

God Was There All Along

The Testimony of Pastor Elijah Rodriguez

I was raised in a Christian home. I was blessed to be surrounded by my mother, grandparents, uncle, and aunt—people who loved me, cared for me, and helped shape the man I would become.

But there was one person who was absent.

My father.

I grew up without knowing what it was like to have my father present in my life. I watched friends grow up with both of their parents. I saw fathers show up for birthdays, celebrations, difficult moments, and everyday life. Although I had people around me who loved me deeply, there was still a place in my heart that wondered what it would have been like to have my father there.

Years later, I met my sister from my father's side of the family. From the moment we met, we connected. It felt natural, as though we had known each other much longer.

Then she told me something that would change my life.

Our father was in the hospital, and he was dying.

She asked me to go with her to see him.

So I went.

The first time I met my father would also be one of the last times I would ever see him.

He was lying in a hospital bed and was unable to speak. There were so many things I could have carried into that room—anger, rejection, disappointment, questions about why he had never been there.

But instead, I chose forgiveness.

I forgave him for not being present in my life.

He couldn't respond with words, but I watched tears run down his face.

I'll never forget those tears.

I walked away from that experience with a decision in my heart:
I would never become the father I didn't have.

I wanted to be present.

I wanted to show up for my children when things were good and when things were difficult. I wanted to be there for the occasions that seemed small and the moments that meant everything.

I didn't want to simply father my children.

I wanted to be their dad.

I wanted my children to know what love from their father looked like. I wanted them to know that Dad was present. Dad was available. Dad would celebrate with them, cry with them, correct them, encourage them, pray with them, and walk with them.

Most importantly, I wanted to be a safe place for them.

When God Said, "I'm Your Father"

In 2013, something happened that I will never forget.

I was 39 years old.

One Friday night, I found myself thinking about my father. I remember saying within myself, *I don't know what it is like to have a father in my life.*

I thought about how I had watched friends grow up with both parents. Even at 39 years old, that absence still affected me.

But here's what makes this moment so powerful:

I didn't tell anyone what I was thinking.

Not my wife.

Not my friends.

Not my pastor.

No one.

It was a conversation happening silently inside of me.

The next day, we were in a service where a pastor from Florida was ministering. I had never met this man in my life. God used him prophetically, and throughout the service he began ministering to people one by one.

Then he came to me.

And he said words that broke something open inside of me:

"God told me to tell you, 'I'm your Father.'"

I broke down like a baby.

No one knew what I had been thinking the night before.

No one knew about the conversation taking place inside my heart.

But God knew.

At 39 years old, God took the time to remind a son who had grown up without his earthly father:

"You have a Father. I am your Father."

That moment changed something in me.

I realized that although I couldn't physically see God, He had been present.

And I began to understand that **His presence is everything.**

There is a cry in Scripture that captures what became so important to me—the desire to remain in the presence of God. David understood that possessions, positions, and circumstances could change, but nothing could replace God's presence.

And I was about to learn that truth in a way I never expected.

The Year We Lost Almost Everything

That same year, our family went through one of the darkest seasons of our lives.

We lost our home.

We lost possessions.

We lost stability.

Suddenly, the life we knew was being stripped away.

We had nowhere to go.

My wife and I believed in God. We prayed. We hoped. We expected God to do something supernatural and rescue us from what was happening.

But the miracle we expected didn't come.

I remember moving everything we could into four storage units.

Four storage units.

And we still couldn't save everything.

There were belongings left in the house. We were told that those remaining possessions would be placed into storage and that we would be told where they were.

That never happened.

We lost them.

But losing possessions wasn't what hurt me the most.

What broke me was watching my children experience it.

My wife and I were concerned about what this would do to their faith.

Would our children still believe in God?

Would they wonder why the God their parents preached about allowed this to happen?

Would they lose their faith because they watched their parents lose everything?

I remember looking through the kitchen window and seeing our oldest son break down and cry.

That broke us.

As parents, you can endure pain yourself, but there is something different about watching your children hurt because of circumstances you cannot fix.

Our oldest daughter was in college, and we asked the school if she could remain on campus for the summer because we didn't have a home for her to return to. Thankfully, they allowed her to stay.

My wife, our other children, and I stayed with friends for approximately three weeks.

Our family was scattered.

Our belongings were in storage.

Our home was gone.

And I had questions for God.

"God, I Trust You"—Even When I Didn't

Eventually, we reached out to a young woman from our youth ministry. We had been her youth pastors, and she had become like a daughter to us.

She had a townhouse with a loft and an extra bedroom.

She opened her home to us.

Eight of us lived together in that townhouse.

I will always be grateful for how she loved our family and opened her doors when we needed somewhere to go.

But even though God had provided a place for us, inside I was struggling.

I was discouraged.

I was heartbroken.

And if I'm telling the truth, **I was angry with God.**

I didn't understand.

Why us?

Why did we have to lose everything?

Why did my children have to experience this?

Why did my wife have to endure this?

Why would God allow us to be stripped of so much when we were serving Him?

There were moments when I wanted to throw in the towel.

