMX bike with little bits of the aluminum frame, and rust spots visible. There was one gear, so each time I climbed a hill, I had to dig hard with my feet to grind through, and the chain often made a rasping sound. It was an extremely impractical vehicle on the icy hills on the east coast. I scolded myself constantly for falling behind, even though the bike was the problem and I couldn't afford to buy another one. Then, I scolded myself for that, too: mouthing breathless words to myself as I rode.

Before I went on my mission, Gary Hadley had told me I would be overwhelmed by the things I would learn, and that I would receive much more than I could possibly give. He also told me the mission would be difficult; I anticipated good and bad experiences. I imagined myself in scenes where I was talking to people, sharing truth that encouraged them, and helping them see Christ. I imagined grateful people receiving my companions and I with eager arms. I was not naïve enough to think that all, or even most, of our experiences would be positive. It was just that I did not vividly imagine the negative or difficult interactions we would have with people.

For those first few weeks, I thought I might crumble in the face of many rejections and insults. This was a bigger, older, and far less wealthy metropolis than Orange County; so I experienced a little culture shock. But, more significantly, missionaries had been active in that area for some time already, and many people had already made up their minds about us. Riding into new streets, expecting to make eye contact with a person, smiling—and then seeing them turn away or disappear as we got closer, looking at us over their shoulders—these experiences repeated themselves often. I was used to being thought of as an individual, and I thought of myself as a popular person in high school. But here we were perceived as nothing more than our uniforms. I might see an ugly, angry expression on a person’s face, and race in shock to think of what could be wrong. Then, I would suddenly realize they were responding to me as a missionary, the same as they might respond to anyone wearing a missionary’s uniform, and riding a bike—simply because their religious experiences were not positive or because they were annoyed by missionaries.

I found it natural to blame myself for their reactions to me. I was cold and exhausted, and we were rejected often. Doors were slammed on our faces; or we would receive curses from behind them, bolted shut. I began to wonder why I was there at all. I asked myself: “Why can’t these people listen? Why can’t I preach in such a way that they will listen to me? If they do listen, why can’t they recognize, love, and

embrace the gospel of Christ?” My journal pages from those first days are full of frustration and doubt. Even when I had positive interactions with people, they seemed to be excited to get to know me rather than my message. It felt almost as if even positive interactions with others were the result of me eclipsing the message I was supposed to represent.

I often felt that I should quit; missionary companions could be difficult to work with, and we were being rejected often. In one of my journal entries at the time, I said it was the worst time of my life.

There were bright moments in these first days, however. I spoke with a man I met at a bus stop in Alexandria, North Virginia. At first, I was not in the mood to talk; I was glad to have a silent moment when my companions and I did not have to talk to anyone. We were sitting and waiting to load our bikes and head back north. This man kept glancing at me, and breathing on his hands to keep them warm. He was wearing a knit hat with a grey pompom on top: “I knit this myself,” he said, and nervously grinned. At first, I didn’t want to talk to him, but he was very friendly, and soon we were chatting. We talked about his hat for a moment, and the miserable cold, and then he pointed at my nametag and asked:

“Why are all these churches preaching against each other? Why is there contention? Why can’t they come together in love?” For this question, I had no easy answer ready, no flash cards I had memorized at the MTC, no lesson memorized. I answered to the best of my ability,

something like this: “It’s not about coming together in one faith that makes us better, but how we can come together as the family of God: sons and daughters of our Father.”

I said it with as much conviction as I had, but the man had raised some questions for me. I realized afterward that he was truly asking, “Where is the love?” If we, who believe in God, preach love, why doesn’t our world reflect that? As this man at the bus stop asked these questions, he didn’t care about anything except this idea. All he wanted to know was an answer to this question: where is the love? He was torn by the disunity of the people of God.

The questioner was sincere, and his heartfelt question inspired more thoughts in my mind, questions that would linger for some time. I realized that my own assumptions and beliefs were being broken down to a degree, and I was a little afraid. However, the man’s honest question also inspired me to dig a little deeper and try to find answers, for people like him, and for myself.

When the bus came, we parted ways as my companion and I loaded our bikes and tried to find places inside where we could sit together, more or less. First, the man shook my hand and thanked me for my answer. I could tell he was still questioning, and I wanted for him to feel certain even as I asked the same question he did. As the bus drove us away, my thoughts distracted me; I don’t think I noticed the cold anymore.

## **A man with AIDS: more big questions**

A few weeks into the mission, I was being trained by a more experienced missionary, who told me not to expect much in this part of town. Many missionaries had come through before, and so people were already divided into those who would be receptive to us, and those who would not. Every hour or so, members of the Church might open the door to and give us some encouraging words, and maybe a cup of hot chocolate to keep us going. We were grateful, and we were at least making momentum through the neighborhoods—but I was still wondering why I was doing all of this.

We knocked on a red door, and I almost rocked backward a little when it opened sharply inwards. A thin man with a curved back stood there, and gestured for us with his palm downward. “Please come in,” he said, and his voice rasped slightly. His name was Alan. He had a sad face with stubble and a few deep vertical wrinkles. My impression of him was that he seemed very tired. We stepped inside onto dark carpet that felt a little dirty, and sat down on his couch. I was caught off guard, and scrambled through the lesson we always teach someone on the first day. My companion and I talked about the gospel, and I noticed the man’s lips trembling a little. His expression did not change.

After a few minutes, Alan told us distinctly and straightforwardly that he was gay, and has HIV/AIDS. My companion nodded, and touched his chin to express understanding and sympathy, but I noticed

him blinking out of surprise. We were both a little shocked by Alan's bold admission, and the candid way that he expressed it. My heart sank a little at his grief, and I began to understand the sense of sadness that hung around the house.

He began speaking in the same measured voice, not rushing. He spoke slowly, as if he had to draw each word up from his lungs before he could speak:

"I am gay. And I have thought about my spiritual life for a long time. I feel like I've lost what it means to feel alive. I feel--I don't feel purpose any more." For Alan, fitting into society was getting harder and harder: "I am tired of being in denial of who I am, and I am tired of being persecuted for what I am." He also told us he tried to believe in Christ, that he loves the Bible—but that the Bible is against what he is and that he has lost all hope.

"If I can't change who I am," he said, "there is no believing." He looked around his house, at a sink full of dishes, and grimy floors. He was clearly ashamed of the mess.

