

Strength in Weakness, part 2 - March 11, 2010

LivingWithJoyRadio.com Program Transcript

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Transcript is for entire message:

Been asked to share with you a little bit of my story, how I got in this wheelchair, but importantly, what the Lord's been doing with it and through it ever since. But just before Well, when I was about 29 years old, and yes, that was just a few years ago.

Life was great. Life was wonderful. I had a super job. I was teaching vocal music, choir at San Clemente High School, San Clemente, California, "Surf City, U.S.A." We were number one in the state for surf team, number two in the state for water polo, number one or two in the state for swim team, but our football team...stunk!

We were absolutely awful. But because you literally could walk to the beach from San Clemente's campus, water sports ruled, as they say. Well, when I started there there was only 18 in the whole vocal music program, which really tells you where Bach and Beethoven and Mozart were on the priority list of students in San Clemente. But just like anything, when you really love it, cultivate it, fertilize it, it's going to grow. And within about two years the program had grown to 150 students and was definitely on the rise.

Now I share with you that story tonight because the 150 students is going to have some significance as the story unfolds today, all right? You need to remember that I had 150 students at the time. Didn't know there was going to be a test here, huh?

Love life was awesome.

I was engaged to a great guy by the name of Mike. I was all excited about our wedding that was coming up in two months, everything from the final fitting of the bridal gown to picking up the bridesmaids' dresses to the music, to the food. I was right smack in the middle of it all, being just two months before the wedding.

Walk with the Lord was good. I had always included him in all the big things of my life. What college to go to, my career, who to marry, but did I really include Him on all the little itty bitty things, the waking up in the morning and saying, "Okay, Lord, what you got planned for me today?" To be really honest, probably not. So career was good, love life was awesome. Walk with the Lord was okay, but could have been better.

And then came a Sunday night in the middle of May 1988. Just the night before, Mike, my fiancé, had flown into town from Denver -- he was living in Colorado at the time -- to be my date, to be my date to the prom. We had been asked to chaperone San Clemente High School's prom. Well, Mike had taken me to dinner before we went to the prom and surprised me with my rock, with my engagement ring. And I was blown out of the water because it really was a rock.

And even though he was not able to afford my rock, he had been making payments on it, made the final payment on it so he surprised me with it at dinner. We had a very romantic dinner and then we went to the prom.

The next day he flew back to Denver. I went over to the high school that afternoon to conduct the orchestra in a spring musical and this was truly a banner day. Because it was a sold out crowd -- and trust me, to get this surfers off the beach and into this theatre, this was truly a banner day. I went to bed that night feeling great, really excited about my life. The next thing I know I woke up out of a sound, deep sleep diving off the end of my bed onto my head. I had woken up mid air. I thought huh? Hit my head on the ground, heard my neck, chuk-chuk-chuk-chuk, finished the flip laying flat on my back with my feet halfway in the closet and my head up against the dust ruffle. Boom! I thought oh, man, now I've

done it.

I just thought I had royally kinked my neck. Well I tried to get up and as I did I rolled over on my left shoulder. As I rolled over on my left shoulder the right side of my neck I felt . Ahh, man! The pain threw me back on my back again and now I was wide awake. I realized I needed some help to get up, which puts a whole new meaning to that old commercial.

You know which I'm talking about? The "I've fallen and I can't get up!" I hate the commercial.

That's totally me. Well, I realized I needed some help to get up. So I went to holler for my roommate, Dorothy, and as I hollered out for Dorothy all that came out was Dorothy And again, all that came out was a whisper. And now I was scared because I knew there was no way that she was going to hear me.

But easily, within about two or three minutes I heard "Renee. Renee." The door opened to my bedroom, the light goes on, Dorothy sees me on the floor and says "What are you doing on the floor? It's 2:00 in the morning." I said, "I don't know." "I don't know but it's my neck. It's killing me. I don't know what I did but it's serious. Go call the paramedics."

