

*Any church is only
one generation away
from extinction*

**Loving
Them
Back
Leading
Them
Home**

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Chapter 1

Coming Home

I owe my connection with the church to the unconditional love of godly Christian parents and to a church family who saw potential in me—a potential that only God could have revealed.

Just after my seventeenth birthday I finally made the decision to be baptized. I hoped that the anger, questioning, and disquiet would be washed away in the baptismal water—that I would be changed. I was disappointed to find that the black gown and ceremony had changed nothing, and especially not me. In the following weeks I became further enmeshed with a group of friends I thought I had left behind. But instead of my interest fading away, the bike gang seemed to hold even greater appeal. With my last years of high school still ahead of me, I decided to spend less and less time there and more and more time with the bikers. I left home regularly, telling my parents that I would never return. Instead of acting with the anger I expected, they simply let me know that their door was always open.

I was totally self-centered, angry with everyone without a reason—one of those obnoxious kids. Apart from myself, only one person really mattered to me, my girlfriend. But even she could not calm the storm inside me, so I broke up with her and started a completely new life in another state. With just a few dollars in my pocket, a change of clothes, a sleeping bag, and an attitude that said, “anywhere is better than here,” I headed west to a new life. A couple of friends who felt the same way joined me for the adventure.

Tired of sleeping on the ground and as hungry as horses, we limped into Adelaide, 1,200 miles from home. One of the guys tried to contact some friends, only to find that they were away. We decided to visit anyway; it was an easy house to break into. We thought we’d stay until they came home or until one of the neighbors called the police. But nothing happened, maybe

because the owner of the house was a pastor and the neighbors were used to seeing kids around.

We ate the food in the fridge but couldn't bring ourselves to sleep in the family's beds. After a few days of sleeping on the floor I was ready to try something different. Stumbling over an old mattress in the backyard, I dragged it inside. It smelled a bit, but at least it would be softer than the floor. When we returned to the house in the early hours of the next morning, I rolled out my sleeping bag on the mattress and fell into an exhausted sleep. When I awoke, I was covered in fleas. With bites all over me, I was scratching the skin off my body. There were so many fleas that the floor seemed to move.

Home started to look pretty good and I decided that it was time to head back. When I finally dragged myself back to my parents' house, I had hitchhiked for 48 hours and was struggling with a severe case of the flu. I was exhausted and hadn't eaten well for a couple of weeks. Ignoring my need for sleep, the first thing I did was to call my girlfriend and ask her whether she'd go out for the night.

"I thought you were never coming back," she questioned.

"Well, I'm here. Do you want to go out or not?"

She agreed. I asked dad for a loan of the pickup and some cash and headed off to pick up my girl. We drove down to a deserted beach and spent hours catching up. Finally, in the early hours of the morning we headed for home. With sand still jumping off the truck tires from the beach I discovered we were nearly out of gas. After filling the tank at a gas station I felt my pocket for my wallet. Nothing. Thinking it must have fallen down behind the seat, I groped around the truck's interior. Still nothing. Swinging open the glass door, I walked up to the cashier and informed him that I'd lost my wallet.

"I hear that story every night. Pull the other leg—it whistles! You stay right there. I'm calling the police," he announced.

My exhausted brain jumped into action. I would punch his lights out, make a run for it, and hope that I could race the pickup out of sight before he could take down the license plate number. Then sanity prevailed. I simply asked, "Why don't you phone my dad?"

With his ear to the phone and his eye on me, he finally gave in to my father's promise to pay for the gas. Before he could hang up, I grabbed the receiver and spoke to my dad with uncharacteristic consideration: "Dad, go

to bed. Don't wait up for me. I'm coming home, but I just want to go down to the beach to try to find my wallet."

As I walked away, the cashier shot out, "He seems like a decent man—don't know where he got you!"

