

Pastor Raimon: Testimony

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Preacher: Raimon Jackson

[0 : 00] Well, hey Table Church, this is Pastor Ramon or Pastor Ray, and I as always am so happy to be here with you on Sunday. Listen, what an amazing time that we've had in praise and worship up until this point.

So I just want to give a shout out to those who are leading us. What a great job that Jordan does, and man, we are so grateful to be in this moment. And so we're going to continue worship, we're going to continue praise, and I want to try to bring to you an encouraging word also wrapped in the form of a testimony.

I get to share with you what I think is somewhat of an amazing story about me and God bringing me up to this place. So I do want to share with you first, to guide our conversation, some scripture. And that scripture happens to come from Matthew. It is Matthew 22, verses 36 through 40. Matthew 22, verses 36 through 40. And in our scripture, what we find is Jesus encountering the Pharisees and the Sadducees, or the leaders of that time, having this deep conversation.

Up until this point, the Pharisees and the Sadducees have tried to prove that Jesus was not who Jesus said he was, ultimately to say that Jesus was not the Son of God. And so there's this teacher that is walking by, and here's all of this commotion and all of this energy being given to this moment.

[1 : 27] And so the teacher wants to ask a question to see, to prove who Jesus is, or to not prove who Jesus is. And so the teacher approaches, and in 36, verse 36, he says, teacher, this is the teacher talking to Jesus.

He says, teacher, which is the greatest commandment? And Jesus replies, Jesus says, love your Lord, your God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is just like it. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

All of the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Ultimately, Jesus is saying, love God with everything that you have.

And in the same, love yourself and love your neighbor with that same love. And if you can do that, you are in line with all of the law and with all of the prophets.

[2 : 35] You're in line with God. Another scripture that I want to throw at you is Proverbs 9 and 10, which says, the fear of the Lord, and that word fear could be almost used as the respect of the Lord, but the respect of the fear, the admiration of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One in understanding.

Basically, there are all these scriptures that talk about wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Right? And the people who get those are people who are more in alignment with who God is.

And so you see where our scriptures have an intersection of being more like God and being in alignment with God. And so it is in this type of scripture, it is in these types of words that I found the foundation of my life that brings me to where I am ultimately today.

So I was born and raised here in PG County, right outside of DC, literally about 5, 10 miles, depending on which direction you're coming from. And I was born to a loving family.

My family originally is from Little Washington, North Carolina, a little spot called Little Washington, North Carolina, which for all my vegans, you might want to cover your ears, has this amazing spot.

[3 : 59] I can't remember its name that has these amazing hot dogs, or as the people in Baltimore call them, a little terminology for you, these amazing glizzies. And so there's an ongoing joke in some of our community about these hot dogs and glizzies, but hot dogs that were covered in this amazing sauce and wrapped with fried bologna.

And so again, for all my vegans, vegetarians, you might not want to hear about that, but it's an amazing spot. And if you're ever down in Little Washington, North Carolina, I suggest that you look it up and you visit there because it's an amazing spot and a historic spot.

Very small, small town where everybody knows everybody's name and every family knows pretty much all the families that are there. So I was born and raised here.

Now my family moved up to Baltimore. Some of them, my uncle was the first to come, my grandmother's brother, and then my grandmother, mother, and my great grandmother all moved up there as well. My mom attended a boarding school up there, and then eventually they came down to PG County where my grandmother got a house here.

And so my family was one of the first black families in this community. There was originally, I think, about three more here or two more here before they moved in, and then my grandmother moved in, making her third or fourth, that moved into the community, which was pretty cool at the time.

[5 : 12] But of course, we experienced that ugly thing called white flight. And so once the black folks started to move into community, the white folks began to move out of the community. And how unfortunate for them, but this community was filled with pretty much upper middle class to middle class black folks who were all in either education or government or in doctors and lawyers.

So very rich. Now, if you didn't know, PG County has remained consistent in being one of the number one, somewhere between number one and number three, top black communities in terms of wealth.

And so I believe that PG County has now again become the number one county, black county in the country in terms of wealth. And so what a great place to be, right?