"I don't know," he said, and he rubbed his cheeks. "I just don't know any more."

I wanted to cry but I couldn't. I was scrambling for answers, and finally needed to speak.

“I know for certain that God loves all of us, and that we are all his children,” I said, “but I don’t know why things happen the way they do. We can’t know the meaning of all things.”

My companion and I offered some scriptures, hoping to encourage Alan. His hands were shaking, and he seemed on the verge of tears at every moment, until finally a few drops fell to the carpet. He was nodding, but he was resting his forearms on his knees, and looking down so that I could not tell if he was overwhelmed with relief or shame. His hands were still trembling. We offered the best words we could, but there was still so much missing.

We did not have answers to all of his questions, or know perfectly how to comfort him, but we did want him to be certain of God’s love for him in Christ. We offered to clean his house, scrubbing the residue of moldy milk out of cups in his sink, and scouring every surface we could. Gradually the rooms seemed brighter, maybe because everything was clean, or maybe because Alan himself felt a little lighter in spirit. As we left his apartment, he smiled for the first time since he first opened his door for us.

Back at the mission home, I wrote. I had many more questions on my mind: the Church itself is only fourteen million people; can so few people be the chosen? Why do people like Alan suffer, enduring circumstances they cannot change, and yet are ashamed of? What am I

supposed to offer in a situation like this, when I feel helpless? And what does God himself truly offer those who suffer?

I was surprised at myself for my answers for Alan, and, as I thought about our conversation, I noticed small ways in which he seemed more hopeful after hearing what we had said: that God loved everyone, and he could trust in this no matter what other circumstances. This was something I said that was smart, but I said it almost accidentally, not knowing its true power. It was as if I had known the truth, and it had come out of me, but I did not feel it yet. Thinking about the conversation, I could see the way those words transformed the situation in small ways. It was as if I suddenly realized that what I believed was true, but that I only believed it a little bit, and I was asking the same questions that Alan had. “Why am I doing this?” I wrote; “I am doing this because I'm trying to gain something out of it, or am I doing this because I love these people?” These were questions I couldn't answer at the moment.

I did know that I had seen the man's suffering, and shared the power of the gospel with him. I had felt love for the man, love that had surprised me. I was ashamed to say I had not always been kind to all people whose life experiences were different from my own, and that I had sometimes missed people in their suffering. It was as if a greater level of love had awakened in me, and suddenly I know how much love I lacked. “I am here because I love people, and because I love the

gospel,” I wrote, and I determined that I could at least hold on to the simple words I myself had spoken to Alan earlier that day; they were words for me, too. “If nothing else,” I wrote, “I believe God loves us.” Meanwhile, I continued to think hard on the questions Alan had raised.

### **The Easter Egg: My Ebenezer**

The photograph of United States Marines raising the Stars and Stripes over Iwo Jima is one of the most enduring and iconic images of WWII, but many people do not realize it is actually a photograph of the second flag to be raised on Mount Suribachi. The first was raised while the shooting was still happening, and several Marines gave their lives to see the flag raised up there. They did not give their lives for a mere piece of cloth; they did it to demonstrate to the other troops, still struggling in the brutal siege, that victory was close despite harrowing circumstances. At the highest point on the mountain, the flag would be visible to friend and foe alike, offering encouragement, and boldly claiming territory. It was something for Marines to look at as they continued to fight, and receive strength. This is the idea of an Ebenezer: a banner at the front; a commemoration of victory; something to hold on to in difficult times; and testimony or evidence of truth.

As I said before, first season of my mission was very difficult, but I began to look for signs of hope; I had learned to pity myself a little less and to love people a little more. Easter came, and with it, the first hints

of spring. It was still very cold, however. My companion and I went out “tracting:” handing out small pieces of literature about the gospel and the Church. The streets were quiet except for the occasional sounds of people celebrating the holiday. My chest was hurting so badly that I asked my companion if we could simply walk our bikes that day. We did just that.

All through that day, people were very annoyed with us. They would answer the door with confused faces, not sure why someone would bother them on a holiday. When they realized we were missionaries, they would respond harshly: “Don’t you guys have a break or something? Don’t bother us!” We had plenty of doors slammed in our faces. At one door, a black man saw that I was a black missionary, and called me a race traitor. He alluded indignantly to some historical racism and told us to get out of there. It was not the first time a black person had responded to us that way, but it affected me deeply each time. I felt dejected.

The day went on, and we continued to get many of the same responses, until one man answered us, and a little boy stared at us from behind the man’s leg. We shared our message, while the man scowled at us, and shortly interrupted us to say he was not interested. We were prepared to hear that, so we thanked him for his time. As we were leaving, the man’s little boy ran out of the house, came to us in front of

his dad, and handed us Easter Eggs. I think he was around five years old, with chubby cheeks and a cheeky grin. “I like you guys,” he said.

This was such a simple gesture—but to me, it was the climax of the day, the one small victory handed to us to count on. I cradled the little egg—filled with some candy I can’t remember—and kept feeling it with my thumb the whole rest of the day as we walked and rode from place to place. I truly felt that he knew what we were trying to do, and recognized that we were servants of the Lord, at least in a childlike sense. Since that day, I’ve kept that egg as one of my souvenirs of my awakenings, and I touch it whenever I’m feeling down or feel like I can’t do it anymore. It is an Ebenezer in my life, the flag on the hill when I was reaching the end of myself. I felt as if God had given me ninety-five questions, and only answered five, but I was still encouraged. It was as if God were reminding me he was still there.

### **Elder Alcott**

Sometimes, experiences made me insecure about my place a missionary, and I wondered if I was cut out to be there. I worked very hard--but sometimes, I wore my own misery on my sleeve, as a badge of self-pity. One of my first mission companions, Elder Ruck, told me, “Elder Lebbie, if you are not having fun on your mission, you should go home.” He was the type of young man who was born and raised to be a missionary. I remember he would shovel down his meals quickly, then

get up, put on his bike helmet, and watch you eat with his arms crossed, shaming you to eat faster and get back on your bike. That was how eager he was to be on his mission, and to spend every minute of it working. As I think of it now, I am not so sure he was having fun either, because he was so serious about everything; but I felt I understood what he meant. I didn't necessarily agree with him, but I sometimes compared my attitude to his, and his words sometimes sparked arguments inside myself: "Do I belong here?" "Am I the right one, when there are so many days when I feel I have accomplished nothing?"

