



DELENA'S TESTIMONY

I came to know the Lord when I was seven. I don't remember a lot about being aged seven nor do I even remember much of my years prior to that, but I do vividly recall shyly walking out onto the aisle while the invitation song was being sung.

Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night, Jesus, I come! Jesus, I come! Into Thy freedom, gladness, and light, Jesus, I come to Thee!

I had attempted to walk up several times but then I'd chicken out and have to wait another whole week. I'm not sure how many times I did this but eventually I gathered up the courage to walk up to the pastor. His wife took me aside and spoke with me and we prayed.

It was a very overwhelming experience, one I will never forget. While there were many things as a seven year old I didn't fully understand, I did understand that Jesus had died on the cross for me and He was calling me to accept Him. I cried with such huge relief knowing that from that point onwards my whole life had changed and now I was going to Heaven. I never questioned that until some twenty odd years later.

I grew up in a Christian home where church played a major part in my life. Despite having been taught strong values, I had no real concept of the world. In my late teens things I started to face new challenges. My parents moved overseas and the church I attended had been falling apart for years in so many ways so that many members left. At that time it seemed that all of a sudden the support I relied on growing up was suddenly diminishing and for the first time I was all on my own.

The rift in my church left a bitter taste in my mouth so that I felt betrayed and resentful. I foolishly decided that the most hypocritical and fake people could be found in church and that organized religion was a snare in itself. So with that I made the decision to leave church.

Out in the world I made new friends so that I slowly began to make small compromises which of course only led to more compromise, until I felt too ashamed to return to church. I decided that I would go out and search for truth myself, setting aside all that I had learned in church and from my parents. I pursued all the things that appeared fulfilling from a worldly perspective. I explored new ideas, beliefs, relationships, all the while indulging more in selfish pursuits. While they all led to some form of temporal pleasure it always seemed to end on an even more depressing note than before. I would end up right back where I started, that is, with the conclusion that as long as I was searching outside God my pursuits were futile.

I developed a strong taste for the world. I became depressed and desperate and rather than turning away from the world I only fell deeper into it. In the back of my mind there were thoughts that would jump out to remind me I was going completely against everything I had known to be right, everything I knew to be true, but I immediately suppressed it. I attempted to block out everything that would allow me to think of God. Little did I know I was only allowing myself to become further enslaved by my flesh, and by this world. In my heart I knew I wasn't prepared to fully commit my life back to God. I wanted to find some other alternative. To "deny myself and take up my cross" started to sound too extreme to me. My guilt grew so great that I sought every form of escapism I could just to avoid the reality of the burden I carried. The more I tried to leave God out of my decisions the more I fell into a self-destructive cycle of self-loathing that hurled me further into a downward spiral. Everyone else seemed to be able to get by just fine in the world yet I was constantly going from one problem to the next.

I was consumed with hurt, anger and confusion about what I believed. I was determined to find some other answer, any answer, except the one right in front of me.

A few times I would walk into a church trying not to make eye contact with the preacher in case he would see right through my facade. It was only when I'd forget to ignore the sermon that I would hear the preacher speak

words as if spoken specifically to me. They weren't words of warning or repentance but they were words beautiful and uplifting, words so familiar and comforting yet painful. Many times I would go home questioning how it was that I'd been brought up in a Christian home yet held a heart so tainted with wickedness? What was wrong with me?

Eventually I reached melting point where I felt overworked, unappreciated, stressed and incredibly hopeless. When it seemed everything was crashing down on top of me I finally stopped trying to control my own world and gave in so that He brought me to my knees. It was a simple decision that I made to finally let go of everything and just let Him lead. And He changed me dramatically.

In retrospect, when I think of the many trials I faced I truly believe God was always calling me back to His flock. The fact that it took 13 years for me to return shows how ignorant and selfish I was, but how great God is. Despite my deliberate disobedience, He still lovingly embraced me with compassion. Nehemiah 9:17 reads "...but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness..."

What a wonderful God we have! I am truly thankful that He loves me even though I deserve nothing good. I blamed the leaders in my church. I blamed Christians I labelled as hypocrites. I blamed my parents for sheltering me, but in truth I can only blame myself for looking at all of them instead of looking to God. I cannot describe the joy He has given me. He didn't take all my problems away but He most certainly gave me a peace, even joy amidst it all that I would never have found out in the world.

God's grace saved me early in my life, yet I still crumbled and became useless to God. I learned many hard lessons and I am still paying the consequences however I am so thankful that God chastens His children and that He calls His own back to Him.

The least I owe Him is the rest of my life. If I am not serving Him faithfully I am no different to how I was when I was spiritually dead or compared to anyone else out in the world still holding onto temporal things.

In the meantime I want to press toward the mark for that prize of the high calling of God and I eagerly await so that I will be ready to go where ever He leads and ready to do whatever He wills. Amen!