



James Witham (1992–2013)

Our dear friends journey of faith...

James arrived in Southampton to study Maths with an abundance of enthusiasm, willingness and determination. I met James at the Societies Buntfight and invited him along to Navs for food, fellowship, bible study and prayer. I actually don't remember the first time I met James, however, he responded to my invite and came along to Navs. I was working with Navs as part of the Connect program that year, and I began meeting up with James 1-to-1. What became clear to me was that although James had a church background and some concept of who God is, he did not have a grasp of what it meant to be in and live out a relationship with God. My relationship with James was as much about being a friend as being someone who would help him discover the truth and work out what it meant to seek God. As we met together we would talk, read and study the bible and pray.

James was always willing to have a go, to contribute, even if he wasn't sure. Numerous times on a Thursday evening during bible studies did James say something completely off the wall and people would have to point out the error of his views. However, he was never afraid to get things wrong and his enthusiasm and desire to grow far outweighed his knowledge and understanding, which would come over time.

During James' first year in Southampton I remember him sending me a text. It read something like this, "I get it, I get why God sent His Son to die on the cross for me". It was hugely encouraging to see James begin to grasp something of the depth of God's intensely personal love. Although this was great news I was all the more determined to help James be a disciple of Christ, to stick by, encourage and equip him so that his life would be lived out in response to the Gospel and not just knowledge which had no bearing on reality. James often described much of his first year, especially the first term as being the best time of his life, and would talk of his closeness to God.

It wasn't a surprise to me that his second was more difficult. It is inevitable as we journey through life with it's ups and downs. Although, James described his second year as a low time, I believe it was here that God was at work most. Any time subsequent to the 'best time of your life' causes expectations to be raised and when things are different, disappointment often follows. Later, when reflecting on this time with James he could see how God had been at work, although he didn't 'feel' close to God compared with his first year he could see how God was growing his reliance on Him. I think one of the things he learnt that year was that faith in Jesus Christ isn't based on how we feel, and that actually we grow far more when we are struggling through tougher times. It was these vital lessons that set him up for his third year.

I met up with him at the beginning of his third year and asked him how is he going about seeking God and putting him first and also what had God been saying to him of late. He said, "Well, I'm here with you, talking about this, because I really want to", then he said, "I feel this year is the year I will go for it, that is what God is saying to me". How great is that? The verse I would often bring James back to was Matthew 6:33 "Seek first, His kingdom and righteousness...", my prayer for James was that he would seek God above all else, that he would love the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and that he would trust the Lord with all his heart and lean not on his own understanding. Did he go for it? Yes, like never before. No-one in the group was more committed last year than James. A commitment not borne out of duty or habit but of sheer thirst and hunger of life lived to the full, the life that Jesus gives to those who follow Him. James grew tremendously over the last year, and it was a growth that I knew would equip him for the journey home. I just never expected it to come so soon.

The last time I met James, he was looking forward to his trip to Norway and Latvia and I asked him how are you going to step out of your comfort zone this summer and trust God like never before. He said, "I don't think there is anything else I can do" his response amused me and he even backed it up with, "I'm not being arrogant or anything". Of course I couldn't resist the opportunity to poke fun of him, and he did go on to say one way which he could step out was to share his faith. Looking back on that conversation I can't help but wonder if James had actually reached a point in his faith when the only step left was to meet God face to face. Whatever the case may be, although I have lost a dear brother, there is much rejoicing that James is home. Here is someone who responded to Jesus' call to "come and follow me", and did so whole heartedly. He might not have fitted the mould (nor did God make him to fit the mould), but God placed people in his life and used them in revealing Himself and His love to James. As one of those people I can only stand and marvel, that God, by His grace used me in James' life, but also used James to teach and equip me and enrich my journey towards home.

Written by Adam Collett (September 2013)