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The Journey to Worship

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SPEAKERS

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So sometimes we flip the service, and we're going to do that in this moment, because we have the treat today of Joni is not only leading worship, but she is going to share this morning on worship as well. And I'm just gonna, you know, whatever I share, I'm gonna weep so I have known Joni for 27 years, and come on out, my friend. And you know, there's nothing personally that I dislike more than inauthenticity. And Joanie is one of the most authentic people that I have ever known in my life.

In those 27 years, I have watched her go through so many ups and downs. I've watched her walk on mountain tops, and I've watched her walk through the pit worst thing in her life, and she never let go of worship. And when we were doing this and going to enter into this series, I said to her, it would be remiss of us if we did not have you get up and share as director of worship and the arts, but also as somebody who authentically lives worship behind the scenes.

And by authentically, I mean what she does behind the scenes is as important as what she does here on Sunday mornings, and how she lives her life behind the scenes in authenticity. And by authenticity, what I mean is, when life is hard, she lives into that, admits that, curses about it. We one time, we scream about it, and then she worships with everything she's got.

And so, I just said to her, you know, please share. And then three weeks ago, she came to me, walked into my office early morning, and was like, I cannot do this. I cannot do this. And I was like, Uh huh, whatever. Yes, you can. So here she is to share about worship. So, give her a hand.

Okay, all right, different spot. It's, I'm way more comfortable up there. So, we'll just go with this today. First of all, thank you for worshipping with us today, and what was

brought into the room and it was, here we go. It was just beautiful to be with you all in worship today. So, thank you for that.

And I want to kind of say something right from the start, I don't want you to think I'm here to convince you to worship a different way, or you're doing it wrong, and I'm going to set you straight, you know. And like, I have none of that today, trust me, my legs are about to give out, sweating for worship, which is a good thing. We love it when we sweat and worship. That's a good thing.

So, I just want to share, kind of my journey and how, you know, I got here to this place of worship, and maybe some of that kind of enlightens your journey or helps you along the way. There is no wrong journey, because it's not even about all the things we think we're doing. It's about God and how He meets us and when He meets us in certain situations.

So, we'll just start from way back, and that's I was raised Baptist and brought into the Baptist church. My folks got saved at Word of Life camp up in the Adirondacks, and came home, threw all their booze down the drain, I don't know why it was a Baptist thing, and told the whole family that they were going to the dark place. And that didn't go over well, and so I was brought into the Baptist Church. I loved my little Baptist Church in Long Island, New York. I loved the people, everybody there was called aunt and uncle, and there was a family kind of atmosphere, and just a beauty about it.

You knew everybody, and you could, as a kid, you could just go up to anyone. And so, the song leader, this is my first introduction to worship, was Uncle Ernie. That's what we call him, Uncle Ernie. And yeah, so Uncle Ernie was like, it was like a carnival. When Uncle Ernie was leading the songs, they didn't call it worship. The whole service was a worship service, but they never called it like worship.

And he got up and he would do things like split the congregation into parts. So, like, say this half and this half, or men and women. And we did songs like this, wonderful the mattress grace, the mattress grace of Jesus, deeper than the mighty rolling sea, the rolling sea wonderful, higher than a mountain, all sufficient grace for even me, for even me, for even broader than the scoop of my transgression.

Sing it greater father than all my sin and shame, my sin and shame. And we love to sing about sin and shame as a Baptist church every Sunday, oh, magnify the precious name of Jesus, Praise His name. And that was Uncle Ernie. So, I thought every church was like that, and I thought every song leader was like Uncle Ernie. But we moved when I was 11, and then they were just hymning, and there was kind of, we opened the hymn, and there was nothing there.

And my soul was kind of inspired. I think I have a little bit of Uncle Ernie in me, just a little. And I know he's in heaven, leading all the choirs and sing-alongs up there,

because he was amazing. And as a kid, he made an impact on me, and I went all the way through high school with really no worship experience at all.

And I think of our kids here, and just the wealth of what is offered. They might not like it all the time, and that's okay. Nobody ever does, but just that, the opportunity to worship God, it comes in so many different varieties, and so I went to college, and the first week of college, I saw a sign for a contemporary Christian singing group. This was a brand new thing. It had never been done before. Contemporary Christian music was out.

And there were songs that were coming out, like from Andre Crouch, like that. We started singing. So, I, you know, songs like Jesus is the answer for the world today, above him. There's no other right? Jesus is the way. Yeah, all that kind of groovy stuff and our name was Horizon, the New Horizon group, the funded group by the college, was called Sunrise, and we were New Horizon, and we were sort of the renegade singing group on campus, with five year music students leading.