I take it as no coincidence that Dorothy is a nurse. She stared at me on the floor, she was sizing me up, then she picked up the phone, called 911. Well, pretty much the rest is history. I had broken my neck, leaving me quadriplegic, quad meaning all four limbs completely paralyzed for the first year, year and a half. But then once the swelling of the spinal cord went down, which usually takes about a year, more messages were able to get from my brain through the traffic jam in my neck down to my arms, which is why my biceps work now but still my wrists, my fingers, obviously my legs don't work.

To this day we still have absolutely no idea what happened. I don't have any history of sleep walking, any history of any kind of disease that would cause a seizure. The only thing we can think of is that I must have been having some sort of a dream where I was diving, which still makes no sense to me because I was no jock before this and to be doing some Mexico cliff diving thing makes no sense to me but that's the position I was in when I awoke.

The doctors said that I would never walk again, that I would never have functional use of my hands again but also said that I would never sing again. Mm-mm. I was in the hospital – Long Beach Memorial Hospital for five months. Now Long Beach is right next to Los Angeles. You don't know where one ends and the other one picks up. It's just one big ole honkin' slab of cement. You're going to have to remember the city of Long Beach tonight, too, okay? The 150 students and the city of Long Beach.

I was in Long Beach Memorial for five months. I couldn't go home at night. But there was a time in that hospital when I couldn't pray. I knew I was supposed to. I was raised in a very strong Christian home, and I knew that when things got tough you didn't walk to the Lord, you ran to the Lord and you white knuckled it. I knew that I had a personal relationship with Christ at the time. But this is what would go – what would happen when I'd go to pray, and I wonder if this ever happens to any of you in your prayer time, it seems that I always woke up about – about 4:00 in the morning and I'd start praying, Lord, I don't now what's going on here, Lord, but this is big. This is really big – Mike – how can he stay with me? I'm not the woman he was going to marry. What kind of wife can I be? Can I even be a mom? Oh, that's right, I was praying. Lord, you've got the power, you've got the will, Lord; you can do this. You've got the miracles, heal – mom and dad. Eww. They looked awful when they came in last night. They're so upset. Oh. Sorry, Lord. I was praying. Father God, if it's not your will to heal me then please just take this pain away, please just take this pain away – my students, my kids. Who's going to direct them? Oh, I was praying.

Does that ever happen to you? When you go to pray and your mind just goes ziiiiinnng! Or what drives me crazy, even to this day sometimes, when I'm having this nice quiet prayer time in the house, right? Maybe with you your house is all cleared out and you're finally getting some nice time and you're thanking him and you're praising him and you're making your request known and all of the sudden in your head comes: Put paper towels on your grocery list.

And you think hello. Where did that come from? Well that's what happened to me. I could not stay focused in prayer for probably more than ten seconds max before my mind would just take off and go. Then it was interesting, about four months into the hospital stay, again I was trying to pray and my mind would go to the dripping of the IV or I'd hear the nurses out in the nurses' station. And then all of the sudden in my head came – Be not afraid. I go before you always; come follow me, and I will give you rest. Hmm. I wonder what kind of toast they're going to serve this morning.

I hope it's a bagel. Blessed are you that weep and mourn, for one day you shall laugh.

The real reason I'm here is to tell you or remind you that there truly is no such thing as coincidence. God is real and God is faithful. And please allow me to share with you how I really know that to be true so that you don't have to break your neck to learn it.

First of all, there's no way that Dorothy, my roommate, could have heard me. We lived in a two story condominium. She lived upstairs, I lived downstairs. My bedroom door was closed and I hollered out with no microphone, "Dorothy" . Now, a lot of my non-believer friends, my friends that really don't believe in God say, "Well" – "well, I don't know; she might have woken up and she heard the thud." Thank you very much. My hips are big but give me a break, okay?

So I said all right, maybe the house shook.

But what explains Dorothy waking up, ding, wide awake, sat up in bed, did that what am I doing awake thing, thought she heard something so she got out of bed, walked to the top of the stairs, saw it was 2:00 in the morning and thought Renee wouldn't be on the phone at 2:00 in the morning. Walked downstairs, opened up my bedroom door and found me. We believe very strongly that the Holy Spirit woke her up. There's literally no other explanation for it. Hmm.

