

Spiritual Autobiography

As of December 2003

Certain words of Isaac Watts' hymn *How Sweet and Awful Is the Place* again overwhelm me as I begin this abbreviated account of that which God so graciously wrought in my life several years ago when He saved me. "Lord, why was I a guest?" Indeed, the following is an auto-bio-graphy in that it is a **written** account of the "**life and life** more abundantly" that God gave and continues to give to **me**.

Having been chosen "before the foundation of the world" to be a son of God, I could rightly comment about many occurrences in my life in which I, now, clearly see the arm of the Lord having worked, but time and paper preclude this. I was not reared in a Christian home. Insofar as I can remember, neither my mom nor my dad received Christ as Savior and Lord while I lived with them. And their actions were commensurate. They divorced each other when I was nine years of age and my dad usurped the authority of God by taking his own life when I was thirteen years old. Throughout my teen years, both my mom and stepdad were alcoholics. Statistically speaking, I should either be incarcerated, drunk, or a contributor to the rising domestic violence in our country. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

Late in the summer of 1993 after graduating from Bentonville High School, I took up residence in Yocum Hall at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, AR. Here, having been given ears to hear, I understood for the first time, at least in part, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as it was explained to me by a passionate, young guy named Phil Mitchell. Shortly after beginning the first semester, Phil befriended me while lifting weights at the university athletic center. He and another member of the First Baptist Church (FBC) of Springdale, Arkansas soon visited me one afternoon at the dormitory. Having taken Evangelism Explosion (EE) later in my college years, I smile each time I recollect the discussion that transpired that day. Phil and a man named Brad Graves evangelized me and a visiting high school buddy by walking us through the EE outline. My secondary school classmate, much to my surprise, confidently stated he would bust hell wide open if he were to die then. I, however, believed I would enter heaven upon death, but like most people throughout time, had no justification for my belief. The second diagnostic EE question arrested me that day: "Suppose you were to die today and stand before God and He were to say you, 'Why should I let you into My heaven?' What would you say?" I still cannot remember anything else that I or the others said following that second question. God did not save me that day. But He did unsettle me and begin to cause me to consider my condition before Him.

Throughout the next few months, Phil and I occasionally saw each other in the gym, or he would swing by my dorm room to chat for a few minutes. Eventually, I began attending FBC-Springdale. This church was and still is a relatively large body but was well organized to facilitate interaction and relationship building with those of my age group. Sometime during the first few months of 1994, I made a profession of faith in Christ and was subsequently "baptized" in April by my University Minister, Steve Moore. Steve and his family had a profound influence on me during my college days. I still thank God for them.

After completing my freshman year of college, I began working as an engineering intern for an electrocomponents company in Bentonville, Arkansas. My supervisor was the father of the girl

that I had dated while I was a senior in high school. Thankfully, he had not harbored any resentment towards me for abruptly ending my relationship with his little girl when I headed off to college. His daughter, Shannon, and I resumed our relationship before my sophomore year started and continued to date until the spring of 1996. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote in verse nine of chapter five, “He [Jesus Christ] became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.” Our sovereign God, doubtless, works all things after the counsel of His will so that all things in His providence have purpose and eternal import. Although I still suffer from the consequences of it, I thank God for using my immoral relationship with Shannon to clearly show me that I possessed and evidenced to those around me only “a form of godliness” during that time. From 1994 to 1996, I was one about whom Paul warned Timothy in II Timothy 3 – “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” I had professed Christ but had not yet possessed Him. I claimed to my friends, teachers, and parents to have repented of my sin, failing to understand and realize, however, that God alone grants the gift of repentance unto salvation which powerfully manifests itself in perennial rejection of sinful works. Sometime before the end of the spring semester of 1996, I ended my superficial relationship with Shannon and entered into a genuine relationship with Christ. A few days after saying farewell to her, I listened intently to my pastor deliver a timely, sharp message that had obviously been crafted by the Lord to break me. “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”

