

My journey to finding a relationship with God is a long and complicated one. There wasn't ever just one moment that I can recall, where my life completely changed forever. I had years of hurt and pain that could not be healed in one church service. I had to learn to let go of grudges, to open up and be vulnerable with God. Even allowing love to be present in my life was a challenge. I struggled to understand God's grace and favor over my life. I knew I served a God who doesn't make mistakes, yet I thought that Him choosing me was an error. The hardest lesson I had to learn was how to forgive. Nothing in this world will help you feel more liberated than forgiveness! I am a living testimony of the transformative power of forgiveness. I am a completely different person after forgiveness took place, and now I understand that I am a daughter of the King and He has chosen me.

Ever since I can remember I have always been in church. Specifically, a Spanish speaking church. For some context, my parents were very immersed in ministry while I was growing up. This meant that we had to give up more than just two days a week for church. From a very young age I had to let go of extracurricular activities and hangouts with friends, for church events. During this time, instead of hating the church I decided to embrace it and make friends with other ministers' kids. This led to an excitement for church related activities, and a desire to be with my church friends. But this caused church to become a playground for me, and that's all it really was until I was in 5th grade. Up until this moment in my life I didn't know what the truth was because I was so focused on my friends and just having a good time. Then came our last Wednesday night service. Everything seemed to be going as per usual heading to church, but my parents turned around to tell me and my siblings, "Today is our last service, we are leaving this church, and you can't tell anybody until we tell everyone after church ends today." This was a monumental moment for me, and truly what felt like the start of my villain story. In one moment, everything that made me happy was stripped away and I couldn't voice my feelings. So, I forced myself to go numb and not care about things in this world, that way I couldn't feel the disappointments around me. My motto for the longest time was, "Don't have any expectations because if nothing happens then you won't be disappointed." My parents went on to plant their own church and became pastors of that new work. Church planting became an exciting, yet peaceful season in my life. It almost felt like while I was in a season of deep resentment, I allowed myself to become so busy doing things with the church that I was too occupied to sit in my thoughts and add fuel to the fire. Years passed by and as we would lose people, I taught myself to not care that they left. But the years of growing hurt could not stay hidden for long. I went from being involved in every ministry, to suddenly stepping out of everything in one night just to see the church suffer, and to do what I could to get back at God. I began turning to the world to find distractions and any form of happiness I could experience, because all the church brought to me was suffering, disappointment, and anger. It was the bullying, the forcing, the abuse, and the roles I was pushed into that drove me to a place where I never wanted to do anything for God again. I was on my phone during every service as the words being preached would go in one ear and out the other. Music would play and I would clap, but I'm thinking about what I'm going to eat for lunch. Present but not open. Because that would require feeling, and that's the last thing I would allow myself to do.

In the Spring of 2016, my family had an emergency that caused an out of state move to take place, followed by questioning and gossip from the people of the church. My family stepped down from their pastoral role as they watched their church members, family, and friends turn on them. Seeing not only our church but neighboring pastoral friends of ours gossip about our family is what really did it for me. I began to question everything. How could someone so “Christ like” act like this in a time where my family needed rescue. During this time, we went through a season of no longer feeling welcome when going to church. When my family began to look for a place where we would feel welcomed, it was in 2017 when we visited our third church and finally decided to try out our first English speaking church. Going in, all I wanted was to find a church that I could just simply bare, and in three years leave and be done with this church life. But the worship convinced me to stay. I had never heard something so beautiful! The worship made me feel something that I wanted more of. All it took was one service. My family proceeded to leave the parking lot with the same conclusion: this is the one. But there was still a deep hurt within me that God needed to heal. Months passed and I would rarely talk to the youth and make connections. I remained closed off because I was done with God and everything that came with Him. Sitting quiet left time for observation and even if I wasn't letting God speak to me, He was showing me things and teaching me lessons through these people. I spent service after service biting my tongue and holding my emotions in. Until a realization hit... These people are different! They walk in this truth I'm hearing about. I saw that, not only at Refuge Church, but through Youth Convention and youth hangouts as well. They were the same people inside of the church as they were outside of the church. It sparked a hunger in me to give God another chance because maybe He is different, and maybe this is actually the truth!

This was a major stepping stone in my journey. I look back now and can say that God chose me and my family and that is why He allowed everything to happen to us. I would spend 2019 allowing myself to slowly open up and heal. I can confidently say that because His word was preached every Sunday and Wednesday, my heart was truly pierced by the truth, and I couldn't stay the same for long. His word was no longer going in one ear and out the other, but rather in one ear and straight to my heart. It was His sweet embrace and love that I would feel wrapped around me every time that music would come on. I was carried by the music team to the feet of Jesus when I felt I couldn't even call out His name.

My healing came because the people of Refuge Church gave me hope. This changed me. I would proceed to get baptized in June of 2019, and receive the Holy Spirit in August of 2019. That quiet, hurting, and closed off girl had a renewal in her. She would go on to being a certified yapper and learn to accept love and show it. More importantly, she learned to offer the same hope that she experienced. We offer hope so that others can understand that God has chosen them, and they are just as qualified to have a relationship with Him as we are.