

Straight Jackets & Other Religious Garb



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By Les Dennis

The events in this article are real. The emotions expressed are still very much alive. There is a real person who received the original emails, but Jane Doe is obviously not her real name. After a short series of email exchanges with Jane, the material has been compiled and edited into a booklet. The intent of this article is help people who like me in my youth found the Christian yoke hard and the burden heavy. A few things have been added for clarity and completion, but it is essentially the same information sent to Jane. To protect the privacy of those involved, the name of the church has been changed to Church of Our Youth and the name of the liberal arts college has been changed to College of Human Wisdom.

To stay closer to the flavour of the original emails, the email format has been retained. The email address for Jane Doe is a working email address but does not belong to Jane. Jane's email address is one of my own creation using my domain name to assure that it does not belong to some unknown person out there in cyberspace. If desired, either the jane@novalifecoaching.com or the les.dennis@novalifecoaching.com addresses may be used to reach me. In the unlikely event that emails arrive in large volume, I may not be able to respond to all emails, but I would like to know if this article has been helpful to you.



From: Les Dennis <les.dennis@novalifecoaching.com>

To: Jane Doe <jane@novalifecoaching.com>

Subject: **Straight Jackets and Other Religious Garb**

Jane, thank you for your email. It was good to be able to compare notes about our experiences at Church of Our Youth. Your email helped me realize that my experiences at Church of Our Youth were not so unusual after all. When I left Church of Our Youth for the Air Force, I carried a lot of spiritual baggage with me that I believe was a direct result of the well-intentioned teaching I received there.

When I recount my experiences it is not intended as a criticism of Church of Our Youth, because I owe them a lot as far as my early knowledge of the Lord. Their priority on Bible memory has been a real asset in my life. However, I will tell about a few of the struggles that I went through, which started at Church of Our Youth. Those struggles were caused by trying to achieve standards that went beyond what God requires. This may be a surprise to you, but I did not come to know the Lord until I was 18 years old.

Wishing upon a Star for Salvation

When I was in grade two, I remember doing the childhood thing about wishing upon a star. My wish was always that I might get saved.¹ I would privately ask the Lord to save me but I never put my faith in Him, so nothing changed. This would happen about once or twice a week all through my childhood into my junior high school years.

Loves Me? Are Sure about That?

The Church of Our Youth taught me that God loved me, but the expectations of perfection made me think that God was a horrible person up there somewhere who was following me around even in childhood looking for any excuse He could find to condemn me. I felt no love at all from Him. I spent my childhood in fear of God--not fear as in respect, but fear as in terror. My thought was that Jesus loved the world enough to die for everyone, but I guessed I was the exception.

Nightmares

As a child, I would have nightmares about going to hell. In trying to remember when they started, I think it was sometime after hearing a sermon on the radio where the speaker gave an illustration about a ten-year old in hell. I heard the sermon when I was ten years old. In fairness to Church of Our Youth, this sermon was from a different source, although I did hear a similar emphasis at Church of Our

¹ Coming to know the Lord, coming to faith in Christ, being born again, having forgiveness of sin and assurance of heaven, etc.

Youth, but it was just not as graphic.

One nightmare that was particularly bothersome was about the return of Christ. It continued into my early teens. In my dream I was 15 years old. I would dream about seeing a newspaper headline announcing *Christ Has Returned to Earth*. Of course, in my dream I immediately thought, "It's too late for me now. I am doomed with no chance of salvation." I would wake up, but you can understand that I was not too thrilled about ever reaching the age of 15.

If at First You Don't Succeed, Try, Try Again

From the time I was about 13 years old until I was about 17 years old, I would go forward for salvation, where according to the custom of Church of Our Youth, I would kneel at the front at an altar.² People would gather around me and pray for me. Occasionally, someone would ask, "Has it happened yet?" I had no idea what to do or say while I was praying, so I would just shake my head no and remain as confused as ever. I thought that something supernatural must happen to inform me that I had received salvation. Nothing happened!