Sanctification is a life-long process. One theologian aptly wrote that sinners are idol manufacturers. I agree. Being created in the image of God, we are incurably religious and will therefore always worship something. Having lifted weights since the start of my freshman year, I had become an aspiring bodybuilder by the time God saved me in 1996. I had gained forty pounds of lean muscle while dropping my body fat content to about 7%. What began as a harmless hobby became a god to me. My life literally revolved around it. The training required at least two hours every day of the week, not counting the time to consume six meals per day. Gym membership fees and nutritional supplements on my limited college budget exceeded my tithe. Nothing interfered with this passion of mine. But, thankfully, God disciplines and scourges every son whom He receives because He is jealous for His glory. Young and dumb as a babe in the faith, I could not see the subtle idolatry in the passionate devotion I had for bodybuilding. On July 25, 1997, my heavenly Father began to show me the error of my ways. I underwent the first of four surgeries on my right knee to alleviate chronic symptoms of patellafemoral chondromalacia. The next three unsuccessful operations occurred in November 1997, February 1999, and December 2002. If God the Holy Spirit had never taught me about His absolute sovereignty over all things and that He causes all things to work together for my good and His glory, I could not fathom the depth of despair I would have now. Many New Testament scholars believe the Apostle Paul’s thorn in II Corinthians 12 was a physical affliction. His words in verses 7-10 have consoled me on many occasions. In my literal weakness, Christ’s strength now shines. Once very strong and confident in my literal flesh, God has brought me low and made me dependent on Him, day after day. He is true to His word. I *will be* conformed to the image of His Son. No purpose of His can be thwarted. Away with the modern myth of carnal Christianity.

I graduated from the university in December of 1997 with a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering. Having already accepted an offer from an oil and gas service company

named Halliburton, I moved to Duncan, Oklahoma and began working as a manufacturing engineer in January of 1998. The fourteen months I lived there mean so much to me. I am still amazed at all the Lord taught me during that short period of time. I knew only two people in the town of 20,000 residents upon my arrival – David and Tammi Eubank. Both were close friends of mine and former U of A students. David, an industrial engineer, had graduated one semester earlier than I and was already serving Halliburton in the same capacity that I would be. Having been members of the same church in Springdale, Arkansas, David and Tammi naturally invited me to visit a small Southern Baptist church in Marlow, Oklahoma which they had been attending for several weeks. I enjoyed the services at Gatlin Baptist Church even though they were somewhat different than those of my former *megachurch*. I am sure the membership size had something to do with the differences – 9000 versus 250! After visiting a local Church of Christ fellowship (I was then oblivious to the heretical doctrine of baptismal regeneration this cult espouses), I returned to and remained at Gatlin Baptist until I left Duncan.

God mightily used the young pastor, John Sherrill, and many of the precious members there to teach me much about the true nature of saving grace and sincere, personal Christian love. I later came to realize you cannot have one without the other; truth and love are interdependent Christian graces. One family in particular, the Skiles, took me in as their own and, for all practical purposes, became my surrogate family. They gave substance to the Lord Jesus' words in Matthew 12:50 – “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” I probably spent as much time with them in their home as I did in my own apartment. The time we spent together was quality time. Seldom did our discussions waver far from Christ and His kingdom. I miss them.

Russell Wahkinney was another living stone of that body who played a major role during that time of my life. He was the youth minister when I began attending. I fondly remember the first time he visited my apartment on Plato Road. He had two of the youth members knock on my door and pose as Jehovah's Witnesses! When I began to engage them, he and several other young guys and girls jumped out of their hiding places, laughing uncontrollably. Russell, perhaps better than any other Christian I had met theretofore, epitomized the proper relationship of truth and zeal. He constantly strove to harness and guide his passion for the glory of God in apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship by always looking to the precepts found in God's word. Although he did not term our weekly meetings as discipleship sessions, I certainly learned a lot from Big Russ when he would hang out with me to discuss serious matters of Christian living and doctrine. Before beginning a study of I John with him, I remember a few questions he asked to lovingly challenge my thinking about my faith and practices. Is it more spiritual to pray with your wife or walk your dog with her? How do we vindicate God's word without putting Him in the dock and violating Deuteronomy 6:16? What happens to the pygmy in Africa who never hears the gospel?

