

What people are saying about  
*The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*  
and Richard Young

“Once again the Lord proves it is His choice whom He uses. In *The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*, Richard Young documents the miracle that began with a simple man full of faith in the most unlikely location in Houston and reached its apex with the rightful heir in the largest church in America. It is a challenging book that proves radical obedience to the will of God works in the most difficult struggles and greatest opportunities.”

—**Richard Hogue**  
Senior Pastor, Citychurch,  
Oklahoma City

“Whether you agree or disagree with the ministry of Joel Osteen and the Lakewood Church, you will never see either of them the same again after you read this book. Richard Young has honored both his readers, Joel, and Lakewood in his thoroughness of sharing their amazing story. Even critics will be ignorant about the church and of the issues if they ignore this book.”

—**Dr. John Vaughan**  
Author of *The World's 20 Largest Churches*, *Megachurches and America's Cities*, and *America's Most Influential Churches*, and  
past president of the American Society for Church Growth



THE RISE OF  
LAKEWOOD CHURCH  
AND

JOEL  
OSTEEN



THE RISE OF  
LAKEWOOD CHURCH  
AND  
JOEL  
OSTEEN

RICHARD YOUNG



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

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## THE RISE OF LAKEWOOD CHURCH AND JOEL OSTEEN

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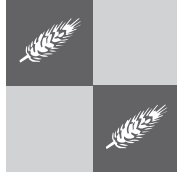
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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to two beautiful women who made  
this book possible:

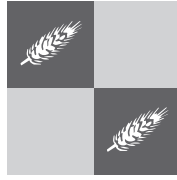
To my wife, Brenda, whose love and encouragement  
has made this possible. She reads, “fluffs,” and endures  
everything I do.

&

To Frances Hunter, who has been a friend and source of  
spiritual support for fifteen years. She is truly an apostle  
of the faith.







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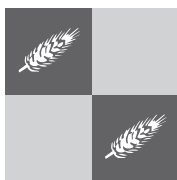
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## FOREWORD

**T**he John Osteen family was and is a very unique family. This is a family that raised their children according to the Word of God. We lived very close to them for many years and never heard one word of gossip about the family throughout all those years.

Dodie Osteen was and is a fabulous mother. All of Lakewood Church has heard her say she never let her children go out of the door in the morning without praying over and blessing them in the name of Jesus. I have heard almost all of her children say the same thing: that their mother never let them out the door without praying for them. I especially remember Lisa saying that one morning, when she was late to school, she was halfway down the block, and her mother was screaming after her, "I bless you, Lisa! I bless you, Lisa!" Whether they were early or late, they always received a blessing.

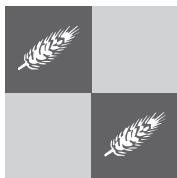
John Osteen was an incredible father. He always set aside time to be with his children and didn't let anything interfere with that. Joel was very active in all kinds of sports, and John always went to his games during baseball season. John, of course, would always wear his black dress suit. One time Joel said to him, "Daddy, all the other guys' dads wear shorts when they come to the baseball games. Why don't you?" John, always thinking about what it meant to fulfill a desire of his children, appeared at the next baseball game in white shorts. But he still had on his long black socks and black dress shoes.

## *The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*

After the game Joel said to his father, “Why don’t you go back to your regular suit after this?” I can picture in my mind John Osteen, who was not the shorts type, appearing with the white shorts and the black socks and shoes.

The entire Osteen family live out what they project on television and in their church services. For years we had the privilege of eating lunch with John and Dodie every Sunday. This delightful book shows some of the intimate little details of the Osteen family that you may never have heard. It will delight you. We have known Joel since he was a young boy. We heard him preach his first sermon, and we are there every Sunday to hear his next sermon. We are proud to be members of Lakewood Church.

— *Charles and Frances Hunter*



## PREFACE

From the first time Brenda and I met Charles and Frances Hunter in the early 1990s, they raved about how much they loved Lakewood Church in Houston and their pastor, John Osteen. Although they traveled a great deal themselves, ministering across the nation, they always attended Lakewood whenever they were home. Even when they were on the road, the Hunters would always try to arrive home on Sunday afternoons in time to go to Lakewood's Sunday night service, often driving directly to church from Houston's George Bush Airport. It was due to their excitement for the church that we decided to visit.

