

GOD'S HANDWRITING OF GRACE

My Life Story: How I Was Called into the Ministry

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Heavy beats of solid rock music pounded hard on my chest as I approached the campus' hall. I was late for the party. But I have to come, nonetheless, as president of the high school graduating class at Bulacan National Agricultural State College. It was around 10:30 when I parked my motor bike a few meters from the hall turned into a dancing ballroom. The lights pierced through the enveloping darkness like a laser partially illuminating unknown faces for a split second. The floor was filled with sneakers dancing to the rhythm of the most popular songs. The highest spirit of excitement filled each young body as they danced for the last time of their high school life.

Inside the dark hall illuminated only by blinking lights, I inched my way in to find a waiting friend. An hour earlier I instructed her I will just go home to change my clothes. As I passed through pairs of couples dancing with delight, I finally recognized a very familiar face that seemed bored. Friends surrounded this lady. A very familiar lass-my girlfriend by the name of E-. As I approached her, she was surprised by my presence. She waited for me because she just wanted to be with me. After all she expected for our last dance together. Our last high school dance. A dance that will never take place that night.

As I began to speak she expected for my invitation to dance. But instead I made a request, "Can you please give me time to be alone for awhile. I am not feeling well. Will you just stay with our friends while I go outside for some fresh air?" Wondering ...she still gladly complied to my request. After greeting a few friends along the way, out the hall, I managed to escape into the stillness of the night.

A few minutes earlier, after dressing up for this party, I wondered why my mother often allowed me to attend dance parties of this non-Christian school I attended. Somehow I managed to think through this question that haunted me as I filled the motor with gas from a nearby station. There was this queer feeling of uneasiness and discomfort. As a naïve lad who grew up in an Adventist home, I was somehow exposed to the church culture that considers dances as taboo. I really don't know the biblical reasons why Christians shouldn't dance. Somehow I just believe I must not. Somehow attending the ball that night made me wonder if an Adventist like me should really be there.

So that night, before I met my waiting girlfriend, an eerie feeling engulfed me as I approached the hall. Somehow I didn't like the music that was playing that night. It was too noisy. As I peeped inside the hall to look for my girlfriend the atmosphere of dancing people made me uncomfortable. I wanted to have a few silence to sort out the bothered feelings I was going through that night. The hard beat of rock songs made me feel uneasy. And so after asking permission from my girlfriend, I left the hall and started to walk.

I wanted silence for my soul so I tried to walk into the darkness of the night. Away from the pulsating beat of heavy metal music. To the dark track and field. I walked slowly. As the sound of music was silenced by distance, the stillness of the night began to speak to me. God was given a chance to whisper his voice. As I walked farther and farther away from the dance hall, I felt God's presence. Walking closely beside me. He was there. And after a few minutes I found myself talking to him in my mind. A few seconds later I found myself talking to him audibly.

I could no longer remember everything I said to him. All I just remember was, at that moment, as I walked, time stopped. The cool breeze of the air signaled God has come near. As I walked, I talked. As I talked, I found my eyes crying. All because of the thought and feeling that all through those moments God was speaking to me. An overwhelming sense of his presence has unturned the stones of insensitivity in me and revealed me of my true nature. Somehow God had used my attendance to a non-Christian party as a way to rouse guilt in me.

As if he was saying, "Son why are you here? Are you not suppose to be a good Christian witness?" I did not hear him speak audibly but he spoke clearly to my heart. As I sank deeper into complete darkness in the middle of the track and field, His voice became more audible in my heart. His message was simple. He

was making me feel it. His message was convicting, “Ardie, you are a sinner.” In the spontaneity of the moment, I sensed my sinful condition. I just knew in that instant that I really do not know this God whom I professed to worship since I was a child.

Born on June 2, 1974 at Bulacan National Agricultural State College (BNASC), Pinaod, San Ildefonso, Bulacan a healthy baby was born to Armando and Aida Bernardo. My mother is an Ilocano teacher from San Fernando, La Union. My father, a Bulakeno, was still a college student at BNASC when they met. Later after marriage, my tatay (father) worked at Land Bank, while my nanay (mother) continued to work as a college instructor of physics at BNASC. When my Dad met my mom, she was a catholic then. Later in the course of their relationship, my mother got baptized and accepted the Lord Jesus. Their relationship bore 4 siblings. I, being the eldest, followed by Mandy, Donaida, and Obreand.

