

Larry's Testimony of Salvation

I have considered many times how that perhaps I should set down how I came to believe in (or into, if you like that better) Jesus Christ, but haven't done so in what? 46 or so years? I have at times orally given the facts as I recall them, and some number of times have written some exposition of the gospel, or some part of it, or some theological topic. But heretofore, not this. I'll try to record this lucidly enough. Hm, I see it has grown to several pages. I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*, a whole book, and fascinating, that records his conversion. Naturally nothing I write will be as fine, or interesting, or edifying, as Lewis's work, but I see how it is that a conversion story necessarily contains some background to provide intelligible context. Well, anyway, you should read his story. Mine is not as long; be grateful.

My background as a child was Catholic. My father had always been so; my mother converted in expectation of my birth, on the theory that I was to be reared Catholic, and that anything I was to be taught, she was to know and be a party to. What I was taught in my father's lap or at my mother's knee, very young, was that the church was "God's house", that Christmas was the birthday of Jesus, that one was to obey one's parents, that they stood in the stead of God over me, and that God made everything and everyone, and that He loved me. It was always and in every way clear to me that my parents loved me. Now, I was a child, and after my dad reading to me a Golden book about the manufacture and delivery to a family of an International pickup (a story about trucks! Boy, did I like THAT!), I remember asking what about the factory in which babies were made. My notion of God at that young age was some guy in a bathrobe (like my father's, I believe); I recall no distinct impression of a face. I'm sure my mom gave me more understanding as she spoke about God and good behavior, but memories are not distinct. One thing she got across, though, was the concept of truth. Things were so, or they were not so. I was always to tell the truth - and no matter how bad I might have to report of myself, it would be worse if I didn't tell the truth. Much worse. I believed her implicitly. These are among the things I was taught at ages 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and no doubt before.

At age 6, I was sent to the local Catholic school. This lasted several months, until it became clear to my parents that the nun was excessively harsh and unjust. (It's sad to report this, for often, private schools of any persuasion do a better job than public schools, but that was not so in my case.) So, not much later, I was sent to CCD classes, which non-Catholics might regard as the Catholic version of Sunday school. I was taught explicitly that Christ was true man and true God, that He died on the cross to pay for our sins, that He resurrected, and that I should believe in Christ. Perhaps I did; I was likely to do what I was told. I was also taught many particulars of the Catholic religion and its catechism, and being considered a "bright" student in those days, I think I assimilated the various doctrines at least as well as, or better than, the average for my age. I remember a fair amount of it today. I learned of the rosary, Mary's venerated position, the 7 sacraments, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Limbo, angels and devils. I was taught of venial and mortal sin. I was taught that, while Christ's death paid for my salvation, nonetheless it was to be administered to me through the offices of the priests, Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, the Eucharist, and possibly Extreme Unction. Salvation was hardly secure, although it seemed you had to be moderately intentional about sinning seriously (mortally) to lose it. Most Catholics could, however, expect to spend some period of time in Purgatory to burn off whatever venial sin had remained unconfessed (to a priest) and unabsolved at death. That period could be a few to many years. But (we were told) Catholics had a more sure path to Heaven than Protestants, for we could confess our sins to a priest and know they were forgiven, while the Protestants had no such effectual sacrament and had to (so to speak) take their chances.

I can say that, when young, I prayed, and not only Catholic prayers. When I was about 7 (I think), my father had to have a very grave piece of surgery to repair an aortic aneurysm. This was new stuff in those days. My mom and I prayed rosaries for him, but also the more direct prayers that he should get well. For me, the prayers of a child. I don't say I believed or didn't; I don't think there was a question. I also remember at these young ages praying for a nighttime thunderstorm to abate (it was scary) and it did. I report these things as a matter of honesty; you can chalk them up as you will. I have (I think, still) a note from my dad while he was in hospital where he reported an angel standing at his bedside. I don't disbelieve this.

What we heard in church included some well-executed singing and organ-playing by nuns, a set piece each of epistle and gospel each Sunday, and a homily which quite frequently built on whatever passage of Scripture as was set for the Sunday to explain how the part of the congregation, as implied by same passage, was to give monetarily. At home, my parents were not slack to notice and decry the hypocrisy in such a message, nor the observably inconsistent lives of the priests and nuns in some particulars. It may also be said that we noticed that some of the religious were much more consistent and honorable. So, in our family, we were believing that salvation obtained through the Church, but that that didn't mean the Church could do no wrong. The seeds were sown for my later skepticism.

