

Believe it or not, when Pastor John called me on a cold Monday morning a few weeks prior to Christmas and asked me to give my testimony during the Christmas Eve service -- I did not consider it an early Christmas present from Santa Claus. The way my heart was beating at the proposition of sharing my story in front of a large group of onlookers, God wasn't just knocking at the door of my heart – He was pounding! After I accepted the invitation, hung up the phone and my nerves calmed down a little bit - I couldn't help but laugh to myself. God has a good sense of humor.

You see, earlier that morning, I found myself thinking about a time not too long ago, when I sat in a room and listened to many different people give their own testimonies. I thought about how I would sit and listen to them speak, all the while thinking to myself that there was no way I'd ever be able to stand in front of a group of people so large and share my own story. They called that story our, Experience, Strength, and Hope. And the room I sat in was one of many during my time in Alcoholics Anonymous. Many men and women would stand up in front of the room and talk about a higher power; some even called that higher power, God. They spoke about working the program, going to meetings and working the 12 steps of AA; and how this was the answer to their years, maybe even decades of sobriety. Then I began to wonder how they would respond if I got up there and told them that THE answer... is Jesus and all the work has been done for them. However, I brushed off those thoughts and told myself it was not something I needed to worry about doing anytime soon. Not too long after that, the phone rang.

I grew up on Long Island, NY in the small town of Woodbury. Coming from a Jewish family, my Jewish community and Jewish friends was largely all I knew. Ironically enough, my closest friend for the better part of my childhood was Catholic. It was during my time spent with him that I can first remember hearing the name Jesus. I can vividly recall him telling me that Jesus was the Son. As I gazed upward through the clouds and focused my attention on the big, yellow ball of fire in the sky, I thought to myself, Jesus is the sun? I attended Hebrew school several days a week where I was taught that the secular calendar denotes the time period prior to the 1st century as B.C. As Jews, however, we correctly denote that time period as B.C.E., Before the Common Era. Although what I heard was, before the common error. Well that makes sense; they think Jesus is the sun. Of course that is an error. I was not off to a good start.

I learned how to recite the Hebrew prayers, but I didn't learn to pray. I learned the Jewish people were still waiting for the messiah, but I didn't learn about Jesus. I was taught about God, but I didn't know God. I knew the traditions and customs of the Jewish religion, but I didn't know history. I didn't know His story. Unlike other children who are bar mitzvah'd once, when I had my bar mitzvah at the age of 13, I had two ceremonies on subsequent days. My parents had recently divorced and due to irreconcilable differences and extreme tension neither my parents, nor either side of my family could be in the same room as each other. I was told by a therapist later on in life that I had grown up in the middle of a battlefield, with my mother and father as the two opposing factions. As I entered high school, I felt the need to seek refuge from the fallout of the war. I had recently moved with

my mother and sister to Queens to live with my grandparents, while my father and brother remained on Long Island. My family had been torn apart.

I had a difficult time adjusting and struggled to fit in my new atmosphere and markedly different culture. I desired to be accepted and to conform at any cost. So I donned baggy jeans that were several sizes too big and turned my hat around backwards. I skipped class to hang out with the “popular” kids and turned to drugs and alcohol. My grades drastically declined and after playing junior varsity baseball, I missed the tryouts for the varsity team in my senior year because I was too busy getting high. Tensions at home with my mom flared as I became increasingly out of control and disrespectful. I did not honor my mother. I didn’t know how to. I didn’t even know I was supposed to. But I was finally part of the in-crowd, and I even had a new girlfriend. I was finally happy. Wasn’t I? I had the life that entertainment industry told me I was supposed to have. That the hip-hop music I listened to instilled in me; that the movies glamorized. Pop culture was selling me fairytales. And I was buying.

As I entered college, my relationship with my father had been severely strained as well. I continued to be placed in the middle of the on going conflict between my parents. Drugs, alcohol, and women continued to serve me. They allowed me to escape the pain and emptiness that had taken hold of my soul. Little did I know at the time that I was serving them. My addictions were not at the core of the problem, they were symptoms of life devoid of God and a heart that was not of Christ. When my father was diagnosed with lung cancer during my senior year of high school, the discovery of his pain medication would ironically serve to be my pain medication for almost a decade. My father passed away during my freshmen year of college as the need to suppress my suffering intensified, while my idols continued to grip me. In a poem I wrote last year about my childhood, I was able to clearly convey how my strained relationship with my father impacted my life. I wrote, “How does a boy walk away from his father, the day that he’d be free always seemed farther and farther. And soon the anger was directed at him, the boy had to give in, he just couldn’t win. This was the dynamic that lasted for years. Too many arguments. Too many tears. When his father past away there had been no resolution, to tell himself he was happy was his only solution.”

