

Rob Rodgers Testimony

Luke records a great parable of our Lord in which many of us can probably see ourselves reflected — the one that has come to be known as the parable of the prodigal son. It was while reading this Gospel passage nearly three years ago that I found my heart weeping as I saw there a parallel to my own dark past and glorious return to our Father's arms. You see, I was that ignorant, self-righteous son who once thought he needed nothing from the Father.

I once thought my life's destiny would be whatever I chose to make it. The laws of right and wrong, I insisted, could be twisted to fit my needs. My conscience had been seared when I was still young. I had come to view faith as a threat to my freedom.

Every Sunday when I was a child, my parents took me to a place where I didn't want to be, a place where I didn't feel comfortable. I had been baptized in the Anglican faith, and I attended services until I was about nine years old. Finally, after I had put up enough of a fuss, and my parents had lost sight of our need for the faith, I gained my "freedom."

It was a "freedom" I would abuse every chance I got for the next seventeen years of my life. I put God out of my life. I recognized His presence only when necessary to please others, such as on certain occasions when I needed to talk about faith in order to be part of a conversation. But I was convinced that I didn't really need God.

I took to this "free" lifestyle like bees to honey. Since I had tried to push God out of my life, Satan could freely gain a great portion of my soul. Slowly my vision narrowed, my sense of guilt faded, and I lost any sense that my actions had consequences for which I was responsible. I thought I was free! Deep inside, of course, I knew my "freedom" was only an illusion that would one day fade, and I would be left to face the outcome of my choices alone and without comfort. Nevertheless, I still loved the illusion.

As the years went on, I continued to take whatever I could get from the world. Work at our family business provided a seemingly endless source of money, which gave me a distorted sense of reality. I wanted to have my hands in everything I saw going on around me, and nothing was going to stop me.

In the eyes of my parents, I was a great son, but I had to work hard to keep them from suspecting otherwise. By the time I was in high school, I was deep into drugs, even selling them to friends. Alcohol also became an easy friend. Through these two tools of the Devil, my true identity was buried, and I became another person.

I wore mask after mask so I could appear to be whatever the occasion called for. I had become a social chameleon. "Truth" to me was something I could fabricate. Nothing was sacred, and nothing was beyond my twisting, if twisting it was for my benefit.

Whenever I found someone who loved me, I would appear to respond with genuine love on the outside, but inside I was actually trying to calculate how much I could profit from the relationship. I gained trust through falsehoods and used it to my benefit. I quickly learned that I could take advantage of those who loved me to further my own agenda.

This abuse of love left a deep void in my heart, which I learned to bury through my addictions. On occasion, when I would allow my heart truly to love even a little, a glimpse of the truth would surface inside. The inner battle, to which I was otherwise blind, would manifest itself every once in a while, causing me to feel the true turmoil of my soul. In these moments, those who loved me would draw nearer to me, wanting to help me. But the moment would soon pass, and I would return to my blindness.

My pit of despair was too deep to escape. I was helpless to crawl out of it on my own. I convinced myself that I was comfortable where I was living and safe in my false image of myself. I chose to know nothing else. Truth was something I feared. The dark had become a comfort for me.

There was no pain. Grief emerged only when I allowed the quiet voice inside to speak out, urging me to start the long, impossible climb out of my pit. But hopeful moments like these would be quickly erased by my actions whenever I was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. I often publicly inflicted pain on myself. Any glimpses I had caught of the truth I quickly rejected as lies, while the lies I took as the truth.

Off to School and Then London

Next I went off to college. But instead of focusing on studies, I looked for opportunities to give another boost to an ever-growing ego. Soon, however, this ego suffered a terrible blow: I was on academic probation by the end of my second year.

Still, the wound to my selfishness was soon forgotten, buried beneath the usual addictions and lies. In the shadows of pleasure offered by the Devil, my eyes were blind to the truth about the road I walked.

Finally, with the assistance of a family friend, I packed all my troubles into the trunk of my car and moved West to begin a career in the hospitality industry. I felt free, because I felt I was leaving all my problems behind. It would be just my best friend and I, off to start anew, to forget what had been and to find rebirth.

My new life was short-lived, however; within a few weeks, my ego unpacked itself, and things turned out to be much the same as they had been before. Even so, I fooled myself into believing that the change of location had somehow altered who I was. I convinced myself to continue on this new road because I was a different person.