In the summer between my last year in grammar school and my first year in high school, my father died, when I was a few days shy of 14. This was a hard blow, both to my mother and to me. I don't know whether it could have come at a worse time, or whether there even IS a better or a worse time for such things. I just know that I cried a lot. I had about a month or so following before I had to begin high school, and were I to have it to happen again, I would ask for neither more nor less time between; I needed the time that I had, and no doubt I needed the distractions of the new "adventure" as well.

My mother and I continued attending the local Catholic church. This was approximately concurrent with the "new liturgy" with greater portions of the Mass to be in English. I don't know whether it was better or worse than what had gone before, but it in no way bound me to the Church any more than before. I was making new friends at school, especially in the band program, and this became a source of increased happiness over grammar school (which happiness was not to write home about; it was a low hurdle). I was referred to a private teacher of the French horn and actually began for the first time to achieve a measure of proficiency. I also became friends with one Mark Sikorowski, my age, who was similarly achieving on the euphonium. To boot, his sister played the horn, and Mark loved the horn. He steered me to some excellent recordings, and we arranged to play together when we could.

I should also mention that during that freshman year, puberty had raised its ugly head. While my sexual temptations were solitary and internal (that's all the detail you're going to get), I was quite aware of my lusts and desires and how they would be considered sinful, and how I considered them sinful. Yet, these subjects were simply NOT going to be mentioned to a priest in a confessional. I had no understanding of the common plight of man, nor had I the guts to admit any of this embarrassing stuff. I'd have to make do with whatever I might pick up from my peers, or from books.

In our sophomore year, Mark and I both signed up for beginning orchestra to learn to play the viola; this in addition to our existing musical activities. Spending time with Mark, I learned of his drift to agnosticism. His point was, why should you believe anything solely because your parents do? A cogent point, to be sure - if your beliefs aren't really your own, how then can you say that you truly believe them? I felt I had to agree. Moreover, I looked back at my Catholic upbringing, and found . . . what? Inconsistency. Hypocrisy. Maybe that also was why I'd not want to talk to some priest. But further: what was right and what was wrong, and who said so? Was there really a God? I mean, really - was there? How would you know? And what good would it do you? I came to the conclusion that I really couldn't know, and that, further, if there was, I probably had already sealed my fate with Hell as my destination anyway. I don't remember exactly when, or how many times, I discussed these thoughts with my mother. (She really did seem to understand.) But I do remember thinking there was no point in further attendance at the Catholic church. She didn't object - I suspect she'd more or less had her fill of some of it herself. She didn't buy that you were going to Hell just for not attending Mass. Her childhood had been whichever Protestant church was nearest, and her family had moved a number of times due to her father's employment. And her philosophy could allow salvation to pagans genuinely seeking after God (that's probably an excessive simplification, but trying to be brief). So I had no pressure from that quarter.

So I became a practicing agnostic. Whatever that means.

Late in my junior year, I auditioned for the Wheaton Municipal Band, a summer ensemble in which I participated for, what? the next 7 summers. The principal horn there was one Lowell Greer, at the time a student at Wheaton College. I'd never heard, in person, someone who could play like this guy, and I had to become acquainted. Just had to. I found him friendly. We had some number of talks after rehearsals, and I sometimes took him home to his dorm since I had a car. This friendship continued over several of these summers. Lowell identified himself as a Christian, and explained some doctrine along the way. Now I had understood "Christian" to be rather synonymous with "Catholic", although not entirely so; we had friends who were Lutheran and some of the Church of Christ (I think they were). We had some common understanding: if there's anything a Catholic, or former Catholic, knows, it's sin. I knew without doubt that if there was a God who could be sinned against, a sinner was I, through and through. But I didn't take on much knowledge very fast.

There was more conversation with Lowell the following summer. He leaked doctrine here and there, among much talk about the horn and horn players. I was to enter Northwestern in the upcoming fall to study horn with Frank Brouk of the Chicago Symphony, with whom Lowell was already (or had been, I don't retain the chronology well) studying. (The book on Brouk was that he was the best of teachers and a kind and honorable man. He was also reported to claim himself an atheist, but for all that, Lowell accounted him to be trusted as the Bible itself when it came to horn playing. My subsequent experience bore this out.) I couldn't say whether I understood very much more Bible teaching during this time, but Lowell did not fail to provide what conversation afforded.