That does not negate that there are several other places that we could all turn our attention to, to make sure that they have the same opportunities that some of us have. So I got my education within the DC public school system.

And then in Maryland, I started in DC because my grandmother was one of the head teachers for Charles H. Houston Elementary School, which is over in Northeast DC. It is a visual performing arts school.

[6 : 29] It was a visual performing arts school, magnet school, math and science centered school. And it was one of the top schools of the city at the time. And I went from there and came into Maryland to do middle school and eventually ended up at Suitland High School for the visual and performing arts, which was also a magnet school.

And so pretty decent education there. I'm all surrounded in love as I search for wisdom throughout my life. My family, interesting enough.

So some of you all know that I helped to lead worship when we had in-person worship with the table church. I did help to lead worship there at the table. That is because music is in my soul.

It runs through my spirit. My family. So my grandmother was a musician. My great grandmother was a musician. My grandfather was a musician. My mom was somewhat a musician.

My brother was somewhat a musician. My great great grandmother was a musician. And so music runs through our veins and our blood. My background on my father's side, not as much musicianship, but I did have my grandfather on that side was a visual artist.

[7 : 43] My family, most in my family, we all have black in our blood, of course. But then on both sides of my family, there is a prevalent amount of Native American that runs through our blood, as well as on my father's side, some Irish that runs through our blood as well.

And so there's a good healthy mix of a couple of different things. My family, all musicians. My grandmother was an educator, a music educator, special education teacher.

My grandfather was a band conductor and carpenter teacher. I did carpentry. My great great, my great grandmother was a music teacher as well and a musician. And then on my father's side, my grandmother was a nurse.

My grandfather was one of the first black sheriffs in PG County, known for his motorcycle that he had. Everybody talked about his motorcycle growing up. And even to today, some people that still knew him talk about his motorcycle.

So again, a very loving family. I was draped in love growing up. And so love God, love neighbor, love yourself. That was something that resonated with me from a very early age.

[8 : 52] I lived in PG County, but I often frequented Baltimore, as I mentioned earlier, had some family there. And so it was nothing for the summertime to be in Baltimore with my great grandmother or to be up there on the weekends sometimes.

I would go to church with my great grandmother. And so that was pretty cool. Now, we'll talk about this fear of God and knowing who God was. I want to talk a little bit about my spiritual foundation. Again, love, love, love. Everybody say love or type it in the box. Say love. If you're with me, type in the box right now. Say love. All right. Great. Great. Great. They're coming up. Love, love, love. Everybody type in love. Amazing. So as a child, I went to church with my great grandmother and my mom quite often, who are pretty much the foundations of my spiritual formation.

My mom was big on names. And so my name, Ramon Christian Jackson, actually means strong Christian. My mom always believed that she spoke into people what they were.

[9 : 49] And we can see that in the Bible so many times when God's called different people by different names because of what he wanted to call them or because of what it represented or because of what it meant.

Even when we talk about Elijah, God with us, Emmanuel, Emmanuel, God with us. Right. And so there are all these meanings behind people's names. God spoke into them what they were, this love that he's spoken to them.

And so my mom was very intentional about my name and my brother's name, Darius Isaiah, which meant wealthy prophet. And so my mom called me and began my spiritual formation there.

I always knew who God was as an early person. Some people were like, oh, when was your God experience? When did you come to know Jesus? It just kind of, I just kind of knew who God was. My mom says the same thing about her life though.

Now I know for my sociology people who are very big into like nature and nurture. Listen, my mom did not tell me that until I got older. So this whole notion of knowing God before I got into my older life, that was kind of something that I just did.

[10 : 49] I just knew who God was and I'm grateful for that. God has always been an influencer over my life. And speaking of influence, I want to talk about two of the greatest things that influenced my spirituality.

One, my great grandmother going to church in Baltimore was amazing because the pastor there was this amazing woman who just influenced her congregation and encouraged her congregation. And I loved church, man. I loved, especially our form of church. Some people would say the black church. But listen, it was all of this.

It was all of this influencing of people to really have a joyous time, to have a good time, to laugh, to smile, to participate by praising and worshiping, by throwing up their hands.

