

# John Giarrizzo Personal Testimony

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Preacher: John Giarrizzo

[0:00] Thank you, Pastor John, and I want to thank the people here at Grace Fellowship Church for the opportunity to come and to open the Word of God to you. And this morning to share my personal testimony, which simply is this. I am a sinner and nothing at all, but Jesus Christ is my all in all.

Amen. And that summarizes that there's really nothing else they need to say. There is a biblical precedent for sharing personal testimony. David, in Psalm 66, verse 16, says these words, Come and hear all you who fear God, and I will tell you what He has done for my soul. So I would like to tell you what God has done for my soul.

The Apostle Paul shared his personal testimony when he was under arrest. It was used to show how God had worked in his life. And many of you are familiar with the famous work of Augustine's Confessions, where he shares about his life, and halfway through his confessions, he writes, The human race is inquisitive about other people's lives, but negligent to correct their own.

Why do they demand to hear from me what I am, when they refuse to hear from you what they are? Another famous personal testimony is that John Bunyan, his word, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners.

And he talks about how profitable it is for Christians to call to mind the very beginnings of grace in their lives, and to be able to share that with others for their profit, their instruction, their edification and encouragement.

[1:52] So I will endeavor to do that this morning, with what little time I have, and it's very, very difficult to talk about myself.

I'd much rather talk about my Savior, but I'll try to do both at this time. I was born in a little town called Albion in upstate New York, about an hour east of Buffalo.

So some of you New Yorkers are probably looking at each other. In fact, I recently discovered that Gordon Taylor's wife, Raina, she and I not only share the same birthday, but also she and I lived in the same region of New York.

That was interesting. So I'm from New York, but recently I heard that where a person comes from is not near as important as where they are going.

And I always knew where I had come from, but it seems like I never knew where I was going. I was born on January 19, 1957, to Joe and Emily Gerizzo.

[3:05] I was the second child of four boys. And they were farmers in upstate New York. My dad worked with his father on the family farm. I was raised in a Roman Catholic town.

Went to a Roman Catholic parochial school through fourth grade. And growing up Roman Catholic, I had what I thought was a good relationship with God.

And I based that upon the fact that the Roman Catholic Church had me baptized as a baby. And in second grade, I had my Holy Communion.

And in fourth grade, I had my Confirmation. So I believed that I was good with God because the Catholic Church had all my bases covered for me, so to speak.

So I was content with this notion that God and I were on good terms. And that if I were to die, I would naturally go to heaven.

[4:13] In 1964 and following, my father and grandfather lost their crops to early snow.

And they soon found themselves in financial difficulty with the bank. And eventually, the bank foreclosed on the farm. And in 1967, they lost their farm, their houses, their cars, everything.

My dad was a Cornell graduate. And he was an intelligent man. And he heard that there was an opportunity for a fresh start in Phoenix, Arizona, selling real estate.

So he borrowed some money, and he flew to Phoenix. And he took his real estate exam and got his real estate license. And then an uncle bought us a little Dodge Dart, a 66 Dodge Dart. And the family all brought it in this car. And we drove to Arizona, arriving July 1, 1967 to 116 degree heat.

[5 : 28] So that was a very warm welcome to Arizona. Coming to Arizona was a real turning point in my life. Because in the town we moved to, that was Mesa, Arizona, there was really no Catholic parochial school other than the Hispanic school.

And none of us knew Spanish. So I went to a public school in a bad neighborhood, where I was easily influenced by the troublemakers in my class.

In Proverbs 13, 20, we're told that he who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. And I was a companion of fools.

In fifth grade, my friends and I got in trouble with the police for stealing candy bars from a convenience store. I was a follower, not a leader, and I was following the wrong crowd.

My life at the time had no real direction. My parents were too busy with three boys besides myself, and their work to get me much attention.

[6 : 43] My mom soon got her real estate license as well, and they became very busy with their business. And it seemed as if I was just floating down the stream of life, going wherever the current took me.

And looking back, I can see that those were the most formative years of my life, the years that molded my character and set my moral compass.

And yet I was living without any direction and any purpose in life. In Proverbs 22, verse 6, it says, to train up a child in the way that he should go.

And when he is old, he will not depart from it. But I did not have that training. I was just left to myself to go however and wherever I would.

We continued to attend the Catholic Church in Mesa, Arizona, but in decreasing fashion because of the demands to my mom and dad's real estate business.