Since my Dad was a second generation Adventist I grew up in a very influential Adventist home. We have been exposed to much of the church’s programs and activities. Each Sabbath we were at church. My parents made it a point that we are at church every Sabbath. And though through the course of time my Dad would have his disappointments with God and missed church worship, my Mom would insist that we attend church even if Dad is left behind. So she persistently brought us to church when my Dad is “nagtatampo with God.”

My mother lived her faith. And though she couldn’t explain Adventist doctrines in detail like my Dad, who has been Sabbath school teacher all his life, she walked the talk. She could not explain the dynamics of righteousness by faith. She just practiced her Christian virtues of faith. She remained faithfully consistent with whatever she believes is right. Because of this, she has been a great influence in my life. She was always honest, simple, and true. If I would describe her she is indeed a simple woman of faithfulness.

My Dad on the other hand has been influential to me in terms of leadership. I have always admired him. And though at first we were not that close, we eventually became good friends when, due to a course of internal conflicts inside the bank, he lost his job. He was always a busy man. So in my last year in high school he eventually had more time with us at home while he fought for reinstatement in his former office as assistant manager in Land Bank, Makati. It was quite a rough time for all of us.

One good thing about my parents is that they started saving when we were young. They acquired lands and properties which they can sell in the future just in case we run into financial difficulties. And that time did come. So in spite of joblessness we never really felt we had nothing to spend. My parents started selling some of our properties to send us all to school. Three of us finished college at the Adventist University of the Philippines located in Silang, Cavite, while my brother (second to me), finished his BS in Industrial Electronics at Bulacan State University.

Life was not perfect. No wonder why my Dad wanted me to become like him and get rich. When I was about to graduate high school, I still didn’t know what course to take. But I had always performed well since elementary. And the year before I finished high school, I have received many awards during the Senior’s night. I have garnered many medals from different inter school and regional competitions. Early in my young age, I have been exposed to the arts, music, electronics, oration, painting, drawing, handicraft, declamation, writing, and other skills and have won numerous awards for my school. In each year level, I have always been elected as President.

My Dad was really proud of me. He believed in me so even before I can make a decision for myself, he took me to the University of the Philippines, Diliman campus, to take a qualifying exam for B.S. economics. A course I never fully understood until recently in life. Four or five months before high school graduation, I still remember, I was there inside an air conditioned room in UP, taking this qualifying exam. I gave my best shot. Answered those questions carefully. I knew that UP has its own quota and only the top scoring students would be given a chance to enroll by June.

I think I was one of the few who finished last. Then I went outside to meet my waiting family and ate a hearty mirienda after that. Months later, I received a letter from U.P., stating that I passed the qualifying exam. I was so happy that day and proud too. Another extra point I can show the campus muse whom I

have been courting for almost two years since third year. She had been my crush since first year and two months before graduation she will give me her heart.

The day came around February when E- gave her resounding “yes” to me. I could no longer remember exactly how I won her heart but all I remember is that she became my girlfriend. The most beautiful lady in the campus, mine after all. Who wouldn’t be happy. She became a friend to me. She knew what I have been going through. And just like her I am at times confused not knowing what course we would take in the future. We loved each other much and have been supportive to each other at all times.

After passing the exam at U.P. and after winning the prettiest gal in the campus, what more could a young man ask? Unknown to me, God has prepared something else for a would-be millionaire. I always wanted to be a pilot, but my Dad wanted me to enroll Economics so I can eventually land in any job I want. Whether in government or in private.

So I was headed for U.P. and my parents expected that.

On the latter days of February 1991, the school would have it’s last party during the Senior’s night. It was on that night that I became specifically troubled. There in the midst of the track and field, I talked with God. “Ardie, you are a sinner.” The conviction was getting stronger and louder. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say. I just tried to talk and pray. I opened my heart to Him and eventually found myself talking and praying to Him. Eventually, I found my self in tears. I was crying and for the very first time I was praying to a God I personally do not know. He was there... I know. He was walking with me. Finally I sat down on the track too far to hear the rumbling sound from the hall. All I can see is a tiny speck of light that went in circles. I sat while I prayed. I think I cried for more than 10 minutes and all the while I have been asking God, “Lord, what do you want from me? Who are you? What do you want me to do?”

As I talked with Him, I sensed more of His presence and felt my guilt even stronger. So I prayed. So I opened my heart, and for the very first time in my life, I confessed my sins to him and admitted I am a sinner. For unknown reasons I do not know and understand why, I told him, “ Lord, do you want me to become your servant and be a pastor?” I just don’t understand why I blurted out, “Lord, if you want me to become a pastor, then I would go to AUP and enroll.”