From that weekend on, we understood why the Hunters and thousands of others felt so strongly about Lakewood. We began to look forward to returning to Lakewood to hear John preach in person, as well as watching him on television. When John went to be with the Lord in 1999, we joined much of the world in mourning the loss of this great man.

We continued to watch and visit Lakewood whenever we could. The three times we visited Lakewood in 2000, Joel was out of town. We were privileged to hear Brian Houston, from Hillsong Church in Australia, Marilyn Hickey, and Lisa Comes all preach during our visits. We heard magnificent things about Joel, but never heard him preach, except on television. I began work on a doctoral degree in 2002. My doctoral thesis was "The Ten Most Influential Pastors in America." Joel Osteen was among the pastors I listed. When I began the thesis, I decided that if John were still alive he would surely

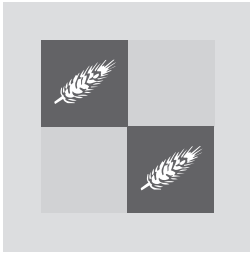
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be one of the most influential pastors in the nation. However, since he was gone, I included Joel on the list because of the size of the television ministry and the weekly church attendance, though I did not give him a great deal of the credit. But as I began to make inquiries for my paper, I began to gain more and more respect for Joel and the job he was doing as the senior pastor of Lakewood Church. Each time we returned to the church, we witnessed the growth in weekly attendance that was taking place. The more I investigated Joel and recognized the changes he was bringing to Lakewood, and the growth that was taking place as a result, the more I learned to appreciate him. I soon realized that one chapter on John and Joel's ministry at Lakewood was just not enough to tell the whole story.

My first draft told all about how John built the church—what I thought to be the meat of the story—and ended with a few brief paragraphs stating that Joel had taken over as pastor. I felt the need to add to the chapter, describing the emerging impact of Joel Osteen's leadership at Lakewood. As we continued to visit the church, I began to collect more and more research material, which stretched beyond a chapter and eventually became this book.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I don't deny a strong appreciation for the ministry of John Osteen and the work that Joel continues at Lakewood. I admire a man who was willing to risk his future as an evangelical pastor and step out to become what God intended him to be. I admire a young man who was willing to come out of his comfort zone and follow wherever God would lead. Not many people are willing to do either one. This is the story of what can happen when they do.

—Richard Young



## *introduction*

# THE LAKEWOOD EXPERIENCE

**T**he experience of going to Lakewood Church begins as you drive along the various highways around Houston on a Sunday morning. You soon notice that, all around you, the history of Lakewood is literally displayed on the bumper stickers of the many vehicles that fill the roads. These stickers recall various church campaigns from the past: “Lakewood...An Oasis of Love,” “Lakewood—You Were Meant for Victory,” “At Lakewood...Discover the Champion in You.”

The closer you get to the Edloe exit, the more traffic begins to build from all directions. The vehicles vary from Hummers and stretch limousines to older cars that seem to be held together with wire and duct tape. There are large city buses filled with people who ride public transportation to church. Peer inside and you’ll often see these people smiling, laughing, and even singing. You can see the huge, beautiful Lakewood complex from the highway, so by the time you reach the exit, enthusiasm is high.

When you take the exit, you are directed by police officers and Lakewood volunteers toward various parking options. The parking on any particular Sunday morning at the former

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stadium is similar to when people attended Houston Rockets basketball games there, except that just before the 11:00 a.m. service you'll have cars coming in for one service and cars going out from the earlier service. And yet, no one seems to mind; all of it only adds to the sense of anticipation. From the time you open your car door, people actually start to enthusiastically greet you. You quickly find that you feel comfortable speaking to strangers, because all are a part of the Lakewood family.

People come to Lakewood from Houston, surrounding areas, and even beyond. It would not be unheard of to meet a farming family from as far away as Oklahoma who attend every other Sunday, except during harvest. If they can't come to Houston, they still attend each week via the Internet.

