

Losing Jesus

A story of discovery-- by Whitney Green

He commands my leg to grow, and I watch in disbelief as it creeps forward nearly half an inch. I'm spending an extended weekend at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Mo., looking for answers. But now, I have only questions. A cold tingle rushes through my body. I can see my outstretched right leg getting longer as the 23-year-old healer—my age—says, "I speak to the right leg and I say, 'Grow right now in the name of Jesus.'" In this moment, my mind, body and spirit are at war.

February 4, 2011

Dear Jesus,

I am completely content living in a little, dirty, poor village the rest of my life to make disciples for You. I will be a servant to the servants. I will go to the hardest and darkest places—even die for the gospel. I don't live for this life, I live for the next, for Heaven.

Love,

Whitney

While strange, this scene is not unfamiliar to me—I've seen it before, done it before, lived it before. Two years ago, if you would have asked me what I wanted to do with my life, I would have told you that I planned to dedicate myself to this very thing—to seeing the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear and the dead rise up. And I believed it, too. Every bit of it. Without question, I believed that through the

power of the Holy Spirit, I had the ability to speak to a dead man in his grave and see him arise or speak to the cancer in someone's body and see it flee.

I would have told you that I didn't care if I ever earned a single dollar, got married or had my own children. I would have told you that my greatest desire in life was to live in the slums of Indonesia among the orphans with bare feet and empty bellies, to heal multitudes around the world suffering from physical, emotional or spiritual pain and tell those willing to listen anything God wanted to say to them.

I was raised in an atmosphere where God's power was as tangible as the beating heart pounding in my chest, but doubts had been hanging over me like a developing thunderhead for years—especially since giving up my life as a missionary in 2011, to continue my education as a journalism student at the University of Arkansas.

Growing up, my mother taught me that I could talk to Jesus, and He would answer me. I could ask him for anything in the world that I wanted and he would give it to me, if he thought it was a good idea. I tested this theory with signs—asking Jesus to show me a red cardinal or the number 444 if he was real, and for years, it seemed like they were always in front of me. That was enough of a miracle for me.

Now, I still catch my breath when I see cardinals or 444, and like an old habit, I look around and wonder if he's trying to talk to me again.

After earning a general associate of arts degree, I took a sabbatical year to travel and attend a missionary training school with the organization Youth With A Mission, based in Kona, Hawaii. I circled the globe, traveling to countries I knew nothing about and sharing the power of Christ. Along the way, I fell in love with a God whose name I knew, but whose character I had just begun to discover. It was the hardest, but most fulfilling time of my life.

To this day, I question if giving it up to go back to college was the right decision.

Sometimes, I became so overwhelmed with the grey downpour of questions that all I could do was lie in bed at night wide-awake for hours, trembling under the weight of my unbelief. I hoped that eventually all of the worries would melt off of me, but every morning I awoke with doubts still attached to my soul like Jesus's red letter words on the pages of the Gospels.

Two years later, there is still a question that lingers in my breath like the smoke of old cigarettes— *What if the Truth I have built all of my hopes and dreams on for 23 years is a lie?*

Sitting in that chair in Kansas City with outstretched legs, I look at the man kneeling in front of me, at my legs that suddenly appear to be two different lengths, and wonder what my life has become and why the faith I was founded on is vanishing beneath me.

I want to still believe.

Two days earlier, it's Saturday at 10 p.m. on my first night in Kansas City, and the room is filled with nearly 300 young people dressed in neon-colored pants, polka-dot shirts with leopard-print leggings, waist-length dreadlocks and ears gaged to the size of a quarter. It looks like the crowd at a Skrillex concert.

"Come and kiss us with your word as we talk to you," a middle-aged man says from the podium.

All over the room people are dancing, twirling and jumping. I almost put down my laptop to join them, but decide against it. I take notes through the music. My fingers pound the keyboard and my foot shakes under the weight of the melody. I see matching water bottles all over the room with a slogan pasted on them for the International House of Prayer (known more commonly here as IHOP). Maybe there's something in the water.

This is how these students choose to spend their weekend—worshipping instead of partying. It's the norm at IHOP. The house of prayer and famous pancake restaurant have one commonality—both run 24/7. Members of IHOP have been worshipping and praying non-stop for 14 years. All over the world people come here to receive healing, prophecy and to partake in the aroma of a different kind of Christianity; one

where people walk out of wheel chairs, blind eyes see, uneven legs grow, and God speaks clearly (even audibly, at times). At IHOP, staff are required to pray for 24 hours a week in the corporate prayer room, students pray for double—sometimes triple that—and a group of 100 Fire in the Night interns, pray together from midnight to 6 a.m., every night except Sundays.