Two months passed, and my mission became more difficult. I was transferred between parts of the city, and while I had hoped a quick change of scenery would energize me, I felt more exhausted and lonely than ever. Every day there were more rejections. Meanwhile, my lungs grew worse in the cold, humid air. I later understood that this may have been Costochondritis, which is a chest pain that can possibly come and go throughout your entire life. I still felt sore from the tear beneath my sternum that had made the first few weeks so difficult. My chest felt like a separate animal from the rest of my body, always twisting and knocking. The pain got reached unbearable levels when I had to exert extra effort. My mission companion was patient with me, which I was grateful for. We spent lots of time pushing our bikes up hills rather than riding them.

One day, I felt more beaten down than at any other point yet, as if my Self was stripped down and bruised. When we got back to the mission home, I skipped my usual shower and sat on the floor wearing my tie, which was still cold. I struggled to breath. I did not want to move, and I did not want to feel anything.

I began to ponder Elder Ruck's words, thinking: "I can't deal with all the frustrations, hurts, and trials any more." I imagined him saying "If you're not having fun, go home," over and over, with a little arrogance and a little pity. His words themselves were making more sense to me then than they ever had. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I was not meant to go on this mission; perhaps the work was for other people. Even more so, I felt sorry for myself. I stood up, still wearing my cold, scuffed shoes, and started packing my clothes to go home; to quit.

As I packed my things, I looked at my desk, where I had a picture of me, which I think Joyce Dean gave to me, and a painting of Jesus Christ. I held socks in my hands and gazed at those two pictures. I began sobbing, and spoke almost silently, almost choking out the words: "I want to go home. I can't take it anymore. I want to go home." Then, I looked at the picture of the Savior. It was as if I was speaking to him myself, looking at his face, into his eyes; and I pleaded: "Please don't let me go." Somewhere inside of me, I still wanted to want to be there; to complete what I had begun.

My mission companion's head appeared at the door. I didn't turn around because I didn't want him to see me feeling sorry for myself, crying; and I told him I needed my space. The moment he disappeared, I wept. I packed now with shaking hands, and tears dripped onto the crumpled clothes in my open suitcase. I thought of Alan, of the man at the bus stop, and so many other moments I experienced so far. Each memory of the mission felt like a sacred part of an already-distant past.

One of the older, more experienced missionaries in the flat, Elder Alcott, heard I was not alright, and came to check on me. He joined me on the floor by my suitcase and embraced me. He was crying with me, and the only thing I could speak was "I can't take it anymore—I can't take it anymore—." I had never cried like that in front of a peer before, and I haven't since. He hugged me for well over five minutes. Then, he read me his favorite scripture, a verse about enduring and having faith in our trials, and another scripture about hope. I wish I could remember which they were. I do remember that I asked him to read me John 6:64-68, which he did. I held that little Easter Egg the boy gave me the day we went tracking.

Before long, I felt a little better; his words made me realize that I know better than to pity myself. I am a man of God and I should rise up and stand firm. I was still shedding tears, but I calmed down. I opened my journal and read some passages, paying special attention to the things that God had done during the first two months of the mission. As

Elder Alcott and I were talking, and I shared some of my experiences with him, I had an urge—or perhaps a voice in me—that said: “Go out and talk. Go and pour your heart out to people about what you know. Go and teach the Kingdom of Christ, not mere information. Go and run to every door until you can’t breathe as you talk.”

I decided to act upon this inspiration. It was time to stop feeling sorry for myself; it was time to embrace the discomfort I felt. It was 22 degrees out and I decided not to wear anything that would prevent the cold from hitting me: just a short sleeve shirt and my pants. Then I hit the road with Elder Alcott, who was willing to do this crazy thing with me. I willingly went out unprepared in the cold weather because I was ready to face any obstacles that night without protection; focusing only on testifying and pouring my whole heart and soul to the people we met. It was amazing how the cold weather seemed not to have any effect on us as we ran to every door. At the end of the night, we had connected with five new people willing to be taught the gospel.

I came back to our apartment totally frozen, but feeling a sort of exuberant exhaustion, satisfaction: like finishing a race. I stayed up late into the night, lingering in that feeling, unpacking my suitcases and shaking out my now-wrinkled clothes. I shivered, and my body was chilled so much that I shook in my blankets as I tried to sleep; But I felt reassured.

None of my problems were solved. None of my questions were answered. However, the Holy Spirit had saved me from making the mistake of quitting, and Elder Alcott had encouraged my spirit. There were still things Christ would do in my life, and he was going to do them here in the field. I realized that the mission was not about me anymore. If I were to go home now, I would deny that He lives.

This was the beginning of a steady and gradual realization: that total submission to Christ requires losing your life, and following him with your whole heart, might, mind, and strength. Living this life requires work: many acts of faith on your path. I could have taught those words to any of the people who opened their doors when they knocked—and yet not understood them, truly. It would take me much more time to realize the depth of these words. However: as I thought about the hundreds of people we had spoken to--five people eager to receive freedom and hope--I realized that my Savior knows what he is doing. He brought me here through civil war, all the way from Africa to America, to the church, and helped me through my challenges for the purpose of sharing with people like this.

For the first time of many, I forgot whatever misery I was experiencing, and I sensed that I was a tool in Christ's hands. I was being hammered into a different shape, a different pattern, one that he could use. Elder Alcott, the discomfort, the suffering, the hope, all of it

—was part of the hammering process through Christ. He was using it to change me. I finally fell asleep, thinking of these words: “Be of good cheer and let Me finish My work in you.”

### **The Bryces: slowly awakening: my first prayer for another person**

Spring came, when I still wrote in my journal that, “every day is a struggle both physically and mentally.” However, I was following the rules of the mission carefully, and I was working harder and harder every day.

My mission companion and I started to teach the Robert and Joann Bryce, a sweet couple who were always hospitable to us when we visited their house to teach spiritual lessons. They would set out food for us to share each time we came to the house. They seemed to believe our message was true, but they tended not to be willing to change their lifestyles in any way: they didn’t want to make room for church, for example, or to be baptized, or other things we were teaching. Extremely difficult circumstances in their lives seemed to be driving them to look for answers, or at least hope.

Robert suffered severely from diabetes; he was even on dialysis, and, when I met him, his doctor had recently told him he would go blind quickly. He had no functioning kidneys and his life was coming to an end soon. In the midst of these circumstances, Joann was deeply confused about the church. She had been an active member in the past,

but through all of the difficulties they had experienced, her ideas and her faith had been tested, and they wavered. This is the root of their difficulty accepting that Christ loved them, but also the reason I wanted so dearly for them to experience it.