This pattern of destruction lasted well into my mid twenties. All the while, through the pain and suffering my choices brought into my life, I could not help but recognize that there had to be more to life than this. I felt, at times, inexplicably pulled to discover a greater truth, but what that truth was I hadn’t the slightest idea. And though my worldly desires tried wholeheartedly to suppress this strange phenomenon, the continual tugging at my heart persisted. Although I didn’t know God and His commandments, I had surely broken everyone of them – short of committing murder. But I was killing myself – with every act of defiance, I took a step further away from God – I was killing off God and my soul was dying. What happened next at the age of 25, I can only describe now as God’s mercy. He removed my idols from my life. My girlfriend who had been planning on moving in with me the following week left me because of my substance abuse, but not before staging an intervention with my family. With the prospect of being sent away to a drug treatment center and losing my relationship, I quit my drug addiction. But without

the love of my girlfriend and the ability to self medicate, I could no longer numb the pain I had been suppressing for so many years. I had a raw, gaping wound in my soul and nothing to cover it up. I felt like my world was coming to an end. And it was. At least the world I had known for so long. I was gripped with fear. I had no choice but to begin to find a new way to treat my wounds; a new way to comfort my fears.

It is said that God uses the ungodly to carry out his purposes; as was the case for me in my journey to Christ. I had resolved myself to staying on my mother's couch while I struggled to heal from the emotional pain I was suffering. Not surprisingly, everyday, Oprah was on the television. I was introduced to the notion of a higher power and for the first time in my life I truly began to recognize there was something greater in this world than myself. In a book I began reading about spirituality; I read of scripture verses of Jesus' teaching which greatly resonated with me. I read, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" and "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you". Just the thought that there was a God who was in me and all around me began to put me at ease. I didn't have to try so hard, but instead be content with what God would provide. I reflected on my purpose in life and felt called to pursue a career in medicine – a life based on serving others – to give back and repay with my services that which has been bestowed upon me. God was opening my eyes and changing the desires of my heart. I wrote in my personal statement when applying for my pre-medical program in regard to my life prior to my new found desires that, "It was as if I was sleepwalking through life, unable to wake up and realize my dream."

And though my outward perspective on life had begun to change and the desires of my heart had new purpose. They were still self-serving, they were not sustainable. I did not know my Savior. And slowly but surely my idols began to take hold again, a new girlfriend, substance abuse. Alcoholism and worship of material possessions – those which I had never identified as such, but which had always remained. Thus began a downward spiral. Another break up. Out of control spending. And of course, drugs and alcohol. And through it all, by the grace of God, I was accepted into medical school. But my out of control behavior once again prompted my family to take notice and suggested I see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist labeled me as bipolar, ignoring my drug addiction as the factor that contributed to my unstable behavior, and placed me on medication. Compounded by my pleasure seeking behavior, I convinced him to place me on stimulant medication to help me with my studies as result of an ADD diagnosis I sought out and received from a neuropsychologist. And here is where I can look back and recognize God's grace again. He began to take another idol away; medical school. The medication the psychiatrist had placed me on gave me a rare, potentially lethal adverse reaction. So a potent steroid was required to combat the reaction and a different bipolar medication was prescribed. So just to recap, I was concurrently ingesting prednisone - a potent steroid, adderall and vyvanse, which were daily stimulants, a bipolar medication, painkillers, and alcohol; and all during my first month of medical school. The results were disastrous. The adverse reaction to the original medication had caused me to miss an extended amount of time at school as well as a final exam. And even though I tried to stick it out for another two months – I could

never rebound from the time I had missed. I reconciled on taking a medical leave of absence from school for a year. Of course I didn't know it at the time. But God wanted me to find Jesus.

I agreed to have my family send me away to a substance abuse treatment center where they would also treat me for bipolar disorder. As the weeks turned into months and the fog of a life filled with drugs and alcohol began to clear from my head, I started to place my strength in God. I learned what it meant to surrender and to have faith in Him. I prayed daily to God, at first because I was told to do so, then increasingly because I felt the peace and comfort that comes with knowing Him. And though I was free from substance abuse, I struggled greatly with another girlfriend, another break up, and the desire to be loved. I began to have daily dialogue with God. Not just while on my knees in prayer, but in all situations where I struggled, especially while trying to break free from an unhealthy toxic relationship. And for the first time in my life I saw God answer my prayers; sometimes subtly and other times so blatantly I could not ignore it, although I definitely tried my best to. I wrote while I was away that, "with God in my life I now have great power, I live day to day, sometimes hour to hour. So resistance keep trying but you can no longer win. Brett now looks to himself to feel whole within". And with the new strength of God I felt within me and after being treated with over a half dozen medications, I asked them to take me off all of them. I had been away for 3 months and it was time to come home.

I initially tried my hardest to find solace in the rooms of AA where I first heard the Lord's Prayer and took great comfort its words. And while three months of sobriety turned into six, I still struggled with loneliness and ending a broken relationship. I appreciated the support of the friends I met in AA, but I couldn't help but feel something was still missing. Many other aspects of my life still need to be addressed and I desperately wanted to find an answer. There had to be a solution. Then I found Jesus. I didn't even know I was looking. I had grown tired of secular music and the messages that had perpetuated a false reality in my life for so long. Without any resources in my life that had any message of the good news of Jesus Christ, God led me to Christian music. I remember thinking that these singers were talking to me, that they were talking about me. I know now that God was using these talented musicians to spread His message, His story. God was talking through them, to me. I heard for the first time about God's mercy and grace. Of struggle and despair and the hope that is Jesus Christ. I couldn't find peace in my life before because I didn't know God. I didn't know Jesus. God continued to place a hunger in my heart to know Christ; to see how He transforms our souls. I began listening to Klove, a Christian radio station everyday while I was driving in my car. I watched just about every Christian movie I could find. And while singing these songs and watching these movies, I began crying out to Jesus. I started attending the Christian Medical and Dental association meetings on campus once I returned back to school. It was at one of these meetings I met a Pastor for the first time and heard him speak about Jesus.