As I look around at more than one hundred people praying and worshipping, I notice a timid girl wearing a bright blue vest that says “ministry captain.” She walks up to a group of students talking and asks them to take their conversations outside, while gesturing towards the door.

This place is reserved for conversations with God.

Near the stage, I see a man jumping up and down, flailing his arms and tapping his feet. He has a red Mohawk. It almost looks like he’s doing a tribal dance, but he’s worshipping the Christian God. A girl joins him near the front, pauses, then lifts her arms straight towards the sky and tilts her head all the way back like someone is showering her with light from above. That used to be me, I think.

I try to worship with them, but can’t. Feeling defeated, I sit down and watch, hoping my desire for God will return. The charismatic worship I once joyfully participated in looks comical and ridiculous from where I sit now.

The International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, is an evangelical missions organization that is committed to praying for the release of the fullness of God's power and purpose, as its faithful followers actively win the lost, heal the sick, feed the poor, make disciples and impact every sphere of society, according to its missions statement. IHOP was among the first houses of prayer to spring up during the charismatic movement. Now, countless churches around the world have borrowed IHOP's model and dedicated a building solely for prayer and worship.

Four hours south, where I attend the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Ark., the New Heights Church started the Fayetteville Prayer Room taken from the IHOP model. The FPR (as it's more commonly known) is open to the public from 6 a.m. to midnight, with times of corporate worship, prayer and live music, but there is only one original International House Of Prayer (IHOPKC).

For these committed "prayer warriors" as they are often called, their lives revolve around the idea of praying and communing with the Lord without ceasing.

On May 7, 1999, the International House of Prayer of Kansas City (IHOPKC) was founded by Mike Bickle and twenty full-time "intercessory missionaries," who cried out to God in prayer with worship for thirteen hours each day. Four months later, on September 19, 1999, prayer and worship extended to the full 24/7 schedule. This group of radical believers has built an altar of prayer and worship to the Lord non-

stop, for more than a decade, which they believe has helped create an atmosphere for God to speak and work miracles.

December 24, 2005

Sometimes I doubt Your existence. I doubt everything about You. I'm sorry. Father, please help me to understand how real you are.

I was raised on stories about God's glory being revealed in impossible situations. He had always been my family's consistent point of rescue. When my mother, father, baby brother and I were living in Guatemala as missionaries, our white skin made us easy targets for thieves. We believed our faith protected us. In one instance, my father was held at gunpoint. He screamed out the name of Jesus. Immediately the perpetrators ran away with horrified looks on their faces. Behind him, my father says he saw a 30-foot angel protecting him from the oncoming bullet.

Growing up, talking to Jesus and seeing the supernatural was normal, but even as a child I remember asking myself the forbidden question, "What if this isn't real?"

Saturday night at IHOP, two hours later, it's nearing midnight and the dancing girl is still up front swaying side to side—hands clutched to her heart. Soft tears stream down her flushed cheeks as she raises her hands back towards the heavens. She's crying out to something—someone, maybe. I think I could watch her for hours. She is enchanting to me. I'm jealous of the passion and love on her face.

“My life is not my own, for you I belong, I give myself to you,” she whispers.

I don't ask her name. I cannot bear the thought of interrupting the intimate moment between her and the invisible lover. I'm suddenly aware that I've been staring at her for some time. Feeling voyeuristic, I try to shift my eyes to my computer screen, but cannot turn away. As I peel my gaze from her to look around the room, I realize it doesn't matter if I'm staring. No one even notices me. They're all experiencing the love story that I once knew.

October 22, 2011

I feel like I'm drowning. Unable to pull myself up, to look upon Your face. So far gone, yet caught up in the hauntingly beautiful memories of what was. How it used to be. How we used to be.

These young adults, love-struck with the power of God, are among a rapidly increasing number of Christian charismatics.

“The charismatic movement is a religious movement that believes all spiritual gifts, as described in the New Testament, still exist, with an emphasis on speaking in unknown tongues or holy gibberish, and being able to get in ecstatic states— everything from the old idea of jumping pews or running down the aisles to the recent trends like Holy Ghost laughter,” says Michael McCoy, pastor of Little Elm Baptist Church, a 50-person congregation in Farmington, Ark., and a doctoral candidate professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Arkansas.

