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TWO LOST GIRLS

I was recently sitting with a friend who I've been journeying with for a short time and getting to know. We have been connecting to pray and work out some of the difficult chapters of our lives and share our stories. In our last meeting Jesus spoke these words to her, "It's not about getting it right, it's about walking it out with me."

You know those moments when something is spoken to someone else, but the words connect to your soul. They permeate your spirit and land in such a way that you carry them with you – like a new extension of yourself. A truth or understanding that brings light into a place that was void and dark. This was a moment where God lit a torch for me and I started to examine the words He spoke to us that day in lieu of the journey towards healing I had been on.

The last five years I've been committed to deep diving into my past and resolving areas of my life that seem to be stuck. One

thing I have learned is that striving, for me, is something that seems to be persistently unresolvable. Time and time again something will rise to the surface in my life that I am pursuing with a striving heart. Even the words, “It’s not about getting it right,” offend me in a way. Aren’t our social constructs and religions based on this notion of getting things right? I’ve never been one to be okay with getting things wrong. That seems to lead to a consequence of some kind – I tend to avoid the pain of getting things wrong as often as I can. In fact, I avoid pain to such a degree I will do almost anything to escape it.

To strive refers to one who is fighting, contending, or straining to achieve something or working hard. The opposite of striving would be relaxing, resting, yielding or surrendering. Striving for me became a tool to keep myself from hurting, even though the reality was that striving was the very thing keeping me from healing. “My identity is ultimately shaped by who I love and what pain I avoid. Love and the pain I avoid often compete within me to see whether my love or my fear of pain is stronger.”¹

Much of my identity was driven by the pain I was avoiding because that seemed to be safest. In relationships or situations, my focus would tend to be on the person or thing that had the potential to be the most dangerous. I would problem solve what I would have to do to neutralize my environment constantly. The root of this was unresolved pain, which without realizing it, became the driving force of my perfectionism, people pleasing and a distorted relationship with God. Striving and working in my own strength often gave me control over my circumstances

and allowed me to not depend on others. People can't hurt you if you don't let them help you. This seemed to work well for a time but eventually the foundation I had built my life on to keep myself from feeling pain came crashing down. And with it the false identity I had been accustomed to. On the outside I looked whole but on the inside I was fractured and imprisoned.

I was born into a broken home where chaos and dysfunction were the foundation of my youth. To combat the level of constant change and loneliness, I became addicted to performance and achievement. Being academically inclined I was happy to give myself away to my studies, filling the unhappiness and voids with self-motivational speeches on how to be an honor roll student. Having control and being self-sufficient also became a way in which I found I could create my own happy oasis in what was otherwise a rather detached deserted adolescence.

I grew up with a single mother, just the two of us for the most part. My brother who is 5 years older than me lived with our dad cities away. Mom was a brilliant artist and entrepreneur and a model for creativity and hard work. Despite the many hardships she faced in her life, she never showed any signs of weakness or gave any setbacks much time. To this day she is the strongest person I know.

We didn't talk about God in our home. With occasional visits to my grandma's church on Easter, I remember little outside of the dresses my mother would buy me to wear. My parents divorced when I was four years old and I don't have a single

memory of the two of them together in a home. Any interaction between them was fighting over custody and child support.

My father at one time was an evangelist with a burning desire to share the gospel, but somewhere along the way he fell far from the church and people. I would see my dad occasionally with split custody and remember a few conversations about Jesus and some powerful testimonies, but I was never able to reconcile much about my heavenly dad. Even still, there was a seed planted in my young self that believed in the God of my father. I remember being a fervent prayer at the age of five. I prayed for healing over my parents because I wanted my family back together. I can still remember almost every word of those prayers as if they are still echoing into eternity. Every night I would recite the same words over and over again. I don't remember how old I was when I gave up. But I do know that was when I stopped believing that prayer really mattered to God. Or that I mattered much to God. That little girl crying out for a father to come back home had to find a way to cope with heartache too painful and too complex to reconcile. Unbeknownst to me, this trauma would govern my heart and all the relationships to come.