My freshman year at Northwestern put me in close acquaintance with a girl I passingly knew from Wheaton and from my horn lessons; she played flute at Wheaton and was also studying horn. Laurel Schroeder became my girlfriend for most of that year. She was a Christian from a Bible church, and I have no idea how she thought I, who by no means claimed Christ at that time, was by any means a suitable chap. But I suppose she had hope of me. Certainly she did indeed get me on some occasions (like Christmas) to attend her church, and she spoke to me of various things in the Bible. Most of it sounded to me vastly unlikely and unscientific, and she didn't, perhaps, have Lowell's talent for an apologetic explanation. But I shall say she was faithful. And I wish to record that I am at this late date perhaps more grateful to her for her concern for my soul and my welfare than I was at the time, nor even after salvation. Sometimes the years confer a better sense of what was important in one's life. Surely I know that this girl prayed for me. She was a better friend than I knew.

At this point, I have to insert that, along the way now and later, Lowell (and Laurel) acquainted me with a number of truths of Scripture. It doesn't maintain the continuity, but I should list somewhere what I can remember, knowing I can't provide the correct chronology. So the following list is at least a partial set of the doctrines put before me in some way at some time. I knew notionally already about the Trinity, the deity and manhood of Christ, His birth, death and resurrection. Further, I knew (again, notionally) about God's omniscience, omnipresence, and that He could be prayed to at any time. As mentioned, I understood well the concept of sin. And Hell. But now the new stuff, in no particular order.

- Inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible - huh!?! And Sola Scriptura, not tradition on equal authority.
- Nothing special about "clergy", and the priesthood of the believer.
- Why, really, Christ died - I didn't really get it, but I was told.
- Substitutionary atonement - whole thing sounded kinda bloody.
- God's justice, and His requirement of moral perfection - and how 100% of us can't do that.
- Many facts about eschatology: the Rapture, the Antichrist, the Tribulation, the Millennium, the new heavens and earth - this all really sounded like fantasy, while still sounding scary. This was VERY new to me.
- No Purgatory. Really.
- The fact that believers don't get lost. Ever. Once saved, always saved. New concept.

Lowell, in particular, could show verse-by-verse where all of this came from. Again, I heard it in pieces, over time. And didn't understand it altogether.

I broke up with Laurel at spring exams. The reasons aren't important to this story. Once again, I played the summer at Wheaton, and was in touch with Lowell. He deepened what knowledge I had of the Bible (o so little I had). What became especially important to my understanding was that salvation was for keeps. This was so contrary to Catholic doctrine. I had felt that, supposing I should be saved, how long would THAT last? 20 minutes, perhaps, if I was especially slow at lust that day.

I guess I should acknowledge at this point the substantial antipathy I still had toward the Catholic Church. Lowell affirmed also to me that he couldn't see how one could be both Catholic and saved. The issue for him was that the Catholic Church teaches works for salvation, in addition to faith. I knew what work-ish activities were enjoined, and if salvation was by that Church, I wanted no part of it, for I'd not be able to keep it. (Now, I don't mean here to be bashing Catholics. While I could not recommend that church to anyone, I understand better today that true Christians don't always have their doctrine straight, nor need they. Salvation is in a relationship to a Person, not according to whether we pass an exam. Many people seem not to be doctrinally oriented, but rather relationally, or emotionally, oriented. And the most learned of us get some things wrong anyway. So I need judge no one, and glad of it.)

But anyway, how could I know there was even a God?

I did acknowledge that if there was a God, who else could He be, but the Christian God? Or perhaps a better way to put it: if God was any other kind of God, like the Norse, or Greek, or Roman gods, or the devil himself, what would be the point of worshipping Him? If you can't trust His character, what matter whether you worshiped Him or not? He could choose to smack you either way. Might as well do as you please and take whatever consequences. Further, I somehow reasoned that if there was a devil, well, then, there must be a God - how else did the devil come to be?