Number two. I'm the youngest of four children. The oldest is Danny and then Michelle and then Denise and then me. Denise is a nurse, Michelle a dental hygienist, Danny a mechanic. All three of my siblings were already in careers to help with my every need down to fixing my feet, flossing my teeth. Now on first listening, you think well, good for her; she had a lot of support. And yes I did. I'm very grateful for that. But I'd like to take it a step further. Remember I'm the musician in the family. If this had happened to my sisters or my brother, what was I going to do to help them?

Pick up my guitar and go lang-and-lang-and-lang, sing them a song. Now, with all respect to the musicians that are here, yes, that might make them feel better for five or six minutes but if any of you know paralysis, you know that we need practical help. You need somebody there to make sure you don't get that bladder infection that eventually can go to kidney infection. That eventually can be fatal. You need somebody there to fix your wheelchair because it's literally the only way that I can get out of bed. And all three of my siblings were already in careers to help with my every need and we all lived within ten minutes of each other.

Number three. Mike, my fiancé, was living in Denver at the time, as I said, when he got the phone call he was on the next flight home. When he realized how serious it was he wasn't going back to Denver. He had to find a job in southern California. The company he was working for had only two facilities in California, one way up north in the Bay Area and the other in Long Beach. Where did I spend my five months of rehab, everyone? Long Beach.

Good. You were listening. All right. Well, raise your hand if you've ever been to the LA area. Raise your hand high. All right. You all know LA traffic. You know it to be the worst in the country.

If Mike was placed in any other city but the same city where I was doing my three – my five months of rehab, there's no way he could come on a 30 minute lunch break to feed me lunch, come right before work, feed me breakfast. Come right after work so we could keep our communication going. Where are you at with this? I don't know. Where are you at with this? Mike could have told me until he was blue in the face, over the telephone, from some other city that he was not going to leave me, but I needed to see his eyes. Right? Because we all know that the eyes are the window to the soul. Well, do you know that one year after I got out of the hospital Mike and I got married. And I – yeah, woo-hoo!

In this day and age. And I believe that it had so much to do with the fact that he was placed in Long Beach, not so much for him but for me. Because I kept pushing him away, saying, “Go.” What kind of wife can I be? I don’t even know if I can give you children. But because he was placed in Long Beach, it allowed his action to equal his word, allowing me to believe it. And therefore begin accepting, receiving it again. Coincidence? No. God-incidence? Yes.

Number four. Number four. I wanted to go back to work so badly I could taste it. And we – we humans, we are the weirdest creatures on earth. Because when you’re working all you dream about is not working, right? How many more years till retirement? Come on. Bring it on, right?

So I wanted to go back to work so badly. I couldn’t go back to San Clemente High School. They were wonderful to me, but how was I going to teach this way? I had absolutely no movement in that first year – first year and a half. I could do this. I couldn’t move my arms. But one day the pastor at our church came over and said, “Hey, why don’t you come be the youth choir director at the church?” My response to him – “I can’t do it. I can’t do it. There’s no way I can do it. By the time I get the page turned the song will be over.” Lah-lah, and I’m crying. And he says, “Well, let’s just try it. We’ll get you a couple of volunteer moms. We’ll have them come turn your pages for you, pass out the music to the kids, take roll. Hey, we’ll even have them drive you from your house to the church.” An hour a half once a week. Baby steps, right?

So, I tried it. How many students do you think I had my first year, everyone? A hundred and fifty.

A hundred and fifty. I’ll never forget the day that I realized it. One of the choir moms came over and put the roll book on my lap. We were ordering a bunch of school sweatshirts – or choir shirts. And I was counting up, 147, 148, 149, 150. I remember looking up thinking you are one detail oriented God.

I know that many times we wonder if God exists. Let’s say you have a very important decision to be made and you’re totally willing to do God’s will, you just don’t know what it is. So you’d love to get a FedEx letter delivered right to your door saying, Dear Renee, do this, Love – comma – God.

And you’d do it, right? Well, that 150 students was a FedEx letter delivered right to me saying I’m with you. I’m here. Be not afraid. I had a friend when I was about – I don’t know – 19, 20 years old. Her name was Julie – Julie Turner .

And she was from Greenville, Mississippi.

She had this really cool way of talking all the time .

