

EXPERIENCING JESUS

Like my first kiss, I will never forget my first encounter(s) with Jesus. There have been a lot of amazing moments in my life when I have encountered Jesus. But early on, when spiritual things were new to me, there were a few special 'introductory' encounters that still stir my heart. One at boy's camp. Another at my grandfathers house in Texas. Another in my apartment during summer break at college.

After the last one, in my apartment at college, everything changed for me.

But first, a little background... I think it may sound strange to talk about encountering Jesus. Is he even real? I was raised in a Christian home and probably knew as much 'about' Jesus as any kid my age. But when I was placed in the public education system and began sitting shoulder to shoulder with people who were brazenly anti-Jesus, or profoundly apathetic toward him, my eyes were "opened" to other possibilities. At times I was embarrassed about my association with Jesus and, frankly, began to wonder if he was necessary. Life was good and friends were abundant and, apart from the 'obligatory' context of my parent's home and church life, what was the point of 'thinking' of Jesus all the time? At school, we were just a bunch of innocent kids enjoying life and having fun. Was Jesus going to make things any better than they already were? Nope! Jesus was just totally a non-issue and irrelevant concerning the day to day minutiae of my friends, my social life, my life plans, my music...

Well, that is except for one small problem.

Even when I was not thinking about Jesus, I found myself thinking about Jesus. For example, when someone would curse, or joke about immorality, or get drunk, or do drugs, or act hatefully toward someone, etc., I would feel uncomfortable and think, 'Something about this seems dirty.' I felt I didn't belong around these activities. It was a weird dichotomy. I wasn't completely comfortable with darkness -- I knew it to be darkness -- but I also wasn't in complete ownership of the light. I knew there had to be something more. But I didn't fully understand and I couldn't quite get there.

WHERE IT BEGAN

My first encounter with Jesus was something that took place when I was about 8 years old. My father showed me an old filmstrip about "The Pilgrim's Progress" (a great book by John Bunyan - see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pilgrim's_Progress). At one point Pilgrim came to a fork in the road and had to make a tough decision that would affect the rest of his life, as well as his relationships with family and friends. Would he go the *way* of God? Or would he go *away* from God? The way of God would be more difficult; it was not the way of the people around him. The path away from God would be easier, but in the end it would lead to shipwreck and eternal separation from God. I still remember that sense of decision vividly, sitting in the back room of our house in Richmond Indiana, shades drawn, projector humming, images of the Pilgrim shining on the wall. It came into my heart at that moment that the same decision Pilgrim faced was before me right then and there. Jesus said that *He Himself* was the *Way, the Truth, the Life*. When I understood that, I wanted to go His Way and give my life to Jesus then and there, which I did in prayer with my father.

That was a foundation that I have come back to many times over the years. I made that decision. It happened. I did it. I meant it. And no matter how difficult the journey-- and perhaps more importantly, when I later *rebelled* and became *wayward* -- I knew deep down that, as of that moment as a small boy, Jesus rightfully owned my life. I had given my life to Him. He was the

rightful *Lord of me* and *God of me*. The deal was done, but the journey of becoming like Jesus was just beginning and would prove to be bitter sweet.

BOY'S CAMP

When I was about 12 years old I went to boys camp. That is where I personally encountered the Presence of Jesus for the first time. One day, there was a big evening meeting where hundreds of boys from all the dorms came together in a big barn-like building. We sat on wooden folding chairs, sang songs, had a few fun activities, and then a man came out and began to speak about the Spirit of Jesus. I cannot remember the entire message now, but as he spoke I became convinced that Jesus wanted to fill me with the Holy Spirit. At the end of the message, I went to the front of the barn to ask Jesus to forgive me of my sins and fill me with His Holy Spirit.

He did.

As anyone will tell you who has had a similar experience, it is hard to put into words what happened. Not because I am unsure of what happened, but because what happened was not a matter of words, but of power. The power of God washed over me when I asked forgiveness for my sins, I actually felt them lift away like a weight being pulled off of me. A tangible Presence flooded into me and I fell to the floor weeping and thanking Jesus for this marvelous awesome Gift.

And that is when I first heard myself speak a strange and beautiful new language.

