

## **WHO AM I?**

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"...but we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." 2 Corinthians 4:7

*I would like to thank the Lord in allowing me to share how a loving Heavenly Father, took me from a life of self-defeat and engrafted me into His life to fulfill my life purpose. I will share this through five events and encounters with the Lord in my life.*

### **INTRODUCED TO GOD'S LOVE!**

I grew up in a home that had very little regard to God, though from my mother's background was very religious. My mother emphasized the importance of going to church, and being Roman Catholic, made me go through the sacraments of my holy communion and my confirmation. (In the Catholic Church this process is with tests, and a lot of memorizations of the catholic doctrine, and practices).

From early childhood, even though I had lived under a very abusive and immoral home, I had a sense of desire to be good in spite of all that I was introduced to through the influence of my older peers and my father. I also sensed that there was a God and that that I would have the favor of God in my life. I guess I believed this because of the many things that He had allowed me achieve in my formative years.

My parents separated when I was 6 years old and divorced when I was 12. I attempted to balance out my life and cope with the sense of rejection or abandonment by getting involved in sports and becoming a high academic achiever. My identity was in being successful in these areas in order to get noticed, and acceptance my by mom and peers.

At the age of 8 I met a friend, Dan Reaves, whom I wished I could emulate and though we were not close, I had a high admiration of his confidence and ability to play sports. In school during 7<sup>th</sup> grade we went to different schools and in every sport, we would compete head to head. When my parents divorced we had to move to the district of the school Dan attended. It was during my 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade that I learned so much more of him and his character. It was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when we played basketball together, that he noticed that before a game I would not go home, but had to wait at the

school for 2-4 hours before the games would begin. He and his family knew the Lord and exemplified it to me in a personal way.

One weekend after a game, Dan invited me to hear Tony Fontaine, a professional basketball player speak at a Youth for Christ Crusade. Knowing that he wanted me to go (and there were pretty girls to go meet), I went. (It's amazing how the Lord sees our needs in spite of our selfishness). It was here where I heard that God was not someone aloof, and that He did want us to have a relationship with Him. During the message, he spoke on the importance that everyone should know that "God knows everything about us, and loves us unconditionally!" In my mind I said..."really, how? Prove it!" It was as though he heard me and began speaking on how on the cross Jesus died to take my place in order for me to get my relationship with God the Father the way He intended. The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart, and at the time of the invitation, Dan asked me if I wanted to get 'saved'. I didn't know what that meant. So I asked him to explain what that meant. He then asked me, do you want to accept the love of God and give your life to Jesus. I sure did, and went forward to give my life to Jesus.

The youth pastor who had driven us to the Crusade was there and he and Dan introduced me to the Lord Jesus Christ. I was shown through Scripture that God's love would remove and forgive of all my sins, and that because of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, He wanted to enter into my life. When he asked me if I would accept Him and give Him my life, I broke down, knowing that God was loving me and accepting me just as I was. After I prayed to commit my life to God and ask Him to make me His son, the youth pastor asked me the question. "Do you know what just happened?" I responded that I had just been forgiven and that I no longer had to go to confession. He smiled and told me that yes, I had been forgiven for ALL my sins. I was made a child of God to never again be rejected, (this really meant everything to me), and that I would live with God eternally in heaven. He showed me scriptures highlighted in his new testament. He told me that I had to fully put my trust in God and believe what He said through His word. To not trust my feelings or ideas, but to fully trust on God's Word.

When I got home, I ran in and told my mother what had happened. At first she was shocked and told me that it was against our religion and to be real careful with religions that try to control us with 'weird' thoughts and beliefs.

## **MY FAITH JOURNEY FROM EGYPT TO THE EDGE OF THE JORDAN!**

The night I came to the Lord, all the way home I kept asking my friend and his older brother, Tom. 'So, what do I need to do next?' "...What am I supposed to learn now?" They smiled and told me that they would get back with me the next day. Sure enough, my friend and his brother called me and invited me to go play softball with the church team. As we were warming up, Tom, the older brother began telling me that I needed to first of all learn how to read the Bible, and begin going to church. He told me that I should plan on going to church with them on Sunday. After the game, he asked me if I wanted to know how to tell others about how to know Jesus. This was a life changing experience for me.

I see know that even though I was saved, or better stated, born again, I was still on the same mode of my past life, before I was saved. Even though there was a deep hunger to know more of what the Bible said, and would spend hours reading it, I still had issues with my thought life, and feelings of rejection and fear of what else would happen in my life. I was well known and liked by many in my school, but I felt so alone. I knew that there was a change in my desires, but I still looked for ways to fulfill my puberty changes and drives.