According to a recent Pew Research Center report on Global Christianity, 305 million Christians worldwide are following the trend towards the charismatic movement—the 2nd fastest growing religious movement in the world, being surpassed only by the spread of Islam.

“The charismatic variety of Christianity has definitely gone from being the fringe about 20 to 30 years ago, to now being the predominant version of Christianity. Its influence is changing other denominations of Christianity as well,” McCoy says.

“Generally in history, there’s always some sort of attraction to spiritual movements, especially ones where people get into states of ecstasy or do strange things.”

McCoy doesn’t agree with charismatic Christianity, and believes the Bible makes it clear in the New Testament that spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing are not necessary for the church today. He has studied the original Greek manuscripts and says in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13, spiritual gifts are characterized as children’s toys that should fade away through maturity.

I meet David Ursin in the Israel Room Monday night. He is a student at IHOP University, a sect of the ministry that trains students to, “encounter God, do His works, and change the world,” according to the slogan.

He is tall, 6 ft. 7in., and lanky with blonde hair. His arms hang by his sides like the branches of a weeping willow and a wide smile stretches across his face. He reminds me of Shaggy from Scooby Doo. Tonight, David is my healer.

David tells me that he's a "PhD student," and I'm surprised that this school has a doctoral program, especially since the university is non-accredited.

He chuckles and tells me at IHOP, PHD stands for prophecy, healing and deliverance. David is a senior and has been studying at IHOP University for four years, since July, 2009.

One aspect of the PHD program teaches students how to activate the spiritual gift of prophecy—hearing from God and telling people what he says.

"I didn't necessarily learn how to prophesy," David says. "It's kind of like working out. You may know how to work out but just need to practice. My main thing is I'll sit down and say, "Lord, what do you think and feel about this person?" In 30 seconds to a minute you get a response."

Praying for healing is a routine for David. He volunteers at the Jackson County Department of Corrections jail where he prays for inmates and regularly sees supernatural healing and deliverance. However, prayer is just a tool he uses to help

reach his main goal, which is to tell the inmates about Jesus, he says. He prays for every problem under the sun, but growing out uneven legs is his specialty.

David laughs when he says that he sees legs grow out all the time. He tells me it's really common here. He claims to have prayed for nearly 500 people's legs in his 23 years, and seen every one of them grow.

"You wouldn't believe how many people don't know they have one leg that is shorter than the other," David says.

He says that many people suffer from back, neck or hip pain because of uneven legs. Even just a quarter of an inch can make a difference.

One year during IHOP's annual onething conference—25,000 people from around the world regularly come for the chance to experience God's presence— David prayed for a young girl in a wheelchair to walk and saw her do just that.

"We put her legs out and one was shorter than the other so I prayed and it grew out slowly. She started bawling," David said. "Twenty of her friends were weeping around her because this girl was walking for the first time. She wasn't walking normally and wasn't 100 percent healed, but she was walking for the first time in her entire life."

The way David speaks about his faith sounds familiar. Our language is completely different now, but I remember when I used to talk about supernatural things like they were ordinary too.

As I'm getting ready to go, David asks if he can prophecy over me. I've been hoping he would do that.

For David, the goal of prophecy is to edify and encourage. As a rule, he doesn't prophecy names, dates or babies.

"Psalm 139 says the Lord's thoughts for you outnumber the sand of the seashore, so our goal is to pick up a few grains and tell them to you," David says. "We prophecy in part—meaning we can't pick up all the grains of sand and we might be wrong about some stuff, so we encourage you to go home and pray about it."

I've heard this speech before. It reminds me of home.

"I'm going to pray for a minute and ask the Lord what he has to say, then we'll start," David says.

Though my heart is dull, my ears are ready to hear whatever David thinks God wants to tell me.

After a long pause he begins.

“Do you sing at all?” he asks curiously.

“Yes,” I respond without much emotion. Lucky guess, I think.

“I saw a microphone and when I asked the Lord what it means, I feel like he said you have a big gift for singing and worship. Being a worship leader might be your main occupation or maybe it’s just something you carry in your heart. While you’re in your car or alone you’re always singing, and even as a little girl you were making up songs and singing your heart to the Lord. He just loves your voice.”

I try to hide the tears that begin to form in my eyes.

“I also saw a picture of fireworks— you’re a very flashy person. People see fireworks from miles away, you know. Even for this paper, you want to do it big, flashy and with excellence to really make an impact. You’re this way about life in general.”

I feel like he’s reading a fortune cookie with my name on it.