Then I asked myself, “How would I know if God wants me to be a pastor?” I barely knew Him that time. I do not understand why a thought came to mind, “Why not ask God for a sign?” Instantly as I prayed, I asked him, “Lord, if you want me to become a pastor, could you please give me a sign.” Tears began to be scarce at that time. A few minutes earlier, I was crying and sobbing and gasping for air. But as I ended my prayer with a question, I began to sense peace.

“But what would be the sign to ask?”

Later in life I would learn as a theology student that asking for signs is a simple indication of lack of faith. But doesn’t God sometimes ride with our foolishness so that His glory can be revealed? Read the book of Corinthians and you will understand how God used the foolishness of the cross to reveal his Son to the world. So how did my prayer end that night?

From a new found relationship with God that night, I whispered, “Lord, if you want me to become a pastor, will you please drop a star in the clearness of the night?” After whispering my last Amen, I readied my self. Sitting on the edge of the track, I slowly turned my face towards the heavens. And just as my two eyes looked up at the starry skies, a falling star suddenly appeared. Streaked with white light. It’s burning tail illuminated my eyes for a split second. There it was. I couldn’t believe it. But the Lord God just answered my prayer of doubt.

Somehow the God of the heavens took notice of my feeble prayer. And there with his own fingertips, He affirmed my call to the ministry using the falling meteor as his pen and the skies as his paper. My call was finally signed with God’s very own signature.

Perhaps you wonder if it was God who really called me at all. My story is quite different from the experiences of other pastors who have been called into the ministry. There are those tragic accidents that led to a second life encounter with God. A demon possession that ended in spiritual deliverance. Or the tender wooing of the Spirit in a child's heart that eventually led to a decision to become a minister. And countless extraordinary ways by which God transformed the life of an individual and called him to the ministry.

Mine was not peculiar. It might even be questionable. To others it might not be a very unusual conversion experience that bore fruit to mighty acts of faith. Nevertheless I believe that an encounter with God is divine. Period. God has his way of winning our hearts. And whatever medium he uses, He will eventually win us over if we will let go of ourselves and allow him to rule. But mind you, I questioned my call to the ministry. But that would come later in my life.

That night after the star confirmed my call, I walked slowly back to the hall. I sat on my motorbike and just sat there. The music was playing loud. Somehow my girlfriend went out and ask how I was doing. I went inside the hall but was completely unaffected by the noise. I just sat there with her. We talked. She found me extremely silent. After that we went home and I told her I want to become a pastor. She's Catholic. I don't know if she understood what I said but I knew she heard me right.

Finally graduation day came. The moment we have all been waiting for. It was special to me because I will be awarded with the highest academic awards. My father helped me write the valedictory address. During the awarding ceremony, I receive two important awards: the Gerry Roxas Leadership Award and the Gold Eagle Award. I was so happy that day.

Weeks after graduation I informed my parents that I wanted to become a pastor. My parents did not expect that. Specially my Dad. He was expecting I would become a businessman or someone who will make money. After all I am the eldest in the family. Wouldn't it be nice to help my family financially when I begin to earn a few bucks.

It did come as a surprise to my Dad. But what I really like about him is that he, together with my mother, respected my decision. So there it was. Both of them granted my wish and supported my decision to go to Adventist University of the Philippines which was Philippine Union College then. Early before the school semester of June 1991, I applied for admission, took the exams, and attended the orientation sessions.

There I was a young man who don't even know the God I profess to worship. I will be wrestling with God for the next five years to finish two degrees: a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, History, and Religion and a Bachelor of Arts in Theology. AUP will become a part of my life. The College of Theology (which was just a department then) will help shape a future pastor. There were many good experience to share but I will emphasize those that made a significant impact upon my life.

The question that bothered me most as a young student was the question of how are we saved? It was after all the most important question humans can ask. How is a man saved? It was and is a basic question that I needed to answer. On it lies the other pillars of faith. If enrolling in the College of Theology do not guarantee me with salvation then what is life after all. I was on a quest. A quest for identity and freedom that would take me years to discover.

What prompted me to know more about God's plan of salvation is my fear of death and hell. I don't know if that is what the church taught me but somehow I grew in an environment where subconsciously I came to believe that If I don't obey all of God's commandment, I will not make it to heaven. How true?

I remembered when I was baptized on December 1991 I really did not understand what baptism was all about. All I knew was my parents wanted me to be baptized. I saw nothing wrong with it so I complied. After a brief review of our fundamental beliefs by a layman, I got baptized by Pastor Leopoldo Baylon at Matimbubong, San Ildefonso, Bulacan. After baptism I made a vow with God that I will no longer sin. I made a list in my mind of the sins that I have committed. It was my goal to stop sinning. For ten days I

tried to be good. I tried not to be tempted. And I will be proud to tell you that for ten days or so I did not commit any sin that I know of until I fell to one. "How could I sin? How could I fail my God," I sighed.

