

The following is the long version of Tyler's testimony sent to Hillsong Channel as summarized on the website. More detail of Tyler's faith journey can be read in the version below:

My name is Tyler Bell. I am 36. Born and raised in Traverse City, Michigan, USA. I have been incarcerated now for 53 months beginning at the end of October 2015.

My faith journey really began back in 2013 when a series of bad choices in both life and substance use caused me to be living back in my childhood home with my mother. My father passed in 2009 from cancer.

While still struggling to find my place and purpose in life, my mom casually invited me to attend a local church she had started going to regularly. I at first had no interest, still thinking religion to be for the weak-minded man who needed a fairytale story to give life purpose. Still, I was drifting in a sea of depression and worthlessness. Spending my days playing guitar and piano, watching TV, never really committing to anything or anyone. My mom mentioned once again that I might really like this church as the music there is really good. I had, at this point, never been exposed to any kind of modern worship music. Through her casual invites (and some moving of the Spirit, which I was completely oblivious to at the time) I awoke one Sunday morning and asked to go with her. I think she was even a little shocked and suggested, maybe because I had just awoken from a drunken stupor of the night before, that maybe I should be more prepared and go next Sunday. Unbelievably, I followed through with this. Very unexpected at that point in my life for me to follow through with anything.

So anyway, we went to church. Now, I would be lying if I told you there was some kind of instant conversion where I just loved church and wanted to be there every Sunday. I even criticized the music to myself that first day. Things like, why is it so repetitive? Don't they have better song writers in the Christian genre so they don't have to say the same thing over and over again all the time? Not to mention all the people singing along in the audience, lifting their hands and doing all kinds of other strange things. But I kept going back each week to try to find out more about what these people were doing there.

By the third or fourth week going to Bay Point, the Lead Pastor, Nick Twomey, concluded a message with an altar call where they had a door on the stage. The door was just there, all by itself. Nothing really special about it. Nick almost casually invited anyone who felt moved to come forward and walk through the door. Somehow, before I even really knew I was doing it, I was up on the stage walking through this door. People on the stage shook my hand, congratulated me, and gave me a little bag with a coffee cup and a bible in it. So began my life of coming to know about Jesus. I didn't even really understand at the time why they were congratulating me. I just walked through a door to nowhere. I mean it wasn't hard or anything. Oh how little I knew! Both that the door I had walked through was not to nowhere, but a door to everywhere and

everything, and also, how hard it would be later on. Like I said, this is the start of my coming to know about Jesus. The story of my coming to KNOW JESUS is much harder to tell and a little darker.

Now I was saved! Everything is great now right? WRONG! As much as some of my tastes changed and I was drawn to music like Chris Tomlin's "Whom Shall I Fear" performed by worship leader Drew Hale at Bay Point Church I look back now and realize I was just a fan. I was having experiences that made me feel good at first. But when things that the world presented seemed better, I would quickly go to those. Despite my early attempts at reading God's word and some really great conversations with Lead Pastor, Nick Twomey, I see now how little of the Gospel message I really understood.

So, when the world started to give me what I thought I needed to be happy again, I went right along with it, proclaiming the blessings of God the whole time. Eventually, I came to live with a woman to whom I was not married, and who had recently been married to a former close friend of mine. I was even pretending to be a part time dad to their two children. At the time, all of this seemed like everything I ever wanted. Never mind that it was indeed filled with sin. This is proved by the fact that I had less peace and grew more miserable each day. I was still falling into a victim mentality often and blaming others for whatever went wrong in my life.

Things culminated with the loss of a job that I had really put a lot of stock in and then the loss of the relationship that I thought was so perfect. I landed back at home with Mom again, this time living in the basement. Such a perfect place for me to live, as it was an accurate portrayal of my feelings at the time. Basement low. I was worthless. Where is this God anyway?! Why won't He bless me if He is so good!? I'd spend countless nights up late drinking and getting high, looking to the sky and yelling these very things at God. All the while, I was abusing my mom's love and compassion that allowed me to continue to live in her basement.