I couldn't have seen it, but enough of a system of belief had been set forth for me to be able intellectually to follow what Lowell might further say to me. It wasn't that I was prepared to agree, but there was a possibility of things making sense; I might be able to understand the other fellow's propositions. (Not that my thoughts were as organized as all that.)

It happened that, late in July, Lowell, whose summer job was at Scripture Press, gave me a Bible (actually more than one version) and, I think, a couple of books intended to help me along. He also challenged me that God could give evidence of Himself. So, unbelieving, but at least intellectually open, I prayed something like, "God, if You're there, please show me." I had no expectation of any kind of response, but hey, I did yay much.

Now this one Wednesday night (don't know the date, early August, 1970, I think, sometime after 9:00 PM), I'd taken Lowell back to his dorm in my blue 1964 Pontiac. We were talking about such things, and somehow demon possession became a topic. He began to relate a story about his friend, Mark Ritchie, who had been an MK. At one time when Mark was younger and on the missionary field with his parents, he and another private school kid were dared to spend the night in a mosque. I think the dare was by a Muslim student in the same school. They went forth one night to do just that - and encountered manifestations as could only be called spooky and frightful - noises, perhaps winds, the details are not in my mind - in any case enough to shag them out of there with all speed. The "darer" himself, hearing their report, was to make a similar attempt the following evening. He didn't show up at school the day after his appointed vigil. Or the next. He was found later near the mosque with his throat torn out. Now, please understand, this is years later, and I got the story through several people. I have no way at all to discuss its authenticity, except to say that this is approximately what I heard on that night as I remember it, and I believe that Lowell was telling me the truth as he knew it.

What I can testify to is what I subjectively felt next. I was leaning back partly against the car's driver door, as Lowell was doing opposite, so we could talk facing in the parked car. I began to feel fear, and an almost physical pull downward and to the right inside, as it were, my body - lower chest, perhaps. I somehow had this awful conviction that I was NOT going to make it home that night (about a 17-mile drive), that there was a devil present, who had in mind my death and an unpleasant destiny to follow. At this moment, it was clear I needed a Saviour and I wanted one. And, not able to pray, asked Lowell to pray for me, which he did. He assured me my name was being written in the Book of Life. While it may *sound* questionable (me not immediately praying), he got this right, for it was my will and intent to take the salvation Christ offered. I didn't understand it all (and I confess that I sometimes today think I understand it even less, that God should die for me), but Lowell correctly perceived my choice. Also, Lowell confirmed that he felt, or had felt, the presence of a demon, that my perception, and fear, was not groundless.

At this point, I need to be clear about several things.

- I can't prove there was any demon present threatening me. My emotions and background might be a sufficient explanation of what I felt. (What Lowell felt requires an explanation which is not mine to give.) For all that, I was quite scared, and recall no like precedent in my life. It seemed real enough to me. And I wasn't going to drive home without gaining protection.
- My logical inference about the existence of a devil requiring the existence of God was a correct one.
- Whatever actually happened (for I know of nothing an external observer would have seen), the experience was sufficient to convince me of both the existence of God and my need for Him. That was all it had to do.
- Yes, I was subsequently able to pray.

The key reality was that I was confronted with my need in terms I could not refute, nor wished to. And I wonder whether there would ever have been another time or circumstance in my life that would have availed as well or better.

Lowell took me inside the dorm to settle down. There was some kind of coffee or eating place there, and we joined a couple of his friends, to whom he introduced me as a new believer. In the classic kind of conversion story, I should now have been completely at settled peace. That was not the case. But in any wise, I was instructed that I should tell others of what had happened. Soon, I drove home, praying along the way for what I think was the first time in years. I should say that among my prayers was the request that if I hadn't asked for salvation aright in the midst of it all, I was asking for it now, by means of Jesus the Christ.

Now, when I got home, I did relate the story to my mother. And, the next day, to the other workers at my summer job - well, those with whom I took lunch. When I next saw Laurel, I told her also.

Can I tell you things went swimmingly afterward? Uh-uh. It was several years before I began regularly attending a good church. Lots of ups and downs. But I have found, the more I know the Bible, the more true I can see it to be. I bear two graduate degrees, in music and in engineering, and I find more and more in disciplines well studied an agreement with the Word of God.

May Christ also convince and lead you, to the saving of your soul.