And that resonated with me at an early age. And so I just wanted to live through that. So I remember my great grandmother's pastor coming to me one day and she looks at me. She says, hey, Ramon, I'm glad to see you.

[11 : 48] How are you? She said, hey, have you thought about what you want to be when you grow up? Now, mind you, I'm like four years old, sitting in the pew with my family. My great grandmother was a musician for this church.

And I look at her and I said, hey, yeah, I want to take your job. Can you imagine this four-year-old? You ask him, what do you want to do with your life? And he looks at you and says, I want to take your place.

That was my answer. I ultimately knew that I wanted to be able to influence people and motivate people the same way and encourage people the same way in which she did that.

The second part of my inspiration came from a TV show. There was a TV show called Quantum Leap. And I don't know, most of us are probably too young to remember it.

But my mom watched it when I was just a small child. Again, three years old, two years, and four years old. And there was this guy who traveled throughout time. His name, I believe, was Sam.

[12 : 45] And his goal was to help folks correct things that had gone wrong. It could have been a murder. It could have been a suicide. It could have been a mistake that someone made in their marriage.

And ultimately, Sam had to fix it. And in fixing it, it brought him closer to getting back to his family. And so he traveled the time until he ultimately could get back. Something about that show resonated with me.

The fact that Sam could go and help other people and influence them and motivate them to get something right that they had done wrong, to love them even though he might not know them, and to help them get through it.

I just thought that was super dope. And that resonated with me. And so I wanted to do that too. And so from that, I remember elementary school, my elementary school teacher asked me, she says, Ramon, what do you want to be when you grow up?

And my answer to her, which my family laughs at to this day, was, I want to be a human angel. I ultimately did. I thought that angels had a great job to oversee and to overlook and to help other folks in the human race to find love and to make their lives right with God.

[13:50] I mean, even at four years old, that was like my thing. I just wanted to help people. I wanted to love more people. I wanted to inspire people to do better and to be great and to know who God was.

So I guess God had chosen me from an early age to kind of do what God wanted me to do. All right. Are you with me? Again, if you're with me, everybody in the text, just say love. Type the word love. L-O-V-E. Put it in there. I just want to see love all around us today. All right. And so that pretty much confirmed my destiny to be a pastor, to walk into words of God.

And my prayer growing up was this. I had one prayer. God, please give me wisdom. Because I believe even at four and five, that wisdom was what we needed to be more in alignment with God and who God called us to be.

Now, let's move over into a little bit more about the arts part of who I was. Because like I said, my family have all been into the arts some sort of way, mostly music, creative arts.

[14:51] So inevitably, it was like I had to be a musician because it was in our blood. It was in our heritage. And so I remember about three or four, my great grandmother was giving lessons, music lessons to the kids.

And I was in the bassinet. And I would repeat all of the notes that my grandmother was teaching. So she would teach the piano, you know, the scales, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C.

And then there I was going, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. Just as a little kid, right? It was amazing. But I think my family kind of knew, all right, we got to teach him music because he wants to learn.

And so my grandmother started me off, my great grandmother as well, on piano. And it was nothing for me to learn pretty quickly. Sooner or later, I studied piano under my grandmother because she was a music teacher at the school.

And she had a music lab at the school that she had been afforded. And she taught all these students. And I was one of them. Now, I wanted to share with you a picture because in this picture that you see here, there I am right there with the big old ears, the Will Smith, Barack Obama ears.

[16:01] Can you see that? That was my band conductor, Mr. Russell, and all these students who play instruments at my school, either trumpet or trombone. This was a brass section. But listen, I started off in piano, but I also learned the violin.

I was afforded the opportunity to learn trumpet. I was afforded the opportunity to learn clarinet, but what stuck was the pianist. And so I became the maestro for the orchestra.

How dope is that? Super cool, right? Pretty, pretty, pretty cool. All right. So there I was, this musician. And it afforded me this opportunity to play for so many things. There was a breakfast spot called Duke Zeebert in the D.C. area that I got to play for all of the superintendent and all of the educators and the mayor of the city at the time.

I've got a picture actually over to my right where I was with Mayor Barry who visited our school. Yo, I even got a chance to meet Tupac when I was at this school because he visited our school. And then a couple other music groups.

