

Paul Browne: Running from God

I grew up hearing the message of the Bible. My father was an army chaplain and a pastor, so we always went to church and pretty frequently had family devotions where all of us kids were taught from the Bible, and we prayed together as a family. I was entirely convinced that all of us are sinners rightly condemned by God, but that God had made a peace plan, sending his Son, Jesus Christ into the world to save us. I believed that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord was the only way we could ever be pardoned of our sins, escape eternal punishment, and once more know God as our loving Father.

This was what I was convinced of intellectually, and as a kid I had a pretty good mind. The problem was that, while my mind was good, my heart was bad. The very things that Jesus told me not to do were the things I wanted very much to do. The thought of bowing down to Jesus Christ as my Lord and submitting to him all my obedience was extremely distasteful. Unbearable. So I didn't.

In fact, I couldn't; I was a slave to sin. And even while I willfully rejected Jesus Christ, unable to turn toward him for what I knew would be his mercy, I was terrified of the consequences. As much as I tried to suppress it, there sometimes arose—momentarily and unavoidably—the certain conviction that I would stand before him at my death (or his return) to answer why I had persistently rebelled against him and kicked at his offer of love.

For many years I went through the motions of being a Christian, attending church quietly with my parents, but inwardly detesting it. I finally escaped church by going off to college, enrolling in an art school that encouraged the throwing off of all "traditional thinking" and accompanying moral restraints. Living entirely without reference to God, I did as I wanted.

But I was empty within. Especially as I gave myself to a series of affairs and sexual promiscuity, I found the emptiness threatening to swallow everything else. I lived around the great void in my soul and nothing would fill it up. It was like a black hole in outer space—everything I threw in to fill it up only seemed to increase the gravitational pull of dark despair enveloping my life. Such is life without Jesus Christ.

Being your own god is a long and miserable experiment that is bound to fail. Mine began to conclude when I was living with a woman off and on in an unhappy, destructive relationship from which neither of us had the strength to rescue ourselves. My mother had also died recently. I was not really feeling very much like Master of the Universe anymore. Finally, the woman with whom I was living decided the problems were all mine and I should go to counseling.

So I did. The counselor told me that I had not resolved the unexpressed grief I felt over my mother's death, and that I should go home and try to extract all that buried grief and express it.

So I did. I was now not living with that woman again, so I went home every evening after work to my sparsely furnished apartment in the oppressive heat of August in Richmond, Virginia, and tried to experience grief. It was really not difficult to feel sorry for myself by that point in my life. I felt as if I were dead at the bright age of twenty-four. I was grieving as much for myself as for my mother.

Then one evening it came to me. The simple truth. The same truth that I had been fearfully stuffing down into the darkness all these years. But now helpless, at the dead-end of my life, looking inside, I saw it rise up like a bubble out of the murky depths. And this time I let it break the surface. "The first place you went wrong was in rejecting God," it said.

Whereas before this thought had only filled me with panic and terror, this time the fear was mingled with a shining promise of joy. Here I knew suddenly was my last and only hope of life, and where I least had expected or wanted it. I had thought that receiving Jesus Christ as Lord would be the end of freedom and self-identity. Now I saw that the experiment had gone awry and ended in slavery; nothing but Christ could set me free or allow me to be the person I was yearning to be. To be able to return to God after the life I had lived seemed sweeter than I could ever express. While I had ruined myself, love had pursued me.

I was not able to turn to him that evening; I had been running too long. But the next day I went to the library and borrowed a Bible, a book by a famous atheist (Why I Am Not a Christian), and a book by C. S. Lewis, called Mere Christianity. While I never got around to the atheist's book, and somewhat fearfully put aside the Bible for a time, I quickly read the Lewis book and was convinced that the theology I had learned and remembered from third grade Sunday school was right.

God is willing to save miserable sinners. He sent his Son to die on their behalf and under their sins, so that they need not perish for their own sins. This I had feared was truth years before. Now, however, I trusted myself to it and asked God to give me the saving benefit of what Christ accomplished on the cross. I asked him to forgive me my incredibly wrong, sinful, hurtful life. I asked him to set me free and give me life. I begged him to be my God and allow me to worship him. I pleaded with him to save me from the hell I had begun on earth and which would be perfected after I died.

He heard me. He granted me my heart's desire. I have begun an incredible new life. I

have been freed from guilt. I am being healed of the sins in my life. No longer hopeless or lonely, I dwell in God's love and among the love of his people. Life once more has purpose, and eternity looks inexpressibly bright.

I found this Bible verse wonderfully true in my life: "I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. They who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." (Psalm 34:4-6)

Jesus promises to all, "The one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out.... For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:37, 40)