

Refined By Fire

On Aug. 15, 1968, Mickey Robinson was pulled from the wreckage of a small airplane after it plunged to the earth and burst into flames. His near-death experience brought him to Jesus—and today this evangelist has told thousands about the reality of the Savior.

There's a certain kind of pride you feel when you walk beside a man whose face has been licked by fire. It's like being with a war hero, and you feel honored to be his friend.

It's impolite to stare, but people do it anyway. One glance begs another, and what you see is a vigorous man whose body was once badly burned and reconstructed by hands less perfect than God's.

But more intriguing than his appearance is this man's countenance. His legs are bronze from the blaze, but his step is bouncy and free. His eyes don't match perfectly, but his gaze is warm and inviting.

And he's not afraid to extend what's left of his hand to draw you right into his world. He's seen too much of life to keep it to himself and too much of death to want to.

Director of Seagate Ministries in Franklin, Tennessee, Mickey Robinson is an experienced pastor, a bridge-builder and a living testimony of the resurrecting power of God. He's known among today's apostolic and prophetic leaders, and he travels frequently with his wife, Barbara, sharing his powerful story worldwide, bringing healing and hope.

As a young man, Robinson was pulled from a fiery airplane crash with injuries so severe that a quick death would have seemed the greatest mercy for him. But God had a purpose for him on earth, and although he endured years of excruciating recovery, God graced his journey with spiritual encounters—including a death's door experience that changed his life dramatically.

This once self-made man

emerged from the other side of death with undeniable peace, a grateful dependence upon God and a zealous ministry of love.

Falling Into Freedom

Robinson was born in 1949 and grew up in Cleveland. A cool and cocky teen-ager, he was a thrill-seeker, taking flying lessons shortly after his high school graduation. But nothing really wowed the young athlete until he was introduced to skydiving.

"Everything changed in a moment," he says, referring to his first free-fall jump. "All my priorities, all my passion, all my desires."

Skydiving was like falling into freedom, Robinson says. It was the greatest sense of peace and power he could imagine. But skydiving with "the best of them," as he says, only served to feed his appetite for more, until it became an addiction—and

his god.

"I was a skydiving fanatic," he recalls, admitting that it consumed every part of his life. Robinson's world had been turned upside down, but little did he know that at the invincible age of 19 he was about to drop out of life as he knew it.

On Aug. 15, 1968, Robinson was in the front seat of a Piper Cherokee airplane, destined for a routine jump. Lulled to sleep by the buzzing vibrations of the engine during takeoff, he suddenly was roused by an eerie hush barely 150 feet into the climb.

Engine failure.

Trying to keep the plane airborne, the pilot pulled back on the yoke, but the airplane stalled, pitching the nose toward the earth.

"That's it, we're going down," pronounced the pilot, as the hopeless craft plummeted six terrified men into a disastrous dive. Seconds later, the airplane

crashed into a giant oak tree, spinning wing-over-wing as it was hurled to the ground.

The other four skydivers escaped the wreckage, but Robinson and the pilot were trapped in the front seat. Fire erupted, and seconds before the airplane exploded, Robinson

was pulled out, injured and flaming, by one of his fellow skydivers.

“He pulled so hard, he pulled his thumbs out of their sockets,” Robinson recalls. The trapped pilot was unable to be rescued in time.

Suffering a brain injury and severe burns over 35 percent of his body, Robinson was rushed to nearby Southwest Community Hospital in Berea, Ohio. It was a small facility, but the young man was not expected to live, and he would certainly not survive an airlift, doctors determined.

In the weeks following, Robinson hung on, but his condition worsened. The fire had literally peeled the skin off of half his face, destroying his right eye. He was bleeding profusely and about to lose his right arm to amputation, while the nerves in both of his legs died, leaving him paralyzed as well.

Serious infection set in, and he suffered from painful ulcers that bore holes through his esophagus

and from bedsores so severe his bones protruded. His nerves were so traumatized he alternated between a comatose and a “hyperconscious” state, he says.

“The pain was out of this world,” Robinson describes. “If someone walked by [his bed] and even brushed the sheet, it felt like someone had hit my entire nervous system with a sledge hammer.”

Despite all his agony, Robinson never thought he would die—until about a month after the accident. Although he was in a coma, he overheard a doctor and nurse discussing his impending death. Inside his soul he uttered a silent scream: No! I'm not going to die!

That day, as if on cue, the hospital room suddenly faded away, and Robinson says he felt like he was being transported out of his body and into a spiritual plane—the “real world,” he calls it. Instantly, he lost all awareness of time and gained a profound sense of eternity.

“[In the spiritual world], the colors are brighter, the thoughts are more intense, the feelings have greater depth,” he says.

In the distance he saw an inviting white light, which he yearned to reach, but a blackness suddenly began closing in around him, he says. The more he was swallowed by darkness, the smaller the light became, until it was as thin as the slit of a closing eye. He was terrified, knowing if the light would disappear, he would be forever banished.

“It was eternal, empty, nothingness forever,” he says soberly, as if it happened yesterday. “It’s the most horrible, hopeless feeling.”

