

## Reimi Testimony

I was born in Japan and grew up there until I was 16. Like many Japanese, I grew up “non-religious”. Japanese religion is a mix of Buddhism and Shinto. If you have not heard of Shinto, it believes that there are eight-hundred-billion gods in the world, from god of the sun, food, traffic, study, love, ancestors, etcetera. And those beliefs are woven into what we do – visiting shrine on New Years, read the hannya-shingyo sutra when I’m at grandparents’ house for the ancestors, get a good luck charms and wishes at shrines, and the list goes on. Growing up, I thought these were just “what we do”. So many of these activities stem from Shinto, but we just did it anyways. Now I know that these things stem from religious practices, but I thought of them as Japanese culture and traditions. And I’m sure many Japanese people still think that they are cultures and traditions to this day. On top of that, there had been bad cults and organized new religions in Japan that has caused terrorism and money frauds, so the general public steer away from anything that seems like an organized religion.

13 years ago, in June of 2011, I was 16 and my family moved to east Tennessee for my dad’s job. I was sophomore in high school, and I spoke very little English. But I played the Flute, so I joined the marching band, and I remember in a bus to a football game on one Friday night, this girl asked me, “so what do you believe in”? I was 16, never ever thought of what I believed in, stunned to answer the question.

Few months had past, and this boy in the band liked me, who happened to be the son of a pastor at the local church. We ended up dating, and we dated for about couple years. For each holiday and birthdays, he would handmade his own holiday cards, and always included a bible verse in them. Eventually, I was gifted a Bible from local Young Life lady, and started to mark those verses that were quoted. I learned that the Bible is a collection of books and learned that the numbers after names meant chapters and verses. In one of the cards that I got from him, he wrote "I am with you always until the end of the age" – from Matthew chapter 28 verse 20. At this point, I knew nothing about the story of Jesus, but this verse gave me a big comfort, warm and fuzzy feeling.

From then on, from the end of high school to senior year in college, I went through phases. While I dated him, I would attend church services at his parents' church, but really didn't understand the messages with my limited English. I mean really, I went just to see him.

Around the time I started college, my mom became part of the English Japanese ladies' group so I attended it during the summer break after my freshman year. It was organized by the local Christian ladies who had the heart for the Japanese community. Some actually lived in Japan as missionaries. A lot of the Japanese ladies attended the group to make friends and socialize. They did do bible studies in both English and Japanese, and the summer I joined they taught us about the fruit of the spirit. It was fun to hang out with these women, but the bible stories that I learned only felt like fairy tales to me at that point.

During college, I also met many people who claimed to be Christians, but they were not kind and I doubted them. My roommate was a Christian, but once she told me once that I was going to hell because I did not believe in Jesus. Well, I didn't like that.

All that to say, my feeling towards Christians was a complicated one. I was learning more and more about Christians, but the biggest thing I could not wrap my head around was that the fact that we are sinners.

Sinners? I was studying Engineering in college and my goal at that point was to be the strong independent woman – make good grades and land on a big job, sustain on my own and support my future family, just like my dad supported our family. Why am I a sinner when I am doing all the work, and I am getting myself where I got? I constantly thought like that.

Fast forward to senior year in college, I met my now husband David. We were friends at first and eventually we started dating. He grew up in a Christian family, and he had a strong foundation of knowledge and belief. And yet I told him one day “I’m not going to convert to a Christian and you need to be ok with that.” We still dated, and I eventually agreed to attend a church service with him, and honestly it was not an enjoyable experience. The congregation was very big and felt like a high society group, and the service made me feel that I did not belong. But God didn't give up on me. I still attended Easter service and other services afterwards with him at his parents' church. His parents welcomed me into the family although I wasn't a believer, poured onto me sharing the gospel through their actions, prayed with me and for me, and it was comforting to spend time with them.

Upon graduation, I got a job lined up in Houston – my big girl job to become the “strong independent woman” that I always thought I’d be. David also followed and we both moved to Houston. He asked if I would go to church with him, and I agreed. This time, it wasn’t a negative experience. The church we ended up had open arms, and I felt comfortable.

Few months into living in Houston, I struggled to make new friends, and felt incompetent in the job. I would be on social media and see my college friends being successful, making new friends, and I could not help but to think, why not **me**? I’ve worked so hard, I got myself to where I am. I felt alone and lost. David was physically in Houston with me, but something was lacking in my life.