The last question stirred me the most since I had presented it to my university minister at FBC-Springdale. Russell's biblical rejoinder to my antibiblical reply to this question answered yet another implication of the soteriology that I had been hearing preached by Brother John each week from the pulpit. I now understand and acknowledge that Roman Catholics are not the only professed Christians who follow after the traditions of men. Salvation is of the Lord! This is replete in Scripture. Never mind the pygmy and his situation; why did *I* ever hear the gospel and

receive it? In the lucidity of biblical anthropology, why did I ever confess with my mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in my heart that God raised Him from the dead? Why did I ever look to Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life while my neighbor simultaneously viewed Him as the main mythological character in the Bible story? It seems that most Christians today have a favorite verse or passage. II Thessalonians 2:13-14 would certainly be in my top ten list. “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because *God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation* through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I vividly remember reading these words one evening while studying at my apartment in the small, insignificant town of Duncan, Oklahoma. Chosen from the beginning. Me? At the risk of sounding like the latest Dodge adverts, I must say everything changed at that moment. I had always been taught that I was in control of my own destiny. Destiny? “Am I even in control of what I do in the next five seconds?” I asked myself. I firmly believe I was saved that spring of 1996. But, as a music minister once said during a conference at Gatlin Baptist, “Coming to understand the depth and power of the biblical doctrine of God’s sovereign grace is like being saved again.” I chose Him because He chose me, for it did not depend on my will or actions but on God who showed me mercy.

My appetite to learn, memorize, and teach God’s word from the moment He began taught me the truth about the nature of His grace has been insatiable. Seeing this characteristic in me as well as a strong desire to see people turn from their sins to the grace of God in Christ, Brother John appointed me as the college/career class teacher. I thoroughly enjoyed that opportunity. I enjoy teaching and the class members were, for the most part, sharp thinkers who challenged me as I instructed them.

With some sadness I witnessed the incredible, “cleansing” effects of boldly declaring the totality of Jesus’ teaching about salvation while I attended Gatlin Baptist. Knowing he would stand before God and give an account of his shepherding God’s sheep, Brother John preached the apostles’ doctrine that salvation is all of grace. This created much strife. Approximately 100 members left the fold in less than one month due to their intolerance of the truth. I can fully relate to what the Apostle John recorded for us in John 6:66: “As a result of this, many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.” John 6:26-71 has troubled many for 2000 years and it still does. I hated to see Christ’s church suffer and dwindle in number, but I would have hated even more to see Christ’s message hidden from His saints or perverted.

The Halliburton Management Program of which I was a part periodically relocated its trainees to expose them to other aspects of the company. Much to my delight, I was transferred to the Arbroath, Scotland Manufacturing Center in February of 1999. I tried to locate a Bible-believing Baptist church during my first week in the country but was unsuccessful. Fearful of this scenario occurring, I initiated a back-up plan before leaving the States. A Presbyterian friend from Lawton, Oklahoma had already notified a fellow Presbyterian minister in Dundee, Scotland that I might want to worship with him and the church he pastored during my stint in the United Kingdom. I introduced myself to the congregation of St. Peter’s Free Church on the first Sunday after I arrived. Thankfully, the Lord has always led me to a wonderful body of believers with which to fellowship and grow. Aside from an occasional remark about the covenant family or paedobaptism, I have nothing but fond memories of the time I spent with the church as a

whole and the individuals with whom I would have dinner or tour part of the country. I have always been amazed at how quickly God knits together in love His people no matter their nationality, language, etc.

I recommend that all Christians, if possible, visit the United Kingdom, especially Scotland. It is very rich in church history and has produced a slew of fine Christian men and women throughout the centuries. In fact, the church I attended was founded by Robert Murray McCheyne in 1836. His pulpit, though unused, still stands in the church today. Among many historic sites of relevance to this autobiography, I had the privilege of visiting the supposed home of the fiery reformer John Knox and his primary place of preaching, St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. While in the east coast golf town of St. Andrews, Christ reminded me of the high cost to be His disciple. The initials of the preacher George Wishart are inscribed in one of the city sidewalks indicating the location where he was burned at the stake in March of 1546 for his reformation beliefs. (See Revelation 6:11.)