And, you know, didn't quite some of them were six year music students. You understand, they were just there too long, but they started this group, and I loved it, and I loved them, and I was in that group, and I traveled all over the east coast with them, and it was my first group that I had been into. Moving on my senior year, my brother and I started a group, and it was a band. It was a Christian contemporary band, and we started traveling, and when I got out of college, just traveled for a couple years full time, like that's all we did was book concerts and go do them.

Still, I can't say that I was engaged in worship. I would say we were singing songs about Jesus, and that was awesome, and people loved it and were brought into it in a certain way. But it wasn't songs like that we hear today, and like, you know, songs like belovedness, you know, he says You're mine, he smiled when he made you, and then he goes into I find you beautiful in every way. My love for you is fierce and unending. I'll come to find you whatever it takes, my beloved.

There weren't songs like that around. There were, but Keith Green had entered the hemisphere. Thank you, Jesus for Keith Green, and we sang one of his songs today. That song has to be like, 30 years old or more. And Keith Green brought in, he started to create songs like, Oh Lord, you're beautiful. That had a possibility of intimacy.

It wasn't just songs about God or for God, like Onward, Christian soldiers, you know, Viking worship that I kind of grew up with. It was more like that kind of beautiful like brought you into something different. And so, it was really fun at that time. It was really enlightening.

So, the first love band, we were on the road down in Florida in the middle of winter, of course, and we ran into these two guys. They had overbooked us at this little on

the way Cafe, and they came walking in and their name, they had a band too, and we met them, and their name was Christian Stevens, and our band, and Christian Stevens had to share the night because they overbooked us, big mistake.

And, you know, I had no interest in either of these. One guy was getting married, and the other guy, his name was Bob, and we didn't know there was no magic. I didn't want to give any like, you know, fairy tale here, there was no magic. Maybe, I don't know. He was wearing corduroy, and they went like swish, swish, and like boots, like, work boots.

And a flash, I was just like, that's a weird thing to wear on stage, you know, as I was very into my stage look at that point, and nothing happened. Sorry, but four months later, we met at creation festival. Our band's purpose to meet the day before, and set up early, went out to eat, went to a movie, and I saw him walking to the we at that point, we were in a Winnebago, first love band, Winnebago, yeah, traveling the country in a Winnebago, just what you want your 25-year-old to be doing.

You know, my mom probably just didn't like it, but we I saw him walk up with his little eyes, odd tennis shorts, little Izod shirt, little baseball hat. I just went, who is that? And I was struck. I was enamored, and I worked the whole night. I kept working to find ways to sit next to him, wherever we were sitting, and wherever, and he didn't. He didn't have a clue I was doing this. He was clueless. I'm just nudging people and getting so that was Bob Miller. Maybe some of you know him as Pastor Bob and we got married nine months later.

So, something happened there, I know, right nine months hey, we knew you know what you know. So, once we were married, his partner took off, and me and Bob decided we were going to be take over the ministry of Christian Stevens. And we did that, and we were traveling on a trip. It was about three months, a three-month trip across the United States, doing concerts and conferences.

And I mean, we've just having a blast. And I can't also say that there was much engagement in worship, even at that time, it was more songs about Jesus, bringing people to Jesus. It was an exciting time. And we come to this College in Santa Barbara. I don't remember the name of the college, but it had a Spiritual Emphasis Week, and we were the band that was going to play for Spiritual Emphasis Week.

So, we set up all our stuff. And, you know, we were there all week. And somewhere about midweek, this the committee that had brought us in says, "Would you like to come over? "We're doing a little worship thing over in this little chapel, you know, one of those mini kind of Chapel situations. And we're like, yeah, we'll come over, run by students, and we go over, and I walk in, and there's a prayer, and then this junior, this guy, I don't remember his name, but he sat down at the piano with his back to the congregation.

There was about eight of us there, the 10 of us, whatever, and he started playing this really old piano. Know, and something happened in me, and I can feel it even now, while I'm talking about it. And I don't know if it was about the song. I don't think it was because I played that song many times, but something, something broke open in me, and something was different.

I'm like, like, I couldn't wait to go up and talk to him, and so I ran up and I said, "What did you do?" You know, like you gotta, I'm like, you gotta show me that. You gotta show me what you did, because that was unbelievable. And so, he played the song for me again, and I watched his piano fingers, and I like, Okay, show me again. And it was so beautiful and so intimate. And my, literally, my life changed in that moment.