“Then I saw a candle, and I sense that God said you’re a burning and shining lamp, even more than you know. Lately, maybe you’ve been feeling condemned that you’re not involved in a ministry or not leading worship, but the Lord has put journalism

on your heart and you can dramatically impact the world with your gifts—even just you writing stories can change a lot of stuff. He sees your heart and he loves it.”

November 1, 2012

This isn't the real me. That girl in the mirror is confused about life. She's insecure, depressed, easily swayed and exhausted from never meeting expectations. She's sick of trying and failing. She knows she's destined for greatness, but the present isn't matching up. I've tasted and I've seen the goodness of the Lord. I know the truth, and it haunts me because I'm not living it right now. I miss you Jesus. I'm not that girl.

I sign up for a slot in the prophecy room Monday morning at 6 a.m. When the day comes, I can barely drag myself out of the bed I've only been sleeping in for 2 hours—sitting in the prayer room all night is exhausting, even if I just watch.

Back in the familiar scene, I stand in line with 30 people who are expectant to hear what God has been waiting to tell them. I try to have no expectations.

We are called into the prophecy room in groups of three. I've never met the woman to my left who looks too bright-eyed and cheery for a 6 a.m. session, I think, or the man sitting to my right with a notebook and pen on his lap and glum look on his face.

The three girls across from us deliver the prophecies. They don't look any older than me. We've never met before, and all they know about me is my name on the page.

With my head down and eyes closed, I listen.

“Whitney, it’s by keeping your eyes on him that everything begins to make sense,” the first girl says. “I feel like the Lord is saying that if there is any confusion or areas of uncertainty in your life that he wants you to gaze on him and trust him for answers.”

I feel hot tears sting my eyes again, but I stay silent.

“I hear the Lord say that you can be still and let him fight for you,” says the next girl. “He wants to teach you about his faithfulness—that he’s not a man that he would lie, he’s not like any other man.”

Painfully, I fight to hold them back just a little longer. I can feel the walls around my heart breaking down.

“I feel like the Lord is saying you’re a worshipper. It’s time to pick up your tambourine and begin to praise him for the season that you’re in and stand in faith that he is going to deliver you from it,” the third girl speaks with so much passion in her voice that I know if I look up at her I’ll burst into tears. “You may feel like you’re not consistent, but he loves every little yes that you’ve given him.”

With that, it’s over and I’m left wondering if he really is out there fighting for me.

“If Christian healing was for real, science would know about it,” says skeptic and author, Mark Edward, as we Skype from his L.A. office. “I’ve never seen a miracle, but I’ve seen some darn good magic tricks.”

Mark investigated psychics for 35 years—learning all their tricks— in search of answers to his own questions and to collect information for his book, “Psychic Blues.” Through this process, he became an expert on all things psychic— from the biblical idea of prophets to magicians performing for an audience.

Eventually, he came to the conclusion that it’s all a hoax.

“I wanted to believe that those things were possible just like anyone else, but in 35 years all I’ve ever seen are a bunch of scam artists,” he says.

Mark and I Skype on my last day in Kansas City. I’ve been immersed in the supernatural culture for four days and am surprised at how relieved I feel to be talking to another outsider.

I interview Mark in front of a woman who could not disagree more with what he says.

Anja Maree is 35, from Cape Town, South Africa, and believes God created her to be a prophetess and healer to the nations. She has dark hair and glowing hazel eyes that carry the weight of her title.

When Anja walks into a room she never knows what to expect. There have been times when just her presence makes demons flee, sickness vanishes and the Holy Spirit falls under the weight of her anointing.

“I want my intimacy with Jesus to be so strong, that even my shadow heals people,” she says, referencing Acts 5 in the New Testament where the sick and afflicted who passed within the disciple Peter’s shadow were healed by God’s power working through him.

Under her breath, Anja prays in tongues—an angelic language—as she listens to my conversation with Mark, whose soul she thinks desperately needs saving.

Mark and a group of skeptics have \$50,000 on the table for anyone who claims to be a faith healer and can prove it. If faith healing was true, they believe it would change science forever and life as we know it.

Anja hears the offer and feels up for the challenge. She comes in front of the Skype camera, introduces herself, and tells Mark that she’s ready to pray.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Mark says. “I have a physical problem right now that I’m suffering from so if you’re a healer, can you heal at a distance?”

“I’ll ask the Holy Spirit if he can guide me, then absolutely,” she answers. Anja pauses before asking, “Is it your right leg?”

“No, sorry.”

“Oh, and I was wondering if you’ve actually got two brothers?”

