

Reshaping Broken Pieces

Testimony by Randy Johnson

I was born October 24, 1953, in Kissimmee, Florida , and born again August 24, 1975 in Winter Haven, Florida.

My first birth was into lives of two very special people, James and Betty Johnson. I am the first born of three children.

I am very fortunate in that both of my parents are very committed Christians and have been the majority of their lives. Some of my earliest recollections are those of being in Church, seeing both my parents taking very active parts, teaching, youth activities, Sunday School superintendent, etc. They were Christians in and out of church.

I have seen them take genuine interest in the lives of others all my life. I said all the above to set the stage for what I am about to say.

It was Wednesday evening. I was 12 years old. I had just traveled all of 13 miles from my home church to a neighboring Church for a district youth rally for our denomination. I don't recall what the evangelist preached about, but I do recall the feeling that I had to respond to the invitation he gave to come to the altar and receive Jesus. I got up, walked the aisle in that little church and by the time I knelt at the altar, tears were streaming down my face. I didn't really know what I was crying about, but I did know I was doing the right thing.

It's a little rough on a 12 year old boy to cry in public, especially when surrounded by peers. To top it off, the preacher came over to me, stuck a microphone in my face and told me to tell everyone what the Lord had done for me. All I could blubber out was "He save me!" About that time, one of the older saintly sisters from our church pulled out her frilly feminine flower print handkerchief and handed it to me as she gave me a big hug. Her intentions were precious and priceless, but there I stood crying, in front of everybody, drying my eyes with a woman's hanky. Somehow, deep inside, I knew all of this was worth the temporary stress I was experiencing for that moment.

As the evangelist let me return to my seat, he said to the people there, "I don't think we have heard the last from this young man" His words would later prove to be somewhat prophetic.

I went to church the following Sunday morning, which was customary, but something was different. Eventhough I had attended this church all my life and knew all the people there, I had a new sense of belonging. I felt closer to them than I ever had. I truly felt as if they were family.

I sensed this new sensation as I returned the handkerchief to the lady who had been so kind to loan it to me the previous Wednesday evening. I handed her the hanky, which my mother had graciously washed and ironed in appreciation. The lady once again welcomed me into the family of God. I really believe that's when it registered to me. I understood what it was all about being Born again into the family of God. A new birth, a new family.

My new found faith was fresh and vibrant as I entered into adolescence. I was able to say not to the temptations that were beginning to present themselves to me. Out of real conviction, I maintained that kind of stance for three years. I was an outdoor person. My interests revolved around outdoor sports and hobbies. My life was rodeo, baseball, hunting, fishing, breaking horses, camping, and raising dogs, to name a few. As I began to involve myself with these activities and the people associated with them, church activities began to take a back seat in my life. Church had always been there, and I figured it always would. I began to grow numb to Christianity. I began exchanging the values I had learned from my parents and the church for those of my peers.

At 16, drinking and immorality were a part of my life. I avoided going to church when I could. I was still living with my parents and going to church was mandatory. I kept my sins for the most part, hidden from my parents. I was ashamed for them to know.

I graduated high school at seventeen and left home to work on a large ranch. I was on my own surrounded by a world of temptation I found myself vulnerable to. I didn't try to fight them, I only indulged.

At nineteen, I had reached my life's ambition. I was working for another ranch. I thought I had it all, a job doing what I liked to do; a good place to hunt; some good hounds; two nice vehicles and a new home. But, in all of this living, I had left out the main ingredient.

I was the envy of some of my friends; I had a smug sense of "I have arrived". This lasted about three years. It seemed my accomplishments, possessions, and position were not enough. There was still a vague sense of emptiness in me that none of this "stuff" could fill.

I ran into some difficulties where I was living and decided I needed a change of scenery. I packed up and left thinking I was leaving all my problems far behind. The truth was most of my problems traveled with me.

I moved in with an old friend. From there my life took a nose dive, not because of the friend, but because I was trying to fill this emptiness that kept growing. I found myself doing something I vowed I would never do, smoking pot. The main focus of my life had become drinking, drugging, and sex. I was living in a fog stumbling through life.

One Wednesday evening I decided, on impulse to attend the little church I grew up in. Just about everybody there knew me by name, but they didn't know what was going on in my life. The people saw me as that 12 year old boy they had known. That's what I wanted them to see.

The pastor of the church preached and gave an altar call. I reluctantly responded. I knelt at the altar and a tremendous battle began. I asked God what was wrong with me. Why couldn't I stand up to temptation? He answered me. He told me to ask a certain person to pray for me to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. My head had been bowed and my eyes closed the whole time I was at the altar. I didn't even know if that person was there or not. I raised my head and opened my eyes. To my surprise, he was looking straight at me. He asked "Is everything okay, Randy?" I said, "Yeah, everything is fine". I stood up and walked out of the church.

The next two weeks went by in a blur of sin and more sin. On August 28th, 1975, my mother called and asked me to meet her for dinner. We met and she talked to me about getting right with the Lord. Everything went in one ear and out the other.

When she left for home, she had an urgent feeling concerning my spiritual condition. During her hour drive home, she prayed a prayer for me she had never prayed before. She asked the Lord to save me whatever it took.