There was always something I felt separated me from the rest of the kids at school who had families and spent time together. I noticed most of them attended church and I suppose a part of me hungered for both as they seemed to go hand and hand for everyone else. In our small town in rural Minnesota I only knew of two churches, and as far as I was concerned the entire world consisted only of Catholics and Lutherans. I have a vivid memory of a conversation between a family member and myself

around the age of ten. The word had gotten to this person that I wasn't baptized as an infant. They told me that I was going to hell if I didn't do this. I was terrified. I thought I was saved when I was little, my dad had said all I had to do was ask Jesus into my heart. So I did that every night just to be sure He was in there. The thought of being unsaved became something of a death sentence that attached itself into my youngest understanding of God and a father's love.

At some point in my young teens, depression and self-hate crept masterfully into my poorly formed identity. Bullied at school for being overweight and mocked because of my off-brand wardrobe I lost any sense of compassion towards myself. The world informed my identity. The world was cruel. I found other things like substance abuse to pacify the loneliness and unworthiness I felt in school. Drinking on my way to student council meetings before school started in the 7th grade. My mom was unaware because of my continued report card achievements. I suppose her lack of noticing my need for help became an internal motivator for finding approval in all the wrong places. Something we talk openly about now. She recently said, "At one point you pushed me away and I let you. Looking back now, I know I shouldn't have done that." I remember those moments. When I would test and close the door to her attempts to connect. The door would stay closed. She gave me what she believed I wanted. As a mother to a 13 year old myself, I can understand this age and appreciate the independence that comes along with it. How was she to know the wounding message that would wire

in me was that I was unwanted and unlovable? The very last thing in the world she wanted me to feel.

Mom was a contender for finding love, only she found a world of betrayal and always married the same kind of wrong. I watched her get hurt time and time again and rebuild our life from the ground up. Despite how lonely we both were we managed to get by and laugh at one another on occasion. My mother had a beautiful way of not taking herself too seriously and her perseverance is something I admire in her to this day. There was still something special to the friendship we developed in those years despite the silence between the walls – the two lost girls.

2

STARS OF PROMISE

Because our lives at the time were in constant transition and I found myself alone more often than not, I was struggling to find my worth. People pleasing became a strategy I found the most safety in. During middle school, I started attaching my identity and value to others opinions of me. Finding ways to become as likeable and pleasing to my peers to gain their favor often led me to unhealthy relationships, unsafe situations and experiences well beyond my years and maturity. I had no real sense of belonging to a people outside of my classmates. I would do almost anything to win their approval and avoid the faces of rejection. Since our identity is the one thing our brain cannot create on its own it relies heavily on our experiences, our memories and the faces that love us to tell us who we are. Dr. Jim Wilder, author and neurotheologian explains, “Our identity really is, what I have seen mirrored to me, is who I know myself to be.”¹ Looking back, I can see how desperate I was to experience some reflection of value in the faces of the people I loved. It seemed to only come if I was behaving in a way that pleased them.

Several of my friends at the time invited me to their youth group meetings at church. Up until this time I had been carrying a deep unreconciled belief that I was going to hell and was very keen on asking the pastor of the church to baptize me which he happily obliged. I remember those Wednesday nights, starting to come alive in the possibilities of Jesus. A heavenly Father who loved me. I still didn't really understand what He had to do with God or how they had anything to do with each other. I was happy to combine them into one concept and call it good. Call it God. I remember sharing with my youth group a few times where something supernatural had happened and I knew God was speaking to me through it. I distinctly remember my youth leader's eyes getting big and her delight in hearing my stories.

The first dream I remember seeing or hearing God happened when I was 12. I had been praying every night repenting for being sinful and I didn't want to be anymore. In the dream I was floating in Lake Superior, a large body of crystal clear water we have here in Minnesota. I was repenting and suddenly I heard God speak through the clouds above me telling me I was clean and there were no stains of sin on me. At that age I still hadn't been able to comprehend what Christ had done for me. But in that moment, encountering God in my dream, I knew that I was forgiven. I stopped repenting after that for being a sinner. Looking back that dream marked a moment of freedom from a faulty belief system. That dream was the beginning of my restoration story – finding my true identity.

