

VALERIE WRIGHT, EX-CHRISTIAN, USA (PART 1 OF 2)

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Description: A story of an American teenager who discovers Islam from many signs that God had placed for her.

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I could say that my journey to Islam began before I was even aware of it. I was born with a progressive hearing loss. My mother did not realize that I had difficulties hearing until I was 4 years old. Once it was discovered, I received my first hearing aids, and began attending a school where hearing and deaf children were integrated.

At first I was placed in classes that contained only deaf children. Then I began to attend some classes with hearing children, and I had a teacher come to help me learn how to integrate. I felt at home there. I did not realize that I was being prepared to leave the school and go to a mainstream public school.

Once I changed schools, I had a very difficult time adjusting. My constant moves to different homes also compounded the issue. Finally, in middle school, I encountered some stability. I lived in a very small Texas town called Wylie. When I was about 12 years old, my English teacher was special: She was from Turkey. Now, anyone who knows Wylie knows that in those days this was extremely unusual.

The teacher had come to my small town on an exchange program. Of course she never spoke with my class about religion, but it was enough at the time just knowing her. She got us involved in a pen pal project with students from Turkey. My pen pal's name was Yasemin. I still have a card she sent me, with a picture of mosques and churches side by side. The significance of this was not apparent to me at the time, but it was just one among many signs that God had chosen for me.

During this period of my life, I yearned to be close to God, to please Him, and to receive His love. I became very involved in the church of my grandfather. He and his siblings were raised as Pentecostals, and both his father and his brother were preachers.

Every afternoon I would come home from school and play the piano. I played it for God and for myself to feel peace. I was taught that praise for God rises to heaven like the smell of sweet incense. I would imagine this as I was playing. Sometimes I would sing a little along with the music, although the music usually expressed my intense feelings more than my words ever could.

One day, I felt God's presence in the room with me. It was immense and overwhelming. The air felt extremely heavy with the awesomeness and majesty of His Being. I suddenly stopped singing, and my fingers froze over the piano. I began to shake. I did not know what to do. Then, slowly, by instinct (or, I should rather say by the guidance of God), I turned away from the piano and prostrated on my knees and my head.

Trembling and longing flooded my soul. Flummoxed for words, I simply thought, "God, please anoint me. Make me special. Make me serve You." I remained prostrating for a few more minutes, then, with a deep breath, I got up and resumed my other usual activities.

Another time around this same period of my life, I was at my school where parents and students had gathered for an academic awards assembly. My name was called, and I went up to receive my award. Afterward, my mother told me about something strange that had happened. She said, "While you were walking up to take your award, a strange woman came to me, someone I don't know. She said, 'I just feel that when I look at your daughter I have to tell you that God has a plan for her.'" I wondered for the longest time what His plan for me could possibly be.

I was feeling depressed by the many restrictions of the Pentecostal Church then. I couldn't comprehend their purpose very clearly. I also was quite disturbed by things I would read in the Bible, and when I asked about them, I did not get satisfactory answers. In fact, my questions were met with disapproval. So my mother and I started attending a different church together and, again, on two separate occasions, two different strangers approached my mother and told her that God had a plan for me.

I recall that I requested a private meeting with a preacher to discuss something. One of the questions I asked him was, "Am I going to heaven?" "Well, do you believe in Jesus?" he asked. "Ye-e-e-s ... ," I answered. "Then you are going to heaven," he said. Inside myself I was not satisfied with his answer. I felt doubtful. Summer came, and I went to church camp, where two momentous events occurred.

First, the preacher who was speaking to us told all of the youth who were present to come to the front of the room if they wanted him to pray for them. "If you feel like you have any barriers between you and God, and you want me to pray that those barriers will be removed so you can get closer to God, come up," he said. I was among many others who formed a line in the front. We stood up, and he started to place his hand on each person's forehead and make a supplication. That's when something very odd happened: They all fell flat on their backs without even bending their knees, like dominoes! I began to feel a trifle nervous. "What's happening?" I wondered.

The preacher came to me. He slapped his hand on my forehead and pushed me a little. I rocked on my feet and remained standing, while he went on down the line and the others continued to fall. At the end, only a few of us were still standing. I was left wondering what had happened to those who fell and why I was different. Had I missed

out on something?

Another experience happened when the preacher of my youth class was giving a very emotional lesson to hundreds of young people. Then unexpectedly he looked directly at me and said, "Valerie, stand up." I stood, and he continued, "I want you to know that God wants to heal your ears." He thought he was moved by the "Holy Spirit" to say this with authority.

He placed his hands over my ears and prayed. Nothing happened. I was very embarrassed. The following Sunday, one of the students in my class asked him why, if anything was possible in the name of Christ, sometimes prayers weren't answered. The preacher did not look at me, but he threw a pen in my general direction. "God answers prayers," he replied, "but sometimes people do not have enough faith to receive it." My mother and I were of course very upset by this, and we left that church.

I drifted for a while, not really attending any church on a regular basis. I felt lost. I felt that I kept failing, and that somehow I was getting it all wrong. I knew I could never be perfect, but I still did not feel all right. An indefinable sensation always lingered in the back of my mind.

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