Then one night I was home playing video games in the cave I had made of Mom's basement when a longtime friend called and tried to pull me out of my nose dive by inviting me over to his house for the night. It was a Saturday and I was going to go to church tomorrow, but what the heck. I agreed to go if he would pick me up. Long story short, I was far from a close relationship with God at that point, and ended up abusing even the help my friend tried to offer by instead crawling into bed with his wife after he had fallen asleep in the living room. This resulted in criminal charges that brought me to jail and eventually prison.

Upon arrest, early in the morning of October 25th, 2015, I was taken to the county jail. I had been there before on previous offenses of drunk driving and knew the program a little bit but I had very little care about anything at the time. I was still drunk and high when I arrived and when I sobered up, I had been placed in a solitary cell because of other inmates messing with me in the regular holding cell. Finally awakening one morning with a somewhat clear head and realizing a little better what I was facing, I looked at the breakfast tray sitting in the food slot of

my cell door. A giant glob of peanut butter was the main course of this tray. Now, to have my dilemma understood properly, I must relate that I am, and always have been, deathly allergic to peanuts. A large part of me wanted nothing more than to put that peanut butter in my mouth, swallow it down, get back under the blanket I had been given, and let death take me before anyone knew what happened. But God wouldn't let me do it. Again, almost without knowing why or what I was doing, I hit my knees right there in that cell and prayed like I never had before. More than just an emotional experience or a good feeling, this was a real pouring out of my heart to God in prayer. **I told Him how I didn't want to live anymore unless there could be purpose. Unless it could be in His purpose.** Somehow my prayer arrived at His purpose. I didn't even know what that meant at the time.

Upon rising from this prayer, I wiped my tears and went back to look at this breakfast tray sitting in my food slot. As I looked, still contemplating eating the peanut butter, an officer I knew from my times in the jail before approached the door and asked if I was going to eat. I told him I couldn't and he calmly said he would try to find me something else. "Yeah right," I thought. "You're going to get me something to eat." Well...he did. Not only that, he proceeded to give me the bread of life.

Upon returning with some food, he asked how I was doing. I let on, in more colorful terms than I will use here, that I was pretty awful. He asked if there was anything he could do to help. I was still a little shocked that he was willing to help me at all. I said something about something to read, and he quickly returned with a Bible. He then led me quickly down the Roman road telling me how all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that he didn't consider himself any better off than I was in God's eyes. I didn't respond very well to his preaching at the time. But I wish I could remember this officer's name (I think it is Jeremiah something), because between the prayer that had come upon me and his guidance to the Word of God, there was awakened in me an insatiable hunger for God's Word that persists to this day.

The next 7 months in the county jail were some of the most difficult of my life. My newfound faith was tested every day by other prisoners and officers. Not to mention the ongoing legal battle that eventually ended with me being sentenced to 74 months in prison. God was there with me the whole time and I grew to know His presence more and more with each challenge. I even did correspondence Bible studies and requested as many books from the jail chaplain as I could get. My mom would send books as well. C.S. Lewis's "Mere Christianity", Josh McDowell's "More than a Carpenter" and many others opened my mind to the reality of faith in Jesus. At one point, I spoke to Nick Twomey on the phone from a jail cell and couldn't stop myself from asking him what some scripture in the book of Ephesians was really saying to us today. Chris Bornschein, the compassion minister for Bay Point, came to visit me multiple times and was a huge spiritual support, even coming to see me on Christmas Eve. What a blessing.

Anyway, after being sentenced it was time to go to actual prison. County jail is where smalltime offenders or people fighting their cases who can't post bail are held. Once you are doing more than a year of time

they send you to prison. It was the worst day of my life. But the Lord was right there to comfort me and give me peace all the way through it.

After a month in quarantine (that is just what they call the first place you are shipped to in order to be processed while they figure out what prison to send you to), I was sent to Alger Max facility in Munising in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. After a month or so there, trying to get my feet under me and learn how to operate in prison, I was forced by some other inmates to "lock-up" for protection and lost almost all the freedoms we are allowed in here. I was placed in a cell with one other man for 22 hours out of the day, which only left a small amount of yard and day room time. My mom would also drive 5 hours one way to visit me once a month. I think she only missed one month of visiting the whole time I was up there.