When I got off work later that afternoon, two friends and I decided to cool off in one of the local lakes. Growing up in south Florida, I had swam in those lakes all my life. I knew the dos and don'ts about the lakes. My two friends and I were goofing around, seeing who could make the funniest looking dive. There was no pier or diving boards. We were running down the beach, jumping in the air and diving into the water. I came running down the beach for one last dive. I leaped up, tucked my head and dove. My head hit the bottom of the lake with great impact, I was conscience, but I couldn't move. I felt stunned. My arms were moving back and forth in involuntary motion. I panicked and tried to call for help. I began to take in water and passed out for lack of oxygen. In the next minutes, I came to. I was lying on the beach with my head in the lap of one of my friends. He was crying. Through his tears he was saying "Thank God you're alive!" An ambulance arrived about 30 minutes later. They rushed me to a nearby hospital. Sometime after midnight I was transferred to a hospital in the next county. After x-rays, I overheard on of the doctors say this young man would never walk again. The impact of what was going on hit me at that time.

I was having a hard time breathing. I realized while they were drilling screws in my head to hold my broken neck in traction that I was dying. I cried out to God for His forgiveness. He forgave me. I felt such peace with God. A prodigal son had come home.

The outlook for my survival according to the doctors was not good. I developed a bad case of pneumonia. Breathing was getting much harder now.

I had broken my neck at the fifth vertebrae. It had been smashed out of place. Sometime during transition the vertebrae jumped back into place and severed my spinal cord. This left me totally paralyzed for the neck down.

As the pneumonia worsened, I suffered respiratory arrest. I quit breathing. I thought the oxygen I was connected to had run out. I felt like I was falling out of bed. Everything around me grew dark.

Suddenly I was in the light. I was on the back of a large white dove. Ahead of me I could see Jesus standing there. He waved to me. The dove began to go back the way we had come. I came to my hospital bed. I was excited. I had never heard of an out of body experience, let alone have one! When my mother was allowed back in my room after the respiratory arrest, the doctor had told her my heart had quit beating and she had lost me.

I didn't understand everything that had taken place, but I had never experienced the depth of peace I now had either. I wanted everything God had for me. In my ignorance of spiritual things, I didn't realize the dove was used to symbolize the Holy Spirit.

Looking back, I believe one of the reasons God allowed me to have that experience was to show me the Holy Spirit will carry me through whatever I have to go through, if I am willing to let Him. I had rejected His offer weeks prior, due to my pride. But, now in my helpless state of being, He was demonstrating His amazing grace toward me. I was beginning to realize God loved me just as I was, but He loved me with an unconditional love.

A few times in my backslidden condition when I was in a tight spot, I would ask God to get me out of a situation or do something for me. I would bargain with Him and always promised to do something in return. Many times I got what I requested, but I never kept my end of the bargain. Now, when I had nothing to offer but helplessness, God still wanted me. I know now that was all He ever wanted.

Since receiving the Lord into my life, God has taken this tragic accident and used it for His glory. I've said many times, If I could trade my salvation for all the physical ability I once possessed, there's no way I'd do it. Nothing compares to the peace of God. Nothing.

I do believe however, on day God will restore the full use of my body to me. That's not why I serve Him. I serve Him because I love Him.

I could write a book on the miracles God has done on my behalf since August 28, 1975. I have far exceeded what doctors and therapists thought possible. I've been involved in full time ministry since 1980. I was ordained June 26, 1982. I was married August 8, 1982. I have two adopted children. I received my B.S. in Psychology on May 19, 1991. We have been involved in full time youth ministry.

In February of 1992 god opened the door for me to be active in one of my former loves. Rodeo! My wife and I have held cowboy church services at several rodeos. Each one has been a special blessing. We are looking forward to many more, Lord willing.

Another phase of our ministry has finally become a reality " Reality Ranch". The ranch has a summer youth program. The program is structured to accommodate churches and their various needs from day camps up to three day camps. The youth are accompanied by approved adult staff from their individual churches. Reality Ranch provides the accommodations, food, and scheduling of events. Adult and youth volunteers provide hands on livestock experience. This is a double blessing; the campers get to experience something that they might not get to experience if Reality Ranch was not in existence. The other side of the blessing is that the adults and youth that have livestock backgrounds can experience giving some of their knowledge and heritage to the children.

Reality Ranch also provides a handicapped riding program where adults and children with disabilities can experience the benefits of therapeutic horseback riding. Reality Ranch provides the staff horses and the special equipment needed for this program.

At the center of all of these activities and the other functions that take place here at Reality Ranch is the good news of Jesus Christ.

We believe in the Reality of God the Father Creator of all things.

We believe in the Reality of God the Son, Jesus Christ, the sole mediator between God and man.

We believe in the Reality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and current position as our advocate at the right hand of the Father.

We believe in the Reality of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, three in one, and in His power and presence operation in our lives enabling us to live as Jesus taught us to.

We believe in the Reality of God's Holy Word and Bible as the absolute truth and the unchanging guide for living.

We believe in the Reality of Heaven, a place of eternal joy prepared for those who have received salvation through Christ, and the reality of hell, a place of eternal suffering for those who have rejected Him.

We believe in the Reality of the Second Coming of Christ, as He promised to gather His people to Himself to reign with Him forever.

We believe in the Reality of that which is unseen, for that which is seen is temporary, but that which is unseen is eternal.

In closing, I want to encourage you to give your life to God, if you haven't mad this decision already. God can take all the broken pieces and shape them into something beautiful for His glory and your well being.

It's hard for me to find a stopping place when I'm writing about the goodness of God, because it's endless.

Please continue to lift us up in prayer as we do His bidding for our lives according to His will.