

“My Story”
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Ephesians 2:4-10, John 15:5-17

I think it would be good for you to get to know me a little more as your new pastor. One of the best ways to do that is to share a personal testimony with you about how I came to faith in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul speaks of his sufferings with godly joy even though he was lashed with 40 lashings on five different occasions. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. He suffered three shipwrecks and multiple imprisonments. On top of all that Paul had what he described to be “a thorn in the flesh”. Scholars believe it could have been some malady or injury or condition that caused him health problems and pain. Amazingly, in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 Paul says, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

You see I have what I thought for many years to be a thorn in the flesh that has caused me suffering – made me even hate myself at times. I was born with a rare syndrome, genetically inherited, called Noonan syndrome, and in my younger years I lived as though that syndrome defined me.

Noonan Syndrome certainly does affect much about me. It affected my heart. I had major open-heart surgery at 14 months old and still have the scar show it. I cannot have biological children because there is a 50% chance I would pass Noonan Syndrome on to my children. Noonan Syndrome affects my eyes, both with bad eyesight and droopy eyelids. The prescription on my glasses is so powerful I can use them as a magnifying glass to start fires. Yeah, I had some fun with that as a kid. Ants did not stand a chance. Noonan Syndrome affects the shape of my face, and my ears. My sternum chest bone is misshapen and sticks out and in my back I have severe scoliosis. It even affects my pinky fingers – all of me, seemingly defined, deformed, by this terrible syndrome.

When I was 16 and received my driver's license I was 5 ft. 95 lbs., shortest in my class because of Noonan Syndrome. I had to sit on pillows to see over the dashboard of my first car. I was pulled over by a police officer who thought I was an underage driver. At age 17 I was carded for a PG-13 movie in the little theatre in Greenville, Ohio. I could not keep up with the other guys in high school sports

all because of Noonan Syndrome. However, the worst part was not that I was small. The worst part was that I sometimes felt so small on the inside. I thought my identity would always be defined by Noonan Syndrome. I felt stuck in a body that I did not ask for and did not want.

I went to a small farm-town high school with a graduating class of 58 students. I knew everyone and I could not escape or hide who I thought I was. In my sophomore year in high school I was elected to homecoming court. What I thought was wonderful was marred by something terrible. One of the young ladies in my class came up to me and said, "The only reason our class elected you to homecoming court is because they all feel sorry for you. There's a rumor going around that you're going to die soon." Folks, that hurt deep within me. I have had a lot of physical pain in my life and none of it comes close to that. Remember the power of your words. Proverbs 18:21 says, "The tongue has the power of life and death." It is so true. Words can build people up and encourage them, but words can also do unbelievable harm.

Now, I do not want you to get the impression that I was an unhappy kid. Yes, there were some difficult times and feelings that I kept inside tucked away and hidden. But I was fortunate to have a loving family, wonderful friends, and pastors and youth pastors who meant the world to me. Without those people

who God had placed in my life, I do not know where I would be right now. I did not realize it at the time but throughout all my younger years God's grace was protecting me.

That same year I had a conversation with a different young lady from school online through AOL Instant Messenger. When I was a youth pastor talking about AOL Instant Messenger made me feel old. As a pastor it makes me feel young so thank you. Anyways, she asked me if I was saved. I had no idea what she meant so of course I said, "Yes, because I thought that was the answer she wanted." She then invited me to church to youth group on Wednesday night. Of course, I went because I knew she and other young ladies would be there. However, that night God had something else in mind than making friends with the ladies. God broke my heart in a good way. Somehow God miraculously broke through the hardness, the resentment, the hate I had for Noonan Syndrome and for myself, and God spoke to my heart that I was beloved child of God. I heard the scripture that night from Psalm 139:14 that I am fearfully and wonderfully made, and I really had to struggle to hold back tears. There was no way on the outside I was going cry in this new place with these new people, but inside I was overwhelmed with a sense of love and hope. That night I cried out to God, and

for the first time in my life I felt as though I truly was God's handiwork – God's masterpiece. Who am I? My identity is in Christ not in Noonan Syndrome.

I still had Noonan's Syndrome but my attitude about it began to change. I used to question God, "Why did I have to be the one out of a 1000 born this way." I used to question God, "Why wasn't I born normal like my family and all the other kids at school." I resented people who were born normal. My parents, teachers, and friends had been telling me for years that I was beautiful, loved, and valuable. There were many days in those younger years I didn't believe them, but all of the lies of the enemy were interrupted by the grace of God and I finally could see the truth that loved ones had been telling me all along. God had begun a work in me. I am not saying God's work was all accomplished in that conversion experience, but it was a truly miraculous moment and God continued to work on my life.

Later that year my youth pastor gave me the opportunity to preach because he saw something in me that I never saw in myself. He saw God-given gifts. With that simple invitation to preach, my youth pastor freed me for joyful obedience to God. The Holy Spirit ministered to my heart to build me up to believe that God could do something important in me and through me. I can't tell you how it felt to bring a Word from the Lord to my peers for the very first time;

to feel that I had worth; that I was created for such a purpose when for so long I looked at myself in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. For so long I felt so much less than my peers; so inadequate and suddenly, I had words to share with them. I found a new confidence in the Lord, leading small groups for my church, a leader in Youth for Christ. And all of that happened as God lavished me with love, revealing through others that I was gifted by God, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. The enemy wanted me to continue to believe I was cursed, but God kept revealing to me that I had sacred worth.

God tends to redeem that which we might think unredeemable. I cannot count the number of opportunities I have had to minister to young people who struggle with self-image issues. I also have this wonderful testimony that I can share with you and many others. Now I thank God for my thorn in the flesh because God's power is made perfect in my weakness. However, I must be honest. I still sometimes look in the mirror and see Noonan syndrome and hate it. I am sometimes like the Israelites who repeatedly forgot all that God had done for them – God had freed them from their bondage. I sometimes feel resentment welling up in my heart. There are still some days I find myself asking God, "Why?" But praise be to God for the Holy Spirit who reminds me that my identity is in

Christ and that though I may be weak, suffer hardships and difficulties, in Christ I am strong.

As people who are called by Jesus Christ to be true disciples, you might be the next person who can speak words that bring hope to the broken. I find that I struggle in ministry sometimes. There are seasons where I am going through the motions, am on autopilot meeting minimum expectations, meeting deadlines, and turning in my forms. I have at times forgotten the magnitude of my calling. Folks, the lives of the people of our communities are at stake. The souls of the people of our communities are at stake. God can do unbelievable works in us and through us and in the lives of others. You might be the next person who helps someone like me to see his God-given gifts when before he thought he was of no worth. My church family, this a reminder that there is a whole world of people who need to know their identity in Christ – they are of sacred worth. And what God did for me through others; God can do for others through you. So, take hold of your calling, go out into that broken world, and share that hope of the Gospel that has the power to redeem and the power to save. Be the hands and feet of Christ. Witness through both your words and your actions. And remember the power of the Holy Spirit to enable you to proclaim the Gospel – the Gospel that releases us from our bondage to sin and into our new life with Christ. Amen.