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My Journey to Know the Love of God

Timothy Cannata

The smell of popcorn filled the air. My mom and I had just arrived at the movie theatre to see “Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen”. Just before we walked into the theatre, I caught a glimpse of a “2012” movie poster which sparked something in my mind that would change my life forever. The thought of the world ending kept growing in my mind. Then fear began to spread like cancer through my heart. I began to lose control, and this marked the beginning of my first panic attack. Immense fear swelled into my heart while my surroundings became a blur. My mouth dried up as my heart pounded in my chest. I could feel my body trembling, and I didn’t know what to do. I whispered to my mom that we need to leave. I fled my surroundings, but the suffocating fear followed. I could barely breathe as sweat poured down my face. I could not think rationally; there was no hope in my mind, only terror.

I stumbled out of the theatre following closely behind my mom. The warm summer wind rushed around me, drying the sweat on my forehead. I crawled into the car and fell onto the backseat. I heard my mom mutter “hang in there sweetie, I am going to call dad.” I moaned “what is going on?” She told me “we are going to go the hospital to figure that out.” I cried out “make it stop!” My mom looked at me, unable to bare the sight of seeing me in so much emotional pain. My mom got off the phone and in a hopeful voice told me, “Dad is going to meet us at the hospital after he picks up your sister.” The pain grew as the fear overtook my mind. The outside world disappeared around me as I was sucked into my thoughts. I was alone and powerless in the back of my car, left to the mercies of my mind. I was drowning in a raging ocean of fear, alone and weak. I violently shook, hopelessly trying to get rid of the terror. I cried out “roll the windows down,” desperately hoping this would take away the fear. Alone and helpless, I stopped fighting and started to cry. The paralyzing fear left me hopeless. In the midst of this fear,

life became simple. My only goal was to make the anxiety stop. We made it to the hospital and got admitted. I laid on the hard rubber of the bed feeling trapped in the small room. My mom reached over and grabbed my hand and gave me a reassuring smile.

My father and sister finally arrived at the hospital to see what was happening. I said with a shaking voice, "I don't know, just make it stop." The doctors came back and told us there was nothing physically wrong with me. They did not know what was going on and told us we should see a mental health doctor. My family began to make desperate attempts to make this pain go away. My sister tried quoting scripture, but it didn't get rid of the feeling. Then my dad started reading a Christian book. He read it out loud for several minutes. I did not understand what he was saying, but it calmed me down. The steady, deep voice of my father soothed my thoughts, and I felt less alone. After an agonizing three hours, the fear receded and left me feeling defeated and scared.

I later discovered that what I had experienced at the movie theatre was a panic attack. The doctors eventually diagnosed me with a panic disorder and prescribed me medicine to lessen the strength of the anxiety, so I could get to the point of controlling it. I was desperate to find this point and stop the anxiety from ever coming back. My dad pointed me to God and told me He was allowing this stuff to happen to draw me to Him. Through these experiences, I started to look to God in order to get rid of the attacks. I was baptized a few months after my first panic attack and I began to run after Jesus Christ. A couple years after I was baptized, an intense panic attack about my faith shook my heart. It sparked a fire in my heart, and then I pursued God with a renewed passion. Then at the start of my junior year of high school, my panic attacks left. The fear that attacked my mind had been defeated, leaving me with deep emotional scars and a feeling of emptiness. Once the anxiety left, I walked away from my pursuit of God and, my goal was to keep it from ever coming back. I realized that love is a very powerful emotion. If I could find love, then the panic attacks would never come back. This was when I started my quest to find what love truly is.

It was my senior year of high school. Every year the Bellbrook High School marching band competes at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indiana in the Bands of America Grand National Championship.

Senior year was supposed to be the best year, but it wasn't for me, not even close.

I put my suitcase away and walked into the cold dark bus. After an emotional three days, it was finally time to leave. I was part of the Bellbrook High School marching band, and we had just finished performing. I sat in a seat alone looking out at Lucas Oil Stadium. A flood of tears welled up behind my eyes. My girlfriend had just broken up with me and said that we were no longer friends. We had dated for almost two months and had been close friends for over a year. We were such close friends, and I didn't want to lose that. Looking out into the sea of people, I felt alone. I pressed my head against the cold glass of the window and looked out over the winter night. I saw friends laughing, couples holding hands, and people putting their stuff away. As I looked at all these people I could not shake the feeling of being alone. I put my headphones in and retreated into my thoughts.

My thoughts raced across my mind: "what went wrong? I tried everything. I talked to her in the hotel lobby and I said all the right things, but she still told me to leave her alone. Why is this happening? Why can't I be happy? I just wanted to meet someone that I could be happy with. I wanted someone who would challenge me to be a better person. Someone who would fulfill me. I just wanted to find someone to love. I wanted to discover what love was. Was that too much to ask for? I just wanted a relationship to last. This was my fifth failed relationship. How could I screw up five relationships? I just don't want to be alone anymore. I want this quest to find love to be over. I just want somebody to hold. I just want somebody to love. I just don't want to be alone anymore. Why is God letting this happen? Where is God? Why won't He provide the right girl? Why did He let me experience my anxiety? Why did He let all this happen? Does God even love me?" I snapped back to reality when the lights of the bus came on. I took my earbuds out and listened to attendance. Once announcements ended, the lights turned off. I put my headphones back in my ears and retreated back into my thoughts. The bus drove into the darkness of the winter night as I sat in my seat alone on a bus full of people.