Some folks might remember like Immature, which was a music group back in the day, and a few other folks. So it was a pretty dope school to be a part of. But I also played on the National Spelling Bee.

[17:11] And then I eventually won the D.C. Public Schools Music Competition in the category of Jazz two years. And that afforded me the opportunity to work with, who has now passed on, the late, great Maria Butler, who was an amazing jazz musician.

So listen, man, music ran through my veins. I also started to write songs when I was in elementary school. And I took drama lessons and was able to learn more about drama and visual arts.

I had a painting that actually hung in the White House. Can you imagine you're like six, seven years old? And something that you drew is there in the halls of the White House.

And so maybe one day when we get back in a session in person, I'll bring that picture. And you all can see this amazing picture that hung in the White House. All right. I got to middle school and I

was involved in talent shows.

And I became a musician for churches in middle school. And also was connected to a person who will become later my business partner in the music industry, a guy named Jamil. And so Jamil was, at the time, this young rapper who wanted to produce and wanted me to connect with him and produce music.

[18 : 19] High school came and I was accepted into the theater program, the visual arts program, the instrumental program, the choir. And yeah, I think that was it.

And so like I ultimately, because I was already in music outside of the school and I had a relationship with the music teacher because I was an honors course for our county, I chose to go into theater because I wanted to learn more about the theater.

And so I did four years of professional theater as a major in my high school. And that also paid off because I was able to write and direct and perform in my own plays at the school for different students.

I also wrote and composed original music. And then it afforded me an opportunity to perform even with the Kennedy Center, the Washington, D.C. Performing Arts Kennedy Center.

Okay, I want to show you this picture that I have of me at the Kennedy Center. I'm sorry, I got off the camera. But it's also featured on a book.

[19 : 23] And there I am right there with my fade and my big ears again. I loved it. That's my play sister, Reese, there in the front. What an amazing cast of people, which also exposed me to a great deal of diversity.

Also, when I was young, I also got a chance to be a part of the Traveling Young Players, which put me around a lot of Disney stuff, which is dope. So, guys, I had all this exposure, all this love again. Right. Love God.

Love your neighbor. Love yourself. I had all this love that sort of rounded me growing up. Now, let's talk a little bit about history of my family. So, there was, you guys with me?

If you're with me, I want you to text. Let's see. Just put in the text, like, family. Put in the word family. I want to see the word family because we're talking about family life. Again, my family loved me so much growing up.

I was never void of love. So, put in there family. Do I see family scrolling up? Great, great, great, great. I want to see family. All right. So, let's talk a little bit about that. My mother's side, I was pretty fortunate to come up in a pretty good family.

[20 : 24] It was pretty well off. My family, at a time when there was slavery, my mother's side of the family, my folks owned stores in their community. And so, a lot of the community came to my folks' store to buy their groceries, to buy their milk, to buy all the stuff that they needed.

My family also took care of a lot of extended families. So, I grew up with all these extra aunts and uncles and cousins, folks that were sometimes related, sometimes not related.

And so, my family always took in their community and helped raise them. There's even a time where my great-grandmother, who was somewhat my hero, who was my hero, she had plenty of friends.

And, you know, there's one time she went to the bank. She was a school teacher. And during the summer, they oftentimes had to take on other jobs or they had to save enough to get through the summer. And so, she went to go take out a loan and was denied the loan at the bank simply because she was black.

But, she was so great to our neighbors, taught music to our neighbors, cooked some time for our neighbors. And they oftentimes cooked for them as well. That one of her white neighbors went back to the bank with her and told the bank that they absolutely had to give her a loan.

[21 : 38] And they spoke up for her and she was able to get it. And so, when I think about that history, right, what an awful time because you could not, you could be discriminated against because of the color of your skin. However, at the same time, grateful for those folks who, even at that time, spoke up because they believed that that was not the way that it should be.

But my family was very loved, very loved in their community. And so, all of that love sort of still came to me. And it was during my years of college that, and all through my high school and elementary school, I was always sort of bringing folks home, bringing people around, having people spend the night, spend the week, spend the summers because I was always about wanting to just be around people and love with people.