[7 : 46] Slowly they began to make money, and we moved into a larger home, and life seemed to become very easy. In eighth grade, I discovered that I had a natural talent for wrestling.

And I began to pin weights to improve my chances of getting the lead spot on the ninth grade wrestling team. At the same time, I started getting interested in girls, especially the bad girls that like to party.

And in ninth grade at my school, there was this one pretty cheerleader by the name of Roberta Gregory, who caught my eye. But she seemed so virtuous, so pure.

And I just knew that she would not have any interest in a bad boy like me. She attended the Bible study at the school before school started in the mornings.

And so I always admired her, but just knew that we didn't have anything in common. Well, high school brought more opportunity for wrestling and weightlifting.

[9 : 01] I was one of the top wrestlers on the JV team. The coach saw that I was very gifted in wrestling and encouraged me to pursue a college scholarship.

But my junior year, I threw it all away in order to get a job so I could buy a pickup truck. I needed a pickup truck so that I could go on dates and it just seemed to fit my social life better.

I still remember Coach Arradondo. He was so mad at me. He said, you've got the rest of your life to work. You only have two more years of high school to wrestle.

But I didn't listen to his advice. Proverbs 12:15 says, The way of the fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

And part of my reason for working was because my parents were now struggling again to keep their heads above water in the real estate market. If it slowed down and I wanted to have my own truck and if I wanted to have it, I'd have to pay for it.

[10 : 15] And all this time I was just drifting with no ambition, no aspiration for a career. I still remember in high school, in an English class, you were supposed to write an essay on what we wanted to be in life once we graduated.

I had no idea. I had a friend who wanted to be a fireman, another one who wanted to be a policeman, and I didn't have the faintest idea what I wanted to be.

So I thought, well, I'm just going to aim high and I'm just going to write, I want to be an astronaut. Aim for the moon. But I really didn't seem to know where I was going.

And at the time, I guess I just didn't even care. I was still believing in God at the time. I believed in the God of the Catholic Church that we came to know by reciting the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. I believed I was headed for heaven because I was Catholic, and the Catholic Church had worked it all out for me.

[11:33] Looking back, I realized that my faith was in the Church. It wasn't in the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet I never came to the point to where I had turned hostile to God or had abandoned completely my belief in God.

But I was still as lost and dead in sin as the atheist or the hostile unbeliever. I wanted to stay close to God in some terms, in case I ever got in any kind of deep trouble and needed to call on Him. But not too close to God to interfere in my pursuit of sin. I wanted a relationship with God in my terms that would suit my preferences and my desires.

And much of my senior year of high school was just a blur. At the start of the senior year, I began to smoke marijuana because that's what all my friends seemed to be doing.

And that only increased a loss of ambition. I had no goals, no direction. Life was aimless. I didn't even care at the time.

[12:50] And my parents had the discernment to recognize this. And they encouraged me to pursue real estate.

They said, if you don't know what you want to do and if you're not interested in college, why don't you go to real estate school? We'll pay for you to do that.

And so halfway through my senior year, I began to attend night class at the local real estate school. And as God would have it, the teacher at that school was the now famous Tom Hopkins of Champions Unlimited.

He had made millions of dollars selling real estate in California. And he was on his way to becoming a national motivational speaker. And so in between these two careers, he happened to be teaching at this real estate school that I was attending.

And so you can imagine the impact that he had on a 17-year-old hippie who had no ambition or direction in life. Suddenly, I knew what I wanted to be.

[14:05] I wanted to be a top-selling real estate agent. And immediately, I began buying all these motivational books that would help me to be successful in life.

I went from someone who never would open a book in school to someone now who was reading all these books that he could get his hands on so I could better my life and promote my career.

So now I had both the direction and the ambition to propel me down the road to financial prosperity.

So my attitude was, look out world, here I come. I'm going to leave my impact on the world. I'm going to make a name for myself. I took the state exam and for my high school graduation and failed.

But the second time I took it, I passed and I got my real estate license while I was still 18 years old. Excuse me. At the same time, I was still struggling to figure out my relationship with the Lord and my parents were also struggling in real estate because the market was always hit and miss.

[15:33] It was very volatile. At the time, my dad was under tremendous financial stress and he was unconverted and turned to alcohol to find relief from his problems.

And I looked at his problems as all stemming from financial issues. And I determined that I would never end up in such a place in my financial future where I would have to turn to drinking.

At that time, my whole attitude had changed. So instead of aimlessly drifting along, I was aggressively ambitious. I was driven toward success.