He describes it as being filled with every passion and desire known with no chance of ever fulfilling any of it.

“What a torment, what a remorse... knowing that it could have been different, but you turned down the chance,” he says.

Desperate, Robinson began screaming for God to give him another chance. Then, instantly, he was standing in the very presence of God in heaven, he says. He does not claim to have seen the face of God but rather to have been saved by His mercy and bathed in His glory, which he describes as liquid gold radiating through Him in every direction, holding everything together.

“It had in it all of God’s love, all of His authority, all of His wisdom, comfort and strength,” he says with a gleam in his eye. “It’s the most blissful, enjoyable experience you can have.”

So pleasurable, in fact, that Robinson gets annoyed when people joke about going fishing or golfing in heaven.

“Hey, you’re gonna want to hang around God!” he retorts.

People also commonly joke about watching their lives on a giant TV screen in heaven, and Robinson had a similar experience, but he says God showed him only events and

people he would encounter in his future.

Suddenly, Robinson’s renewed spirit was drawn back into his mutilated body, and he literally came back uttering an unknown language, he says, though he had never heard of speaking in tongues. He doesn’t know if he was medically dead during his experience, but when he awoke, his 106-degree fever instantly broke.

Beaming with inner peace, he opened his eyes to see the

worried faces of doctors and nurses hovering around him, and all he could think was, Hey, why is everybody so uptight? he recalls today with a laugh.

Because Robinson was not a Christian before his accident, he is often asked why God allowed him a second chance.

“I repented while I was still alive,” he says, convinced that God heard his every desperate cry, from the time of the accident and beyond. “God gave me a thin space of repentance.”

That event marked the beginning of Robinson’s recovery and eventual call into ministry, although many years would pass before it would all come together.

Through 167 days in the hospital and four more years in a Cleveland rehabilitation center, Robinson endured more than 50 surgeries as doctors tried to put his body back together. The first time they stood him up in physical therapy, he passed out and slept for 24 hours, he says.

He was tube-fed for a year while doctors repaired his esophagus. They reconstructed his face, ear and right hand.

He has vivid memories of many painful procedures—some experimental—but modern medicine could do only so much.

Armed with hope for his future, Robinson pressed on for more. Although he didn’t understand the healing power of God, for almost a year he commanded his paralyzed legs to work.

Over time, one leg gradually began to respond to electrical nerve stimulation, but the other did not. A year later, however, in a split second, that leg was fully restored, with no medical explanation. Today Robinson walks, runs and even skis.

“Nerves can improve, but none of them allow that kind of instantaneous recovery,” says neurologist and rehabilitation specialist Buddy Nichols of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Nichols, who consistently used electrical nerve stimulation on patients during his 33 years of practice, says he has never seen a sudden restoration like Robinson’s. He says the process would be “long, slow and incomplete” for a case like his in which underlying nerve fibers would have to respond to therapy.

Although he’s not Robinson’s personal physician, Nichols says he has examined him “from a distance, with a doctor’s trained eye” when Robinson has ministered at his church on numerous occasions.

“There’s nothing to hypothesize about. What Mickey’s describing with these nerves is so out of the realm of possibility, based on medical knowledge, that I would not hesitate, overwhelmingly, to use the term ‘miracle,’” Nichols says.

Robinson testifies that another miracle occurred when doctors performed a second corneal transplant on his burned eye, purely for cosmetic reasons. Seven days later they were stunned to find that he had regained normal vision in that eye.

Making Sense of It All

Even after his “return from heaven,” Robinson had no biblical understanding of God or his purpose for life. He knew what to expect after death, but he didn’t know how to live on earth.

Numerous spiritual encounters deepened his quest to discover his destiny. Once, as a man read the Bible to him in the hospital, Robinson’s entire body began to shake violently in his bed. Confounded, he shouted, “I’ve got to be some kind of priest or something!”

During the next seven years, Robinson studied world religions, trying to make sense of his experiences. The scenes of his future life, shown to him in heaven, remarkably began to unfold during this period.

People from those scenes began to enter his life, including a young woman named Barbara, whom he married in 1973. The couple now have four children, ages 17 to 24.

Despite his dramatic experiences, however, it was the Word of God that finally brought meaning to Robinson’s life. Eventually, as he gained understanding of the Scriptures through the personal influence of musician Phil Keaggy and others, he joined a church where he was finally discipled.

“Many people have spiritual encounters, but without a biblical foundation, they don’t always find their way to Christ,” Robinson says.

Soon, he was invited to share his testimony in Full Gospel

Business

Men's meetings. He eventually was asked to join the leadership team of The Church on Elm Street in Butler, Ohio, (now River of Life Church) and the Ohio Prophetic Conference.

"We just sensed leadership ability and the call of God on his life," says Larry Lotz, who was the co-pastor of The Church on Elm Street at the time.

Today, part of the Robinsons' calling is to teach expressive worship through Barbara's ministry, Treasure Wind. Quoting Romans 12:1 from the Amplified Bible, Barbara says her passion is helping people to have a "decisive dedication of [their] God."