After my first sin after baptism, I found an excuse with God that it is not really possible to stop sinning. Eventually I lived a mediocre spiritual life and lived in sin again. Unlike other youth I am not the "typical sinner" whose sins are a public display of foolishness. My spiritual life was simply dead. I did not take drugs or smoked or even tried alcohol. I just lived like a good Christian like most Adventist but I was dead on the inside. I did not know the secret to a victorious life. I even remember reading a book written by the former editor of the Review and Herald by the name of Thomas Davis entitled, "How to Become A Victorious Christian." I tried to follow its principles but I never really overcame my sins. So how do you overcome?

I started at the wrong place. How can I be an overcomer when I haven't been born again yet. Yes born of water but not of the Spirit. So when I was already in college, my quest for Christian perfection took place. I wanted to know God. I wanted to know Him more. And there were many retreats, books, radio programs, tv evangelists, music, youth activities that helped paved the way for a deeper understanding of who this God is and what He wants from me.

In my first month in college I became involved in small groups through the invitation of a friend. I was first invited in the Ministerial Association but later I moved to the ROMANS (Reflecting Our Master Aiming For Nurture and Service) Club. The small group ministry of PIC helped me develop my social skills as we did spend a lot of time attending church together, having potlucks, and participating in the many activities of the ROMANS ministry which was actively involved then in the prison ministry of Muntinlupa.

There I was. The small group provided me of a home to meet new friends and to hone my leadership and pastoral skills. Academically I was doing well. I didn't work like other students as I had the privilege of studying full time. I was faithful in fulfilling my class requirements. I spent considerable time reading and studying at the library. I didn't sleep in the afternoons. Instead I went to the library at 1:00 p.m. so I went be tempted to sleep. There I read books. Many good books and magazines. Sometime and somewhere I was taught that if ever I am to grow, I have to keep on reading good books. So I did.

As I attempted to excel academically, my quest for an understanding of what righteousness by faith deepened. As far as I can remember, I know I have a relationship with God, but I just did not have an assurance of salvation. I often wondered and thought, "How can I be sure that God loves me and that I have this assurance of salvation."

Since a young child, I was somehow thought that I have to obey all of the ten commandments in order to be saved. And to be kept saved, it has to be kept perfectly. And I was so far from obeying all ten of it. While in college this fear of hell haunted me.

As far as I can remember, I have been in quest of God from first year to my third year college. I felt I was growing too slow. What does the phrase "justified by faith" mean? How are we sanctified? These terms are too heavy for me to grasp. The gospel was never fully explained to me no matter how simple it was. I had to search for it personally through books and tapes. Two of the greatest theological mentors who influenced my life were Morris Venden and Robert Wieland. These two pastors are well known in the Adventist circles around the world as proponents of Righteousness by faith. Together with other authors who expounded the themes of Righteousness by faith, I slowly began to understand the wonderful good news of the gospel. As I read I begin to understand what a wonderful God we have.

I lived a fearful life before. As a Christian I lived to please other people and God. He was to me a cosmic policeman who is always out there to check for my inadequacies and failures. The God that I have been taught was tyrant God.

I remember so well when I was still in the children's division of the Sabbath school my teacher would always pinch me on my legs every time I giggle or move around. You know kids don't like to sit for

so long. As a young kid I was always on the go. Always trying to find something to do. Then she would scold us by saying, “Children don’t be too noisy. You know Jesus is angry at kids who always move around and don’t listen to stories. He will be mad at you.”

Early on in my life, that teacher already planted in my young mind the concept of a tyrant God who dislikes kids who laugh, who keeps moving and who can be naughty at times. I grew up with that kind of God.

To my surprise, my search for an understanding of what God was like transformed my old concepts and renewed my experience. My readings revealed to me that the God of heaven the Bible talks about is so different from the god many Adventists worships.

The God I came to discover then was a God who “justifies sinners by grace through faith.” All my readings and search can be summed up in that simple statement. I tried to earn my salvation by good works and perfect obedience to the ten commandments. It was completely opposite to what God teaches. There God revealed to me it was because of his grace, his love for me, that I have been forgiven. through his death on the cross.

By his grace He cleansed me from my sin and promised power over it. During that time he gave me the assurance that all I needed to do was to accept him fully by faith. My part was simply to receive Him in my life through faith. As simple as that. From then on I understood the power of the everlasting gospel and received the assurance of salvation which was missing in my life.