I felt somehow refreshed. My new friends thought I was a man of the world and open to the energies of life. I developed a drug-induced sensation of spirituality, a false kind of religion that many of our youth today embrace. For those who adopt this perspective, religion is whatever you make it; God is whatever you perceive Him to be, and salvation is not something to worry about.

Through what at the time seemed to be no more than a random roll of the dice, I was offered a great job at a hotel in London, which included supervising all in-room bars and private functions. This opportunity was like a dream come true: further travel, work at a top hotel, the exciting adventure of living in London, and full access to more alcohol than I had ever seen. I didn't hesitate to accept the offer. Full of even more pride than before, my ego was once again running the show. As I boarded the plane for England, I imagined how proud my family would be as they talked about me.

Leaving everything behind, I headed over the "great pond." Little did I know that this journey would change everything. It would stop me from running from the truth. It would shatter seventeen years of ignorance, seventeen years of lies. London would prove to be my hell, though in my blindness, I thought it was heaven.

Once there, I entered a new circle of colleagues and other acquaintances where morals were deeply in decay. The hospitality industry there was corrupt from top to bottom, seeming to center itself on my two addictions: Alcohol and drugs found their way into everything and everyone I knew. In a strange way, I felt at home, and in this home, I was king — or so I thought.

The Road to Damascus — Almost

My time at this hotel soon ended; corrupt business practices have a way of taking their revenge on you. Yet despite my deceit, despite my theft, Someone was there helping me struggle through the mud of my own making on the low path I had chosen. A management position at another well-known hotel became available, and my life shifted into high gear.

I promised myself a new start. No more shifty handshakes, no more questionable transactions to speed that climb up the ladder, and no more lies. But I soon fell on my face; the burden I was carrying was just too much. My addictions to alcohol and drugs were creeping into my professional life, and I was holding desperately onto a life that was founded on lie after lie. My weakness was beginning to show.

I still remember vividly the night — May 10, 1998 — when, sprawled out on my back in misery, I had what was nearly a “Damascus Road” experience. I was utterly broken. I had traded all sense of morality and values for nights of female company; substance addictions were often my only nourishment; hatred governed my heart and left me helpless.

Yet evil has one great self-destructive fault: ignorance. That night a crack appeared in the wall Satan had helped me to erect around myself. Through that crack I curiously peered out into a light — a light so bright it dazzled my heart, the light of the Holy Spirit.

In one night, all the ignorance that had ruled my life began to dissolve. In its place was the truth that it had hidden from me — the life God could give me. He began to reveal to me the possibility of a life I had only dreamed of in the shadows of my mind.

I felt as though someone were taking a thirty-pound sledge hammer to my body. I was riddled with pain. My heart ached as the guilt of years now seized and broke its hardened shell. My eyes saw and my being felt the pain that all my lies had caused me. My body felt as if it were being broken piece by piece. Yet as I was lying there shattered, confused, alone, and scared, the love of Jesus Christ — though I didn’t know it was His love — raised me up in a way I had never before known. Warmth embraced me and comforted me. Hatred was swallowed up by grace. My ignorance gave way to curiosity, and my eyes were opened to the glory of life from God.

From Confusion to Rome

The next morning, I felt terribly confused about what had transpired. Had I lost my mind? suffered a nervous breakdown? experienced an acid flashback? Whatever had happened, when I looked into the mirror, I saw someone I hadn’t seen for years, and I was frightened. I saw a young boy I thought I had left behind many, many years before.

Nothing made any sense. Everything, I felt, had changed. It was as if I had awakened in one of my dreams, yet this was reality.

Strangely enough, I wouldn’t accept that Christ had come to me the night before. There was no way I was becoming Christian, I told myself — no way. Yet my heart cried for this change, and a desire to search out the truth was engulfing me.

My mind became a sponge, soaking up everything I could learn that I thought might help me understand this new reality. I took a vow of chastity, gave up the bottle, and somehow rationalized that drugs would be my route to spiritual salvation (thus one of Satan’s claws remained in my side). I began to read everything spiritual I could get my hands on, starting with Eastern mysticism and yoga. At one point I almost entered a Buddhist monastery in southern England.

Next I found myself exploring Judaism, especially the mystical strain known as Cabbalism. Finally, however, I went back to my scientific roots and there sought a logical explanation for what had happened in my life. In this way of thinking, there was no such thing as sin; my drug abuse was no hindrance to any kind of salvation; and I was relieved, since I could no longer count on alcohol to lean on.