A QUICK WORD ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

As happens all too often in high school and college, I started to grow distant from Jesus. So much information and experience was thrown at me in such a compressed amount of time, that I became distracted. That is where I began to meet other Christians who, while Christian in name, seemed to have no filter concerning the type of activities they were willing to engage in. I began to think that, perhaps, being a Christian was a true thing, but that it did not need to actually affect quality of life. Perhaps Jesus did not actually care so much about where I go, what I do, or what I watch/listen to, or anything about me. I seldom drew aside to pray or seek for direction. I became very busy. Very impatient. Very empty.

In college, some of the guys I hung out with never talked about Jesus. Some of the other guys who did talk about Jesus, informed me that there was no such thing as the filling of the Holy Spirit or tangible experiences with God; that once you set your mind to utter the words 'Jesus is Lord' you immediately and automatically have salvation and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and all spiritual gifts and revelation -- and you have no need of any further "experience" with Jesus. Apparently, all one needed to do was structure a "quiet time" of reading and a prayer list, and -- eureka! -- you're a functional Christian. In addition, if once in awhile one gets a 'hunch' while reading the bible or praying, God may be speaking to you. And if it turns out that He was not really speaking to you, He will clean up after you if you get yourself into a mess. So just go with your hunches, but don't expect profound weird mystic encounters with God! That's for special people who most likely died when the apostles in the bible died.

Now, whether they actually meant to convey all that to me, or my hard heart simply heard it that way, I nevertheless received it that way and it had a profound impact on my spiritual worldview.

Having taken all that in, I became heart broken and disillusioned. I spiraled into a dark place in my heart, angry that as a vulnerable and gullible young boy, I had been 'duped' into thinking I

had experienced the living and powerful presence of Jesus. I felt manipulated, betrayed, lost and adrift. Who was Jesus, really? Is he even real? Did I really encounter Him as a boy? And which of the intellectual portrayals of Jesus was correct? In the noise and activity of College, I let the matter fade into the background. I had classes to attend, the Beatles + John Denver + Pink Floyd to meditate on, and songs of my own to write. I was blown by strange winds in unknown directions, and I became sad and dark hearted --in demeanor and in many a depressing song.

But as they say, hope springs eternal. And one day in my dorm room, I began to hunger to read the bible. I picked up my bible and suddenly found that I was engrossed in what I was reading. I have read the bible many times, but this was different. It was as if the words on the page were resonating from deep within me, from the inside-out, not just from the outside-in. They were leaping upon me, taking hold of me. I couldn't put it down. It also happened that some of the Christians in my dorm owned Keith Green records, and I was briefly exposed to them. When I heard his songs, though I did not immediately like them, I recognized something familiar in them, a ring of truth, and my heart was stirred once again to think of Jesus. Not intellectual-head-knowledge-Jesus, but Jesus-who-could-call-forth-a-dead-man-from-his-tomb!

GRANDPA'S HOUSE

During a December break, I went to visit my old (now deceased) grandfather in Dallas Texas. Grandmother had recently passed away, and we both needed some company. It was wonderful to spend time with him, just the two of us, and it was about the third from the last time I saw him alive. I'll never forget the day it snowed (in Texas!) and grandpa pulled out the garden hose and hosed the snow off his car and driveway. Why didn't we think of that in Indiana!?

One evening after we had retired to our bedrooms, I was sitting on my bed quietly playing the guitar. I was thinking about God, and friends who did not know God, and my own unknown place in relationship to Him. At some point in my musings, without warning, the Presence of God suddenly enveloped me. I was in awe. It was the same Spirit I had encountered as a boy at camp. Once again, I heard myself speaking a beautiful language that I had not heard emanate from myself in years. It was a brief moment which passed quickly. But before it dissipated I clearly understood that God was yearning for me, still interested in me. The next morning, I awoke and life went on, for the most part in 'superficial mode'. As a dear friend used to say at that time, I was still a 'goof'.

But that was about to change.

COLLEGE APARTMENT

Have you ever seen an actual fork in the road while you're driving? If so, you know that the only choices you have are to go back (if that is an option) or to go left or right. You're either going to stay at that spot for the rest of your life, or you're going to make a decision right then, right there, accept whatever consequences result from the decision, and drive on.

