

QUESTIONS:

In a few paragraphs, describe your life as a teenager—social, familial, and spiritual.

When I was twelve I proclaimed myself an atheist, but I think I only wanted someone to prove to me that God was real. Then I went through a few rebellious years where my friends and I enjoyed pushing the limits. Ironically, we remained in honor society, held student body positions and were cheerleaders while we ran wild, broke rules, and mostly got away with it. Then right before my sophomore year, some friends were killed in a car wreck and I suddenly realized that life could be snuffed out in a heartbeat—and that scared me. As a result I cried out to God to show himself to me.

Shortly after school started, through a series of Young Life meetings and hearing the gospel for the first time, I finally got it. I gave my heart to Jesus and did a complete 180 turn around. I went from wild child to Jesus freak and most of my old friends and even my family thought I'd gone off the deep end. But it was real and before long our whole high school began to experience an amazing revival that still amazes me. I took my faith and relationship with God very seriously and even began reading about missionaries, hoping that God would call me to something like that.

Were you raised as in a Christian home?

My parents were divorced when I was about three. My father was alcoholic with some serious issues and so my mother parented my older sister and myself on her own. I think my mother believed in God, but we really didn't go to church, except for a very short spell which I initiated when I was about nine. I would describe our household as fairly liberal. Because my mother worked, our independence was encouraged at a young age. We had the support of a loving extended family, but none of them went to church. Consequently, I really didn't know much about God, the Bible, or Christianity when I finally became a Christian. In some ways I think that has been a blessing. It's allowed me to pursue my faith on my own terms and discover for myself what being a Christian is all about.

Who were your greatest spiritual influences when you were a teen?

Besides Jesus? We had some great Young Life leaders in our area. But there was also some amazing leadership right in our high school. A small group of senior boys really took their faith seriously. They would lead Bible study groups during lunch time at school, as well as what we called Rapp Sessions once a week in various homes. It really was an incredible era...we'd have gospel rock performers like Second Chapter of Acts, Barry McGuire, and Keith Green play at our high school as well as local churches.

How did you come to know the Lord?

To start with I was "kidnapped" to go to a Young Life meeting. And I'm certain that, despite my earlier crying out for God, I would never have gone otherwise. But when I heard the gospel for the first time, it registered in my heart. Somehow (because of God) I knew it was the truth. But it took hearing it a few times and finally attending a Rapp Session where I asked these "Christian" kids if they ever had doubts. Their faith and testimonies were so powerful, I expected them to say, "No, we never doubt." And that was going to be my excuse to bow out, because I felt like I was still full of doubts. But they all said, "Yes, we have doubts...all the time." Then they explained that faith was gift from God and that it was about believing things that your head didn't understand. And that just seemed to click for me. I went out into the parking lot by myself, and on that dark, rainy October night, I gave my heart to the Lord. My first prayer was something like, "If this is real, God, can you just help me to make it as a Christian until Christmas?" I have no idea why that seemed important to me at that time, but it was. Of course, that was many, many Christmases ago.

Can you share a brief testimony of how He has changed your life and been faithful to you?

Besides totally? When I became a Christian, I really did become a new person. It was pretty much night and day. Before accepting the Lord, I drank and cussed and skipped classes and lied to my mom...and although I hadn't done drugs or had sex yet, I'm sure it was right around the corner, since many of my friends were already there. But besides just those "sin" areas, my whole outlook changed. I became more hopeful, more positive. I cared more about people, I learned to love and wanted to make the world a better place. Jesus really did become my best friend and when I hit obstacles or got hurt or disappointed, I would always turn to him...and he'd always be there...always see me through. That's still the same now. I couldn't live without God in my life.

Did you regularly attend church when you were a teen? By choice? Why or why not?

Once I became a Christian I started going to church. Ironically, I went to the same church that I'd talked my mom into going when I'd been nine. It was a Methodist church, but like out high school it had experienced a little revival too. This was the result of what were called Lay Witness Missions, where "born again" members of another Methodist church would come and hold meetings and share testimonies. So for a couple of years, that little church was really on fire for God. But then pastors changed and many of us moved on to another church where we felt more spiritually cared for and fed.

Did you have any siblings? If so, tell us about them. Did you get along when you were a teen?

I have one sister who's about sixteen months older than me. Before I became a Christian we fought all the time. She'd picked on me constantly when we were younger, but when I became a rebellious, smart-mouthed teen, I could be extremely mean to her in revenge. She was as shocked as anyone when I became a Christian. So then she'd pick on me because I was a Christian, consequently I'd have to bite my tongue and pray a lot. Then, because I was better at earning money and had more clothes, she would want to borrow things. I decided one day that if everything I owned was really God's I'd have to share my clothes with her. When I told her this, she was surprised...but I think it got to her. A couple of years later, she accepted the Lord. And she's still a very strong Christian today. And we're very close.

Tell us a couple quirky facts about yourself.

I try not to show it, but I can be kind of a clean freak, germophobic...like I don't like touching anything in a public restroom or door handles or grocery carts or even airplanes. Sort of like Monk, the OCD TV character. But I don't carry handiwipes around (well, sometimes like on a trip) and I try not to let it control me because I know enough about OCD to know that it can be disabling. Another quirky fact? I was the youngest short term assistant to serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators (when I was 19) for a year in Papua New Guinea...and while there I spent two weeks with missionary, Marilyn Laszlo, where we swam across a muddy, crocodile-infested river every afternoon. You couldn't pay me to do that now.

Who were some of your favorite authors when you were a teen? Your favorite books?

Before becoming a Christian, I didn't read that much since I was too busy being a wild child. But after becoming a Christian, I had a hunger to read as much as I could lay my hands on about being a Christian. At the time, there wasn't all that much to read, but I really got into missionary books. I actually read biographies of Hudson Taylor, CT Studd, Watchman Nee, Jim Eliot, Isobel Kuhn, Elisabeth Eliot and many other Christian leaders and missionaries.

When did you start writing? Why?

I'd always written...whether journaling, letters, poetry, songs, term papers...written words just seemed to pour out of me. Consequently, I took the ability to write for granted. But I hit my mid thirties and the need to write became explosive—I felt I had to write or burst. Without even

knowing what I was doing or why, I simply began to write stories. Then I joined a critique group, went to writer's conference and my pieces began to sell. Soon I was writing books...and before long they were being contracted. Now, many books later, I'm still writing.

What goals do you have for your career?

The thing I love about writing is that I don't think I can ever "conquer" it. It's like exploring unknown territory with every story I write. There's still so much to learn and I hope that I'm improving my craft with each book. I also have an interest in writing for film and TV. One of my books (Finding Alice) will be a Lifetime TV movie (out next fall) and several others have been optioned and under consideration. I've also written one screen play and I would like to learn more about working in this industry—when I'm not so busy writing books.

What challenges do you face in writing Christian books?

I suppose my biggest challenge has been to write stories that reflect real life, which we all know can get pretty gritty at times, without compromising my convictions and faith. My goal is to write stories that change lives and offer hope, portraying grace, love and forgiveness in a way that is honest and true and brings glory to God.