

Rich

My name is Rich Hamilton, and I'd like to start off by saying that it is my desire to be in the perfect and pleasing will of God. I've never thought of my testimony as anything extravagant. In my opinion, it's a story of many failures and disappointments on my part, but a man much wiser than I once told me that it's not about what I have done, but how God has worked through it all.

In my 23 years on this earth I've been a Christian for about fifteen of them. I was raised in a Christian home with parents who came from the same. My father helped with the church youth group and helped lead worship. I suppose coming from that sort of background I just expect more from myself spiritually, because I always knew the right thing to do, but many times just didn't care. When I was six my parents divorced and I moved from my home in LaPlace, Louisiana to Hermitage, Pennsylvania, which I still call home. It's tough as a child from a broken home, you deal with all sorts of feelings that you just don't truly understand. One year, when I was about 11, my mom decided to send me to Camp Patmos, a Baptist affiliated summer camp where she had gone as a little girl. It was there that I believe I made my first conscious decision to follow Christ and began my journey of faith. I had done the same when I was five, but honestly I don't even know if I knew what I was really doing. I wish I could say that my life became radically different after that, but the truth is that it didn't. I started going to my church youth group but still remained in that "liberal theological" mindset.

Through the years I remained in close contact with my dad, whom I visited often. Dad was always very loving and involved in my life. I remember being so excited to get on the plane and go visit him for a month in the summer, and then crying my eyes out when I'd board that plane for home. Something, however, seemed different about him; he wasn't like other dads I knew. One day in school during my seventh grade year I got a message that my dad was on the phone and needed to speak to me. I went into the school psychologist's office to receive the call. My dad then told me that the reason he and my mom split, was because he was a homosexual, and that over the years he had contracted HIV. I don't remember being surprised at first, I was always an astute kid, and I think I already knew from certain clues I'd noticed during my visits. Over the years, my dad developed an alcohol problem, a drug problem, and he attempted suicide twice. I remember one night when he needed his "medicine", and how I never knew medicine could be smoked through a pipe. My dad has surprised me in his resilience and drive to live. I never expected him to see me graduate, and he's seen me graduate twice. He's been hospitalized 69 times for pneumonia alone, suffered through a personality disorder, neuropathy, two surgeries, and takes more medication in a week than I've taken in my entire existence. As difficult as it's been to deal with, through all this I've seen the Lord build my character and shape me for His service, and I know that He is making me stronger through it all.

Through high school I tried to live, what I thought, was a Christian life. I was openly against drinking, drugs, and sex, yet I had a foul mouth and remember many times I certainly did not display the love of Christ. My dating relationships were not healthy Christian ones either; I ignored 2 Corinthians 6:14 and dated who I wanted, rather than waiting on the Lord and seeking a true Christian woman of God. I had two girlfriends through high school, and neither of the relationships were Christian. I remember compromising my faith for acceptance, a problem that any Christian student will face, and made many bad choices. I remember even in youth group I would always try to be liked or try to be funny, and that often involved being inappropriate. The sad truth is that I don't think anyone I knew from high school could honestly say that I was a Christ-like example, and coming from a strong Christian background, I know I completely failed that phase of my life.

During my first three semesters of college I was at Duquesne University and was heavily involved in Crossroads Christian Fellowship. My first few months were great; I was living for the Lord and growing in my faith. I had begun playing the guitar, and to be completely honestly, my motivation was to impress the ladies. I was in a Christian relationship and things went well

for a few months. We broke up after four months, and consequently I became more dependent on God, and kept seeking the Lord. However, soon after, I began to go downhill and started embracing the party scene. I would go out almost every weekend, and sometimes drink on my own during the week. My plan was simple: Go to Pitt, get drunk, find a girl to be with for a while, go home, and then repeat. By the grace of God I was protected through those several months and transferred as doors started to close on me. I returned home and attended a local Penn State branch while I looked for a school that offered physical therapy. It was during that time that my Grandfather, the most influential spiritual role model in my life, passed away. Coping with that loss was very difficult, and I began to remember how he lived his life and what an example he was to me. He would say, "Why worry when you've got prayer?" Through that situation I know the Lord was working on me, softening my heart. I started working with my old youth group, helping to lead worship; already the Lord was cultivating the talent he had given me. In hindsight, I know I was very confused as to the real meaning of worship. At that stage of my life, I was more interested in having the attention and was unaware of how true worship felt.

I ended up at Slippery Rock University and became involved in Campus Crusade for Christ. After Burnie Smucker, the worship leader for Campus Crusade, heard that I played guitar he asked me to join the worship team, something that I can call a significant turning point in my spiritual life. I remember being so excited to continue to use my talents for the Lord. Burnie, through example, taught me so much about how to lead worship and how to be a spiritual leader. I had been on the team for one semester when Burnie decided to study abroad, and the team was passed to me. For me, leading a worship team was a constantly evolving process. I was very new at this, though I had led worship for two youth groups in the past, and it was basically trial and error, but I was in love. I took my responsibility very seriously and kept working toward the goal of leading passionate, heartfelt worship. Burnie returned, but rather than resuming the leadership, he allowed me to continue what he had left to me, and I truly appreciated that; he knew what the team meant to me. I led the Slippery Rock University Campus Crusade Worship Team for 3 ½ years. During that time, we led worship at 2 Campus Crusade retreats, opened for a nationally acclaimed band, made a CD, and led Sunday morning worship at Pulaski United Methodist Church during their contemporary service. Through all that I gained more leadership experience than I ever thought possible, and also more pride than I ever thought I'd deal with. I began to consider myself better than others in the group, took my friends for granted, looked down on those less fortunate than I, and even felt that Campus Crusade (and even God) needed me. I started drinking again just because I was of age and tired of being required to do the "right thing" all the time. It was then, after several incidents, that I was asked to step down from my position, and I did. I had taken my gift, my love, and conformed it to my own selfish desires, and I am ashamed.

I stopped going to church and, yet again, just made bad choices. I even tried to avoid all my Christian friends because I just didn't want to hear how bad of a person I was; avoiding that reality. I started dating a girl and ostracized everyone who I once called a friend. During that period while she and I were together nothing seemed "together". I knew I was confused, and I knew why, but I was too proud to admit that I needed to repent, because I could beat God. The harsh reality set in when she broke up with me very suddenly and I was broken, completely broken and exactly where God wanted me. All those friends who I had abandoned, like the father of the prodigal son, were there with open arms when I was in need. It was through their help, and the prevailing grace of the Lord, that I made it through that painful situation. God was bringing me back to my One Love. From the situation that seemed so awful, so much good has come from it that only the Lord could have created, because all things work for the good of those who love Him.

I have since gotten back on the path I was meant to walk, and am constantly seeking the wisdom of the Lord as Proverbs 4:7 says, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom..." It is

truly amazing to see the good that comes from our struggles, infirmities, and brokenness. I know that nothing but the love of Christ is what has brought me through all the turns on this road of life, and I know that it is that same love that guides me now, even as I write these last words.