

A MOTHER'S PRAYER

Monica never quit praying for her son.
God's answer overwhelmed her.

by John Murphy Ball

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Where did I go wrong? she asked her pastor. "I tried to set an example, to be a good wife, a good mother.... "At a loss for words, she covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

Her grief touched the pastor deeply, for he loved this woman like his own daughter. She was devoted to the church, devout and sincere in her faith, an example to everyone and always eager to share the Gospel. Now, in his office, she sat beside him, heartsick over her son.

"God will not desert you," he promised gently. "Our Lord promised He would never forsake us, and He will not forsake your son, either."

"But Pastor, my son has forsaken the Lord! I am scared to death. I'm afraid he has lost his soul. What can I do?"

He gave her his handkerchief and told her what she knew he would tell her as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"You can pray," he said. We can both pray for Gus. We can ask God to act in Gus' life and bring him back."

"But, I do pray! I pray in the morning when I get up. Throughout the day, I pray, and before I go to bed, I pray for my son. I have prayed for him since he was a baby. But everything just gets worse and worse. I don't know what to do. It's a nightmare."

Monica prayed fervently for years for God to open her son's heart and lead him back to faith. But her son remained defiant.

They spoke for some time, and she left somewhat comforted but still worried. She left also determined to continue her prayer campaign. Jesus had listened to the Canaanite woman, and she would trust God to listen to her.

As she had reminded her pastor, Monica was experienced at prayer. She had prayed for her husband to become a Christian. She was a devoted wife, constantly aware of her responsibility to live her faith.

Through all their years together, however, her husband had steadfastly refused to be converted. He was not a bad man and he provided an adequate, if modest, life for his

family. He simply considered all religion to be a waste of time and Christianity to be a foolish weakness in his wife.

For a time after Gus was born, she had hoped to reach her husband through the child. But nothing had come of that.

Their son was a delight and a wonder. Father and mother adored him and spoiled him, perhaps. He was handsome and intelligent, athletic and confident, a natural leader.

During the first years of his life, she had sung him to sleep with hymns, taught him to say his prayers and read Bible stories to him at bedtime. Of course, she had taken him to church and done everything she knew to make Christ a part of his life.

She had prayed for her child.

He had been an outstanding, competitive student. Yet he made friends easily. Some of those friends had led him into misbehavior, but he had seemed to remain devoted to his faith throughout adolescence. He had especially loved the elaborate Easter services of his hometown church.

She and her husband had encouraged him to go to college and to pursue his goal of becoming a professor. The entire family had sacrificed to pay for his education. Science, art, philosophy, language—he had excelled in everything.

Away at college, Gus had also discovered a new sort of life, free of small-town morality. He had taken a new look at the Bible, enlightened by his studies, and now believed the Scriptures to be shallow and self-contradictory, he said.

Monica had been horrified. She intensified her prayer campaign on behalf of Gus.

Her attempts to talk with her son during his short visits home were failures. Every night, she prayed for his soul.

When Gus' father—who had finally become a Christian—died suddenly, Monica sacrificed and worked to keep Gus in the university.

During that difficult period, Monica fervently prayed for the Lord to guide her son back to the fold.

Instead, Gus moved in with his girlfriend.

Monica begged him not to live in sin, but he went his own way.

By the time Gus achieved his goal of becoming a professor, he was the father of a son, refusing to marry and still looking down at the Christian religion.

When his son died unexpectedly, Gus abandoned his live-in girl friend and began shamelessly chasing after an heiress and her money. He seemed to have abandoned all morality.

During these years of disappointment, Monica continued to pray for him and for herself. She thought things could not become worse, but they did.

Gus became a respected educator and took up with a faddish religious cult. Soon he was giving lectures and preaching this weird and pagan religion. He carried the message from city to city, challenging Christians to debate their faith with him. Gus was brilliant, highly educated and he knew the Bible. Christian laymen, even pastors, were no match for him in debate. He made Christianity seem irrelevant and unscientific. His audiences loved it.

Monica continued to pray, but she began to despair also. Gus was now 37, a successful and respected thinker who discoursed on religion and philosophy. It would take a miracle to change him now.

His mother prayed for that miracle.

It happened while he was walking in her garden lost in thought and melancholy. Across the fence, children were playing. Gus thought at first one of the children was reciting a playtime rhyme. The child's voice said, "Pick it up and read. Pick it up and read. Pick it up and read."

Suddenly, with vivid clarity, Gus knew he was being told to pick up and read the Bible that was lying across the yard. He ran to the book, picked it up and read these words from St. Paul:

"Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Rom. 13:13-14).

Like a brilliant light cutting through the darkness of his spirit, Gus was shown the truth in that moment. He was changed. He was converted.

Exuberant, he ran to a friend who was sitting nearby and told him what had just happened. His friend took the Bible and read the next line aloud, "Accept him whose faith is weak ..."

The friend applied that verse to himself and he too was converted!

Gus' mother was overwhelmed with sheer joy at what the Lord had done.

The story does not end here but extends into history. The year was A.D. 386. The place was Milan, Italy. Gus, the man who said he heard God in the voice of a child, would come to be called St. Augustine, one of the great defenders of our faith. God would use him to protect the church from enemies without and heresies within. His influence upon the world would be incalculable.

All because of God's answer to a mother's prayers.

This story has been simplified and condensed. The entire story and a treasury of spiritually uplifting insights can be found in St. Augustine's Confessions, available from most libraries or bookstores.

John Murphy Ball is a physicist and writer, and a member of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church in Huntsville, Ala.