These were the kind of stories I would share with anyone who would lend an ear at church. The pastor at Trinity Lutheran took

me under his wing and invited me to come to the church once a week so I could catch up for the years of youth group I had missed. I wanted to get confirmed with my classmates because that seemed to be the thing that a Christian should do. I would walk into his office where he sat with a warm presence and a kind smile. In his tender voice he would lecture me on scripture and things I ought to know about the life of Jesus. I had to memorize the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer and he would laugh at me and seemed rather amused at my eagerness to learn. He said, "You come here every week and sit with me and I believe you are actually paying attention to what I'm saying and not just nodding your head." He was right. I was fascinated with the things he was saying. It was all new to me and there was a sense of self growing and new life. His kindness has stayed with me all these years. The time he sat with me and the way he made me feel seen was a great gift to a lost girl.

The Lord often brings me back to those memories when Him and I come together these days. He shows me how present He was in orchestrating moments like sitting in a pastors office memorizing scripture. Those days when I often found myself alone, I would go outside and lay under the star lit sky. It was the first time I started to understand the majesty and glory of God. Right there on display in the stars. I would recall the Lord's Prayer and Nicene Creed and as I did I grew more and more aware of the one I was connecting to. The idea of God started becoming a relationship with God motivating a change in my heart. Almost overnight I walked away from people and paths of destruction I had been on. Even destructive things I was doing to

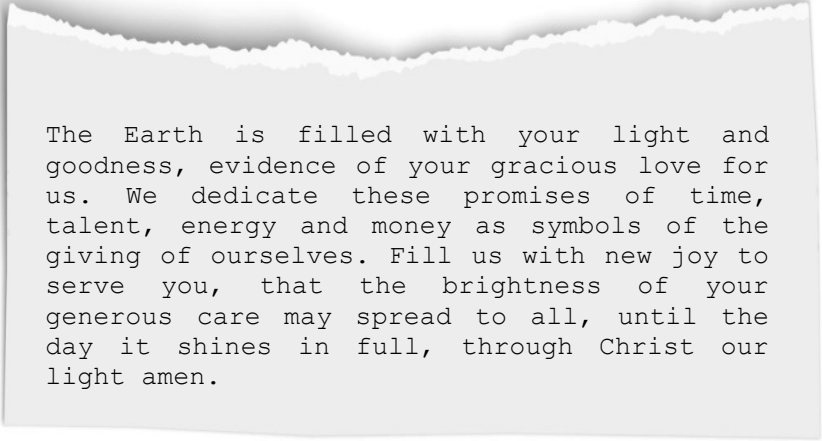
myself. The dysfunction and abusive patterns I was using to fill a void no longer felt like home. I was finding a new home in my creator. I was finding Him.

A few years ago I found an old journal from those stargazing days in my attic as I was looking for something in a box of old memories. Inside were the faces of my best friends from school and cuttings from popular teen magazines. My heart broke for the emotions that younger me was expressing through the artwork inside. I hadn't remembered until I saw the words; *HELP, Pressure, A+, The Faces of Depression* and a cut out of Steve Urkel glued to the cover. The feelings flooded back as I turned the page and saw my Dad's pager number written down. It was probably the most I had of him at the time. The next pages revealed a pleasant surprise. Taped securely to the notepad were the very clippings of the Lord's Prayer I had gotten from the church with a journal entry that read;

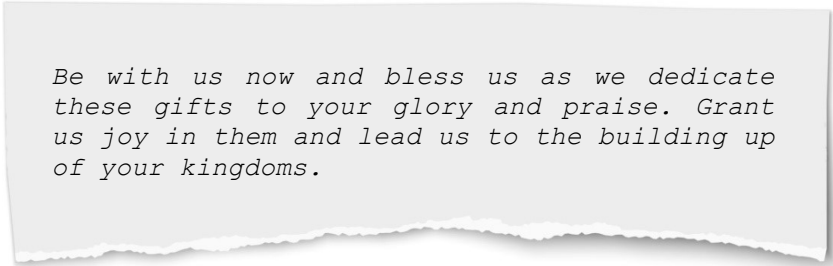
November 19, 1998

I never used to know this prayer because I never went to church. But when I started going every time everyone would say this prayer. But last Sunday I went and I cut this out of a flyer that I found. Now I feel a little better because all I need to do is look in this and there it is. OR maybe if I read it long enough I'll memorize it. I feel a lot better now that I go to confirmation.

Turning the yellowed pages that were stained by time revealed more of my story.