And in college, I went and started working at the same high school that I had ultimately graduated from. And I was able to minister to my own friends, even though I wasn't like churchy-churchy. That was my way of doing ministry was just loving people who often did not have maybe some of the things that I had growing up. I helped to start a nonprofit, which ultimately was a nonprofit that brought in young people that helped them to mentor other young people, whether it be through their academics or whether it be through the arts.

And I even brought in a group that recorded a CD, and it was called Brothers and Sisters United. So, a great way for me to get back to the neighborhood. Also started a music production company with my buddy, who I told you kind of failed me in middle school and wanted to work with me.

[23 : 14] He is now a great producer and works with all the celebrities. I've had a chance to be in the studio with a lot of different celebrities working on music. I love writing music, composing music. It has always been something that I love to do.

So, if you're ever in need of a song, hit me up. I'd definitely love to write a song for you. I'll write a song for our church maybe one day. I began working in the school system, like I said. And listen, I was introduced to mentoring.

All this love, again, all that love, all that love that was poured into me, I continuously wanted to give it to other people. I wanted to share that love with other people. And so, there was a young mentee named Travis.

We're going to come back to Travis in just a minute. So, hold that name, Travis, in your head, all right? All right. So, let's talk a little bit more about ministry. Remember, love God, love others, and love yourself.

Love others as you love yourself. And so, that resonated with me throughout my whole life. And there was something about wanting to do God's work that just resonated with me throughout my whole life as well.

[24 : 13] So, I joined this Baptist church right out of high school, but my grandmother was asked to come and be a musician for a United Methodist church that was not too far from there. She couldn't do it, and so she said, hey, Ramon, you should do it.

Now, I didn't think too much of it. Just, hey, here's an opportunity to go and minister music at this church. So, I did it. I went and ministered, and they later asked me to come back a couple of months later to be a musician for their adult gospel choir.

Now, I had a group that I formed outside of this with a couple of folks who were music singers. But again, I went to a visual and performing arts school, so I know a lot of singers. And we formed this group, and there was another producer that I know who's actually out there.

He's pretty famous right now. And we formed this group. He produced for us, and we went traveling throughout the county and the DMV. But this church that I was hired as a musician, I eventually became the director of music for the whole church.

That was pretty dope in and of itself. And from there, I also, the kids that were at the school that I was working at chose to follow me to this church.

[25 : 20] And so, we grew this dynamic youth ministry of over 100 to 200 folks in our network. We were filling up like two busloads of kids just to go to youth revival.

Super dope time. We were granted a lot of grants from the county. We built this full-length basketball court at the church.

And folks, it just became this amazing place of love. So many testimonies, so many great testimonies of young kids that came into my life at that time. Some of those kids have gone on to do so many great things.

And it was because of that one moment or those seasons of love. Eventually, I had a girlfriend who came to be at the church, and she would oversee some of the young women. I oversaw some of the young men. And from that group of folks, I adopted this whole group of folks that will even call themselves my sons or my brothers in ministry, our young brothers in ministry.

Initially, they came to be known. There's a smaller group of them that came to be known as the fam. So, that's the older group of young people. And then, the next generation was the junior fam.

[26 : 25] And we'll talk a little bit more about that, too. So, remember Travis. We'll come back to him in just a second. And then, I'll introduce to you a young man named Tay Delonte, who is a member of that group called The Young Fam.

And sorry, that was a low power move. So, I want to move through this expeditiously. But, over a decade, I spent working with that young ministry. And I also got a chance to volunteer with a group called Gamilio Foundation, which was a community organizing group.

And what a pleasure it was to be with them. And all of our young people participated in so much stuff. We rallied in front of a gun store and held them accountable for how they sell their weapons and to whom they sell their weapons to.

It was an amazing moment. We made the front page of the Washington Post. We were featured on all of the local news stations. And it was a dope moment for my young people and for myself. And so, we were making headlines, right?

It was pretty cool. And so, a lot of my young people got a chance to learn. But not only did I volunteer for them. I eventually got a chance to work for them. I was trained through them.

[27 : 28] I had a great training. And I became a part-time community organizer. And so, that was some great work we did. And then I got to hold rallies with our politicians.