As you make your way with the crowd, large colorful signs point the way toward Lakewood Church. As you get closer, the frequency of greeters increases. They proudly wear their Lakewood name badges, identifying them by first name. As you reach the entrance you are again greeted with genuine, warm, Texas hospitality—a handshake or hug, and a big “Good morning! Welcome to Lakewood!” It may sound corny, but you have to admit, it really does feel like family.

Just inside are the large escalators, which only go up before services, and only go down after services. At the top and bottom stand eager volunteers who welcome people and assist anyone with special needs. More volunteers are found at the many information booths, areas which were formerly stadium concession stands. Among other things, they offer last week's sermon on DVD or CD and take preorders for today's. They are also willing to answer any questions about Joel Osteen or the many ministries at Lakewood.



## INTRODUCTION: THE LAKEWOOD EXPERIENCE

They are needed because even if as many as 98 percent of the crowd are regular Lakewood Church attenders, that would still leave eight hundred to a thousand people every week who are visiting and unsure of where to go or what to do. Every Sunday, Joel asks all the visitors to raise their hands, and hands shoot up all over the sanctuary.

As the crowd grows, so does the sense of anticipation. So many people excitedly scurrying about, playing a part in one of the most unique worship experiences in the United States. It's a bit like a Billy Graham crusade service with a charismatic twist, only it happens *every week* at Lakewood!

Upon arriving at the second level, you might drop in on Kidslife, Lakewood's children's ministry. Here, children are enthusiastically greeted by ministry mascots Chase, Kyle, and Champ. Champ has four arms, antennae coming out of his head, and wears tennis shoes. Kyle has blue hair and sunglasses. Chase wears sunglasses, too, and has a backpack and hat. This children's area is nothing like the ones you may remember when you were a kid. The typical dingy, gray classroom walls have been replaced by walls splashed with bright colors and cartoon characters. While you may recall a room with a yellowed picture of Jesus thumbtacked to the wall and water stains from the leak in the roof, these rooms are fresh, clean, and lined



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with various games and other things you couldn't have even dreamed of as a child. Each room is a theme-filled area with bigger-than-life characters that seem to jump right off the walls. Huge colorful signs indicate the ages for each area, from Baby Builders all the way to The Warehouse, for fourth and fifth grade students.

While you may remember never looking forward to Sundays, for these kids, church is cherished as the best hours of their week. And why not? The moment they enter the Kidslife area, they are greeted by name. Everyone seemed to bubble with excitement, ready to share God's love through a wide variety of fun adventures. And security is top notch: with their state-of-the-art check-in system, they know where every child is at every second.

Having a little time before the service begins, you make your way to the bookstore located on the second floor of the Family Life Center. From one end of the store to the other are Bibles and books in both English and Spanish—including those by Joel himself. There is music, jewelry, and a children's area with Kidslife T-shirts and stuffed animals embroidered with Bible verses. A youth area brims with the latest tools for teens.

Leaving the bookstore, you make your way toward the sanctuary, passing many more volunteers stationed in each stairway to help with directions, information, medical assistance, or any other need that should arise. You decide to forego the main floor and instead choose a seat on the second level.

Once inside, you are immediately aware of an array of blue light. The sanctuary is bathed in a heavenly atmosphere coming from what appear to be clouds with a royal, fine haze

## INTRODUCTION: THE LAKEWOOD EXPERIENCE

behind them hanging above the choir. Such a large space for church may seem a little overwhelming, but you quickly realize that it doesn't really matter where you sit. Each seat has a good view thanks to the large video monitors rising above the working waterfalls beside the stage. Other screens frame the orchestra pit and the choir loft, giving the feeling that you are face-to-face with anyone on the platform. The people around you seem to have developed close friendships with those sitting around them. They must choose the same seats week after week. How interesting for such a sense of community and connection to exist in the midst of such a large and bustling environment.

When the music begins, the crowd jumps to their feet. A live orchestra plays, sounding as professional as any orchestra you've ever heard. Nearby is a lovely African-American lady, dressed in her Sunday best, dancing with her eyes closed, reaching out to God. On the other side is a teenage boy, dancing to the music as if he and the Lord were the only ones there. The crowd is made up of all types: young and old; married and single; African-American, Asian, Latino, and Caucasian. Economic status, race, language, gender—none of that matters when you are bonded in Christ.