My faith was shaken.

My trust in God was shaken.

And there came a point when I realized something difficult to admit:

I didn't trust God anymore.

But I kept saying something.

"God, I trust You."

I didn't feel it.

But I said it.

"God, I trust You."

My circumstances didn't look like He could be trusted.

But I said it again.

"God, I trust You."

I kept repeating it until what my mouth was declaring began reaching my mind, and what my mind was receiving began reaching my heart.

God, I trust You.

Sometimes faith isn't shouting because you have the victory.

Sometimes faith is whispering, *"God, I trust You,"* while everything around you gives you a reason to question Him.

We Thought We Were Starting Over

Approximately two years later, God opened a door for us to move into another home.

I thought perhaps that chapter was finally over.

But after about a year and a half, something unexpected happened.

We moved back in with the same young woman who had opened her home to us before.

This time, however, it wasn't because we simply needed her.

God was sending us back because she needed us.

We spent another two years there.

At the time, I still didn't completely understand what God was doing.

But now I can see it.

God wasn't wasting any part of our story.

The loss wasn't wasted.

The tears weren't wasted.

The uncomfortable living arrangements weren't wasted.

The questions weren't wasted.

Even the seasons when we felt forgotten weren't wasted.

Then Came Hope

In 2017, something began stirring in our hearts.

We believed God was calling us to plant a church.

My wife and I sat down with our pastor and told him what we believed God was saying. Even after everything we had been through—even while we were still processing our own journey—God was calling us to serve and lead others.

Our pastor blessed us.

He supported us.

And he continues to support us today.

That year, we stepped out in faith and began what would become **Hope Worship Center in New Jersey**.

Then something began making sense.

The loss.

The instability.

The tears.

The disappointment.

The unanswered questions.

The feeling of abandonment.

The seasons when we wondered whether anyone understood what we were going through.

God was preparing us for Hope.

How could we lead hurting people if we had never known hurt?

How could we minister to people who had lost everything if we had never experienced loss?

How could we tell someone to trust God in the valley if we had only known Him on the mountaintop?

How could we tell someone that God was present in their darkest season if we had never had to search for His presence in ours?

What I thought was God abandoning me was actually a season in which God was building me.

The Valley Wasn't Empty

There were seasons when I thought we were alone.

But we weren't alone.

God was there.

In the solitude, God was building us.

In the valley, God was molding us.

In the uncertainty, God was teaching us.

Through the losses, God was stripping away things we thought we needed so He could prepare us for what He had called us to carry.

The valley wasn't punishment.

The valley was preparation.

It wasn't easy.

It hurt.

There were things I would never have chosen for myself, my wife, or my children.

But today, I can look back and see that the process was necessary for us to become the pastors and leaders God was preparing us to be.

Now when someone tells me what it feels like to lose something, I understand.

When someone tells me they are angry with God, I understand.

When someone says, "Pastor, I'm trying to trust God, but I don't know if I can anymore," I understand.

When someone feels abandoned, displaced, broken, or forgotten, I don't have to give them an answer from a textbook.

I've been in the valley.

And I can tell them:

God is there.

From Fatherless to Father

Today, I can see a thread running through my entire story.

I grew up without my earthly father, but God revealed Himself to me as **Father**.

I promised I would become the kind of dad I never had.

Then God allowed me to experience seasons where almost everything around me was stripped away so I could discover that when everything else disappears, **His presence remains**.

I learned that being present matters.

It matters as a father.

It matters as a husband.

It matters as a pastor.

And most importantly, I discovered how much the presence of God matters.

God took a boy who knew what absence felt like and taught him the power of presence.

He took a family that knew what it meant to lose a home and called them to build a spiritual home for others.

He took our pain and gave us purpose.

He took our valley and turned it into a ministry.

He took what looked like loss and used it to prepare us to steward something called **Hope**.

Today, my wife and I have the privilege of stewarding the vision God entrusted to us through **Hope Worship Center—a place for everyone.**

When I look back now, I realize:

We were never abandoned.

God was there when I grew up without my father.

God was there beside my father's hospital bed.

God was there when the tears ran down my father's face.

God was there when He told me, *"I'm your Father."*

God was there when we lost our home.

God was there when our belongings went into storage.

God was there when my son cried.

God was there when eight of us shared a townhouse.

God was there when I was angry.

God was there when I couldn't understand Him.

God was there every time I said, *"God, I trust You,"* even when my heart was struggling to believe the words coming out of my mouth.

God was there in the valley.

And God was there when Hope was born.

So if you are walking through a season where you cannot understand what God is doing, don't mistake His silence for His absence.

The God you cannot see is still present.

You may not understand the valley while you're walking through it. You may not understand the loss while you're experiencing it. You may not understand why God allowed certain things to leave your life.

But your valley may be preparing you to carry something you haven't seen yet.

My story taught me this:

Sometimes you don't recognize what God was building until you arrive at the place He was preparing you for.

We went through the valley.

We experienced the loss.

We endured the process.

And on the other side, God gave us an assignment:

Hope.

And through it all, God was there.

He was there all along.