I was intent on achieving my financial security. And I learned the importance of setting goals and the mental gymnastics of positive thinking.

I didn't know about Proverbs 16.9, which says, the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. I worked very hard in real estate.

[16:42] I began investing in real estate. Every chance I got, I would purchase property. So by the time I turned 22, I owned three houses, 80 acres of farmland and partnership, and had three cars.

I began to believe that I was the captain of my own destiny. The positive thinking school would teach you that you could dream big dreams and devote the energy to achieve these dreams, and nothing could stop you from reaching those dreams.

And I bought into it completely. One of the mantras I can still remember was, whatever the mind of man can conceive, it can achieve.

And to dream big dreams and to devote the energy to reach those dreams. And I believed that. And that became somewhat of a religion for me.

Proverbs 14.12 says that there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. I was going to the gym every day to pump iron.

[18:07] I wanted to be buff. I was buying the latest fashions of clothes. I had an expensive watch. And everything about me outwardly said, look at me, I'm successful.

I'm important. I'm special. But to the discerning eye, someone would realize that I was just simply very into myself.

I spent a lot of money that I didn't have to buy things that I didn't need to impress people I didn't even know.

And I assumed that I was on my way to becoming financially secure. And yet all the time I was moving further and further away from the Lord and the moral convictions that I grew up under. I wanted to find fulfillment in life and I was chasing after the world thinking that the world would satisfy that longing for fulfillment.

[19:13] but inside I was so empty. And the more I strived to achieve and to acquire, the more unfulfilled I sensed myself being inside.

1979 was a very pivotal year for me. It was the year of Jimmy Carter's last year presidency when the real estate market just fell apart, interest rates skyrocketed to 15% and prices continued to rise and I suddenly found myself in a tight spot I could not escape.

So I doubled my efforts to make sales so that I could continue to build my financial kingdom and yet it all began to crumble. And I was powerless to change anything.

I lost the 80 acres of land. I totaled the high school muscle car that I had built from scratch. I had to sell my Italian sports car and the brand new business car that I owned would soon be repossessed. Internally, I was an emotional wreck. I was under tremendous pressure and stress and I became depressed and I felt helpless.

[20:35] helpless and there was like no place I could turn. And you might have thought that at this moment of deepest need I would have turned to God.

But no, not at first. I thought that the way out of my dark world was to double my efforts at work, to make more calls, to try to get more appointments, to work harder.

And I'm ashamed to admit that I looked to God only as a last resort after everything else failed.

Psalms 107 verses 17 through 22 is a good description of what happened to me.

Let me read that to you. Psalm 107 and verse 17 says, Some were fools through their sinful ways and because of their iniquity suffered affliction.

They loathed any kind of food and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and He delivered them from their distress.

[21:47] He sent out His word and healed them. He delivered them from their destruction. Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love, for His wondrous works to the children of man.

Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of His deeds and songs of joy. One November afternoon in 1979 is God ordained for it to be.

I was sitting in the living room of my condominium, channel surfing, and I came across this program that I thought was one of those national geographic documentaries to save the planet.

It was entitled The Late Great Planet Earth. It was narrated by Hal Lindsay, who was a self-proclaimed expert on end-time prophecy.

prophecy. And I always had this fearful sensitivity regarding the end of the world, and the apocalypse, and the return of Christ.

[23:01] Those kind of thoughts just always resonated deep in my heart. And when this program came on, where Hal Lindsay had his Bible open, and he was showing how these prophecies from the book of Ezekiel, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Revelation, were all beginning to fall into place in our lifetime.

And the superpowers of the world were coming into alignment as the Bible had predicted. And how we were at the eleventh hour, on the threshold of the return of Christ.

Christ. And that the Bible was this roadmap for us to be ready and to welcome the coming of Christ. Well, at that moment, just watching that program, God awakened me to the reality of my sin and my condemnation. John 16, 8, reads, when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

And in a moment, God had opened my eyes to the truth that Christ was returning at some time. How Lindsay led me to believe that it was sooner than later.

[24 : 30] But God had opened my eyes that at that moment I was unsaved and I was thus unprepared to meet him. And that frightened me. all my life I had been led to believe that I was okay with God.

That I was headed for heaven. And now my eyes were opened and the scales were removed and the curtain of deception was gone.

And I was so vulnerable. I remember just trembling and looking at my roommate and saying, Dennis, it's true. Jesus is coming soon and we've got to get ready.