The Earth is filled with your light and goodness, evidence of your gracious love for us. We dedicate these promises of time, talent, energy and money as symbols of the giving of ourselves. Fill us with new joy to serve you, that the brightness of your generous care may spread to all, until the day it shines in full, through Christ our light amen.



Be with us now and bless us as we dedicate these gifts to your glory and praise. Grant us joy in them and lead us to the building up of your kingdoms.

November 25th, 1998

All these clippings that I clip out are from Sunday church. I'm not sure why I clip these all out, maybe its cause I feel holeyer (sp?) or something. Cause then all I do is read them and it's just like I'm praying.

November 25th, 1998 – Second Entry

Here is all of my opinions about love. No matter how much you say you love a person or how much you write it, it will never be true unless you feel it...

This new language that I didn't fully understand started to transform my thinking and my inner turmoil. I wanted to feel love and I was longing to be seen and known. As I read the next few entries of my old journal I wept in that dark dust filled attic.

December 13th, 1998

Stars are more than stars to me its heaven....I don't know if stars mean that to anyone else...

I continued talking about my friend at the time who also loved stars and how much we had in common. Both of us felt depressed and wanted more out of our lives than drugs and who we were becoming. We were in a circle of friends who found connection being lost kids. Initially they welcomed me and admired the fact that I wouldn't touch a cigarette. Eventually the safety and love I felt from them led me to partake in whatever they were doing. Before I knew it, smoking weed and drinking became a natural part of my day to day. Beneath the surface I didn't like how it made me feel and what it was doing to me. But I didn't know how to move away from it or move away from

the people who I had come to know and love. Looking back I can see how God met me in the place of not knowing what to do and created a new path. I was crying out for help and He answered me. This journal was a time capsule of memories. Everything I had suppressed and buried over the years and completely forgotten. It seemed that this was a key to understanding some of the reasons I was finding myself stuck today. So often we want memories to stay in the past but when they are unresolved or unhealed they live in our present. This was a rescue mission to descend to the darkest cavern of my youth and rescue the lost girl within by remembering her story.

December 13th, 1998

Picture yourself blind, never seeing anything in your life. The way I would describe it would be blackness. Nothingness, sometimes evilness. I know that I couldn't think. All my thoughts would be jumbled and senseless....and sometimes I would sit there and in my head be screaming and screaming for my mom to come stop me. To find out where I really was and what I was doing.

At the age of 14, I had found myself attached to unhealthy behaviors trying to avoid the pain of loneliness. I didn't have words to convey or the ability to understand, to know that what I was missing was attunement and love. I *knew* I was loved but the

pain of loneliness was more present in our home and spoke louder to me. My mother worked hard those days to keep a roof over our head and we scarcely crossed paths. I had little to no relationship with my brother or father. I thought if I worked hard enough and did everything perfect that would make me worthy of love. It was all coming back to me. I marveled as I read the words I used to express the emptiness I was feeling and the spiritual darkness I was surrounded in – looking for light. Looking for the One who is love and His kingdom of which I knew little of.

In his book, *The Power to Bless*, Alan Wright shares “Without capacity for language, we are less than human.”² He illustrates this powerfully with a quote from Hellen Keller who didn’t experience real humanity until she discovered speech.

For nearly six years I had no concept of nature or mind or death or God, I literally thought with my body...then suddenly...I awoke to language, to knowledge of love, to the visual concepts of nature, of good and evil! I was actually lifted from nothingness to human life.³

In that season of church nights, Sunday mornings, a gentle pastor who spoke life over me, the baptismal waters and the awakened sense of nature and God in creation over my head in the night sky, I started to learn a new language. A language of love. It was more than a word, it was a feeling. It was an experience rooted deep within my healing heart. Something that whispered that I was made for more in this lifetime. Something

more than what I was experiencing in the loneliness of a broken home or a substance. I started to shift away from nothingness.

I recall my last binge and the end of darkness. It felt like a battle over my identity because something was trying to keep me in a state of confusion. I distinctly remember a loud antagonizing thought come into my mind that started mocking the existence of God. A screaming voice that tried to come against this new love I had discovered in Christ. Is God even real? Is any of it real? I distinctly remember turning away from that lifestyle from that moment on. I wasn't about to exchange this new feeling for one that beckoned me back to nothingness. Not anymore. There were too many stars in the sky and each one sang a song of promise.