One weekend I and a fellow Halliburton engineer, Pete Cowan, worked at a Christian hostel situated in a beautiful glen in central Scotland. This allowed us to rock climb, repel, and complete many different ropes courses with several teenage boys and girls. At night and in the mornings, we enjoyed studying God's word with the youth and evangelizing hikers who would spend the night. I will always cherish the 17 weeks I lived in Scotland. The people I met and the places I visited had quite an impact on me.

Near the end of June 1999, I moved from Scotland to Kingwood, Texas to begin working on my next engineering assignment. My time there was short, but the Lord's work in my life is noteworthy. After visiting Second Baptist Church of Houston and a small, local Baptist church, I decided to join the third and last body that I visited – Lincoln Wood Baptist Church. David Pledger Sr. served as the pastor of that small, Spirit-filled church. While in Houston I began to question the validity of what I had always considered my baptism. It did not take long to realize that my initial "baptism" was no baptism at all since I was not born again in April of 1994. God used a sermon by expositor Dr. John MacArthur to convict me of my need to be scripturally baptized. (See Acts 8:36-38.) After asking me a few questions, Brother Pledger happily agreed to baptize me before the Lincoln Wood congregation in September of 1999.

I worked my last day with Halliburton in October of 1999. For various reasons I accepted an offer from Lennox Industries in Dallas, Texas to work at their research and development laboratory as a commercial systems engineer. After much travel while working with Halliburton, I looked forward to putting down some roots and becoming an active, established member of a local body of believers. Pastor Pledger knew of only one small sovereign grace Baptist church in Dallas that I should consider visiting – First Baptist Church of Parker. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe my first day to attend this church was October 17, 1999. I knew I was to continue attending FBC-Parker after only a few Sundays. After completing the requisite class for new members and inquirers, I united with the church in August of 2000. Accurately and authoritatively proclaiming God's word has always been paramount at FBC. This is how it should be. The congregation's high regard for the theology held and defended by such great Baptist predecessors as Charles Spurgeon, Isaac Backus, J.P. Boyce, and B.H. Carroll drives the church's approach to corporate worship, the ordinances, prayer, discipline, and

membership. God has greatly used the exemplary lifestyles and beliefs of the living stones that comprise FBC-Parker to make me what I am today.

God has taught and shown me more about Himself through the church's pastor, Dr. Hal Brunson, than I have been able to absorb and apply to my life. He is intelligent yet humble, firm yet gentle, and bold yet deferent when appropriate, personal characteristics that do not naturally occur together. I praise God for His supernatural work in the lives of His people. Hal, the other Bible teachers, and the music ministers have given me a deep appreciation for reverence when teaching God's word and leading His sheep.

Opportunities to use and hone the talents the Lord has given to me have abounded at FBC-Parker. In the summer of 2000, the Lord taught me many priceless lessons about overseas mission work. A young couple in the church, Jeff and Jenni Hamm, accompanied me and several other Christians from around the U.S. to Ukraine where we worked with a Baptist church to evangelize the heathen and teach new believers. Jeff and I returned the following year to help the same church take the gospel to other villages near the city in which the church was located.

Teaching and "doing" personal evangelism, as you can see by the box that I checked on the accompanying application, is the one facet of ministry for which I feel most gifted. In 2001 I led a fourteen-week course on biblical evangelism and scripture memorization in the home of one of the church families. I am sure I learned as much as anyone in the class.

One of my favorite Bible verses is 1 Peter 3:15. It is the magna carta for apologetics. In the fall of 2002, Peter's words were often at the forefront of my mind due to the ministry in which I had become involved. Late in the summer of 2002, a friend from college who had been working as a cooperative student here in Dallas met a Muslim while visiting Charles Swindoll's fellowship in Frisco, Texas. His encounter led to more than a dozen formal debates/discussions with that Muslim and several other American and Middle-Eastern Islam devotees. The meetings, which are still in progress, usually last about four hours. I and two other FBC-Parker members are very thankful to God for the relationships we now have with our Muslim friends. We have learned much about the veracity and sufficiency of God's word to destroy every lofty thing raised up against the Truth. God has used the Muslims in my life to force me to better understand the big picture in God's revelation. I can now see the gospel in the Old Testament, a glorious thing, and can understand the meaning of texts I would not have otherwise sought to comprehend.