In the midst of the music, Joel comes onstage and invites people to come down to the front of the sanctuary for a time of personal prayer. The staff and prayer team are assembling to meet people at the stage and pray for all their individual needs. Prayer team members also appear on the second and third levels of the sanctuary. Pastor Joel, his wife, Victoria, as well as his mother, Dodie, are all there along with the rest of the staff, praying for the needs of anyone who comes down. The time of worship continues as hundreds of people fill the

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aisles, patiently waiting as everyone with a need for prayer goes forward. It might bring to mind friends of yours who attend much smaller churches—and never even meet the pastor!

When the time of prayer ends, Joel welcomes the millions of people from around the world who are watching on TV to join the service. The uplifting music sets the stage for Joel's message, which works to reinforce the theme that has been communicated during the music and prayer. Then Joel invites those who wish to accept Jesus as their personal Savior to stand and pray a prayer of repentance. Hundreds of people stand throughout the sanctuary. They are immediately handed a packet to assist them in beginning their new life in Christ while Joel shares some wisdom to help them. Then the congregation lets out a cheer as though the Houston Rockets had just scored the deciding points in a championship game. For those who are standing, this moment will be cherished for the rest of their lives. With the help of the orchestra, the choir again begins to praise the Lord for what you have just seen Him do. Everyone stands and, as one, begins to sing in celebration.

With that, the service is over and you look around the room. The people around you are real. They love God and they love each other. Each one represents a changed or impacted life for Jesus, or at least an open and seeking heart. The fact that they attend, or tune in each and every week, is testimony to the fact that they believe that Lakewood is one of the most exciting places to be on Sunday morning.

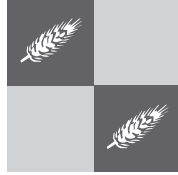
You realize that there is much more to Lakewood Church than what you've heard people say or what you've seen or read in the media. Lakewood is not just the latest fad.

## INTRODUCTION: THE LAKEWOOD EXPERIENCE

- Just who is this Joel Osteen?
- What is it about Lakewood that draws people back each week?
- How did Lakewood become the largest church in America so quickly?

Perhaps now your curiosity is piqued and you are eager to learn more about the Lakewood story. Read on...



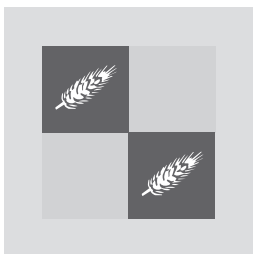


*Part I*

THE MINISTRY OF  
JOHN OSTEEN,  
LAKEWOOD'S LEGACY







## *chapter one*

# GOD CALLS OUT HIS SERVANT

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born  
I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.*

—Jeremiah 1:5

**T**he story of Lakewood Church begins with the work that God did within the heart of one man—John Osteen. The Osteen family lived in Fort Worth, Texas, and did not frequent church on a regular basis. John's parents were cotton farmers who had lost everything during the Great Depression, "the poorest of the poor" as Joel has described them. John's mother worked fourteen or fifteen hours a day washing people's clothes for ten cents an hour. On many nights, the family would go to bed without having had anything to eat. John was often sent to school hungry, with holes in his pants and shoes. They were good, honest, hard working folk, but nobody in the Osteen family had ever known any kind of success in life.

Yet God had plans for John Osteen and was keeping an eye on him. When John was only five months old, he jumped out of his sister's arms and into a roaring fireplace. He could easily have died in the flames, but the Lord intervened and spared his life.

## *The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*

On another occasion, as a teenager, John was riding the rapids on a local river with friends when his strength gave way. Struggling for air, John went under several times, too weak to cry out to the others for help. Unnoticed, he finally passed out and slipped beneath the steady current. But a boy playing on a log in the middle of the river dove in and accidentally hit John's lifeless form. The boy pushed John into shallow water and was able to revive him. Even in his youth, John was struck by the fact that someone wasn't finished with him yet.