After several times of being asked, "Has it happened yet?" I would mumble yes, get up and go about trying to convince myself that it had happened. I thought to myself, "Other people -- even teens like me -- went forward, knelt at the altar and got up saved. Since I did the same thing they did, I must be saved too." After a period of time, I would weary of the internal struggle and admit to myself that I was not saved. Each time -- six times over about five years -- this process was repeated and it was followed by the usual internal struggle to convince myself that I was now a Christian.³ I had no concept that I must accept salvation by faith, and no one told me. I would become very weary of trying to make myself believe what I knew was not so. That was my concept of faith: try to make yourself believe what you know is not so. Today that is my concept of self-deception rather than faith. Eventually, I would have to admit to myself that I was not saved and nothing had happened when I went forward.

Forget It! This Can't Be Real!

After the sixth time going forward, I decided that Christianity could not possibly be real because I had tried it six times and it did not work. I was in grade 12 at the time. After rejecting Christianity as unreal, I would even make fun of Jesus to my friends.

Jane, you were not around me enough during that time period to know what I was really like, so you may find it hard to believe how far I descended into unbelief, although I kept attending church out of respect for my mother. I had been teaching Sunday school, but now that I no longer believed what I had taught, I quit. I became an agnostic, thinking that it was impossible to even know if God existed. For about a year, the Lord did not bother me at all, and I fully believed that my problem was solved.

About Face

Toward the end of my first year at the College of Human Wisdom, something happened that was not supposed to happen to an agnostic. One Sunday morning as I awoke, the Lord put me under such intense conviction⁴ that I knew I must come to some kind of conclusion about God. For three days, only one thought was in my mind because I could think of nothing else: how could I determine if God

² A prayer bench at the front of the church.

³ One who has come to know the Lord on a personal level.

⁴ An internal distress that comes from the Holy Spirit drawing one to Christ indicating that you are in need of forgiveness.

existed? It was time to get this settled once and for all.

That Sunday afternoon, while searching for a way to settle this issue, Psalm 46:10 came to my mind. *Be still, and know that I am God...* I tried to be as quiet as I could when suddenly, I felt that in my inner being I really did know there was a God. It was a witness within that cried out that God was real. Even after admitting to myself that I knew there was a God, I could not believe that the Jesus whom I had been making fun of the last year was God the Son and had risen from the dead after being crucified. I was open to believing it, but it made no sense to me.

I did not go to the pastor of Church of Our Youth because I believed he would just kneel with me and pray expecting the Lord to make everything clear to me. The Lord had never made anything clear to me in the past after going forward six times, so why would He start now? If I was to be saved, I must learn how from Scripture. That same Sunday afternoon, I started reading my Bible beginning in Matthew. I read all that day and into the evening. Monday morning at the College of Human Wisdom, I cut all classes and spent the time in the coffee shop reading my Bible. At home that night, I kept reading well into the evening. I believed that if the Bible had all of the answers as I was taught, the answer must be somewhere in the New Testament.

Tuesday was another day of reading the New Testament at the coffee shop, except for a trip to the library to see if religious books might offer some help. I found a book dealing with the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The book had one chapter for each of the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus. After reading it, I accepted that it was possible that Jesus really did come back from the dead. I went back to reading Scripture again. By Tuesday evening I was in the Epistles. I had occasionally come across verses that seem to indicate how to be saved, but it was still not clear to me. One verse that I had found earlier on, either Sunday or Monday said, *For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*⁵ That sounded promising but I was not sure what to do with it. I kept reading. Eventually, I read 1 John 5:1 *Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.* This seem like the answer for which I was searching. I got on my knees and tried to believe, but could not do it. I got up and kept reading. A few verses later, I came to 1 John 5:10 *He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son.* I suddenly thought, if I did not trust Christ for salvation then I was calling God a liar. I got on my knees and this time I was ready. I took it on faith. I felt like a weight had been taken off of my shoulders and knew that for the first ever time ever I was saved. I did not need any supernatural evidence because I already knew I had become a child of God because I believed on the Son of God and had this witness in myself.