The year 2003 also proved to be instructive and exhortatory. We continued to meet with our Muslim friends. Near the middle of the year, Dr. Brunson asked me to consider moving to Cambodia for ten months to fill the vacant pulpit of two churches started by our native Cambodian missionary, Chheng Nuon. Chheng had to return to the U.S. in July to begin an intensive ten-month-long Hepatitis C treatment program. I did not sense the Lord's leading me to leave then, but I was open to moving to Asia in January of 2004 if needed. To get a feel for living there and the nature of the work, I and a former missionary to Uruguay, Don Eppler, visited the churches near the end of June. It was an incredible trip. The churches hosted a Bible conference at which Don and I preached via translators. I do believe in the perpetuity of the gift of tongues, but we relied on translators to be our voice then. Ha. Don and I spent a considerable amount of time with the provisional leaders of the main church in Prek Ambel in order to

ascertain the stability and quality of leadership that would be in place during Chheng's absence. We left the country believing the churches would be okay until their pastor returned. Jeff Hamm and Chheng Nuon recently returned from an assessment trip of the churches. Lacking their leader the two congregations had to address a few foxes in the vineyard a few weeks ago, but all is tranquil now. My assistance, therefore, will not be needed next year.

Lately, I have been very blessed to see many members of FBC-Parker become more aware of the need to personally visit families in the immediate vicinity of the church. In August of this year, I led the first church-wide outreach day at which time over twenty percent of the membership participated. Praise the Lord! A smaller group distributed another 200 invitation packets two weeks ago during the second outreach day. The area we want to cover is daunting for a church of only 100 members, but we know nothing is impossible with God. We trust He will bless and multiply our efforts if we are faithful to serve those around us.

The believers at FBC-Parker are meat eaters. For many years Dr. Brunson and the other preachers and teachers have consistently administered messages and lessons that are rich in substance, applicable, convicting, and edifying. I have always favored expository preaching, but Dr. Brunson's topical approach to the Scriptures has never left me hungry when he has stepped away from the pulpit. And his linguistic brilliance always accentuates the points he aims to make. I have met no one in the flesh yet who can match his oratory skills or quote more Scripture. I have written these things to help you understand how honored I was three months ago when Brother Hal asked me to help teach the adult Bible study class. I cannot think of a greater responsibility or honor than teaching God's word.

I still stand amazed at the precise, careful manner in which God has *always* led me to the church that I have needed and that needed me. Places wherein God's honor dwells are becoming fewer and fewer in these last days. Yet, He has, according to His word, been faithful to preserve a remnant to honor and bless His holy name. I've enjoyed knowing and loving many of that remnant at FBC-Parker.

Russell, the youth minister of Gatlin Baptist Church, and another brother, Rick Sasser, whom I grew to love while living in Oklahoma, were the first people to talk with me about Southern Seminary. I think both could have served as spokesmen for the school. For more than five years, I have prayed and thought much about attending a seminary to acquire a better understanding of God's word so that I might be a better witness for Him, regardless of my vocation afterwards. Early in 2002, I began to sense an overwhelming need to end my current profession to begin a seminary education. Deciding which school to attend was rather easy for me. I most admire Southern Seminary for its unwavering commitment to the "true truth" of God's word, as Francis Schaffer would put it. The faculty members seem to possess both big brains *and* big hearts for the glory of God, which is unusual in institutions of high scholastic caliber. I also admire Southern for its great concern for the propagation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and the nurturing of those whom the Lord draws to Himself. I have godly friends who have graduated from Southern and have nothing but good things to report. My first visit to the campus in April of 2003 verified their assessment of the school. The Lord alone makes men and women who they are. I firmly believe He has made the students, teachers, and administrators of Southern jealous for His glory.

Even if I had the tongue of Spurgeon and the mind of Edwards, I still could not adequately express my thankfulness for the marvelous, matchless grace of our loving Lord. He has saved me from the consequences of and bent toward violating His holy law. He has renewed my mind and realigned the affections of my heart. He has made me a prince in the kingdom of His dear Son. He has loved, instructed, comforted, reproved, encouraged, and nurtured me through so many wonderful saints and undershepherds of His glorious bride, the church. And I am confident that He who began this awesome work in me will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. May He receive all the glory, the honor, and the praise.

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