I convinced myself that I had found what I was looking for. Everything made sense, I said, and with that I stopped, no more questioning the experience of that night. In fact, I began to explain it away — a mistake that allowed Satan to slip slowly back into my life. In time, I went back to alcohol, and everything began to spin downward, though all the while I thought I was enjoying a wonderful life.

What I had experienced that memorable night transcended the logic of the mind, but I had tried to fit it into logical categories. What had taken place had been a miracle, but I now shrugged it off as an ordinary occurrence, a random chance. All the impact of that night now seemed lost.

Meanwhile, while managing the hotel where I worked, I befriended Barry, the security manager. He would later be my Confirmation sponsor and is even now my mentor. Our luncheon talks became God's way of entering my life without my realizing it.

Slowly I began to reach out for the spiritual food Jesus Christ was offering me through Barry. Then, after several months, he invited me to attend a course at his parish. My heart jumped at the invitation, and a song came from my soul. I answered, "Without a doubt!" I still remember that night as clearly as if it were just this morning. As I walked from the hotel to the Holy Apostles Parish, it seemed as if I were going crazy, as if I were on fire. My addictions had taught me to crave, but this was a kind of desire I had never known.

As soon as I stepped into the hall that night, bam! I felt inside the same sledge hammer that I had felt a year before. I cried like a baby separated from its mother. Then I met Miren, a woman who to this day is my spiritual mom.

Hers was a rare kind of love. She greeted me with the words "You're home!" It was a welcoming I shall never forget. Though she didn't know me from a stranger on the subway, yet she gave me the love I had always wished to find. I knew then that I was home, in my real home. The home I had run from in ignorance I now ran to in love.

Thirteen weeks went by as the course progressed, and each week I hounded Barry: "I want to be Catholic. I want to be Catholic!" But each time I pressed him, he replied simply, "Patience, Rob."

Finally I was brought to the priest. He gave me a catechism and some writings by Thomas Merton, and we set a date for my first Confession.

In the meantime, I was catechized one-on-one by an amazing son of God. Twice a week I met with Edward, a Jewish convert who was very orthodox in his teaching. A couple who became my spiritual parents, also very orthodox and deeply involved in the charismatic renewal, opened their arms to me as well. I was nurtured by them all, raised as a spiritual infant with the desire to praise the Lord with all my heart.

On to Zanesville, Ohio

The date of my Confirmation was set for December 9, 2000. Two days later, I was to return to Canada for my first Christmas as a Catholic. It would also be the first Christmas with my family in four years.

My family eagerly waited. They loved the change in my life. I was clean and sober and once again living the moral life that my parents had modeled for me as a young boy. That Christmas was the greatest day of my life. In a river of tears, I received Holy Communion. I walked out into the world without the void in my heart that I had carried for so long.

The next day I completed an application to work with the National Evangelization Teams (or NET). I had become involved with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal while in London, and I immediately fell in love with their simplicity of life and devotion to serve others through Christ. When I told my family that I was leaving the hotel and planning to do a year of missionary work in the United States with NET, my decision was met with some speculation and concern. But their hearts began to change as they saw the joy that now filled my life.

For nine months I traveled across the United States, being fed daily with the gifts of the Spirit. My experience with NET peeled away layer by layer whatever film of my old life still remained, and I was refined by the fire of love that burned in my heart. To all I met, I witnessed to the healing grace that had saved my life.

After my life on the road with NET, I returned to Ohio with a woman who had stolen my heart so we could discern our course of life. Very happily, we were engaged on July 5, 2002. As we sought God about our future and learned to rest in Him, His grace presented an opportunity to for me work with Marcus Grodi and be spiritually fed as never before.

Today I recognize that so many different hands have formed my life, yet each has been guided by the one hand of God. He lifted me from the gutter, healed me of my addictions, and put life back into my spirit. He even touched my liver, damaged by alcohol abuse, and restored it to health. In all these ways, He gave me a will to live in a way I had never known.

In the mirror, I still see Robert Rodgers, once an alcoholic, a drug addict, a thief, a pathological liar, an abuser of every good thing that came into his life. But now I also see a sinner who has been forgiven, a son of God who has come home to the arms of his eternal Father, a man who receives such remarkable life and love that it often seems like a dream. The refrain of Psalm 118 is now the song of my heart each morning: "His steadfast love endures forever!" The first words from my mouth each day are spoken to the Lord: "Jesus, I love you." I am deeply grateful for the beauty of another chance, a chance to help others find the life I found through Christ our Lord. No day is a bad day, for Jesus Christ willingly went to the Cross to die for me so that I could find true happiness. God bless and amen!