As a child, John had various brushes with the Almighty. He attended Sunday school once or twice. Every once in a while, he was dragged along to a local church service. On one occasion, John recalled the frightening experience of attending a revival service with his mother. The preacher's ominous topic that day was "Be Sure—Your Sins Will Find You Out." Early on, an idea was planted in John's head that he would have to give God an account of his life when he reached the age of twelve. This terrified him and made him dread the arrival of his twelfth birthday, fearing that he would not measure up to the standards of a God whom he did not even know anything about.

In high school, John developed a strong friendship with a fellow student, Sam Martin. The two became best friends. Sam was a "born-again Christian" who constantly spoke to John about his need for the Lord. But Sam was not like the other Christians that John had known. He did not talk about church, the Bible, or the Holy Ghost. He spoke to John about salvation. When the boys had to give reports in school, Sam would talk about Jesus. He was very bold in proclaiming that John needed Jesus Christ as his Savior. Eventually, John became ashamed to be seen with Sam. It got to the point that

## GOD CALLS OUT HIS SERVANT

he would cross the street to avoid him. But the seeds that Sam had planted in John's heart were taking root.

In 1939, seventeen-year-old John was heading home one evening from Lake Worth Casino Beach, a nightclub in south Fort Worth. It was about two o'clock in the morning, and, for some reason, as he walked home John began to think about his eternal condition. He had a desire for God and knew he needed God, but he was afraid to commit his life to Him.

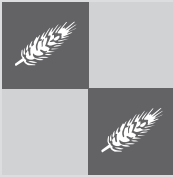
Arriving at home, John began to search for a Bible. He finally found the only Bible in the Osteen home—the big, coffee table kind with family records of births and deaths kept inside. He opened it and began to read, but he really didn't understand it. After a while, he became frustrated and stopped. He stood up and started for the screen door to step outside, but the Lord spoke to him and told him to go back to the kitchen table and open the Bible again. Puzzled, he returned to the kitchen and opened the Bible. There on the pages was an illustration of Jesus standing at a door and knocking. Beneath the picture was a quote from Revelation 3:20, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him."* After reading it again and again, he went outside and lay down on a quilt. Looking up at the sky, John began to cry out to God, "Oh, God, what will I do when I die? What's going to happen to me when I grow older and go out into eternity?" He thought of Sam Martin and his constant words about the Lord.

As soon as morning came, John called Sam. He told Sam about reading the family Bible, about the illustration and the verse beneath the picture. Sam asked John to tell him what was going on in his heart and mind. Sam then explained, "Why, John, you're under conviction of sin." John wasn't sure what

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“under conviction” meant, but he did know that he wanted the troubles in his heart to go away. He wanted to settle things with God; he just wasn’t sure exactly how to do that.

John pleaded with Sam, “Tell me what to do.” His heart



**AS HIS  
FRIEND SAM  
LED HIM IN  
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SAVIOR.**

and mind were receptive to whatever he needed to do to reach out to God. Sam could hear the sincerity and earnestness in John’s voice as he expressed his desire to change his life. As soon as they hung up the phone, Sam went to see John, and together they knelt before God. As Sam led him in the sinner’s prayer, John invited Jesus to come into his heart and be his Savior. Sam informed John that he was now saved and that he needed to go to church on Sunday and publicly confess Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Sam reminded John of the many times that he had invited his friend to go to church and he had not shown up. This time, Sam felt that John was sincere and wanted to take the next step in his walk

with the Lord. So, they set a date and time to go to church.<sup>1</sup>

When the time arrived, John not only showed up, but he also was there before Sam. When the sermon concluded, the pastor extended an invitation to those seeking salvation. John felt as though his feet were nailed to the floor. He wanted to go forward, he wanted to publicly commit his life to Jesus Christ, but he found himself unable to move. Finally, Sam reached over, placed an arm around him, and said, “John, I’ll go with you if you’ll go.” A little encouragement was all John needed.

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Together, the boys walked down the aisle of the church to the altar. The pastor, Dr. Vincent Bennett, asked, "John, will you turn away from your old way of living and confess Jesus as Savior before this congregation of people today?"

John replied, "I don't know. I'm a wicked man; I'm a sinner."

The pastor looked back, smiled, and said to John, "I didn't ask you that. Will you take Jesus as your Lord and Savior?"