During the summer of 1985 I unexpectedly came upon a fork in my life. I arrived at a place of desperation and decision that I could not ignore. I could not go back. I knew going back was not an option because time and life never go backwards, only forwards, into eternity. I knew deep in my heart that the choice I had to make would have consequences for the rest of my life and take me into an eternal destiny. There was no ignoring this fork in the road. God began to make it clear that this was my one chance. The decision was for this moment and this place. I could not assume such a window of opportunity (or willingness in my heart) would ever come again.

Thus one of the most powerful introductory encounters I had with the Presence of God took place in the living room of my apartment during the summer of 1985 while I was attending Purdue University. I had been sensing such a deep emptiness and yearning for God for months and was wayward from Him. Several times over the months a sudden sense of dread came over me as I walked across campus or attended classes or studied. Almost as a prophetic utterance, I could hear something in the depths of my heart saying, "If I do not get right with God I will be lost forever."

The impact of this saying held me and grew in urgency. Finally, one day as I was alone in my apartment, I felt that I could not continue. I determined that, if He was real, I must "know God for myself." I went to my knees on the floor of the living room and fell across the couch. I ached to know the truth about God. I began to call out to God and tell Him that I would rather die than continue in meaninglessness without Him, "If You are real, please make Yourself known to me. If you are not real then what is the point, let me die here and now! Why should I continue to live only to die meaninglessly another day?" I wrestled and agonized with the idea of letting go of my life, hollow and unfulfilling as it was. Remembering the beautiful but strange language I had spoken in the past, I began to utter those sounds and words again. The thought immediately entered my mind, "This is meaningless, a waste of time, you're embarrassing yourself uttering such nonsense." However, I persisted. After some time, and I don't remember how long, a prophetic word began to bubble up from deep within me and take shape in my mouth. It went something along the lines of: "I am the Lord Jesus Christ and I command you to let this precious one go. Release him and never come back. Release him forever for he is Mine. I have chosen him. I set him free to serve Me and you may never touch him again. Get out and never return!"

This amazed me because these sayings were not the creation of my mind. It was as though I was watching and listening to this exchange take place. Other things were spoken in other words and I don't think there is human communication that can convey it. When the prophecy came, a familiar Presence entered the room. But now the Presence was far more powerful than anything I had ever known. It was powerful in proximity and powerful in authoritative prophetic utterance. So much so that I began to fear.

And yet at the same time I understood that this One Who had come into the room with me was good and pure and had kind intentions toward me, though wrathful toward His enemies. I began to weep for joy. A great weight lifted from me. I felt freedom from futility and meaninglessness. Confusion melted away and life suddenly began to make sense. I knew that this was exactly what I was made for. I was meant for Him. To be close to Jesus Christ. I sensed that, not only was something new happening around me, something new was happening in me.

At some point I closed my eyes and began reaching toward heaven, holding up outstretched arms, speaking unknown words, thanking Jesus for making Himself known to me-- for knowing me! I sensed the protective love and embrace of God. Then, as I thought to open my eyes, a sense of dread came over me, the Presence was so powerfully surrounding me and filling me. It occurred to me that perhaps there was someone physically in the room with me. I was afraid to open my eyes thinking I might see an angel. Eventually, I resigned to open my eyes and see what I would see.

When I opened my eyes I did not see an angel or anyone else in the room. But what I saw amazed me and still amazes me to this day, so vivid was the picture. It was as though I had never opened my eyes before; as if I had never seen the room or the house or the world, or the spot where I was sitting on the floor. The room was still the same room, but it looked -- I'm not

really sure how to describe this -- clean and brand new and crystal clear. As if before there had been fog, and now I could see everything clearly for the first time in my life.

I have come to know that this was the day when Jesus Christ changed me into another person (another spiritual species) and took up permanent residence in my heart through faith. The eyes of my heart were at last enlightened to see "more".

THE EXPERIENCE OF DAILY LIFE

Now it seems as though each day brings a revelation of how much "more" and "more" there is to know; and how endless He is, past finding out-- at least for mortal minds and bodies. Yet each day my spirit leaps for joy at His Presence as He continues to lead me and call me and watch me grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus. How I thank You my Savior, my Lord and my God, for being patient with me all those wasted years! Heavenly Father, I ask in Jesus Name that Your merciful and patient love would abound to all those who are lost and seeking the Way, the Truth, the Life. Push back the clouds and darkness and allow them to experience You Yourself. For Your Own sake and glory! The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come Lord Jesus!"