Out of all of the challenges and grief Robert and Joann faced, there were few I could address. I could not help them directly to face the rising costs of Robert's medical care, even while his kidneys failed. I was no doctor, able to find a solution to the problem when others could not. I was not a counselor, able to talk them through these circumstances. The one thing I could offer them was the hope of Jesus Christ. Robert and Joann also seemed to understand this; they seemed wistful sometimes, as if they wished they could accept what we were teaching, and even believed it, but refused to let it have any power in their lives.

Their hesitation, despite their own belief, was frustrating for me. They listened so carefully to our messages, and asked us good questions, so we were always sure they understood the material as well as we did. We were spending a lot of time with them, and there was no breakthrough. They were missing out on the joy and freedom of Christ, even while the suffering in their lives was making them miserable. We were almost finished with the lessons we had prepared, and I had shared with them from my heart, as genuinely and sincerely as I knew how. I felt my companion had done the same.

I started to ask: “Why haven’t Bryce and Joann felt the Spirit?” I felt strongly that the Spirit is not selfish; It shares the truth with people so that they can understand. It's deserving, content, improving, kind. It testifies love and peace to people. I couldn’t see any reason why the Bryces would not accept the message of Christ’s love, and they needed a lift in their lives. We were trying to give it to them in the only way we knew how; yet, our time with them seemed to be drawing to a close.

After one of our final lessons, I came home frustrated--desperate, even. I knelt down and prayed to my creator. This was the first time I prayed with no agenda for myself; not a selfish prayer, asking God for some favor in my life, but really beseeching God to do something for someone else. I remember the words I spoke because I wrote them, too: “O God, if I have done anything in the past or likewise my companion also, which is not good in thy sight, or which is preventing this family to feel thy Spirit because of our iniquities or sins, please forgive us and help them come to feel thy Holy Ghost so that they can partake of your blessings through thy Son's gospel.”

I think that, using this prayer for Robert and Joann, God started to change me, making me less selfish, and more observant of the two beautiful people I was trying to minister to. Now, every time I went to their house, I would look at Joann’s face and see the pain and agony she was going through because of Robert’s condition. I would cry with her, and I wished that I could do anything to heal her broken heart. She

would sometimes joke about Robert's condition, and we would all laugh —she had a keen sense of humor about everything, which helped her cope. But when she laughed, I started to see something in her eyes. It was as if I were looking past a pair of shutters into two windows, into a crying and broken heart. I saw flashes of anger: anger at God for letting her husband have this condition. I saw love for her husband, and the ultimate question: "Why him? Why us?"

Robert was harder to read. He smiled often despite his obvious pain. He was a very tough man, and he seemed even comfortable with the idea of death, most times. But on one occasion, his doubt and fear showed through the cracks. After a lesson, we were drinking some lemonade that Joann prepared, and Robert said that he could not see his favorite cup any more. He said it almost wistfully, as if it would have made no difference if he said it to us or to the wall. He had been blind for some time, but it was as if he were making this simple observation for the first time. We all sat quietly.

"I can't see it any more; I used to be able to see it and feel it, but now I can only feel it and know where it is," he said—"and it feels the same as the others. I can't recognize it any more." Everyone was quiet for a moment, and our muscles were a little tight, as if we were all waiting for some release. Joann looked at him, and that pain flashed across her face again. Robert shrugged and drank from the cup in his hand, and I was glad he could not see me. I could not hide my own pain.

I had never felt love for someone like this before, to the point that I tasted even a little of the pain they must be feeling. In that moment, as in many others, I wished I had supernatural powers: that I could simply heal Brother Robert of his illnesses, and make him live.

Love was slowly becoming part of me, imperfectly and with stutters. I still thought of Robert and Joann as lost, and needing my help. I was frustrated and impatient with them at times, feeling as if I knew exactly what they needed. I felt that I was telling the truth of the Problem Solver, and that they only needed to listen. Still—the love was growing. I started to love them more than myself. I worried about them constantly. I prayed for them more than I prayed for anything else. I reasoned with them together, I cried with them in my heart, and I laughed with them in joy. I believe God was hammering—slowly removing the selfishness that caused me to focus so closely on myself, and to turn me toward other people.

I visited Joann and Robert in the hospital again after our lessons were complete, and Joann seemed stronger and more at peace. It seemed as if God had humbled her, and her anger was sapped—I, too, felt humbled. She was gaining more love for Christ, so that I knew it was God who was changing her. Whatever it was that she needed, Christ had given it.

Robert, too, was growing more courageous in the Spirit. He had been strong before, but he seemed calm and certain now. He was clearly

dying though. He used to be fit and doing well, but now he could not see and he could barely move by himself. I realized that this life is just a tiny dot, and it ends quickly; but I also saw the peace Robert had attained. He helped me realize that, when we look at things in the eternal perspective, we are able to endure even the most severe trials. He told me he looked forward to the embrace of Christ.

Next Sunday came; Robert got up and bore his testimony in church despite being in very bad condition; he said he wanted to “tell his story before anything happened.” The time was right; I mentioned earlier, the shadows of death were all over him. His whole body seemed to be trembling, and his hand gripped the podium hard. His testimony was the most powerful I've ever heard. He talked about his life as a soldier in Vietnam, confessing terrible things he experienced and did, and how his life was destroyed when he got back to the States. He was incapable of trusting anyone and avoided being in public with a lot of people. He had been damaged, and damaged and destroyed the lives of other people, yet he concluded: “The gospel is true; I know it in my heart.” His testimony was full of pure humility and gratitude, and his struggles seemed to have made him humble and at peace before God. Those of us at the sacrament meeting were pierced to the heart by his words.

Stephen B. Allen- one of the speakers during my stay at the MTC, said; “Serve your mission in such a way that when you depart, look back at the place from your airplane and say with much certainty and guiltless

to God, 'I've done it,' and He will whisper in your heart, 'Well done my good and faithful servant. Go home.' I remember wanting this kind of certainty and peace, and Robert's testimony gave me a clear picture of it. It was as if Robert was going guiltless to God, no matter what evil or shocking things had taken place—even as a result of his actions. His illness had made him totally dependent upon God, and he received freedom and joy from Christ.