A Whole New Set of Problems

Now I had a whole new set of problems! How could I keep the salvation that had come to me after as such a long struggle. How would I ever achieve the standard of perfection expected of Christians, which the Church of Our Youth so carefully instilled in me almost from birth. I remember a poem that was often read at the Church of Our Youth, which I hated: *Others May, You Cannot* by Watson.⁶ Because the Church of Our Youth had a very long list of taboos, the poem would be read to the youth on occasion so that we would feel content with having this long list. The intent was to make us feel special because God expected more of us. To me it suggested that I had to work very, very hard to be

5 KJV Romans 10:13.

6 After reading the poem as an adult, it appears to me that Church of Our Youth may have had applied it in a way that may have gone beyond what Watson intended.

acceptable to God. I envied those who were in the “*others may*” group. I wondered why God had to single me out to lead an unbearable life. What did He have against me? However, I would try to live by that standard. Once again, the yoke was hard and my burden was heavy and this created a spiritual straight jacket that I tried to wear faithfully. How could Jesus say *the truth will make you free?*⁷ The truth seemed to put me into bondage.

I'll Fly Away

I had an unrealistic idea about living a Christian life; I had to live it perfectly or lose my salvation. After more than a year of trying to get saved again, and again, and again, I decided that it was not possible for me to live a Christian life and gave up. I knew I would have to keep attending church as long as I lived at home, so I joined the Air Force. I had already considered going to an out-of-town college but I could not afford it. The Air Force was my way out. After about six months in the Air Force, I was so miserable that I tried turning to the Lord again, although I knew I would lose my salvation somewhere along life's road and go to hell anyway, but just maybe I could have a little peace on the way. I was a pathetic spiritual mess.

Well-intended Advice that Failed

After being stationed at an Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, I went to church with a friend who attended a church of the same denomination as Church of Our Youth. After the service, I did not go forward but I did ask the pastor a question when I suddenly broke down in tears, He took me to his office to talk. As a child, I was taught that you could not return to God just because you wanted to return, you had to wait until He drew you to Him. I asked the pastor how to know if God was drawing me. His advice was for me to just keep asking the Lord to save me several times a day hoping that eventually I would ask it at the right time and the Lord would save me. I tried his advice, but it did not work. A week or two later I went to a youth meeting and went forward. By this time, I knew the Lord was drawing me to Him and I did get things settled. I was back in fellowship again, although back then I called it “getting saved again.”

The idea that I must wait to feel a certain way before I could be forgiven of anything held me back for a couple of years. Later in my Christian walk, I learned that a desire to get right with the Lord is evidence that He is already working in your heart to draw you to Him.

How Can Eternal Life Come to an End?

While I was still in Cheyenne, Wyoming, I was in a discussion about eternal security with a cousin who came to visit me. He asked, "How can eternal life be eternal life it can come to an end?" That stuck with me. I started studying the topic from Scripture and other books trying to find the truth. A book *Shall Never Perish* by Strombeck was a big help. In time I became convinced of eternal security. The immediate effect was that I stopped worrying about my own salvation and could be concerned about other people. It made an effective witness to other people possible for the first time.

Church of Our Youth

Jane, I hope that I am not telling you too much about my life. I considered just telling you the results of what I found from my experiences, but decided that knowing what I went through might make it more useful, especially since we had the same background at the Church of Our Youth. I have a lot of respect for the Church of Our Youth and its denomination. Nothing I say is intended as criticism of them. It is

7 John 8:32

likely that my own deficiencies added to the problem. It seems that many in the congregation of the Church of Our Youth came through the experience without the bad effects that happened to me, at least as far as I could tell. Perhaps being introspective by nature caused the teaching to affect me differently.

MARS and the Book Worm

My new belief in eternal security changed my life. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, I was assigned to a ground radio station called Military Affiliate Radio System or MARS. The radios broke down and could not be replaced for several months, but base regulations said that the station would be manned at least eight hours a day. Being the lowest ranking airman at the MARS station, the other two airmen would leave me at the station alone. Just being there with nothing to do was my job. I would take my Bible and a lot of other books on the Christian life and spend almost eight hours a day reading. The Lord knew that I desperately needed that. After a few months, the radios were replaced and actual work days started up again.