John was still uncertain. He told the pastor, "I don't know. I work in the wrong kind of place. I am a popcorn salesman at the Isis Theater in North Fort Worth."

The pastor was still resolute, "I didn't ask you that. Will you accept Jesus into your heart as your personal Savior?"

To that question John's reply was firm, "Absolutely." At that moment his heart opened and received Jesus Christ as his Savior.<sup>2</sup>

John went on to say, "I have come today to give my heart wholly to Jesus. I trust that I can help other young men find Him as their Savior, too." On his way home from church, he pulled off the road at a gas station to pray. He knew deep down inside that something life changing had happened to him that day.

Within three weeks of his conversion, John began preaching the gospel in Southern Baptist churches, on the streets, in schoolhouses, jailhouses, nursing homes—anywhere a crowd would gather. John was very enthusiastic about the gospel of Jesus Christ, but he lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of the Word of God. He mispronounced books of the Bible, such as Psalms and Job. Not surprisingly, everybody around him tried to discourage him. They said, "John, you're never going

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to make it out there on your own. You better stay here and pick cotton with us. That's all you know how to do. Stay here where it is safe." John didn't listen to them. He responded to the call that God had placed on his life.

A deep desire now resonated in John—to see those around him, including his family and friends, experience God as he had. John had become a new creation; his life in many ways was drastically changed.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*  
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

He stopped doing some of the things he had done before. After dinner, when other members of his family went out to nightclubs, John happily sat at the kitchen table at home and read the big family Bible. One night his sister Mary asked, "John, why do you read the Bible instead of going out with us?" Up to this point, John had not spoken to anyone in his family about his experience. Now he sensed that it was time to talk about what had happened. He told her, "Mary, I'll be honest with you. I've let Jesus into my heart. He's become my Lord and Savior. I am through with the nightclub circuit. I'm through living for the world."

Tears began to slip down Mary's face. "John," she asked, "do you think Jesus would save someone like me?"

"Yes, I think He would," John replied. That night, John and his sister got down on their knees, and Mary asked Jesus to come into her heart.<sup>3</sup>

John then began to lead other members of his family to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. His father was the big

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holdout. John's mother had a history of being the one person in the family who occasionally attended church. But John's father never attended church and refused to speak of God in any manner. He was a good father who loved his family, but at no time did he speak to them about a need for God. He would often say, "John, when I'm dead, I'm dead like a dog. Just roll me over in the ditch. There is nothing after this life."

"But, Daddy, it's just not true," John would respond. "The eternal Word of God declares that you are made in the image of God. You will live somewhere. There are only two places to go—heaven or hell. Without Jesus, you'll die and go to hell. I'm not going to give up. I am going to stand for you, Daddy. I am going to go before God and believe for your salvation."

Some time later, John was preaching at weekend revival services at a Southern Baptist church in nearby Dallas. He had asked his mother to bring his father to the services. Watching John preach on Friday and Saturday evenings, his father did not move to do anything. But on Sunday morning, while John was preaching his message, his father suddenly got up from his seat and walked down the aisle. Standing next to his son, he simply said, "I'm going to finish today what I started twenty five years ago. I am giving my life to Jesus Christ." John did not know what he meant by this, but his father explained, "Years



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## *The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*

ago, I got lost in the fields during a snowstorm. I was about to pass out from the cold. I was numb and knew I was going to freeze to death. I couldn't move and I cried out, 'God, if You'll get me out of this, I'll serve You.' Later I woke up as warm as toast. God spared my life, but I forgot my promise."<sup>4</sup>

### **JOHN'S EARLY MINISTRY YEARS**

John understood that he needed some training in the Bible if he was to serve the Lord in the best way that he could. So, in 1943, he enrolled at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, where he earned a bachelor's degree. After graduating, he enrolled at Northern Baptist Seminary in Lombard, Illinois, where he earned a master's degree. During this time, he was also ordained as a Southern Baptist minister.

John's enthusiasm and passion were contagious and he became a very popular preacher. After serving as first assistant pastor at First Baptist Church of San Diego, California, John pastored First Baptist Church of Hamlin, Texas, for three years.