I gave my life to Jesus in October 22, 1967 and in March 14<sup>th</sup> of 1968, we had a mission's conference where I was challenged by a speaker to fully surrender all of my life to Jesus Christ even if it meant that I would have to go be a missionary. I ran to the altar and cried to God that I wanted Him to use me any way He wanted to. The best way I knew how, I surrendered my life to Him. As I look back at this decision, I see that God had planted a seed and that there began a change in my life. But still I struggled with temptations, and strong insecurities. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, in early January of 1970, one Sunday morning, our pastor challenged us to make a New Year decision that would change not only what we would do in our life, but it would change our lifestyle. He spoke on losing our life and allowing Jesus to be our life. He stated that friends would abandon us, and that God would begin changing us more into what He wanted us to be. He gave the invitation, and as I was sitting there next to my friends, I was the only one in the entire auditorium to stand up to make this commitment (There were over 700 in the service) My friends started laughing at me, but I knew then that I was willing to fully surrender to the Lord, allowing Him to change me into what He wanted! I went forward and laid my life at the altar at that moment. Yes, my friends left me after church, but I didn't feel rejected. Rather, I sensed that I had entered into a new lifestyle, a better and greater

lifestyle, and the sense of inferiority to them seemed to leave since I had now wanted to know how to fully identify by faith with the Lord.

## **A RADICAL DESIRE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE!**

Even though I had totally committed my life to the Lord, there was an element in my life that I still felt like I had to prove myself to God, my authority and even my friends. I continued to battle inner self-image conflicts and temptations. I was told that it was 'normal' as a Christian to have struggles that every man deals with, and that in time I would overcome them.

I entered into college to serve the Lord and many times in the 4 years of college, I would see that I was struggling with so many thoughts of my past, the pressures of life, and my identity (which I based upon the requirements that the ministry put on me), and the pressures of life. In my junior year of college, after work the Lord stopped me as I was walking from my car to the dormitory. I plainly heard Him tell me, "I am all you need; I want all of you!" I fell on my knees on the pavement and cried out, "How do I do this?"

From that moment on, I had a hunger for not only the Bible, and to serve Him, but I realized that there had to be an element missing in my life. I got married in 1973 and in our preparation for marriage, I studied some of the writings of Watchman Nee and Major Ian Thomas. They were sharing information that was so true, yet I could not comprehend the transformation that they spoke about. I believed it, but it was much later that the Lord would allow me to be illuminated to the fact and allow me to appropriate Him as my life. In the meantime, I went to my pastor at that time and to others of this college, with my new found information. I was advised against from delving into the 'deeper life' studies, that it was detrimental to my growth in the Lord and dangerous. But, I thought, What is wrong with going "deeper" in His life? I was living too shallow. Again my fear of being rejected by those I admired, controlled me and exposed my weakness.

I was given the favor of the Lord in my studies, and even though we were in a position of leadership of the ministry, my old struggles existed, and in some cases increased. Our ministry grew in numbers and in people coming to Christ, but my ego and pride overcame me. I was let go from my first ministry position due to my pride. Even though the pastor still wanted me to stay, he saw that I had to learn how to trust the Lord in a better way. He recommended me to another pastor he said would help me and knew how to handle someone with my potential and gifts. I moved to Jacksonville,

Florida to work in a larger church, and again God blessed my efforts, but my baggage I had carried in engulfed by my pride brought me to a breaking point. I made so many egotistical and selfish mistakes that the pastor called me in often to deal with me, and as much as I tried, I continued to be 'controlled' by my ambitions, desires and selfishness.

During my ministry in Jacksonville, I met another pastor from a different denomination who invited me to come hear Major Ian Thomas speak. Again, the "deeper life" was introduced in person. I look back at this conference and see how the Lord 'planted' a seed into my spirit during that week. For I realized then that when I was saved, I was crucified with Christ. Another speaker in the conference, Manley Beasley, spoke on how in the Roman Empire times, there were a sect of Romans that would crucify the murderer to the body with the murdered, showing their guilt and guilty identity. This not only made sense, but it was then that I wanted to have the same testimony as Paul did in Galatians 2:20. I wanted to know what the crucified life was all about.