“No, you’re way off. I don’t have time for this.”

Their brief conversation is so tense I can't help but bite the fingernails I've been trying to grow for months. I take back the computer, knowing their interaction just ended my interview.

"Yeah, that lady's full of crap," Mark tells me curtly. "Be wary of people who use religion as a shield, because it's very dangerous."

Then he hangs up, leaving Anja and I alone to question why the God we've seen heal countless times, sometimes chooses not to show up.

At midnight in the Global Prayer Room, it's official time, everything changes. People file in and out as a tired set of students are replaced with fresh, bright-eyed Fire In The Night interns who are ready to intercede until 6 a.m. Video cameras rotate from the ceiling so that prayer warriors around the world can participate anytime via live streaming at ihopkc.org/prayerroom.

There are 72 people in the prayer room. I count them twice, trying to stay awake.

At 1 a.m. someone on stage announces that anyone who needs prayer for healing should stand up. Ten or so people rise all over the room. In front of me, a man stands up and three people gather around to pray for him. Timidly, I join them. His name is Paul and he wears glasses, but has always wanted perfect vision. He asks to be healed.

They lay hands on him—a routine symbolic act when praying for healing— and I put my hand on his shoulder. For ten minutes they take turns praying and commanding perfect healing for his eyes. One by one they drift back to their seats, leaving Paul standing alone in the middle of the room. The thick Ray Ban glasses stay on his face.

I find him later to hear his story. A Canadian native, Paul Penner, has been in the U.S. for two and a half months to study at IHOP University.

His eyes don't work together correctly. He can see peripherally, but they do not focus. He takes his glasses off and shows me that his eyes gaze in two different directions.

"I still believe that God will heal me. I'm not the type of guy that gives up in prayer for even the small things," Paul says thoughtfully. "One day we will see breakthrough in it."

I nod in agreement, but quickly look away from his eyes. I don't want him to see the hope fading in mine.

February 8, 2013

Once upon a time, I knew Jesus. I knew what He looked like, what He felt like, what His voice sounded like. I heard Him call me and I answered. But that girl hasn't been around in a long time. I can only hope that she still lives somewhere deep inside of me.

Two years ago, my plan was to return to life as a missionary after graduation, but two years ago I never would have imagined that the faith I held so tightly might be ruined in the process. At night I lie awake wondering what life would look like now, if two years ago I had never gotten on the plane to come home.

Dawn Hallstein is the supervisor of the faith healers at IHOP. Long brown hair flows down her back as she walks towards me Monday night—my last night at this enchanted place. I meet her gaze and get lost in her sparkling blue eyes and kind face. Her body may be old, but her soul is young. Her words are coated with wisdom. People come from all over the world to receive healing prayers from her and the team.

She walks back and forth behind the roped-off rows of chairs marked Healing Ministry Soaking Area in the prayer room. She covers the weeping souls like a hawk protecting her babies. She is their shield and they can rest in her wing.

“Healing the sick doesn’t have to do with how powerful we are or how anointed we are,” she says compassionately. “It has to do with Jesus and who he is in the Bible. As we walk through the healing process, we realize it really has nothing to do with us.”

Dawn has been involved with IHOP for more than a decade, earning a special title—she’s an Anna, one of the Mothers of this House. Within that role comes the dauntingly beautiful task of more time spent praying than sleeping.

In Sept., 2011, the Lord asked Dawn to give up her job and commit to full-time prayer for America, Jerusalem, young people and houses of prayer around the world.

“And you don’t just tell God no,” she laughs.

As we talk, she looks at me with those piercing eyes and asks if she can pray for me. With my nod she pulls me into her chest as my eyes fill with tears. I bask in the warmth that envelops me. Immediately, my defenses fall away and I surrender into the pain that has been building up for years. Warm tears trickle down my cheeks as I breathe a heavy sigh of relief. Somehow, this woman I met 20 minutes ago, feels like a mother I’ve known my entire life.

“There, there my darling,” she says. “Papa God wants you to know that He has never left you.”

A weight lifts from my chest and the dark cloud dissipates. I can breathe again.

March 12, 2013

Dear Jesus,

I still don't know if You're listening or if I'm only talking to myself, but if You could speak to me now, I think You would say it's all going to be OK. I have nothing to fear because you will find me again. You will rescue me from this pit I've fallen into and when you do, I will be a better person because of the fight I've endured. I was taught that You use all things for good, so maybe this is just one of those things.

My conclusion is that there is no conclusion.

Still waiting and hoping,

Whitney