

## Shannon's and Trey's Story

Shannon:

Hello, my name is Shannon. I'm 21 years old and blessed beyond measure. God has changed my heart and life so much in the last 16 weeks. I want to share the story of God's healing love as it came to me through Tree of Rest. I don't recall my exact age, but around 4 years old, one of my mother's boyfriends took me on "dates" to our couch. I thought that he was my boyfriend and preformed what he asked me to. I thought that I loved him and that was what girlfriends and boyfriends did. My mom was in the house during our "dates."

Around age 5, my other, little brother and I moved to Connecticut with a different one of my mother's boyfriends. After a few years she had my two younger brothers, and her boyfriend, their father, contracted HIV from intravenous drug use. He was physically abusive and one night we ran away and moved into a battered woman's shelter. About a year later, we moved into our own apartment. From this time on, I thought that my mother was going to die, and that I would be left to take care of myself and my brothers.

We had a neighbor who lived in a trailer next door. He sexually abused me and gave me money that I hid under my mattress. Because I felt that I needed to take care of my brothers, I returned several times. My mother found the money and asked where I had gotten it. I told her where the money had come from. She did nothing.

After a year there, we moved again. Following this my mother began to leave us frequently. I would never know how long she would be gone or how to find her. I was left to take care of my family with no food or money to do so. I used to worry so much during those times about my mother's safety. I felt responsible for her. I thought that I must have done something wrong and that was why she would go away.

I remember asking my mother many times to let me go to church, but she wouldn't let me have anything to do with church or God. She tried to keep God a secret. He was a myth to her – there was no God. But I knew. I had no reason to believe this, but even through all of this, I knew that God was there and that He was real.

When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I moved to Florida with my father and stepmother. After persistently begging them to take me to church, we went. Someone anonymously paid for my brother and me to go to summer camp with the youth group the next week. We went. The first night, I gave my heart to Jesus; and for the first time in my life, things made sense. Shortly after this, my brother and my father also gave their hearts to Christ

I loved God so much and grew so much in Him through high school. I went to Christian college and quickly learned how Christians were supposed to look, talk, and act. So I did this, although my life was consumed with pain, fear, secrets and distrust. I didn't trust God. I could believe He loved me when I performed well and looked like the other Christians around me; but when I undershot the standards that I had set for myself, I thought that He didn't love me. I fell into a period of sin; and for a year, I thought that God had left me. I felt that I performed badly and that He had just left me.

Then God brought a special friend into my life. This friend was the first person I opened up to about the way I was feeling. She told me that she had felt the same way. She told me about the Tree of Rest retreat for sexual abuse recovery and healing. I knew that God wanted my husband and I to go to the retreat, but we were both scared. It was at this retreat that my life changed. And because of this, I can stand before you now as a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold all things have been made new. God brought me to a safe place, with women that loved Him and loved me. Each one understood how I was feeling and had experienced first hand God's healing in their lives.

God revealed to me at retreat that I didn't trust Him. I didn't understand who He was and how He loved me. He told me that our relationship had been very childlike and that we were going to begin a new relationship; because I am not only God's child, but I am also Jesus' bride.

My healing began and has continued because of the promises that God has given me. The first promise was Isaiah 54:9,10. I can trust God. He loves me. He will never leave me. He is no longer angry with me. When I understood this, I began to trust God. There was so much of my life that had been in darkness; so many secrets that I had kept from my husband and my family. All of these things Satan was using to torment me and to keep me away from God.

But God's light came beaming in! It revealed all of the darkness that had been hidden in my heart, and my life began to change. I received freedom from all those things that had been controlling me and keeping me in bondage. But what has most dramatically changed my life is that, for the first time, I understand how God loves me. That His love for me is not based on my behavior – whether good or bad. He loves me because He created me and I am His child.

I had been afraid my whole life to talk to my mother about the past. I didn't want to hear her say that she didn't love me, that she didn't protect me, that she stood by and allowed those things to happen to me. I thought that if I ever heard her say those things, I wouldn't make it through. That was something that my heart could not handle. But God brought everything into the light. I did talk to my

mother, and she did confirm my fears. But in the midst of this, God whispered to me that He loved me. And it is because of His love that I will never be the same.

Trev:

Hi, my name is Trey. I am Shannon's husband. God has changed my life in the past 4 months. I could not even begin to explain all the things He has done, but I do want to share some that have had a real impact on me and our family.

My wife told me about this ministry that had truly effected a friend of hers and how for the first time my wife was able to communicate with someone about her abuse and that here friend had been able to speak wisdom into her situation like no one else had before. She told me other people experienced the same kinds of feelings she was having and that this made her know she wasn't crazy.

This was the first I had ever heard of a sexual abuse ministry. I came from a very evangelical background where I was taught never to mix theology with experience.

I also thought that "My Wife" was just how I wanted her. We were doing pretty well as far as I was concerned. I thought I was a good husband and she was a good wife. We never raised our voices at each other so I thought we were fine. To be honest, I didn't want her to change; and I knew I didn't want any changes to be done by some poorly founded theology.

I would condescend to this ministry that my wife wanted to get involved with; however, I came up with lots of reasons why this ministry was not going to help her and how it could potentially hurt our marriage. I did give in though and went to the retreat grudgingly. I figured I would go so that I could support her and speak intelligently about any false doctrine that was being used.

As soon as I got to the retreat, I began to measure up all the men there. How I was very different from them. How I didn't really need to be there.

Well, God changed my heart when He showed me how, even though my outside seemed nice and conformed to Him, my insides were being corroded by my past. I was confronted with a choice: either allow God to come into those dark places in my heart or deny Him and continue to try to walk wounded through this Christian life.

I thought a lot about Shannon during the retreat, but mostly about myself and how unreal my own walk with god had become. The most important word I can say about the retreat is that it showed me the issues in my life that I was putting ahead of God. These were the sins of my heart...unforgiveness, anger, judgment, generational sin. My heart had become hardened. I needed a new heart.

One of the exercises we were asked to do at retreat gave me a new hope about my past. It was like a promise that God gave me that I knew I could trust...Isaiah 54:4. Other exercises helped me learn my coping mechanisms, ways we try to deal with life outside of God's provision.

Even with all the good stuff that happened at the retreat, most of my healing occurred in the 16 weeks of group sessions which followed with opportunities for prayer, accountability and teaching.

Both Shannon and I know God in a whole new way. We wish each one of you could "see" everything God has done for us both as individuals and as "the one" we are becoming in Him. We are telling you as a couple who has seen the promised land, that God's presence is not something we should be afraid of. He has a gentle hand and a love for us that we will never fully understand but are blessed to be allowed to live in.

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with sexual abuse issues or any issues from the past, please prayerfully consider allowing God to minister His love to you through his ministry.

**God bless you!**