She also had this amazing faith for being just 19 years old. She would say things to me like, “Renee, the Lord told me to give you this book and read Chapter 3.”

And I’d think, really? What’s his voice sound like?

Is it a low voice ? Is it a high voice? Does he have an accent? Probably should. He’s from the Mid East.

Now mind you I would never ask these questions out loud, but that’s what I was thinking inside. I don’t hear a voice. Because I was always expecting some Charlton Heston God voice is what I was expecting. But what I’ve come to understand is that all these God incidences was the Lord’s voice saying I’m here. I’m with you. Be not afraid.

Number five. And there’s many, many more, but in the interest of time, I’ll just share this one more with you. This is the one that blows me out of the water the most because it’s ongoing. A couple months before my injury – and the keyword here is before. A couple months before my injury some sweet ladies at our church asked if I would make a recording of songs that I always used to sing at church that seemed to help them get through their difficult times. So I started the recording project, and then wham! Right in the middle of it I have my injury and I’m the one needing to hear the music that I was recording.

Well, remember, my voice was reduced to the whisper. So obviously I wasn't going to be finishing any recording project at all unless it was some Marilyn Monroe CD or something.

So that got put on the back burner. Until about four years after my injury. A really good friend of mine – Jim – was visiting. Wonderful musician. He said, “Hey, when are we going to finish that CD?” And I said, Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh, I really can sing again. Oh, my gosh, I really can sing. Oh, my gosh, I really can. Was that me? Oh, my gosh, I really can sing. That sounded pretty good.

Here we start crying, this grown 40-year-old man stands up from the piano bench, walks over, dumps his head in my lap and we just sobbed crying. You need to know the significance of Jim playing that song that day in my living room. How I know him – well, let me back up. Jim May is one of the most phenomenal musicians in the country. He was the music director and conductor of “Beauty and the Beast” on Broadway in New York, “Sunset Boulevard” on Broadway in New York, Les Miserah – however you pronounce that.

“Les Miserables” on Broadway in New York, “The Lion King” here in LA – over there in LA, I should be saying. How I have the privilege of knowing him is that many years we traveled in a national singing group called “The Young Americans”. And I was playing –

Oh, we have some fans here. I played Maria in our little vignettes of the “Sound of Music”. So think of the wealth of repertoire this guy had to choose from that day. He could have just as easily started playing, I don't know, High on the hill was a lonely goat, .

Right? Or The hills are alive with the sound of music.

Let's do that again.

The hills are alive with the sound of music.

First place. All right.

But instead – but instead, this nice Jewish boy that never goes to Temple –

sits down and starts playing Be not afraid. Well, we ended up finishing that CD. My husband wanted to make 3,000 copies. And I said, “Yeah, right. Who's going to buy this thing?”

He said, “No, but I been – I been – I been praying about it and every time I pray about it the number 3,000 keeps coming to mind.” Being a good wife, I said, “Yes, dear”, thinking we're going to take this loan to our grave.

We're going to be giving these things away for Christmas presents the rest of our days.

Well, do you know that we sold out of the first 3,000 in four months? We made numerous re-orders. There was such a demand for a second and then a third. Recently we released a fourth. To date we've sold well over 200,000 copies and the profit – profit? Like I said, I thought we were taking this loan to our grave. The profit, 100 percent pays for my attendant care. The person that comes every morning, stretches my body, helps me use the bathroom, gives me a shower, washes my face, blows by nose, brushes my teeth, feeds me breakfast, cooks the meal so that Mike can be my husband and not my nurse. That's about \$40,000.00 a year. Insurance does not pay for a penny of it. And it is completely covered. Our God – yours and mine -- is a very practical God!

Think about it. There's no way that Dorothy could have heard me. All my siblings were in careers to help with my every need. Mike gets transferred to the same city. I get a 150 students. And my financial needs are covered. Our God is a very practical God. And I know that many times, if we believe in the Lord, we think he's only in that beautiful mountain scene or in that beautiful sunset or up there on that altar, or even in that really holy person that can quote scripture even in the grocery store.

And yes, although he's present in all of those things, I'm here to remind you that he's right here in our every day life.