While I was in this cell 22 hours a day I was finally given the TV I had ordered and found the Hillsong Channel. Oh what a connection to the Lord this was. At that time Hillsong United's "Of Dirt and Grace" album was on a lot and I was so blessed to be able to get wrapped up in the Holy Spirit's presence while watching, often through the tears I had to hide from my bunkie. The inspirational preaching and teaching also lead me deeper and deeper into my understanding of who God is and what he wants in a relationship with us.

After six months in this cocoon...it was time to emerge. God pushed me right into it by moving me in with another bunkie who was just horrible. After leaving that situation, I was back in the same place I started, but I was now much more solid in my footing. I joined the very small church there (about 15 guys) and proceeded to worship musically with my, at the time very limited, skills on the keyboard and guitar. I didn't know how to play a single hymn or worship song. It was a humble beginning to say the least.

The instruments available at that facility consisted of a couple of very cheap acoustic guitars and a couple cheap keyboards. I was so thankful we even had those. I learned a lot from a guitar player that was there and made what I hope is a life long friend in Dustin Jenkins. We have since gone to different facilities and I think he may even be very close to getting out of prison. It is hard for us to keep in contact in here.

Anyway, just as I was feeling a little more secure and settled I was moved to another facility in Kincheloe. They called it Kinross after the first facility with that name was closed. While at this facility God helped me work on other aspects of my walk with Him that could have been easily overlooked if I had come straight to where I am now.

I did join the church there and attend regularly, the worship leader didn't need any more help, or at least not my help. I couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to serve in the way God had so obviously called me (oh brother). I see now that I needed that time to really concentrate on worshiping Him in other ways than music. During that time I met another lifelong friend, Scott Rookus. Scott was instrumental in building my faith then and continues to work with me today at our current facility. I

was only at Kinross for 6 months and was then bumped down to level 1 status and moved to St. Louis in the lower peninsula of Michigan.

This "new" facility was full of opportunity to serve God and much closer for my mom to come visit. Thank God for that as she still has never gone more than a month without visiting. Upon arriving I was immediately approached about playing keyboard for the church as they had just lost their keyboard player when he went to another facility. Overjoyed with the opportunity but terrified with the larger scale of the church (100 plus at times) I began playing every Sunday and have not missed one since.

While the beginning was very rocky, I have continued to grow both musically and spiritually while here at STF. Currently I serve as worship leader on two different worship teams every Sunday with practices through-out the week. Instruments have always been provided when needed and I am amazed at God's provision in every hardship. Every person on the worship teams looks to me as the obvious leader both musically and spiritually which is both humbling and encouraging. I have also been put in leadership positions in the primary protestant service and a ministry called Keryx here on the compound.

God also blessed me with a job in the Chaplain's office soon after I arrived at this compound. The work has been very rewarding. I do believe at this point that I have a future in ministry somewhere. With a little less than two years left I am looking forward to what God has in store as I know..."the best is yet to come".

Throughout this journey Hillsong has been a huge part of my spiritual life. I really feel like a member of the church, even though I have never been to a service in person. Thanks to the outreach of the channel I "go" to service with you guys every Sunday night. It continues to be a beacon of hope in this sometime very dark place. When the channel was removed from our cable system (it has since been brought back) there was a huge outcry amongst the believers. It was what prompted me to finally reach out with my testimony though. That, and ringing in the new year with Joel Houston and Hillsong United at the Passion Conference opening that I was able to watch on TBN. What an awesome way to start the year! Singing along with "Good Grace" as the clock struck midnight brought tears of joy streaking down my face as I thought of all the New Years nights spent so miserably alone and lost in my life.

This whole experience has really brought me closer to God than I think I could ever have been otherwise. I truly feel more free in prison right now than I ever did outside the gates. With everything that is going on right now, I continue to lean on the rock that is Jesus Christ; my Lord and Savior. I pray that I am allowed to continue to serve Him in so many ways when I am released from prison and hope to join Hillsong in taking the Gospel across the world. I know it can reach anyone, anywhere. It reached me.

Tyler Bell
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