"It's prophetic worship," she says. "It's a language, like using parables. Sometimes the Word of the Lord will come forth from [expressive] movement."

Ramona Rickard, co-pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Minneapolis, says Barbara's role greatly enhances Mickey's ministry.

"Barbara is a wonderful woman of grace. She gets everyone involved—the old and the young, and people of all abilities," she says.

The Robinsons currently devote much time to regions where community networking is ushering in a new unity and a fresh move of God, particularly around Minneapolis; Rochester Hills, Michigan; and Sacramento, California. Mickey leads prophetic

conferences and is also involved in connecting people in pursuit of revival. But his passion is helping people find their destiny in Christ.

“His prophetic gift comes in such an outpouring of love,” says Ramona’s husband, pastor Jim Rickard. “He captures people by his love, and it’s genuine.”

“[As a minister] you cannot be aloof,” Robinson explains. “You cannot be sequestered, although there are many untouchable ministers out there.”

More than a teacher, Mickey Robinson is known as a team player and a relationship-builder. He provides apostolic guidance to churches nationwide, including New River Fellowship, a church in Franklin, Tennessee, co-pastored by musician Michael W. Smith.

“He’s very affirming to ministers and ministries,” says Don Finto, a former pastor of Nashville’s Belmont Church, who played an important role in the Robinsons’ move from Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1998. “Mickey is a teacher, a lover of people and has a strong prophetic influence.”

But Nashville is only one small part of the Robinsons’ “relational web,” as they call it. And if “relational” is the buzzword, then Mickey is a bee, cross-pollinating the move of God to everyone he meets. To know Robinson is to be his friend, because his warm personality makes him approachable to everyone.

“He’s kind of like a Tinkertoy,” says Ramona Rickard. “He just

connects people.”

Looking back, Robinson doesn’t blame God for the pain he has suffered. Rather, he is grateful for God’s mercy in a world filled with danger and spiritual forces. He cautions people not to question God amid trials that tempt them to withdraw from His comfort or His purposes.

“Oftentimes you are the most pliable when you are in the fire of God,” he says. “Even Jesus learned obedience from the things He suffered.”

Robinson says he wants his legacy to be like that of the early apostles who “turned the world upside down.” Although he’s known as a loving, powerful man of God, he believes his real testimony is about his weakness and God’s strength.

“People don’t realize how desperate their lives really are,” he says. “I’m just as desperate for God now as I was when I was lying in the hospital.”

Perhaps it is such desperation that keeps this wounded warrior in his place of glory. The glory of God, that is. *

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Finding God In the Midst of Pain

Mickey Robinson says the greatest challenge he has faced isn't recovering from an airplane crash but watching his son Michael suffer with cerebral palsy.

Mickey Robinson insists his greatest suffering has nothing to do with his painstaking recovery from an airplane crash. He says his deepest trial has been over his 24-year-old son, Michael, who was born with cerebral palsy.

Michael, the oldest of the Robinsons' four children, has been confined to a wheelchair all of his life. He had unsuccessful back surgery in 1992, resulting in the loss of additional physical abilities, and was left in chronic, excruciating back pain.

A walking miracle hi

mself, Mickey knows how to rely on the Lord for his strength. But watching his own son suffer challenged him to the utmost.

"As my son lay in that bed and looked at me, I was shattered," says Mickey, agonizing with his wife, Barbara, over Michael's pain and loss.

The next several years brought an exacerbating search for appropriate rehabilitation. Numerous rehab centers pronounced Michael's case a lost cause, offering the bright young man no hope for recovery.

"But the Lord's love was present through it all," says Mickey, who admits that the ordeal reordered his own priorities. In time, the Robinsons moved their family to Jackson, Mississippi, where Michael made considerable progress through rehabilitation and prayer support.

Caring for a handicapped family member on a 24/7 basis can be challenging, with adequate Christian resources few and far between, the Robinsons say. Although family and nearby friends have been very helpful, Michael's main respite caregiver is Mike Amheiser, a longtime friend from the Robinsons' church in Butler, Ohio. Amheiser frequently commutes more than seven hours to Franklin, Tennessee, where the Robinsons now live, to care for Michael when Mickey and Barbara travel together for ministry.

"The Lord clearly led me to come and serve [the Robinsons]," says Amheiser, who owns a pizza parlor in Ohio.

Today, as Michael's siblings are moving out on their own for jobs and college, he says he is ready to gain some independence as well and to pursue his own niche in ministry if he can find the right assisted-care facility.

"I want to do something like my dad does, only not so much traveling," says Michael, who loves to pray for people, especially those with back injuries.

"The Lord uses [Michael] because of his willingness," Amheiser says.

Feeling like the Christian community has not generally taken up the call to meet the needs of the handicapped, the

Robinsons have emerged from this experience with a vision to establish a semi-independent living facility that would nurture the spiritual gifts and the physical abilities of the handicapped. Plans are under way possibly to develop such a facility in Nashville, Tennessee.