Turning the key in the truck's ignition, I rushed off a simple, unholy prayer. "God, I want the wallet, all right?" There was no "Dear Father" or "Amen," just a rattled demand—more of a curse than a prayer. Back at the beach we retraced our steps at the place where we'd spent most of our time. Combing my fingers through the sand, it wasn't long before they unearthed my wallet. A stroke of good luck!

Driving toward home, I found myself teetering on the brink of sleep. Mesmerized by the speedometer, I caught myself drifting toward the curb several times. I begged my girlfriend to talk to me, but she was almost as exhausted as I was. Sprawled across the front seat, her head on my lap, she quickly drifted into a deep sleep. I turned the radio up, rolled down the window, sang at the top of my lungs, and continued driving. My body finally shut down, and I gave in to sleep's irresistible invitation.

BANG! My eyes flew open and I was welcomed back to consciousness by sparks dancing across the hood of the truck. I looked down and saw that my girlfriend was drenched in blood. The engine had come right through the firewall and appeared to have married itself to her body. My hands flew to each door handle, but neither door would budge. Leaning back, I crawled on top of her and kicked and kicked until her window exploded. Wriggling through her window, I fell onto the road. I struggled to my feet, reached through the jagged opening of her window, grabbed her by the legs, and pulled her out of the truck and as far away from the crash site as possible.

People began streaming from their darkened homes, flashlights crisscrossing the accident scene. I had struck a power pole, knocking out the electricity for the entire area. As I lay there on the ground, blood pumping from my head, arms, and knee, I realized that my girlfriend had not moved or breathed since I had pulled her from the pickup. In desperation I yelled, "Is Karen* all right? Is she all right?" I was assured that she was fine. Some people carried me away from the accident scene, propped me against a tree, and told me to press my thumb to the side of my head and to put pressure on my knee to stop the bleeding, as arteries were severed in both places. As I watched, someone brought out a blanket, unfolded it, and completely covered the still form of my girlfriend.

I began to pray for a second time that night—a prayer of absolute desperation. This time it began in the traditional way: “Dear God . . .” The cold realization flooded over me that I had killed the only person I really cared about. In despair I began to plead with God, but nothing happened. The ambulance arrived and the attendants loaded Karen into it, sitting me down beside her. In the darkness of the jostling ride to the hospital, my prayer increased in intensity. “Dear God, if You’ll do this, then You can have me.” What a great deal I was offering God! Looking back, I can hardly believe that He would even have been interested. At the end of my prayer, however, I heard a shrill, bloodcurdling scream, the type that only girls can make. It made my hair stand on end, but it was beautiful. Although Karen didn’t regain consciousness at that moment, I knew she was alive. I exhaled another prayer: “Thanks, Lord.”

When we got to the hospital, they began to strip away my clothing and shave the hair from the side of my head. I had nearly lost an ear and my leg was badly damaged. Just before they began the repair work, my father walked in. I wondered who told him where to find me. He asked whether Karen and I were going to be all right, and the surgeons assured him that there seemed to be no life-threatening damage, although the girl was still unconscious. And then, much to my embarrassment, he asked if he could pray. Just below the surface of my chagrin was the sense that something was changing inside me.

It was not until later that I found out the rest of that night’s story. My father normally wouldn’t go to sleep until I was home, which meant many sleepless hours. But this night he *had* gone to sleep. Jolted awake just after 2 a.m., he got down on his knees and prayed a second time that night for his boy who was out there somewhere. Flipping the light switch, but with no change in the darkened room, he realized the electricity had gone out. He walked to the kitchen and saw the electric clock flashing the time of the power disruption. He had been jolted awake at the precise moment I had hit the pole.

Shaking my mother awake, they headed off together to find their boy. He slowed as he passed his pickup wrapped around the power pole just 10 miles from home. Seeing no one at the scene, he drove straight to the hospital, arriving shortly after I did.

Within a few weeks, my girlfriend had mostly recovered, with just minor scarring, and I was released soon after she was. The experience made a profoundly positive impact on my mind, but I had not yet submitted to Jesus as my Savior, and I was certainly not back at church. There was still a long way to go.