And you think you know that we have these big moments in our lives. That was it, some junior, he has no idea the impact that he had on my life. And He came in and showed me this, this song, and I took that song and I played it over and over again. And then I incorporated that, that feeling, that stripped down, just vulnerable, like, Here I am, God, whatever, whatever you need, feeling like I want to be in worship like that. I can't go back anymore.

I can't, I can't turn around to whatever it was we were doing, which was great, and it was wonderful and beautiful, but it changed that day. And I want to play that song for you right now, and it's very simple. I'm gonna go over here. Can you mute that's okay, I'm back in my comfort zone now the steadfast love of the Lord never she says, His mercy, Sing along. Never come to an end.

Lay on your new every morning, great is thy favor, oh. Jesus, greatest, they are new. Oh, new every morning. Oh Jesus, thy faithfulness.

And right there, everything changed, and I found the new intimacy that I had never known before. It was such a gift. And I want you to know it's not like I was praying for this. It's not like I knew something was missing. You know, it was just there. God just went. But I do know this. I know that I was open. I know that I was open. I was open to whatever God wanted in my life, and I wanted to hear from him, and I wanted to know what he was saying to me.

You know, we sing that song, see if I can find it. I. My for you to come and have your way. I am open, I am open. My heart is your heart is an open space for you to come and have your way. I Am Open. I Am Open.

And there, in that little chapel in Santa Barbara, California, I had a Jesus revolution, Revelation, all the revs, and you can have that, and that's one of the biggest things I want to say today, is there's nothing supernatural that I did or said or tried to look for. It is available. God is available, and he will meet you where you are, and right at that point, that's where I was. I was open and I was listening. Didn't know, even know what I was listening for. I didn't even know, but that intimacy is where I went and

what I had after cultivating a reservoir of years of hanging out with Jesus in worship and prayer, I knew how to I knew how to get there. You know, it was like the road was I found it. It was so sweet. And that place is where I went and what saved me when Bob died.

Because you know, when you lose your best friend and he's also your husband and your ministry partner for 30 years, there's not, I mean, it just feels like a tsunami came in and you're holding on to a piece of driftwood. And I just called out to God, and I'm like, you gotta meet me. And he was there. He was there in that moment, and he's been there for the last nine years, and I'm so thankful to have that, that place to go, and that place that is real, that means more than the whole world.

And the words that I sang up here, if I don't mean them, I don't sing them, because some of them are hard. You know, there were times it wasn't all, you know, glass slippers and pink dresses, because there were even songs that I couldn't sing. And I remember, I just realized that was, yeah, yeah. There were songs that I could not sing after Bob passed, one phrase I recall just, just kind of stayed with me, was like, "You're never, you're never gonna let, never gonna let me." I don't know what song that came from, but couldn't sing it. I would literally get mad when it was sung. Sorry. Whoever sang it, but, my friend, I just, you know, and that's okay.

And so, I put that out to you today to say, you don't have to get it all the time. You know, somebody's up here sharing. You don't have to like, "Oh, I get everything, yeah, bring it on." You don't have to like every song. It's more about just being available in worship, being available to what God wants to say to you. Like, what if you missed that? That piece, that one, I believe God can do it again if you missed it. So, don't worry. But wouldn't you like to grab it if he had it for you, if there was a word, if there was something in his song, and you're sitting there going, like, what time is this service open? When is it over? When can I leave? And, you know, and that's okay, you know, we all do that. I just, I just know in my anger and frustration and my devastation, all I had left was one small seed. You know, we think about what Jesus said with the mustard seed, the faith of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. I have one on my bracelet here, somewhere, one of my bracelets has a mustard seed. And with that, and I remember saying that to God, like I don't have anything. There's nothing left. I am empty. And I and I looked and I went, but I have this, can you, can you start with this?

And I basically had to start all over, because if you read through my journals, which I brought today, because there's two things I did want to that were appropriate to share. But one of the things in, I know, in there, and probably said it a few times, was like, this was your best idea. God, have you ever said that? It's okay if you have, like, this is your great, great idea, like, forward motion, like, this was it, take this guy that was doing amazing work for you. Loved his family, you know, greatest partner, great friend, this was your great idea. You know, it's okay to be mad at God. He can literally handle it. It's okay. I said things to God I would never say to a human being,

just because if I wasn't going to be real, and we, you said authentic, it's like, God has to be real to me. So, he's real when we're up there dancing and joy and blowing off the roof, and he's real when I'm at home and I hate my life because I'm alone and I don't have my guy anymore. I don't have my partner; my kids are out in Carlisle. It's so wonderful when we get together, but you know, it's whenever it is.