Around this time, John met a young lady and fell in love. After getting married, the young couple worked together in various pastorates, and they were blessed with a son, Justin. The congregations where John served loved him and his young family. But not long after Justin's birth, John and his wife began to experience problems. Their marriage suffered and their problems could not be solved. Eventually the marriage failed.

John was devastated. He thought that his ministry was over, that God's blessings had been lifted from him. He resigned from his position as senior pastor, as well as from the executive board of the church. For the following two years, John worked



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as a traveling evangelist, holding revival meetings. He knew that he had to quit mourning over what he had lost and get to a place where he could once again receive God's mercy and love. John never dared to dream that marriage and family might be in his future. But God had someone special waiting for him.

Eventually, John was offered another job in ministry, serving as pastor at Central Baptist Church in Baytown, Texas. One day, while visiting a church member, he met an attractive young woman with an unusual first name, Dodie. She was working as a nursing student at one of the local hospitals where John often visited ailing church members. At this point, John didn't know that Dodie was raised in a Christian home and had made the choice to follow Jesus when she was thirteen years old. As a child, Dodie had overcome the terrible disease of polio. She had walked on crutches and had been forced to endure difficult physical therapies. All those hardships played a part in leading Dodie to pursue a career in nursing. She felt a kinship with those who helped others in their times of physical crisis. She had a deep desire to be there for other people.

John fell head over heels for Dodie. He would later say that he knew from the first moment he saw Dodie that she was the one God had chosen for him. John started looking for every possible excuse he could find to go to that hospital. He almost hoped members of his congregation would get sick so that he would have an excuse to go back! Dodie once told her friends, "That minister has the sickest congregation I've ever seen!"<sup>5</sup> The young nursing student still didn't realize that John's secondary motivation was to see her. Eventually, John asked her out and they began to date.

Although John knew very early that he loved her, it took some time before she began to love him in return. While

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they were dating, they were sitting together under a full moon one night. He was looking at Dodie with eyes full of love, and said to her, "Oh, Dodie, how I love you. I tell you I love you. I wish I had a thousand arms to hug you with!"

Dodie turned to him and said, "I'm not interested in what you would do with a thousand arms. What are you going to do with the two arms you've got?"<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, John asked the former Dodie Pilgrim to marry him, and she said yes. In those early days, Dodie did not know how to cook at all, leading John to often claim that Dodie "couldn't fry water!" In fact, he ate out whenever he could, but wouldn't tell his new wife because he didn't want to hurt her feelings.<sup>7</sup> One time, John got mad at Dodie and decided not to associate or talk with her the entire day. When he returned home, Dodie was hiding behind the door. She jumped on his back as he entered the house, held him around the neck, and yelled, "I am not going to let you go until you give up!" John roared in laughter. As he recalled the story, he asked, "How could I stay mad at the wife that God had given me?"<sup>8</sup>

At the time they married, Dodie was a recent graduate from nursing school, but she knew nothing about being a pastor's wife. Dodie had chosen nursing school assuming that she would remain single all her life. Now, she was afraid that she would not be able to support John's ministry in the way she thought he needed her support. She said to him, "Sweetheart, I can't play the piano. I can't sing. I can't teach a class. I can't do anything a pastor's wife is supposed to do."

John replied, "Dodie, I didn't marry you to play the piano or sing or teach a class. I married you because I love you, and I like you just the way you are."<sup>9</sup> This kind of unconditional love gave Dodie the freedom to realize that she was an original. All

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her life, God had been preparing her for the call she accepted when she married John, and she would remain faithful to this calling for over half a century.

Today, John and Dodie's faithfulness is most evident in the lives of their two sons and three daughters. Most pastors receive the credit when their children follow them in ministry. But in reality, it is often more due to their wives who have been directing the children in their daily walk with the Lord all their lives. It is often the wives who read the bedtime stories from the Bible storybooks, who make certain the children have evening prayers, and whom the children see as an example of faith on a daily basis. Obviously, John Osteen was a huge and influential presence in the life of his children, but it was Dodie who raised them every day in their walk with the Lord.

John and Dodie were partners in life and in ministry. God had restored John's ministry and had blessed him as a successful Southern Baptist pastor. But John was seeking God in a deeper way—and everything was about to change.