I longed to hear that voice in my heart say, "Good job my good and faithful servant." I asked myself: how can I achieve or feel that gratitude in my heart from my Heavenly Father?

Robert passed away not long after.

### **Second Chance—being humbled**

Out of a false sense of pride, I often pitied people I encountered on my mission, and I looked forward to being able to teach people and improve their lives. Often the people who received us were people who had deep social or spiritual needs, and I felt that I could usually see the ways our message would help people who did not receive us. Despite the questions I had for God, I felt sure that most people we encountered were lost souls who needed us. I had passed the most difficult part of the mission and felt a powerful sense of purpose. However, I often lost sight of the fact that God's purpose for me on the mission was not so much to

teach--although I was acting as a teacher--and instead, it was to learn and grow.

We met an older African American Lady in a bright yellow dress, printed with large white flowers. When we knocked on her door, she was very excited to see us, and almost before we could introduce ourselves, she had taken us by the hands and welcomed us into her home. She was a Baptist minister, full of charismatic energy, and before we sat down it was clear she was a powerful leader. When we were seated, she looked at us with her eyebrows raised, and a massive smile. She placed her hands palm upwards at her sides, closed her eyes: “The Lord brought you into my house for a reason,” she said. She told us she was very excited to see young men sharing the word of God.

Then, without any prompting, she told us she had been in the streets for nearly twenty years, hanging out with the hustlers and drug dealers. She said her life was hard, that she struggled to make money and lived in poor conditions. Then, one night when she was riding in the hood with some of the hustlers she hung out with, some gang leaders—enemies, she called them—drove up behind their car. These hard men rolled down their windows and fired guns one-handed, randomly pouring bullets through the trunk, the windows, and the leather bench in the back of their car. Her three friends all died on the spot, and she was shot three times in the back. As the car of enemies screeched away, she lay alone in the metal wreck, trapped with the bodies of her friends.

As she told this part of her story, she started to pause more often, and rocked her torso forward and back slowly as if she were moving to the rhythm of some silent music. One hand touched her chin, and she looked at us sometimes and just smiled sadly. Then, once she had gathered herself, she would inhale and continue.

She was fortunate: an ambulance came quickly, she said. However, she was sure she was dying. She could feel it coming on like a grey cloud, she said; and, as the ambulance sped to the ER, she thought of her three friends who had already passed. She prayed to God: “Lord, You and I both know I’ve not done what you want me to do. Please don’t take me now. I promise I will serve you forever. Give me a second chance.”

She was not supposed to make it. For three years, she lingered on in the hospital, and the doctors were astonished that she seemed to be recovering. They always watched her closely for a long time, uncertain if she would recover. She would need to learn to walk again--and she did, even though she knew some of the staff thought she would never be able to do so again.

During all of the hardship, and the long stay in the hospital, she said she learned and felt much more gratitude than she had experienced before; this made it easy to follow through on the promises she had made while desperate, strapped to a gurney, and bleeding onto the ambulance floor.

She said, “My mission is to preach the gospel to the drug dealers, prostitutes, and poor and afflicted.” We could see that she was a missionary too, the type who entered the darkest places without fear. She carried a power that emanated like the glow of a bare light bulb, so that it was almost uncomfortable to look at, but radiated warmth and beauty. She talked as if she would die for Jesus at any point in time because he had saved her from that awful cycle of hellish suffering she experienced even before she was shot.

Then, she asked us if she could pray for us. We humbly asked her if she please would. She took our hands, and took a moment, smiling at us, sharing her warmth; and then she told us how she loved to see two companions, a black man and a white man, sharing the gospel together. She said, “We are all Gods’ children, and if we don’t get along here as children of God, how are we going to get along in heaven?” We bowed our heads, pondering her words as she prayed a blessing over us, eager, almost like a chant; full of power and the Holy Spirit.

I had knocked on her door, expecting to teach a lesson, but she had reversed our roles, making me the student. She taught us about unity, second chances, and purpose. There we were, people of different traditions and creeds, but united by Christ as we bowed our heads together. We left feeling refreshed and encouraged.

I began to approach new doors differently, beginning to look for ways to learn even from the people who were eager to be taught by us. I

thought of the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Every man is my superior in that I may learn from him.” I determined not to waste opportunities to gain from the people we met. My nametag may have read “Elder,” but I was still so young—and now I was a little more aware of it.

### **Sister Durand—death and sobering**

At the beginning of my first summer on the mission, I transferred to the McLean Ward in the city. Just as I had in the other wards, I attended Sacrament Meetings on Sunday Mornings: times to join together, worship, and share. One Sunday, a young woman named Sister Durand got up to speak about her husband, who had passed away only a few months before. I did not know her well; I only knew that her husband had passed away recently, and I sensed that mixture of present grieving, the sensitive, occasional joy exhibited by those who grieve, yet draw comfort from Christ. I will retell her story as she told it that morning.

Her husband’s name was Jessie. She claimed he was the best husband and dad in the whole world—not because he did not make mistakes--he made many—but because he never forsook his responsibilities as a dad and husband. In their few years of marriage, he was faithful to her and to God in every way, and to their small children.

He was a, quiet, mostly inexpressive man who took his duty seriously, and showed love by steadily following through on his responsibilities.

When Sister Durand dated Jessie, and in the first months of their marriage, he confused her. She went out of her way to look nice and pretty every time they went out. However, Jessie was never the type of guy that gives compliments. Once, when they went to dinner, she took extra time to look pretty, and to try to make it special for him. As usual, Jessie didn't say anything about it. She became frustrated—even angry: “Look man, I've been dressing up and looking good for you all the time, and you never give me a compliment or say I look pretty!”

Jessie looked at her, confused. Then, deadpan, but perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, he said, “You know you are pretty because I married you.” At first, this felt like a slap to the face; but over time, she came to accept what he meant: he really was attracted to her. Words did not come easily to him, but actions did. In fact, words meant almost nothing to him. He didn't want to hear he was loved; he wanted to see the evidence in a person's life, and he felt so strongly that he could not imagine giving love another way. She started to feel loved and accepted in their marriage.

Then, a series of events happened that changed Sister Durand's life, and moved her to a higher spiritual level: Jessie discovered he had brain cancer, and would die soon—within a few months. She said that she cherishes those few months more than any other time in her life. She

and her kids did the best they could to share every moment possible with him. She watched him, heartbroken, but full of admiration, as he took the kids fishing, or played with them, with every remaining minute he could. She translated each action: “I love you, I love you, I love you-- without condition.” Meanwhile, his suffering increased, and he did eventually die; Sister Durand told us in her grief, she drew strength from the example of his life as he faced death.