I gave up on high school relationships and decided to wait until college. The summer was over, and I was excited to begin a new chapter in my life. The first week at Cedarville University changed

my life. During the first week of school, Cedarville held their fall Bible conference, with messages every morning and night. This year, Clayton King spoke, and God used these messages in a big way. I decided to rededicate my life to Christ. I was excited to trust God with my life again. Then, three weeks into the semester I received the news that would shake my world.

One Saturday, my sister and I decided to hang out in the HSC and do homework together. After an hour my dad asked us if we could Skype with him. When I saw his face, I could tell something was wrong. My dad told us in a shaky voice, “Grandpa had a stroke and the doctors don’t think he will be able to recover.” My face dropped, and I stared at the ground paralyzed by the news. He told us he would keep us updated on how he was doing. Eight days later I went to church with two of my friends. When I got back from church, my sister texted me to meet her at her dorm. I walked over and saw my sister, mom, and dad in the parking lot. My sister told me in a quiet voice, “Grandpa had just passed away.” I opened my mouth to say something but couldn’t find the words to speak. I hugged my parents, and we all went to Young’s Dairy to talk about the situation.

The funeral was in Florida and was happening the following weekend. My sister and I wanted to go, but my sister had to stay in Ohio to take care of my grandma. Although my sister had to stay, my parents said I could go. We were leaving Wednesday to travel so I only had three short days to prepare for the trip.

I told my RA, Rodrigo and some of my friends who lived in my unit that my grandpa had passed away and I was leaving to go to Florida in three days. I told my friend Alex this, and I also said that we are making the trip on a shoestring. The day before I left for the trip I found a thirty-dollar gift card on my desk. I didn’t know how to respond to this act of love. All my life when I experienced hard times I felt alone; this time it was different.

I met with Rodrigo the day before I left, and he talked with me about the situation. It was difficult to talk about my grandpa’s funeral plans, and I couldn’t explain how I felt about everything without crying. Then he asked to pray with me said, “Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for being so good to us and being our God. I thank you for Timmy. Thank you for blessing him into our lives. We come to you today with heavy hearts. You know all that has happened

with Timmy's family, and I pray that you're with him through this time. I pray that you draw him closer to you through this time and help him to know that you're with him and working in his life. I pray that you are with him and his family as they drive down to Florida, that they have a safe drive and that they stay focused on you. I know Timmy has a lot of homework, so help him to get that done when he is able. Help him to mourn when it's time to mourn and focus when it's time to focus. Please use this trip to bring peace into his heart and into the hearts of his family. May your will be carried out on this trip, in his life, and in his family's life. In Jesus name, amen."

I looked up, wiped the tears from my eyes, and hugged him. Before I left he showed me a picture of his grandma holding him when he was a baby. He told me that she passed away his freshman year of college here and it was four weeks into the semester when that happened. He told me he knew how I felt, and that comforted me. He also told me to take these three days as rest. He knew I had homework, but said, "Be with your family the three days you're there and do your homework on the traveling days." After I left his room, I said bye to him. Kenton, my mentor, prayed with me and told me if I ever needed someone to talk to he would be there for me. I talked with a few more people before I left and they were all praying for me. This time around I didn't feel alone.

We traveled for a day and a half. Thursday evening was the visitation. I got a text from a few of my friends that day saying they were praying for me. I saw a lot of family I didn't know I had and family I rarely get to see. The visitation was challenging, but having family there made it easier. The next day was the ceremony. It was very tough, and I cried a lot through it, but a feeling of peace began to grow in my heart. On the way back home, I got a text from Adam, one of the guys in my unit, who said he was praying for me. At this moment, I prayed to God. I was going through so much, but I finally had peace. I was not alone, but God was with me.

I came back to Cedarville refreshed and at peace. Two days later, I got a text from my sister saying Belle had died. Belle was my dog who my family has had for twelve years. That hurt so much. I went for a jog around the lake. After my jog, I sat by the lake and started crying. The next night I was sitting in bed at midnight when I had a panic attack. I hit rock bottom. I felt alone and afraid sitting in my bed. I jumped out of bed praying for a way out. Then I saw

Alex studying in the hall. I went over to him and told him that I was having a panic attack. He prayed with me and then just listened. After about ten minutes I went back to bed and lay there.

Right before I fell asleep, it finally occurred to me that I was never alone. God was always there, but I had never run to him. I knew I wasn't alone, and it was in that moment that I realized my satisfaction and my love is found in Jesus Christ. He is the perfect standard of love. He loves us with a perfect love. I had finally found what I had been chasing, and finally recognized what it was. It was in that moment that I came to know the love of God.