We were able to hold the gun store accountable. We got to know our community officials. We also got a chance to work with lawmakers and the police force and the police chief and the local EMS. So, it was a great time doing all of that type of work. All right. Eventually, I left from Gethsemane, which was the place that I was the director of music, had the youth ministry. Went on to become a youth and young pastor at another church in Southern Maryland.

And I also became a young adult council chair for our local United Methodist church cluster, our district. Which is a group cluster of about 600 and some churches.

And so, it was there that I led a couple of other things with young adult ministry. All that had an attendance of over 100 to 200 people. I got a chance to work with some celebrities. And this whole time, God is moving me to my ultimate calling.

[28 : 35] God is infiltrating me with his love and spreading love through me to other people. And so, it was an amazing experience to be a part of all of this. Our denomination, our local denomination, the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, decided that they would build a non-profit called Inspire DC.

And so, I was led to meet with our district superintendent or the boss of our clergy. And I told him a little bit about myself in this meeting that we had. And he ultimately connected me to this lady named Christy Latona who was in charge of Inspire DC.

And Inspire DC hired me. And I was also, I attended this workshop with Jessica Breslin and Kevin Lum who was the visionary who created the Table Church.

We went off to Florida to this thing, this workshop. And we befriended each other. And I came back and the Table Church was trying to create a more diverse atmosphere.

Their evening service was typically all white. And Kevin wanted to expand that to look more like the city that he chose to be in, Washington, D.C. And so, the Table Church hired me along with another buddy of mine, Jorge Granados, so that we would launch the morning service of the Table Church so that it would be more about diversity and bring more color to the Table Church.

[29 : 51] And so, we did. We went through the neighborhoods. We welcomed people. We greeted people. And we invited them to our Easter Sunday service launch of the Table Church morning service.

And that is how the morning service came to be. Now, once we launched the morning service on Easter Sunday, it was a week later that I encountered probably one of the most devastating moments of my life when I lost my younger brother.

And so, right after launching the church, I lost my younger brother. And that took my family through a devastating time. And here I was doing God's work, working for the Lord, trying to build, trying to do what God called me to do.

And then I had to confront the fact that God had allowed my brother to die. And that was probably one of the most devastating moments for me. My family lost a great person. But ultimately, I did question God.

But God, through his love, got me through it, got my family through it. And I came back because I pretty much came to the grips that if God brought me to it, God will bring me through it.

[30 : 50] And that's not necessarily the Bible, but that's what I believe. And so, God did bring me through it. He gave me the strength to move forward in ministry. And I got to meet so many great people here at the Table Church.

After we built the Table Church and that lasted and it continues to grow, the Conference of the United Methodist Church, which also was in partnership with the Table Church. That's how that kind of came. The Table Church then was in partnership with the United Methodist Conference, the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

They asked me, what else could I create? What else could I imagine? And so, I birthed the well. God gave me the vision for the well, which does not meet on Sundays when it meets on Thursdays. And the well is this creative arts and conscious awareness ministry that allows people to encounter God, to become more like God, and to merge and share like God.

And so, it was this place where I believed that you didn't need to preach to people, but instead, people could be involved with their community and have conversation, and they would be inspired to see God in others, and then inspired to go take God into the world.

And less about the walls of a church and more about our interaction with others is the church. And so, you can catch, let me do a selfish plug here. You can catch the well if you go to our social media spots at Encounter the Well, E-N-C-O-U, it's N-T-E-R, Encounter the Well, or our website, EncountertheWell.org, and you'll learn more about what the well is and who the well does.

[32 : 14] I also say that the well is in partnership with the table, in partnership with other churches to sort of expand the ministry of God, but to do it in a non-traditional way. We have it on Thursday evening, so make sure you check that out.

And I oftentimes put it in this Facebook group of the table. So listen, let's go back to Travis and talk about where love really manifested itself as this great part in my life.

When I was in the school system, and we'll go back to that, and I was working, I got appointed my first mentees. Yeah, his name was Travis. And I actually didn't like Travis. Travis was hilarious, but also could get on your nerves really quickly.

He was incarcerated for a small extent, and every day at the end of school, I felt that even in his incarceration and juvenile detention, Travis would call me, and I would reluctantly answer my phone.