In May of 1976, I was called by another pastor to move to Tampa to help establish a Hispanic Church. This was foreign to me, though I spoke Spanish; I had no clue on how to be a pastor. I denied this opportunity at first. It was not until I was accused of stealing some of the equipment from the church and incarcerated, that my state of confusion brought me to a brokenness. In the cell, I cried out to God; I was losing everything! My identity as a successful minister crumbled. I had only been married 3 years, and we had just been given a little baby girl born into our home. I didn't understand why God would allow this in my life. All my anger and frustration became evident. While in the cell for the one day that I was there, I had a visit from a friend who found out about my incarceration, and he asked me a question that totally exposed my need: "Why are you here?" My initial response was, 'because I was raised by an abusive father that would never take time to raise me up to be the kind of man I should be!' After I said this, I asked myself, 'where did this come from?' I am sure it was the Holy Spirit digging into my conscience and wanting to free me up. This friend, then asked me: "So your dad put you in here?" And went on further to state, 'I am the chief of Police here, and I have the liberty to set you free. But until you tell yourself the truth of why you think you are here, I can't.' He got up, prayed with me and left. He then turned and said, 'search the heart of God and allow Him to show you why He has allowed this to happen to you!'

This got my full attention. I had no one to impress or seek for acceptance. I was alone, as I silently waited for the Lord to say something to me. Within a

small period of time, I realized that Galatians 2:20 had to be experienced. I cried out to the Lord and said, "I give up, and realize that I am nothing without you! I give up on all I attempt to do, and am willing to be whatever You want, do do whatever You want, and go wherever You want to lead me!" A new hunger for His Spirit swelled up in me. In about 5 minutes, I was asked to be transferred to another cell with 18 other prisoners. As I walked in, one of the prisoners came up to me and asked. "What is your name and what do you do for a living?"

I stuttered, gave my name, and told him that I was a pastor in a church, thinking that they would all start laughing. Instead he and others proclaimed. "God has answered our prayers!" They all pulled up to the table and asked me to explain how they may come to know God. I wept. I shared the gospel with them, and the Lord touched each of them. They wept before the Lord as they repented of their sin, and gave their life to Jesus. As we were praying, my friend, came to my cell and asked me to come out of the cell.

He then asked me if I know why I had been allowed to be not only accused, but put in jail. I responded by saying, 'God allowed this to be in my life, so that I could understand that I needed to die to myself, and be willing to allow Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Life. He hugged me and as we were ready to leave, lunch was served. Both my friend and I sat down to eat with our new brothers in Christ. I left that Jail with a new perspective in life and understanding that would carry me with a new identity. One who has not only been forgiven, but released from my past!

## **FREEDOM, BUT ENCOUNTERING NEW BATTLES!**

As I got home from this encounter, my wife and I sat down and talked and prayed about our lives. The church pastor met with me, and prayed with me, sharing that my position had been tainted, and asked forgiveness for anything that happened. I told him that I had to leave that ministry and that I would be seeking a job to support my family; when the Lord would open the door, I would go wherever He led.

Two days later, the pastor from Tampa, drove to Jacksonville after hearing what had happened to me. He had contacted the pastor previously to let him know that he wanted me to help him in his ministry in Tampa. When the pastor from Tampa arrived, he said the Lord had put in his heart to hire me and that he would put me in a position of support as a missionary to develop the Spanish ministry to reach the Hispanic population in Tampa.

We moved to Tampa in June of 1976, and as I began the Spanish Church, I had to totally depend on God, His Word and sought His life in me daily. In October of 1977, Keswick Ministries of St. Petersburg hosted Major Ian Thomas and other speakers from Moody in Chicago. A speaker from Colorado also came, to speak on the Trichotomy of man. Dr. Charles Solomon and others spoke in the evening. It was then that I was introduced to the exchanged life application. As I by faith embraced this truth, I came to realize that not only had I been forgiven, but I had become someone new! I was not bound to my identity of my past, or just a 'sinner saved by grace', but realized by the revelation of the Holy Spirit that I was in reality a new person! I had so many struggles prior to this time in my life, due to trying to prove myself, and not realizing all that had occurred at the time of my New Birth.

After that week and encounter with the Life of Christ in me, I was attacked through many other battles in my life. Other pastors became envious of our ministry and accusations and threats were made against me and my family. The more I died to myself, the more I saw the Lord do things in our ministry that are unexplainable.

Since then, I have seen the Lord do miracles in our midst, not only of Salvation, but total transformation in the lives of individuals, families, churches--and now in the school system through those in the Educational Profession. It was through this experience that the Lord gave me the grace to forgive my father, and was able to contact him in a miraculous way. I had the privilege to introduce him to the Lord where he not only repented and asked Christ into his life, but also asked for my forgiveness. He died 2 years later in 1981. At his funeral his brother and 2 sisters also gave their lives to Christ, as well as 22 other family members and friends.