In my senior years in college, I participated in almost every extra curricular activities. I became president of the ROMANS Organization, Press Secretary of the Student Association, Chairman for the Council of Religious Organizations. I wrote for the college paper and became involved in most of the campus activities.

By graduation, God honored my faithfulness to Him by granting me a Cum Laude award. By this time my parents have already accepted my chosen profession. It took my father around two years, after my decision to become a minister of the gospel, to finally accept God’s call to me. He really wanted me to follow in his footsteps. But I’m glad that after two years of theology training, my parents are glad to see me walking in that path.

I can’t blame my parents for wondering why all of a sudden out of nowhere I decided to become a pastor. Yes I faithfully attended church since I was a child but I never really participated in church activities in terms of leadership. After all in spite of my weekly presence in the church I could not recall one incident when I actually finished listening to a sermon since I always stayed outside and talked with my friends during the divine hour of worship. There were no indications that I would become a pastor. Well that’s where you see God hand writing his grace upon my life. Slowly he writes down the words of truth upon my life that would later convict me to live for him.

So I finished my theology course. What’s next? Graduation days are always marked with high emotions. But after that day, what comes next? I can write an entire book narrating every detail of my life. I’ll just discuss more on the highest points in my life which made a difference in my ministry and passion.

I joined a crusade after the graduation. It was held in the summer of 1996 at Novaliches. That crusade was quite a long summer activity for me. During those months I wrestled with the question, “Have God really called me into the ministry? How can I really be sure that the falling star was indeed God’s call into the ministry of grace. God would prove himself later in my life.

After that summer vacation I was given an assignment by the Central Luzon Conference to work as church pastor in Bungabon, Nueva Ecija. I was still young then. I felt inadequate. I was at the crossroads then. After visiting the elder of the church in Nueva Ecija with my supportive father, I went back to my hometown in Bulacan to prepare myself.

It was also that same summer when the Central Luzon Conference had their triennial session in Central Luzon Adventist Academy (CLAA). That was around April of 1996. I was ready to go to Nueva Ecija but I decided to attend the session with my father.

It was there in CLAA where I met my college professor by the name of Pastor Nephthali Manez. Even before I graduated he, together with Pastor Daniel Catangay and Pastor Moises De Ocampo, had been crafting a program that will provide would-be pastors a complete internship training and an academic upgrading. It was there in CLAA where he invited me to join a program which would later be called the District Laboratory Program (DLP). A program under the College of Theology which would also be approved by the NPUM that year.

I got hook into this program. I decided to join this program. And together with my former classmates who decided to work in this program, I stayed in AUP from June 1996 until March 2000. Under the program I taught Bible classes to undergraduates and took my Masters of Arts in Religious Education during weekdays. During weekends I pastored the two churches under the DLP assigned to me. It was quite challenging. So I taught, I studied, and I pastored at the same time. These are the unique training features of the DLP.

I gained my confidence in speech by teaching. I grew intellectually through my Masters. And I developed my pastoral gifts, skills and leadership through my pastorate. It was indeed a fruitful period in my life. I had learn so much.

It was during my second year in the DLP that God would give my affirmation to His call to the ministry. I was holding a Voice of Youth meeting in one of my churches at Adelina Church, Binan, Laguna when during the second week, my Dad visited me from Bulacan. During lunch time we had the time to talk. It was at that time that he unveiled to me what would put God's stamp on my call to the ministry.

My father began to share a story which I still remember. It happened when I was still a young boy around 7 years old. My parents had just visited my grandparents in San Fernando, La Union. I was already sick. My fever was high. On their way home my fever got so high that I started to have convulsions. My parents immediately rushed me to the hospital. On the way my body stiffened and my eyes turned white. Dad was driving as fast as he can to get me to the hospital. As they hurried, they prayed. My Dad's prayer went something like this, "Lord, please save the life of my son. Kung iligtas mo po sya sa inyo na po sya. Bahala na kayo kung anong gusto nyong gawin sa buhay nya." (I am offering my son to you.)

Eventually all I can remember until now is waking up in that hospital with a plastic tube in my hand. I remember waking that morning with my family.

After my father narrated that story, he reminded me of his solemn oath to God many years ago. That story sent a shiver on my spine. So I had been dedicated to God's service a long time ago. And God recalled my Dad's promise by calling me personally the night of February 1991 by writing his call with the illuminating streak of a falling star.

God's handwriting of grace. First, grace that saved me from physical death. Second, grace that saved me from eternal punishment. Third, grace that called me to a ministry of His very own grace.