One Sabbath after I had returned home, the family left for church, leaving me an invitation to join them. As I crawled under an old wreck of a car I was repairing, it dawned on me that I hadn't fulfilled my promise: "God, if you'll do this, You can have me." Suddenly I was back in that ambulance, huddled next to my unconscious and bleeding girlfriend. God had come through on His end of the bargain, and I was overwhelmed with a sense that now it was my turn.

It seemed obvious to me that the first step would be to go back to church. But with anger still simmering inside me, I didn't really want to go, and so I hatched a plan that would ensure the church's rejection of me. Unwashed, clad in my leathers, and my hair and hands streaked with black grease, I swung my leg over my motorcycle and roared off to church. I did a couple of wheelies in the parking lot, and followed them up with a few donuts, spraying dirt in every direction. I wanted them to know that I'd arrived.

I sauntered into the sanctuary, slumped into an empty pew at the back, and looked to the front, waiting for the looks of despising horror to register on the faces of the congregation. Instead I saw tears rolling down my father's cheeks as he sat on the platform next to the preacher. I expected the head deacon, who had two perfect children—one in college training for the ministry and the other about to marry a church worker—to come over, berate me in a loud voice, and command me to leave. You should know better! Your father is the elder! What are you doing in church dressed like that?

With a heart simmering with bile, I had a mouth full of venom ready and waiting to spew all over him. Then I would walk out of the church and say, See, I tried, but they didn't want me, God. But the deacon didn't come.

The sermon dragged on and on. At long last, the closing hymn marked the end of the agony, and the congregation began to filter toward the door at the back. As they passed my pew, there were no despising glances, no horror-filled expressions, just reassuring hands on my shoulders and sincere comments about how good it was to see me at church. This wasn't what I expected, nor what I wanted.

Following the line of people exiting the sanctuary, I saw my dad at his post, shaking hands with each person. As I extended my hand to him, he swallowed hard. He said nothing, but the handshake spoke volumes. Then I placed my greasy hand in the hand of the pastor, and I could see the start of the reaction I had wanted. But he bit his tongue and said nothing.

Walking down the steps at the front of the church, I saw the deacon approaching with his eye on me. He's kept it until now, I thought. I was sure that he was going to hit me, so I decided to slug him first and then run like mad, hoping that my motorcycle would start before the rest of the deacons got to me. But instead of a closed fist, he reached out with an open hand. As he pumped my arm, he told me how thrilled he was that I was back at church. No sooner had he let go of my hand than a little man who stood only as high as my chin threw his arms around me and began to weep on my shoulder. "Welcome home," he gushed, assuring me of his prayers and how he had longed for the day that I would come back.

Standing there on the steps of that church, 19 years old, I felt awkward, embarrassed, but strangely warm. That was my first day back at church, and I have never missed since. It took a while for God to change my exterior, but His Spirit had already begun to work powerfully on the inside.

Looking back over my childhood and adolescence, I have asked myself what it was that moved me from anger and alienation to a realization and acceptance of God's love for me personally. I had godly parents who did not deserve to have a son like me but who consistently and unconditionally accepted me. I went to a Christian school where teachers let me know how much they cared for me. With these integral factors as background, it was the unconditional love and support of a church who were a true family to me, a family who really understood community and acceptance, that finally broke through my shell and helped me realize how important I was in the eyes of God.

In the years since I have seen my experience echoed in the lives of young people over and over, and I believe with all my heart that the positive ending of my story means hope for kids going through the same process. Having been away from the church, I know how great it is to be home. I have a passion for that restless kid running from home, that angry kid seething with alienation, that leather-clad kid at the back of the church expecting rejection. I long for him to come home, for her to be restored, for them to be reconnected to the church family, and to know just how good it can be.

* This is not her real name. I have changed the names throughout the book to protect anonymity.