News that Will Keep Your Mind on Heaven

After a year in Cheyenne, I volunteered for airborne radio. I was transferred to Otis Air Force Base for training in a speciality of airborne radio called electronic counter measures, which meant flying over enemy territory locating concentrations of enemy troops, convoys, or supplies. Word got around that our squadron commander expected that our unit would lose about 55% of the men once we were flying combat missions. I was very glad that losing my salvation was no longer an issue.

A Revelation from 1 John 1:9

After a few months of training, our unit was sent to Korat, Thailand. The first four months at Korat were spent primarily waiting for the unit to finish preparation for our mission. I used that time to take correspondence courses through Moody Bible Institute. Even though it was a time of spiritual growth, the straight jacket continued as tight as ever. At least my salvation was no longer an issue when I failed. When I did wrong, I would lose about a week of my Christian walk waiting to make sure the Lord was drawing me so that I could return to Him. Same old story! In studying 1 John 1:9 the Lord showed me that it did not say that I had to feel a certain way. It said nothing about being drawn to Him. It just said to confess our sins and He would forgive us. No other conditions. That was a revelation to me. My life changed again. The Christian life was getting better. The yoke was still hard but the burden was not as heavy as before.

Do Not Walk on the Grass

To show how tight the straight jacket was, here are some examples. If there was a “Do Not Walk on the Grass” sign and if I stepped on a corner of the grass while making a turn, I felt condemned. If I crossed the street outside the lines of a crosswalk, I felt I had just sinned. If my car crept up to one mile an hour over the speed limit, same old story.

Help from Hundreds of Years Ago

I was tired of the straight jacket and was desperately longing to be free of it, but I thought I must live the Christian life perfectly. During the first four months in Thailand, I found a small book in the base library called *Scrupulosity* by Ignatius Loyola. A fifteenth-century Catholic Saint was a strange place to find spiritual help, but it made another big change in my thinking, which prepared the way for a huge change in my life. Ignatius Loyola faced the same problem I faced, except his problem was even more severe. This book helped me to identify the problem, but I struggled with being confident enough to actually do something about it.

A Slap in the Face that Changed My Life Again

While pondering about doing something to end the scrupulosity problem, a friend helped me in a backhanded sort of way. I was trying to witness to him when he said, "Do you want to know why I do not want to become a Christian? I don't want to be like you. You are in bondage." My thought was, "I don't want to be like me either because he is right. I am in bondage." That made me do some hard thinking and praying. The result was that I had to take action. People were being kept from coming to the Lord because of my spiritual problems. I went outside and found a sign that said *Do Not Walk on the Grass*. I walked on the grass and felt no guilt. I was free of this huge burden at last. It may seem a little strange that a spiritual victory came by walking on the grass, but that is how it happened. There were other things that I had to sort through regarding my freedom in Christ, but the biggest battle was won. This changed my life in a very big way. Maybe it changed my life a little too much because I have gotten a few speeding tickets over the years. :)

Best Year of My Christian Life

My schedule suddenly changed dramatically, I went from having no work to do to having a schedule that included four hours standby on the flight line followed by about 10 to 11 hours in the air, followed by a debriefing. It usually took about 18 hours to do all of it. There would be 12 hours off and the schedule repeated for a month. After a month, there would be a three-day pass and the schedule would resume for another month. This workload continued for the rest of my year in Thailand. The flights were in constant danger from anti-aircraft fire as well as frequent in-flight emergencies caused by flying an aircraft designed many years before, which quickly accumulated too many flying hours for safe operation. It was a situation that lets you know if you have assurance of salvation or not. We were always tired, but when it came to spiritual things, it was the best year of my life up to that time. I left Thailand a different person than I was when I arrived. His yoke was getting easier and the burden lighter. Although I still had much to learn about Christian freedom, I left my straight jacket lying on the grass somewhere in Thailand.

Yours truly,

Les Dennis