And Dennis just grabbed that remote control and said, what else is on? He wasn't alarmed like I was. There's another passage of scripture in relation to that in Matthew 24 verse 36.

Jesus says, but concerning that day and hour, Noah knows not even the angels of heaven, nor the son, but the father only. For as were the days of Noah, so be the coming of the son of man.

[25 : 47] For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark. And they were unaware when the flood came and swept them all away.

So will be the coming of the son of man. Then two men will be in the field. One will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill.

One will be taken and one left. Therefore stay away, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. That afternoon two men were watching TV.

One was taken and the other was left. God. And from that moment on there was only one thing on my mind and that was preparing to meet the Lord.

For the first time in my life I had realized I had never been truly converted and I was consumed with that one goal of getting right with God.

[26 : 50] Whatever it took, whatever I needed to do, I wanted to be right with God. In Matthew 11 verse 12 Jesus says, From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.

So with a holy violence I was pursuing the Lord. I was a man on a mission. I was obsessed with finding the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Jeremiah 29 verse 13 says, you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. And there was nothing else I wanted at that time in my life than to seek after Christ.

I was 22 years old. I had never read the Bible. I didn't even own a Bible. Growing up a nominal Catholic at best, I had zero knowledge of the Word of God.

I didn't even have a biblical or theological vocabulary. You know, words like repentance, conviction of sin, regeneration, those kind of terms that are household terms to those of us who are Reformed Baptists.

[28 : 14] I had no concept of what those terms meant. I had no idea where to turn or even what to do.

I only knew I had to seek after the Lord. In Isaiah 40 verse 11, we read, He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom and shall gently lead those that are young.

And you know in Pilgrim's Progress, how Pilgrim, the man in the city of destruction with the burden on his back and a book in his hand, was crying out, what must I do?

Well, I was that man with the burden on my back, and I was crying out, what must I do? But I didn't have the book in my hand. The man in Pilgrim's Progress ran into someone by the name of Evangelist, and as you know, he showed him to the Wicket Gate, which led ultimately to the Celestial City.

And about that time I ran into an Evangelist who was, as God would have it, an old girlfriend of mine from ninth grade, who had since been converted, and she was attending a solid Reformed Baptist church in Mesa, Arizona.

[29 : 41] And she gave me my first Bible, and she introduced me to her pastor, and I still remember my first appointment with Pastor Harold Barrington.

And I said, Pastor Barrington, I don't know if you can really help me, because I have these real deep philosophical questions. Things like, can anyone really know for certain that they're going to heaven?

And how can you be saved? there was a little smile, a little twinkle in his eye, and he sat down next to me with the scriptures, and every question I asked, he showed me in the Bible, the answer.

And it just brought such peace and assurance, and it gave such guidance. At the end of this hour, it seemed like it was just ten minutes, I said, you have helped me immensely, and I can't thank you enough, but I'm Catholic, and I feel like I need to go back to my priest, kind of, you know, give him equal time, this is how I felt.

So I made the appointment with the father, I can't remember his name, and I went there, and the first thing he did was to chastise me for not being in church very regularly.

[31:06] And I said, well, we'll stay in open houses, and Sundays are busy days, and so on and so forth. But I said, I've got these serious questions, can you help me?

And it was a completely different scenario. Instead of sitting next to me, he sat behind this big desk in a high back leather chair, leaning back, pontificating, and telling me that we all have questions and doubts, and here's a little pamphlet, here's another one, take two pamphlets, and you can call me in the morning.

And I was so disappointed in the sense because I was hoping he could one-up Pastor Barrington, and I would need to leave my church, but something inside really told me that I wasn't to be there anymore.

So as I walked out of his office, I made it known that I was going to be walking out in the Catholic Church, and I never returned, and I have no regrets. Pastor Barrington baptized me a month later. I began attending the Church of the Redeemer, and almost immediately I began to tell my friends about my newfound discovery, to share the excitement I had of forgiveness of sin and peace with God.

[32:38] But none of my friends had any desire or interest. I thought, well, maybe if I can get this Hal Lindsey program, and I'll call them all over to my living room, and I played the program for them, and I thought, this will do it.

It certainly did for me. That didn't work. And I was troubled that they could reject so great a salvation, such a wonderful Savior, that they could turn their back on deliverance from sin and bondage to Satan and peace with God and the hope of everlasting life through Christ and glory. It didn't make any sense. And I had this insatiable hunger to understand God's Word, and it began to actually interfere with my real estate career, to the point where I was studying the Bible all the time instead of going to the office to work.