This was the time that I started to realize how broken I was, and I couldn’t do life by myself. Every Sunday, the pastor would finish the service with the prayer “Lord we are not perfect, we are broken and we are in need of Savior”. I recited that with him and tears fell. It took the weight off of my shoulders and it felt so freeing. I started to long for the relationship with Christ. Yet it was so hard to let go of my ego, my human selfishness, weakness. It’s like being on a tight rope and I didn’t want to let go of what I was holding onto.

I started to pray, and finally realized my need for Jesus as my Savior. Finally in 2019, at the age of 24, I decided that I wanted to get baptized. I wanted to tell my family what it meant that I was getting baptized and accepting Christ as my Savior. It was hard to translate this to Japanese and explain to my family who are not believers, so I turned to google to find a way to tell them. After some googling I came across a good explanation of what it means to get baptized and become a follower of Jesus Christ.

It quoted "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Again, from Matthew 28 verse 19 and 20. The very verse that gave me comfort years ago. It made a lot of sense, and I proceeded to share the news with my Family. To my surprise, they were accepting and happy for me.

For my baptism, I asked David's mom to baptize me as she always poured onto me and shared the salvation in Christ. It was set on a Sunday in June in the Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. In the beautiful nature that God created.... I invited the women who hosted English-Japanese bible study and we planned a picnic and a small reunion in the Smokies.

But the mother nature had different plan, and it was forecasted to rain all day. So quickly we had to change our plan, and, or I should say, God had a plan that was clearly better than the Smokies, and the plan became pool at a family friend's house. I was bummed, but what could we do. Because we no longer needed to drive to the Smokies, we decided to go to church.

It was a typical service - we sang few songs, read a passage from the Bible, and the pastor went on to talk. I was starting to get nervous about my baptism, and I wasn't paying attention to the sermon.

But then at the end of his sermon, he wrapped it up with the great commission. "I am with you always". He brought Matthew 28:20, again, the very verse that gave me comfort when I first learned about Christ. That moment I was balling, and I knew that Christ wanted a personal relationship with me, and that I am His.

In this weekend's theme "Abide", John chapter 15 verse 16 says "It is not you who chose me, but I who chose you" – the moment, I knew that all these years, God pursued me, and I denied and denied, until I finally opened my eyes. I am in need of the Savior, and He is my Savior.

After baptism, my life still went on. You know baptism is a public statement of your commitment to God and the Savior, but I do not become perfect the moment I come out of the water. It is a commitment of daily repentance and prayer – abiding in Him. So far, there are three life events that has tested me.

First of all, David and I got engaged at the end of 2019, and we were excited to start a new life together. We had planned our wedding for September of 2020, and as you all know, the world had another plan. Few months in Covid, we thought everything would be back to normal, and it did not. 2 months before the original wedding date, we had to send out emails to family, friends, and vendors to postpone the perfect day that I had dreamt of. It was painful. But God showed that what really mattered was our commitment to each other, and our unity with Him in it. We got married in the church on September 18, 2020, with just us. I was at peace because I knew He was with us.

Second, In 2022, we moved from Houston to Utah for David's job, and we had to move within a month. And that meant that I had to look for another job, while selling our house in Houston and buying a new house in Utah, and planning a trip to Japan for my sister's wedding, while waiting for my new green card to come in. Without the green card I couldn't start a new job, or come back to the U.S. It was stressful. But with daily prayer and trusting in God's timing and that it was His plan, we were able to handle it with grace. We were blessed with being able to find the house during the tough housing market, I secured my job, and green card came in just in time before I started working and had to go back to Japan. The move happened in a snap of a finger, and I had so many logistical things to worry about, but I knew that it was His plan, and that He was opening doors.

And finally, last year seemed like an amazing year, and yet it was another challenging one. I got into running when we moved to Houston because of David and our dog, and I ran my first marathon last year, thanking Him for the strength he's given – and then David fell very ill. He ended up losing half of his left lung and had to be hospitalized for a week during Thanksgiving. That meant we had to cancel our trip that we had planned, and instead I was watching him in physical and mental pain in the hospital. Not knowing what was going to happen – there was a possibility for open chest surgery. For someone so active, it was agonizing to see him in such pain – and I kept asking “why God us?” I still don't have the answer to that question; however, God provided the healing we had been asking for. To everybody's surprise, David did not need the surgery, his body recovered and is now back to his normal self. But to this day, we praise Him for healing David.

So with all these events we went through, I feel that Abiding in Him is not easy. There are days that I still ask, "why me?" for the things that we have been praying but not yet answered. But for all I know, He gives us some challenges so that we draw closer to Him, and that we cling onto Him even more. His timing might not be our timing, but I know it's perfect. My faith is even stronger through these events, and I know more and more, that He is with me always.