And there comes a point in life where, you know, I remember thinking, I don't want to be with people, but I don't want to be alone. Like, I don't want to talk, but I don't want to be silent, like, nothing was working. Nothing was working. And then I would go and sit and play and sing a simple song, and that worked. And I can't even say enough how much worship saved me, and not worship. It was Jesus. Jesus, like, was there and is there. And it's been so many hard days since, and so many tough things to go through, and I still don't like being alone, and I still don't like any of the things that happened, but I love to be in the presence of God. And there was a comfort being in his presence. There was a peace being in his presence. So, the whole, it's like the whole tsunami, the world explodes. But then I would get, I would get up and start, you know, worship, even at practice, and God bless all the people that put up with my craziness. I love you all. I'm not going to look at any of you, because I you know who you are, but I'm sure I was a handful for those first couple years. I know I was with you, my friend, so, yeah, just to know, like we can be in his presence, and there can be healing there, there can be comfort there. You know you can weep, you can yell whatever you're going through. He hears you. God hears you today. He hears you, and he goes before you on things you're not even thinking about or praying about. He's ahead of you. He's ahead of all your thoughts, all your dreams, all the situations that aren't working out, all the finances, all the jobs, all the schooling, all the relationships. He's already there. He's come up before you. And I think it's about trust and about you know, sometimes you gotta forgive. Going back, let go. Had to do that too. Lots of names in here won't show you that. Either will not show you that.

So, I found this really cool thing. This was in my journal for this was three weeks after Bob passed, and I'm writing this to God, and I'm like, and now that the memorial service is over, what now God, he said, "Hold on to me and wait. "And then downloaded this verse. See if you recognize these words. I did not know that I had written this in here till yesterday, when I looked at this because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassion never fails. His love is new every morning, great is your faithfulness. And I say to myself, The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him. Lamentations three. It's the same song that the kid out in California sang for me years and years and years and years ago. All of a sudden, I'm looking, I'm like, I didn't even know, I didn't even know that I wrote that in there, and that's what you know. Greed is your faithfulness.

There's not much more to say with that. And then later on, a few years later, this is my second journal, by the way, journaling, wow, get it all out, man. Just pour it in

there so it has a place to go. I'm pretty sure I'm in the waiting. This is two and a half, almost three years later. I'm pretty sure I'm in the waiting, not sure of what or who or where, but I'm here. There's so much I don't know, but this, I do know I want to stay in his presence as much as humanly possible. It is where I find peace, it is where I find hope. It is where there is life, not death. It is my future, it is my past, and it is where I belong. So, besides all the anger and the frustration and the craziness, that's where I keep landing. I look through my journals. I keep landing there even I'm like mad on one page, I'm like, God, and I'm like, but I love you, God. I just want to be with you and Jesus, you know, protect me and protect my family and hang out with me and be with me. And you know, I think we have a choice. I think we have a choice. I loved what Sophia brought into her worship message a few weeks back that you know, what you look at, what you concentrate on, what you magnify is where all your focus is, and that's that becomes the most important thing, and trying to do that with worship through the most horrible time of my life was my salvation and brought me peace.

And I just have, like, one or two things I want to share, and then I'll be done. I just, I think I'm going to say it again. I know I said it previous, before. Be vulnerable. Be open, and simple. Prayers are good, or, Hey, God, I don't even know what to pray, but I'm here. Just let God meet you where you are, and in worship, it could be. I mean, we've heard all the amazing sermons by all the amazing preachers here about all the different ways we can worship. And maybe for you, it's in nature or with a spoken word or a poem or just looking, you know, at the artwork and the beauty of that, and bring that in. But whatever it is, let God in, let him in, you know, break down the wall. Start with small, tiny things. Yeah, you're going to be frustrated. Yeah, you're going to feel like he's let you down and you can't sing the song "You're never going to let me down." Yeah, that's going to happen because we're not, we're on Earth, and, you know, Earth is broken, and we need a Savior, and we need Jesus.

I want to sing one song for you to close out, unless Is there anything? Are we okay? You?

This is a song that I usually can't make through without crying, so I tried to get through it today. And it's from a conference in Ireland years ago, and it just kind of sums up life.

Ah, when it's done, there is just one thing that matters. That matters: Did I do my best to live for the truth? Did I live my life for you when it's all my treasure only?

What I've done for love, done for loves me, will stand the test of time.

Lord, your mercy is so great that you look and find pure as gold in my reclaim, turning season to sing.

Time will always sing praise here on Earth, and oh, for you show me heaven, my
True Home when it's all.

You're my life when life is gone.