Listen, I didn't like the kid, but I said, you know, I'm not going to just leave him hanging. So I would pick up my phone, and we'd have a great conversation. He would tell me what was going on with him, share a little bit about his life, laugh a little bit because he was humorous.

[33 : 13] But he eventually told me that the foster care family that had him would not take him back in. And he was kind of trying to figure out what he was going to do. And I asked him one day, I said, yo, what are your thoughts? Where do you feel like you're led to go?

And I'll never forget the answer he gave me, guys. He got a little quiet, and he says to me, well, I'm coming to live with you. And I thought, here I am, working at the school system, trying to get through college.

I'm 22 years old. What do you mean you're coming to live with me? Yeah, right. I went home. I talked to my mom about it, talked to my grandmother about it, and guess what my mother said to me? She says, well, I have always brought you up to listen to the voice of God.

So what is God saying to you? Ah, and I prayed about it, and God spoke to my heart. God said, this is what I want you to do.

I want you to take him in as your son. So there I am at 22 years old, taking in this 14-year-old boy who got on my nerves, who initially was not someone that I liked, but someone that I became, that I came to love.

[34 : 22] Through this upbringing of him, it taught me so much about being a parent. It is how I related to other parents in our youth ministry. It is what pushed me to accelerate, to be more, to be greater than what I already was.

And in that, it was what taught me to love him and love him into being greater and more than what he already was. A few years passed, and once again, there I was.

My girlfriend had brought a young gentleman to the church whose name was Tay. And Tay was going to court the next day, and so we prayed for him. And a couple of months later, his mother passed away from cancer.

Tay again was left with nowhere to go. And so my play brother and myself opened our doors and welcomed in in somewhat the same fashion as my oldest son into our homes.

And he became my second son. Listen, my sons both got a little busy doing their own thing in the world, and they were afforded the chance of becoming early fathers.

[35 : 26] Something that might not have been the right action at the time, but something that I welcomed because I will always love who God gives me to love. And so it is due to that passion that I became a grandfather.

I am affectionately known as Pop Pop to nine beautiful, adorable grandchildren whom I love very much. And so that is the story of my grandchildren and my children, who I love so much, who I, after I finish this, am going to go be with.

All that said, my story has been one that has taught me to love. My family has always loved me. And I know that there are many people that don't have that same type of love all across the world. But God loved me so that I could love others, and I extend that love to as many people as I possibly can. This isn't a testimony about how I did everything right, about how everything has always gone right in my life, because God knows there are times when I have messed up, when I have done stupid things, when I have made the wrong decisions and the wrong choices.

But my life is guided by the words, by the sentiment that if God loves me, and if I love God, then I should love other people as much as I love God, and as much as I love myself, even when they don't do me right.

[36 : 36] Because God knows, I've taken God through the wringer a couple of times, but He forgives me every time. And so, I encourage you today to seek after the same wisdom that I've asked God for.

that in your wisdom, you will begin to fear God. You will begin to respect God enough for God, all that God does. The mere fact that you're here, the mere fact that you're breathing, the mere fact that you have life means that God loves you that much.

And so, in my testimony, I have come to understand how much God loves me, and so I try to do the best that I can to forgive, and to move forward, and to love people through their transgressions, because people love me through my table church.

I also say, that if you have not known that love, but if you want to know more about what that love is about, don't hesitate to reach out to those of us here at the table church, those of us who are servant leaders.

Reach out to our community. Reach out to each other. Because the best place to find God is not necessarily in the sky, but in the hearts of the folks around you.

[37 : 40] Sometimes, you even find God in your enemy, because after all, God created all of us in God's image, and we have to be cognizant of that.

Table church, you are my family, and I hope that today's word, I hope that my testimony, has helped someone to think more about your life, and what you are choosing to do with your love, and whom you're choosing to love, and whom you're choosing not to love, because quite frankly, you should be choosing to love everybody.

And I want you to know that I love you, and there is absolutely nothing, nothing that you can do about it. I encourage you to go love on somebody right after this, and we're going to go back to our worship.

Table church, I love you. Peace out.