She did not realize how much he changed her until years later; she took over his business when he died, and met with his old business partners in Las Vegas. These were other young men the same age as Jessie, many of them unmarried. They would regularly meet in a casino that one of them liked. When their meetings concluded, they would stay in the bar, drinking and spending time with the women, but Sister Durand would always go upstairs to her room in the hotel. Once, the bartender told her she was exactly like Jessie. She did not see the similarity: “How so?” she asked.

“Jessie never stays,” he said. “He always leaves this place right after the meeting. He never participates in drinking, gambling or talking to girls like his partners do. He always has to go to his room.” The bartender shrugged.

To Sister Durand, however, this was a perfect example of the way David quietly loved. He did what he thought was right, and she would never have even thought he would do otherwise. He loved by building

perfect trust. He never sought attention for the way he lived, but even in his death, his life spoke to his values and the things he held important.

I began to think about my own legacy. How and when would I die? Would the values I say I believe be represented as well by my life—not by the words I said to hundreds and thousands, but by my actions in front of one or two, or none? I started asking myself these questions: Am I here to help people come in unity with my faith? Am I here to proclaim charity? Am I here to help people feel what I'm feeling? Or am I here to condemn? I resolved to examine myself; to see the evidence my life produced, and know if was the kind of man I wanted to be.

I knew one thing: I wanted my values to be clear from the way I lived my life, and not the way I talked about it. I realized that the only way I can hear my Lord say “Good job my good and faithful servant” during the last day is not by baptizing hundreds, or bringing hundreds and thousands the gospel; in fact, it was not about the results at all. I thought about what God did expect of me: to be faithful; to share the truth; to be charitable; to do my part to bring people together with the message of Christ. Would I have passed away with the grace that Jessie had? What would be my legacy?

### **A Convert from Sierra Leone—encouragement**

Moses Koromba arrived in the US from Sierra Leone almost exactly a month before I and my mission partner met him, knocking on

his door and sharing tracts. He immediately began attending church every Sunday. He was twenty-five or thirty years older than us, an energetic man with a big smile who was very comfortable to be around. He seemed to have evolved past the possibility of being embarrassed by mistakes or misunderstandings. He would laugh easily, and he often laughed at himself, with a kind of carefree and wistful away. It was like he found life amusing, and felt it could not hurt him at the deepest core of who he was.

I was surprised and encouraged to meet someone from my own home country, and someone so eager to learn about Christ. I could not help but see several other parallels with my own story. Just like me, he had grown up in the Methodist Church. The very first Sunday he came to church, knowing almost nothing about the church or the meetings, he decided to get up behind the pulpit, and share during the time of testimonies--just like I did on my first day in Sacramento in Orange County.

He had been baptized twice already, but he felt for the first time, he was really giving his life to Christ. He had a very specific request:

“If I’m going to be baptized again, I need to do it just as Christ’s baptism was. That means in a flowing river and with someone who has the right authority,” There was one problem: there is not a flowing river in D.C. like the River Jordan, except the Potomac River--which would not be pleasant!

We taught Moses for three months before he finally committed to be baptized on his son's birthday, March 21<sup>st</sup>. We found the closest thing to a flowing river that we could. He was given the gift of the Holy Ghost the next day at church. Then he told us in the circle that he had a song to sing for the congregation. The bishop was surprised, but he gave Samuel the opportunity.

Samuel sang in his thick accent, loudly and boldly, even though he had almost no experience with a microphone. He was unafraid, and bold about the truth he had found. He swayed and nodded his head like an old gospel singer, and sang just as loudly as he wanted.

God was working in Moses' life, taking a bold man and making him bolder. This shamelessness for Christ, and this attitude of worship, were two gifts that I, too, wanted for myself. I began to try to practice this boldness, allowing my own words and my own excitement about Christ to work their way into the lessons my mission partner and I taught.

Moses Koromba's example taught me, although I had been his teacher for a quarter of a year. I was full of joy, and I finally understood what Gary Hadley meant: I, the supposed minister, had been ministered to. I was giving more than I ever had before, and once I did, I found I was receiving much more than I was giving.

**The McCarthy's—building certainty and authority**

That July, we visited Chris and Jen McCarthy. Chris was a less active member, although he served his mission in Venezuela more than ten years before. They were married for most of the time since his mission, and they had two kids together. They were a sweet couple, and the type that seemed nervous during the first meetings and does not share very much. They seemed happy when they opened the door, but the longer we met with them that day, we saw that they were working extremely hard to keep up the appearance happiness. We also knew they had been meeting with missionaries for five years now--an unusually long period of time. Something was not right.

I decided that I needed to be bold with them. I told Jen, “You have the Gospel right here in your reach. People are dying to have what’s in front of you—Christ himself. I know it can be hard to change, but you and I know the Gospel true. As missionaries, we don’t teach people and baptize them just to add on the membership and growth of the church. We teach and baptize because we want their salvation and to see them have life to the fullest.”

I went further, speaking directly to Jen as her husband Chris watched; “We are new missionaries here and we want to help you get baptized. You have been taught all the lessons for over five years now, and are still doing it. So what is holding you back? ”

She couldn't give me an answer. Her eyes dropped, and her mouth pinched. Chris’ eyebrows were furrowed and he was watching her

with his hand in front of his mouth, so it was hard to read him. As I saw her struggling, I told her she doesn't have to answer, but she should think about it and call us. At that point, an impatient look crossed her face, and I could tell I had annoyed her.

We quickly ended our meeting, and asked them if they could meet with us again. Chris looked at his wife, but she was looking down. He said, “Oh--We will call you guys if we think it's right to meet with you guys again”—I took that as a “no.”

My companion that day and I left the house. We were walking our bikes to the next house, and my mind raced.

I felt two simultaneous responses: first, I felt a confidence that I had done the right thing in following that impulse to speak. But second, I also wondered if the timing was wrong. I wondered if I should have spoken the words differently. I wanted to talk about it with my companion, but we both had to prepare for the next house.

As we were still walking down the street, I heard a voice saying “Elder Lebbie! Wait! Wait!” In the quiet neighborhood, the shout resounded like a gunshot, and my companion and I turned to look behind us. We were so startled, our bikes clashed into each other.