I knew my life had to be holy if I was to be serious about following after the Lord. And I had been dating two different girls, and I called each one of them to tell them I had come to know the Lord, to share what God had done in my life, but they did not share my enthusiasm or my interest, and that was fine.

Shortly after that, I ran into an old friend from ninth grade who told me, reminded me of this pretty cheerleader named Roberta Gregory that I knew back in ninth grade, and said that she was still single and had moved back into the area, and she arranged for Roberta and I to meet again.

[34:29] We went out for a date and began dating. Six months, within six months we were engaged, and six months after that we were married.

So, you know, sometimes short engagements and quick marriages, they can work. But now I had a companion in Christ who was there by my side in my pursuit of Christ.

In Proverbs 19, 14, we read, Houses and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord. Amen. I soon lost all my interest in real estate.

Only one thing was driving me, and that was an unquenchable thirst to know the Lord Jesus Christ, and to tell others about him. So happened that the church that we were married in had a small little seminary to train men who were pursuing pastoral ministry.

And it came as a bit of a shock to Roberta when I told her that I was sensing that God was directing me toward pastoral ministry. Roberta's first response was, I never intended to marry a pastor, or to be a pastor's wife.

[35:52] I thought I was married a realtor. I said, I'm sorry, I never intended to be a pastor. But I think God is calling me in that direction, and I don't think I should tell him no.

By the way, Roberta has been a great pastor's wife. She has been a better pastor's wife, and I've been a pastor. In Ezra 7, verse 10, we're told, Ezra set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and laws in Israel.

And I set my heart to study the word of God, and by the time of our one-year wedding anniversary, I was enrolled in the seminary. I graduated three years later, and by the time we celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary, I was the new pastor of a church plant that came to be known as Grace Covenant Church.

Next Sunday, we will be celebrating our 27th birthday at Grace Covenant Church. We began as a Reformed Baptist Church, holding to the 1689 Confession.

We were chartered members along with Grace Fellowship Church in the ARCA Association. Association. I had the honor of serving on the ad hoc committee with Pastor John Keeney as we formulated the association, and I've been on the AC Council with him for many years, and have always looked up to me as a man of God.

[37 : 27] I was very honored that we could be brothers in Christ, and fellow pastors, and now we're going to be related by marriage as well.

What a praise, the honor that is. Since then, God has blessed that Roberta and I were the two children, David and Paul. From the moment we knew we were expecting, we committed ourselves to fasting and praying for their salvation, and God has been pleased to answer those prayers.

One of the highlights of my life was baptizing my two sons, and now my sons are my brothers in Christ. Roberta and I also prayed that God would bless them one day with godly wives.

God has answered those prayers beyond what we imagined. He not only has blessed them with wives who are godly, but wives who are intelligent and beautiful.

This November marks my 33rd year of walking with the Lord, and I am eternally grateful to God who has called me out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[38 : 41] I could never thank him enough that he has led me to know the Lord Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself up for me. This faithfulness in my life, in my marriage, in my family, in my church, has just overwhelmed me with wonder and praise, and I will never be able to repay him for the love and grace that he has bestowed upon me.

In closing, let me just read to you this text from the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1, 12 through 17. I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.

Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The same is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

[40 : 10] To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Should we close the word praise?

Our Father in heaven, we give all praise and glory and honor to you. We thank you for your electing love from the foundation of the world.

You have chosen those whom you have set your love upon to be holy and blameless in Christ, to be given to the Son as objects of his love and redemption.

And in time, Christ came and bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might be reconciled unto God. And how thankful we are, Lord, that the Holy Spirit has come to us personally and awakened us, shown us our sin, our condemnation, the judgment that has hung over our heads, and given us the grace to cry out, what must I do to be saved?

And it has led us into the paths of righteousness for his name, saying, O Lord, I pray that if there's anyone here this morning who is yet in darkness outside of Christ, that this would be the day of everlasting life for them, that this would be the day of their salvation, that there would be an awakening in their lives, that there would be that determination to turn from self and sin and Satan and embrace the cross of Christ and the forgiveness that is offered so freely there.

[41 : 52] Lord, come and grant salvation, grant us grace that we would live for you, and that we will follow you wholeheartedly all the days of our lives and never look back.

We pray that you'll prepare us now to meet with you in corporate worship, may the spirit of truth and grace be with us all, and may the glory be to the