## **HIS LIFE WILL LEAD ME**

As stated in this brief testimony, the Lord became my savior at the age of 13 when I felt the need for love and acceptance through the rejection of my dad, and in a city that (back then) looked down on us 'foreigners'. The influence of a friend that showed me the love of God in a practical way drew me to know my need for Christ. As I grew in the Lord, within a year, in my search for significance and wanting to be the Lord's servant, I saw the need to fully dedicate and surrender my life to the Lord. This happened in three different occasions, once at a missions conference and the others, when the Holy Spirit so burdened me prior to going to Bible College and at Bible

College. I began then to understand what it meant to lose my independent life and performance-based identity.

In spite of my continual surrender, God convinced me of the need to totally identify with Him. I sensed this leading in my life, but I didn't know how to do it on my own. In Jacksonville I heard Major Ian Thomas speak on the Life of Christ in me, and a seed was planted to understand that I had been crucified, buried, resurrected and was sitting in Heavenly place with Christ Jesus. It was not until I was in jail and in total confusion, which I just gave up on all my selfish ambitions and identity in order to allow Him to be my Life. For many years, I tried to continue to live this exchanged life, but had battles with habits, anger and a lot of bitterness.

God began to show me this battle raging in my life but I again reverted back to my desires and ambitions to satisfy my own goals without consulting with the Lord. In 1981, our 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter was born, she was and is beautiful, but was born with a physical defect. Instead of running to God, I again got angry at God. For over 10 years, not only did I get angry with God, but part of me gave up on God. I went from confusion, to disillusionment. I was in bondage to a lie with my concept of what God should be. To add to this, in 1989, my son was born, and he also had a birth defect--he was born with only one arm. This threw me into depression and anger.

One evening, I drove to the beach and took my journal and began 'hashing' it out with God. I openly spoke of my feelings of being abandoned, and rejection again, and for over 2 hours just cried out to God as well as yelled at Him. I came to the point that I told God that I didn't care to trust Him, unless He would not give me a glimpse of hope and an answer. As I sat there crying, I sensed the Lord walking me through a process of forgiveness. The releasing of vindictive thoughts toward those who had deliberately stolen from me, mocked me, rejected me and used me. At the end, I told God that I felt like a hypocrite since I was supposed to be in the ministry representing Him. I told Him that I had heard that it was sacrilegious to ask him 'why', but I had come to a point of my life, that I didn't care. So I cried out: "Why Lord?" He responded. "Son, I know what is in your heart, and it's okay, since Jesus cried out the same way on the cross. He identified with what you are going through right now. And I know it's hard to trust one you feel is against you, but please trust Me. And if you feel like 'forgiving Me', please allow Me to let you know that I fully know how you feel."

As I received His peace, I realized something. So, what happened to Jesus after He cried out to the Father in time of abandonment for my sins? Yes, He died as He gave up His life! I knew then that I had to be willing to fully



give up my life and self to Him! Jesus allowed the Holy Spirit to raise Him up from the dead! At that moment the Holy Spirit filled me to fully know that I was united in Christ at the cross, and my life and circumstances all had a purpose.

In the following 9 years, I walked through continual freedom from sinful habits, thoughts, released from bitterness. My children had a different father, and my wife had a different husband. At the time of this writing, I have come to begin to not only learn how to enjoy the Lord, as I develop a loving relationship with Him. Knowing that no matter what I do or don't do, His love for me has not changed! In the mission ministry the Lord put on our hearts, we are getting more totally dependent on Him, His provisions, His timing, and His direction in our lives. No, we have not arrived yet, and are continuing to see how to fully trust and follow His leadership!

Yes, Jesus Christ became my Savior in order for me to be called a son of the Father; I was restored to a relationship to a loving Father. Jesus is also my Lord and source of Life in a more evident way today. As my source of life, He has become one who has broken the chains of my past, released me from bondage and is now my guide, and frontrunner. I am continuing to learn how to follow Him and allow Him to live in, through and instead of me!

### **ENGRAFTED INTO HIM TO BRING FORTH HIS LIFE AND FRUIT.**

The Bible explains this spiritual life process that the Lord walked me through. In 1967 I was given the privilege through Jesus Christ to be born again (John 1:12). I was born into the family of God. I was removed and cut off from the lineage of Adam, and 'engrafted' into Jesus' eternal life. As I matured in the Lord, I see now how I was lifted up as He was lifted up because I was only producing selfish fruit; later I surrendered, and eventually I identified with His death. The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead now lives in me to give me new life! Jesus became my Savior, and not only gave me salvation, but I made someone that I was not before! Jesus became my Savior, Lord and Life, yet it took many years for me to recognize and live in this life of abundance. And still, I marvel at the revelation that He continues to give me. The more I learn and understand, the less I realize I fully comprehend.

Here is how God inspired John to explain this transition in my life--which can be in any believer's life--as I exchanged my life for His:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He lifts up;<sup>1</sup> and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples." John 15: 1-8

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