I saw Jen holding her baby in her hands trying to catch up with us in the street. As she approached me, she said, “You asked earlier at my house what’s keeping me from being baptized; well, if you can help

me accept Christ, and put away what I used to believe, then I will be baptized.”

Now I knew the ball was in my court: time to decide what to teach. Jen had already received many lessons, so it was not that she did not know the things we could teach her; I chose the most important truths, truths about our Heavenly Father’s love for her, and explained them again, just as she had heard many times—only now she was nodding, holding the baby in her arms and bobbing him at her hip, and her eyes followed my hands.

We were only there for a few minutes—she did not need more. She told us she wanted us to come back the next day, and “to help her come to the waters of baptism.” Needless to say, my day was a lot better after that!

I felt like I had tasted what it would be like to be a bolder, simpler, and more loving person, saying the truth directly, as I saw it. I felt as if I was beginning to understand what my mission was about: showing people that you love them, and that you desire the best for them, but at the same time helping them to make the decisions that will result in eternal life and the knowledge of Christ.

We began to love Chris and Jen, returning to their house many times, and they loved us. If they had shown us a façade when we first came, there was none any more. We could talk about anything and laugh, or cry, and it all felt natural, as if we had known each other a long

time. I still think about that family with love in my heart, and remember our relationships when I am tempted not to be bold with the truth.

### **Natalie Soriano—vulnerability and authenticity**

Natalie Soriano was a thirty year-old, ethnically-Jewish woman who met us at church one day. She entered alone and sat down. My mission partner and I decided to go and welcome her. We asked her how she was doing, and she turned to us in the pew and smiled. She told us off-handedly that she'd had a terrible week, and that it could only get better from there. She was an energetic person, each movement expressing something. We talked for a while, and my partner asked her where she was visiting from.

“Sorry, this is my first time of coming to church in like, fifteen years,” she said. She pushed her dark hair back. “I just woke up and decided to come to this church today because I already tried the different churches closer to me, but something said I should come here instead.” She looked at us, and her eyebrow moved a little, as if she thought we might somehow know why she had this feeling. I thought to myself: “We will have to find out, just like you!”

We offered to come to her place and teach her lessons, and she said she would like that. I felt certain that she would be open with us, and if she were not receptive to the message, we would never be left

guessing why. It could be refreshing to teach someone we knew would not play any games.

In time, Natalie told us she was born to Jewish parents, but became an orphan at a very young age. Her grandmother raised her until her eighth birthday, but died soon after. Her childhood with adoptive parents was difficult, she said; they had raised her to be religious--her new dad was a pastor--but, at fifteen, she stopped going to church. She was angry with her parents and with God. Years passed: she got married, and had two boys with her husband, who we would meet soon.

Then, she told us she literally woke up one morning and realized that she was missing something in her life—that her relationship with God, which had kept her rooted as a child, even as her whole life changed around her—was gone. Her voice, though confident, softened. I believed she was going to tell us something very private and precious to her, something she needed to guard with her voice.

“I woke up at 4:30 in the morning, so incomplete, so shaken by the realization of no God in my life,” she said, “that I heard a voice in me: ‘You need to go to church.’” It was very early on a Sunday morning, so Natalie got up immediately, put on one of her favorite dresses, and sat down, counting the hours until church might start. She told us to teach her everything, and that she was ready for whatever God wanted. However, things were a little more complicated than that.

She was married to a religious man named Michael, who felt strongly about her choosing a religion, even though he was no longer practicing, himself. He was friendly when we met him, but he seemed to be in shock, uncomfortable with all of the changes going on in his wife's life. After a few lessons, we met at the home of another former missionary, Brother Howard, where it was more comfortable for Natalie to talk about the church. She was very worried about what Michael thought.

To be fair, Natalie's life had changed very suddenly, and very dramatically. She went from not going to church in fifteen years, to becoming one of the most active members of our congregation. When she attended, it was as if she was born to be there; she began serving immediately, greeting new people, taking notes on the lessons. We could not sense any conflict inside of her when she was at church, doing these things; at her house, this was not the case.

We taught Natalie for four months, and she committed to be baptized twice, but both times, she cancelled: "I just don't feel the time is right yet," she would say. At Brother Howard's house, discussing the lessons, she was not the same decisive, lively person that she was at church. She was still expressive, but she often took a long time to respond to questions, as if she were allowing different voices to argue with each other, uncertain which to listen to.

I think the root of all of this self-doubt was her desire to make decisions together with husband; she was being stretched between the church and her family like a piece of cloth being stretched until the fabric of threads becomes visible and the cloth is near tearing. I loved her, and watching her struggle within herself caused me a little of the same agony it must have caused her all the time.

One day, we were delivering one of the lessons in Brother Howard's home. We were sharing small talk about our days for a little while, just as we usually did before the lesson. I excused myself to use the restroom.

There, I settled on to my knees to pray for Natalie. I did not even close my eyes, as I always had to stay focused on God--I felt that he was right there with me, his presence as real and as local as that of another person in the room. I did not "beseech" him, or talk with formal language, this time: I conversed with him as a friend, or an older brother. I told him I needed guidance. I did not know what Natalie needed, but I could tell that she needed something, and I knew that God loved her.

I had never spoken to God this informally before, and I felt awe at being so close. That bathroom was a humble Mount Sinai for me, my first place of meeting with God to speak face to face as friends. He came down to meet with me, not in a storm, or a formal ceremony, but with a still, small voice.

We started the lesson, and I heard the Spirit whisper: “Ask her to tell you everything she knows about the church.”

She did—but it was as rote and as dry as if a boring science teacher had called on her to repeat some facts about mammals or something. I started to wonder where this was going. Was I sure the Holy Spirit was talking to me?

However, as she told us the things we taught, she looked away, and touched her face. Then, she began to cry.

She admitted that she knew the truth, but that she was afraid. She was worried and uncertain because her husband had so much animosity towards the church. She began confessing things we already knew: her doubt and uncertainty in regard to her husband Michael, her feelings of obligation toward him, and her love, which seemed to be tearing her away from God. How could she possibly do the things she needed to do?

We told her how Abraham talked with God, and how God allowed him to be bold, and even make covenants with Him. In those days, “Cutting the Covenant” was very common. For example, when someone desired a certain goodness or favor from God, they would do everything that God asks them to in a specific amount of time, and then leave the rest to God to fulfill his part of the deal, then read a scripture where God promised to do just that.