October 21st, 1999

You can change your mind but your heart and soul must be willing.

These last words written in the journal were crammed on the bottom of the page after I mentioned a valuable lesson I learned through the process of transformation. I was now a freshman in high school and boasting of my grades and how I was finding myself. I listed several crushes and my deep desire to live life to the fullest and seize every moment to experience joy. The words inked on the pages spoke into my desire to break away from all the negative things in my life that were keeping me down. One of my friends during this time had gotten into treatment and

came back a different person. I had noted how proud I was and how quickly a person can change if they are willing. I realized that change required willingness and it needed to come from the heart, not the head. No one can make that choice for us but they can give us an invitation.

I no longer attended church because confirmation ended but I was still experiencing God around me in creation. I continued to focus on school with a deep love of the arts which I inherited from my mother who now owned and operated a framing studio and art gallery in our small town. Leaving destructive relationships in her past – it seemed we were both on a new path. We were ready for change.

In no time I was working several jobs, enrolled in community college while still in high school and falling in love with my now husband. These were the years I found myself in the arms of someone who I had determined God had created just for me, Trevor DeCorsey. He had already graduated high school when we started dating while I was a sophomore. I remember meeting his family for the first time. They were one of those families I had deemed perfect. They had a beautiful home full of love. They went to the Catholic Church every Sunday and had meals together. His mother was the most encouraging person I had ever met and they welcomed me into their home as if I was one of their own. In those years I was both thankful but also burdened by the truth of what home was supposed to feel like. The presence of Trevor's family made the absence of mine come to the surface in new ways. It made me fully aware of the things I

had never gotten to experience which created other unhealthy ways of coping.

Trevor, my patient hero, showed me the love of the Father by picking up the pieces when I would fall apart day after day. When the voice of rejection would tell me I was unlovable and not enough, he was there to remind me that I was. He walked through the valley with me as I had developed an eating disorder and routinely pushed him away because his love for me at times was too real for an immature teen. I didn't know how to love him back the same. Not in the sacrificial way he loved me. But no matter how much I hurt him and hurt myself his love never wavered. He endured patiently, waiting for me to come back to him. He embodied the love of Christ to me. Never rejecting or condemning me – just waiting and loving me back to life. Once again God provided me with a new language of love, grace.

3

THE NARROW ROAD

“You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.”

-Matthew 7:13-14

Matthew 7:13-14 was the only Bible verse I had ever memorized. I have no idea how old I was when it permeated my heart but it was the only one my Dad had ever spoken to me and I clung to it. I suppose the striver within wanted to always make sure I was on the narrow way and not the broad one. I had been on a path of destruction and I didn’t want to go back. It didn’t mean I didn’t wander off every so often but the striver was always propelling me to work harder and to keep my eye focused on the narrow gate. Only I thought that was a call to performance and not a relationship. I was working towards perfectionism and

success. I didn't know that entering the gate wasn't based on our works. The gate is Him. "Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures." (John 10:9)

I started my counseling journey in my 30's because of a season of overwhelm I didn't know how to process alone. After a few months of counseling I was asked if I had ever experienced any childhood trauma. "No," I quickly replied. "Nothing traumatic." She then suggested that I go home and ask Trevor if he thought I had any childhood trauma. She explained that sometimes our loved ones can see things more easily about our lives than we can see for ourselves. I thought that sounded interesting but didn't expect him to respond any different than myself. As soon as I got home and started telling him about my session as I usually did, I decided to follow her advice. I asked him if he could see any trauma in my childhood. I remember his response vividly because it caught me off guard. "Jess you have so much trauma in your past – the craziest part of it is that you don't remember." He was right.

He started explaining things from the way he remembered – the countless times he would come to be with me because I was alone. The endless hours he would spend comforting the rejection I was feeling or the tears that he caught as I watched the hardships both of my parents were facing. The weekends I was alone as my mother found another companion to spend time with now that I was working and scarcely around myself. The façade I carried at the time to try to make myself look happy and beautiful on the outside when torrents of self-loathing

accompanied me most of my time alone. Always lingering in my peripheral vision – always present as I fixed my gaze on working hard and people pleasing. Becoming what I thought the world wanted me to be. It's no wonder why I let the painful things get buried deep inside and internalized. I had a hope and a future and I was going to make it for myself and no one was going to stop me.

