

Testimony of Carole Graves

Good evening everybody.

It gives me great joy to be given this opportunity to share my testimony once again with you.

My journey in coming to know Christ has been a long one.

As a child growing up in a non-Christian family, I had very little guidance, understanding or belief regarding Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. Having had quite a turbulent childhood, coping with a difficult father, who left me at the age of eight, surviving and keeping out of trouble was enough for me to contend with.

At school RE lessons would pass me by in a blur. I distinctly remember being afraid of my RE teacher, Mr Tricker. Often he would be seen bellowing like a grisly bear down the corridors at any child running or making a noise.

To avoid getting into trouble in class I would sit quietly, and avoid asking questions for the fear of getting ridiculed or shouted at. I would produce neat, articulate essays and achieved good grades. However in the process I was left at a loss not knowing what Christianity was truly about.

Although I rarely attended church other than for weddings, Christenings or funerals, in church I was always filled with emotion and an aching in the pit of my stomach but just did not know what my soul was trying to tell me. I recall my love of singing hymns but the words I sang and the sermons I listened to meant very little to me and they would go over my head.

Reaching my early teenage years I turned my back on any notion that God existed and believed I could make my own way in the world without him. I labelled Christianity as a religion to suppress and control society. Going to church, I believed was something you did because either you were lonely or weird. Anyway I thought who would want me, I was not good enough or pure enough for the likes of others who I saw attending church.

As the years ticked by there was a part of me that yearned to know what the purpose of life was and why on earth I was here.

Through several failed relationships, a long string of failed careers and generally slipping off the rails into soul damaging situations, I became increasingly aware of a deep emptiness in my soul and nothing could satisfy this. My coping mechanism when I was faced with this emptiness was to fill my life with being busy but I found there was no where to hide from the true reality of an empty void.

In December of last year just after my 38th birthday, my spiritual awakening began. The last few months of 2005 was particularly difficult. I had yet more relationship problems, work issues and finally I contracted an illness that provoked my immune system to attack my skin. The condition produced painful red sores all over my body and swelling on my eyes and lips. I was not a pleasant person to be around. My moral was at an all time low and I felt myself sinking lower and lower into a black hole.

Over the Christmas holidays I was invited to a friend's party in Cardiff. I was reluctant to go and wanted to hide away from everyone but I forced myself to make the effort for my husband's sake.

At the party I met up with a Christian friend Sian. We got chatting and before long we were discussing Christianity. I broke down in tears and explained that I had reached rock bottom. Sian kindly offered me support and suggested that I read Rick Warren's book – Purpose Driven life – a 40 day spiritual journey.

I followed the book daily and although I had no-one around who wanted to share my thoughts and views, I battled on and kept an open heart. I gradually found myself getting hooked and couldn't wait to read the next chapter.

During this time life was becoming increasingly more difficult. My father in Law was very ill and after a major operation he sadly passed away in February this year.

Sitting in church at my father in laws funeral, pieces of the jigsaw started to fall into place. I found I begun to have clarity and understanding on the sermon I was hearing.

During my drive home from the funeral, my thoughts were fixed on work the next day. Suddenly out of the blue I felt a deep aching in the pit of my stomach – my solar plexus. I was overcome with an urge to wail out loud. I sobbed and sobbed. Once the sobbing subsided I felt a deep wave of love, forgiveness and warmth wash over me. My heart was bursting with joy. I began to laugh out aloud and just couldn't stop. From that moment on I knew I had opened the door to Jesus and invited him in. The emptiness that had once engulfed me was now full and brimming over for the love of our God. All along I had been denying the need for his love, forgiveness and guidance, thinking I could make it on my own –how very wrong I had been.

The next step was clear. I felt a real need to know more about the Christian faith and Jesus. I spoke to Kath and Paul who were both Christians in the Village. I quickly learned that they were members of this church. Kath told me about the Alpha course and that a course was shortly commencing in March, the day after I was coming home from a holiday abroad. Gods timing couldn't have been more apt.

It was arranged that Kath would kindly take me along to the Alpha course as her guest.

Since that 1st day at Alpha I haven't looked back. Attending the Alpha course has been the best thing I have ever done in my life and it wasn't just the lovingly prepared and delicious food that kept me coming back or Phillips witty jokes.

Alpha has given me the answers to the many questions I have often pondered over and was a lynch pin in giving me a true understanding of the Christian faith.

Through the Alpha course & after alpha course I have been privileged to meet such a wonderful fellowship of people who have welcomed me with open arms and shown such love, kindness, compassion and friendship – I thank you all.

Following on from Alpha, I could not wait to be baptised and was baptised three weeks ago on the 2 July. The baptism for me was the final step I needed in declaring my belief, love and commitment in following and serving Jesus Christ. The baptism has truly allowed me to shed my past which was filled with guilt and shame and to start afresh.

My heart which had an empty void is now filled with deep joy and love. Each day I am amazed in how the Lord is working through me, softening, remoulding me and using me in my every day life for his work and ultimately for his glory.

My husband, family and friends have noticed that my anger has diminished and that there is an inner strength and calmness about me. My family have also commented on how much happier I am and noticed a spring in my step.

With this spring in my step, I can not hide my new found enthusiasm and energy for the Lord. It bubbles over like a fountain and I find myself at every opportunity telling others of my testimony, faith and love for Jesus, hoping they too will come to know him and be set free from the sufferings and find a deep eternal joy like I now have.

Even though I still have issues in my life, I find I am much more confident in confronting problems face to face rather than pushing them under the carpet. I find great comfort in knowing the Lord not only loves the world, he loves me too and I increasingly find myself trusting more and more in the Lord knowing that he wants the best for me.

My spiritual journey would have not been possible without the support and Guidance of Phillip & Hermie. I would like to thank them deeply for showing me the way to the truth, the way and the light of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally I would like to give praise and thanks to God the father for his never ending love, mercy and grace and acknowledge his endurance in never giving up on his lost children.

Thank you.

23rd July 2006