We told Natalie that, if she chose, we could go ahead and set a date for her baptism, and that she would talk to her husband and ask for his approval. However, before her baptism, we would make a covenant with God. That is, for our part, we would choose one day before she talked to her husband (a Saturday) to fast and pray to God for her. We would make the covenant with God that she would receive approval for her baptism, and this conflict in her life would be resolved. The three of us agreed upon it and did it.

We did not see her until the next Sunday. On Saturday, we fasted, as we had committed before God. My companion and I would usually pray for people making decisions like this, but this time, I did not. I felt that God and I had made the covenant, and that I should honor it by trusting God to uphold his side of it, and not to continue advocating for him to follow through. Then, that Sunday, Natalie approached us at church. A smile kept breaking across her face, as if she were trying to hold in a surprise for us. We kept our part of the covenant, and God kept his," she said. She had spoken to Michael. The Lord touched her husband's heart, and he was very humble and appreciative of the decision his wife was making. She could barely believe God so easily healed a situation that caused her so much trouble.

Natalie asked me to perform the baptism, which was a huge honor for me, as if God was adding a bonus to the covenant in order to bless me with a surprise. My companions and I had led several people to be

baptized by now, but a bishop baptized each one, which is normal unless the person asks otherwise. I was humbled—we had taken a risk by being bold, and Natalie trusted me through it. The Savior had put all of the pieces in place. I found a place alone and thanked God with open eyes, just I had prayed to him in the first place in the bathroom at Brother Howard's.

### **The Tragic Story—what the death of Christ means to me**

I was in Bell Haven that fall, on exchange with another missionary named Elder White. We went out on another long day full of rejections, and although neither of us said it, we were both looking expectantly for someone who might be receptive to us. We considered the neighborhood to be a bit dangerous; some of the few people we saw outside displayed tattoos and gang paraphernalia. We did our best to stay both friendly and alert, which is exhausting. We went through an entire apartment complex, where I cannot remember a single person willing to talk with us. Then, we came out of one of the structures, and saw a man sitting on the curb, wearing work clothes and smoking cigarettes.

He welcomed us when we approached, and we were happy to be talking to someone friendly. We taught him for a while, our bikes leaned up against a tree, all three of us gathered on the curb between the parking lot and the grass mingled with fallen leaves.

He told us he used to believe there is a God, but not anymore. We asked why, and he told us that, within two months, he lost his parents, one sister, and one brother. What kind of God does that to someone he loves? This left him two possibilities: there is no God, or God does not love him. After those two months of hell, his life totally changed: he had no family, and he said, “My friends are alcohol, cigarettes, and work” — the things that could distract him.

We taught him more about how the atonement of Christ can be a healing power for his wounds—how Christ himself can heal—and how he could see his beloved ones again in the next life. He listened politely, but never gave any indication that he might accept what we said. He thanked us, and said he still believes there might be a god, but he is not ready to hear about this god, because a god who loves him would not take away his loved ones--and he had no interest in a god who did not love. We gave him some scripture, and he promised to read it. We left. I hoped that the book we gave him would help him realize that there is a God who is his Father, and who loves him so much as to send a Redeemer to atone for his sins and to comfort him. I hoped he would at least find healing and comfort for his grief.

I needed to ponder the man’s questions. How could God take away his family? I realized that I did not know what the man had suffered. As an immigrant from a country at war, I had experienced many things--but

not the same experiences this man faced. Life is not fair—and I was starting to realize it. But I was also starting to understand that Christ didn't just die for our sins, but also knew our daily pains. I thought about Golgotha, the place where Jesus gave his life in atonement for the world. To the Lord, a thousand years is as a day and a day is as a thousand years. I believe He is out of time, or that linear time is only something we experience; Christ is experiencing the day and time of his atonement, his absolute suffering, abandonment, and humiliation—now and for all time. This is the depth of his sacrifice.

However, Jesus also looked forward to all of the things that would ever happen, experiencing them two thousand years ago as he hung on the cross. What kept him there? What keeps him there, in ragged agony? Surely he felt all of our pains, loss, suffering, loneliness, shame, and suffering—as he hung there. He had been with me in any physical or emotional suffering I had experienced: with my family in the Civil War, with us as we crossed continents to find a promise, with us when my grandma died. He had been with that worker during those dark months, and afterward, and when we sat on the curb; and even now as I write this.

Paul writes that Christ knows our sufferings; he must have known them intimately even before we were born. I thought then—and I believe now—that Christ would have stayed on that cross for any of us, even if we were the only one to be saved. He knows our pain and the death we

experience around us so intimately that he cannot step down from the cross. He cannot call upon anyone in heaven or on earth to rescue him, because he knows our struggles too intimately—he must bear the suffering of the world, so that we—who need him—do not need to live and die without him.

That night, I thought and wrote about this conversation, and the questions the worker asked, more than I had written about any since I met the man with AIDS at the beginning of my mission, ten months before. I was beginning to surprise myself—or maybe I was being surprised by the movement of God, as he completed his own acts around me and through me. I, too, was experiencing the transformation of Christ, written about so compellingly by C.S. Lewis:

When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well (in the sense that some of his bad habits are corrected), he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles come along—illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptation—he is disappointed...why now?

Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level: putting him into situations where he will have to be very much braver, or more patient, or more loving, than he ever dreamed of being before. It seems to us all unnecessary: but that is because we

have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing he means to make of us.

Just like the man C.S. Lewis writes about, I was beginning to see any challenge I myself faced as part of Christ's hammering, His ambitious work to build something new out of me. I expected to learn things on my mission, but now I was being transformed.

I drew courage from this as the fall progressed, and the cold, windy weather of the East Coast settled back into the leafless cities. I felt that my self had been stripped away, and that I could see the world around me more clearly than I ever had before. Christ had nurtured me during a kind of infancy as a missionary, and only now was I beginning to walk on my own two feet. The hammer might continue to fall, but I embraced it now, just as I had embraced the cold when I wore a T-shirt into the evening cold with mission parter, Alcott. My bag was now full of souvenirs, if you will—the stories I had written in my journal, the moments when people had encouraged me or taught me, and a growing understanding of who God is and what He expects of me. If I was not fully awakened yet—I was at least awakened enough to see that I had been asleep. Whatever lay ahead, I felt ready.