My last year of high school, I found myself immersed in studies of ancient mythologies that peaked my curiosities in world religions. I was enrolled almost entirely in college courses my senior year driving my rusty beat up truck back and forth to campus. I took in as many art courses as I could and the professor took a special liking to me, despite my young age, and let me co-lead her classes on occasion. She spoke a tremendous amount of identity into me as an artist. And with this new found confidence I wanted to study art and art history at university. Upon making this decision my mother warned me of choosing this path, pleading for me to pursue a degree in business or something else of that nature. She had been able to find stability as an artist herself by framing and selling art. She knew firsthand how hard it would be for me.

I couldn't argue her. I had grown up watching her work tirelessly to make ends meet, struggling to sell her own art. I had a high school teacher at the time that was encouraging me to consider a degree in art education. He loved his job as an art instructor and thought it was something I would like as well. Fear of failure made the decision for me. I didn't want to risk having an unsuccessful career as an artist but I also didn't want

to let go of this part of my life. Becoming an art teacher made sense. I always identified as an artist. As young as the age of five I had people wanting to buy my drawings. It was something I always seemed to have a knack for and it was the one thing everyone seemed to champion about me. Being an artist was a place of refuge and safety that I could retreat to. A place that felt secure and untainted.

In June of 2003 I graduated high school and Trevor proposed to me. I couldn't wait to take his last name. Something inside of me wanted to sever all ties to my story of origin and have a new name. We went off to college together and were married a year later one hot July day in 2004. We had little to nothing to our name as we started building our life together, but I was used to this kind of building.

I was not a great wife in those early years. We were busy cramming for exams and working random jobs with little time in between for much else. Trevor was eager to start a family and I had no intentions of settling down whatsoever. The thought of a family had never really crossed my mind. We never spoke about our faith much and didn't attend a church. I was fighting a deep desire to have total freedom and to experience all the pleasure that this world had to offer which resulted in endless weekend binges and bars.

Being the only married couple on campus was challenging. The honeymoon days quickly wore off as fellow students and new acquaintances responded negatively asking why we rushed into marriage. I felt judged and insecure. My resolution was to live like a single and do whatever I wanted to do with little

thought of how it was impacting Trevor. What I love about him to this day is that he still claims that loving me has been easy. HA! I remember one time living in a rental house in Northern Minnesota when he started to cry. This was something I hadn't seen before no matter what circumstances he had faced. He said, "I feel like I am losing you." And the ugly truth, he was losing me.

It's not easy to love someone who lives their life lost. Taking on a new name didn't resolve everything that I had hoped it would as a new identity. On occasion I would think about God but He had become something of the past. I was on my own path and I wasn't going to let anyone get in my way of where I wanted to go and what I wanted to accomplish in my life. However, that day when Trevor opened up his heart to me, there was a still small voice that pierced through the walls I had built up. I can picture the entire scene and the cry of my young faithful husband's heart. Here I was, on a destructive path, hurting the person I loved most. And once again I was faced with the choice to turn away from a lifestyle that had cunningly led me astray. The greatest gift in that process was growing a deeper love for Trevor and for our future together. I wanted him and I wanted to become the wife and partner he deserved. This opened me up to a moment of total surrender that marked a dramatic change in my relationship with God.

Also, during that time, we had a pair of cocker spaniels that had a litter of puppies. When they were born I had a favorite one that took after its dad and his markings. Within a week or so it became the runt and stopped eating altogether. To keep it alive I

had to feed it every few hours day and night to make sure it would survive. One night I was inserting its feeding tube and it took its final breath in my hands and passed away. I had grown so attached to this little one it destroyed me. I couldn't understand what I had done wrong or what I could have done differently and it made me feel so powerless. I had no power over death. I had done everything I could do but it didn't matter because it was out of my control. Something in my spirit realized the fragility of creation and how every breath answers to the author of life in the end. My soul responded by lifting my eyes to Him and there I discovered a deep desire to give Jesus my life and everything I put my hands to, as I realized my life had been in his hands all along. I was starting to understand the gateway to life was trusting Him.