I continued to recognize the way God used people to bring Jesus into my life. A friend of mine had posted a YouTube video on Facebook about love and marriage. It was a spoken word poem by a young man named Jefferson Bethke and when I

finished watching I spoke out loud, “that is what I want,” – to pursue Jesus as my foundation in all my relationships. I continued to watch his video’s each one resonating with me deeply and growing my affection for Jesus – God who became man in order live a sinless and perfect life and sacrifice Himself for us so that we may be washed clean of all our iniquity; To be resurrected three days later so that death died that day and we could have eternal life with the Father and the Son in heaven.

But God wasn’t finished calling out to me. As I watched an interview Jefferson Bethke gave he mentioned a pastor by the name of Timothy Keller. So I found my way to the Redeemer Church in Manhattan’s website and found the link to a small church in my neighboring town of Oyster Bay. As I navigated my way through North Shore Community Church’s website, I came across the profile of the church’s pastor – John Yenchko. As I stared at the picture of him on my screen I couldn’t help but think that I knew him from somewhere. “I know this guy,” I kept repeating to myself. He looked so familiar. Then it clicked. It was the same pastor who I had met several months prior at the Christian association meeting on campus. It was no coincidence that God had brought me full circle back to the first pastor I had ever met. I had no doubt that North Shore was where I belonged and as I attended worship services and my faith in Jesus Christ grew I had no doubts spiritually in the truth that was increasing revealed to me as I sang in praise to God and listened intently to the message He delivered through Pastor John, but what about the theology? Was there truly historical evidence to support the scriptures? As a thinker and a new Christian immersed in a sea of non-believers, was there any evidence to support my new faith? Romans 12:2 says “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's.” So with my brand new bible which Pastor John had given to me, I immersed myself into the Greenhouse Sunday school class, joined the Journey discipleship group and with an abundance of resources on the internet on doctrine and apologetics, I found, and continue to find rational, historical, and prophetic evidence that has grounded my belief in the authoritative word of God found in the bible. Today, I am comforted with answers to all the questions about a life that had never made sense to me before. And though I have new and likely even more questions that I had before, I rest assured in my faith that God’s mind is infinitely greater than mine. And some questions may never be answered.

My testimony gives great detail to all the attempts I made at subduing the pain in my life and the attempts made by the professionals to heal me, in order for me to clearly illustrate that the only solution there is and ever was is Jesus. The truth is that behavior modification never gets to the core of the problem. That we are all broken and we are all sinners. Once I knew the true problem. I knew the true answer. And in Jesus all our sin and shame has been washed away. God has not only given me new desires of my heart, he has given me the only way to sustain them. Through His Son - which gave my purpose new meaning. And gives my meaning new purpose. That because I was so loved first, I now know how to love - and how to pursue the desires of my heart in a way which glorifies God and gives glory to His Kingdom. And though as I write this, I am one month shy of having two years of sobriety, a semester short of completing my second year of medicals schools, with

countless other accomplishments since I have come to know Jesus – I know that there will still be times of struggle and strife and temptation. That, before I knew Jesus I could not - not sin – there was no choice but to sin. And though I will still sin, in Christ I can stand up under any temptation. I am not ashamed to say I am still an addict. I am addicted to Jesus.

Another young spoken word poet, by the name of Nick Vitellaro writes, “If you call the gospel trash, then I guess you’ve grasped the message, because my God dumpster dives head first into wreckage. He transforms recycled sinners into his very own reflection. So you can call him a garbage man, because he turned my mess into a message.”

I wrote a poem after hearing 2 Corinthians 5:17 for the first time, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

Made New

In me – A new creation

A past life of sin with no willpower against temptation, overcome by His grace, how gracious His greatness has led me to salvation.

I await – my intuition

Fueled by the Spirit of my Maker that my creation is a manifestation of a visionary King- of the universe. Craftsman of the stars, all seeing Ruler – Healer of our scars.

He spoke the word and into us breathed life and with that very same breathe my lungs recite.

Spoken words – to a broken past. Mended together by faith – welded glass.

A reflection of what was – returns to the future.

A story - spoken by word – healed - by His suture.

Arriving in the present – each moment made new.

The hourglass is eternal – You have chosen me to follow You.

Given sight – I see.

Given ears – I hear.

I would cross seas if my map proclaimed – You are here.

And though I know where I stand, I know not what’s to come next.

There’s no end to my journey that’s marked with an X.

Because the only spot I desire – is the one in Your Kingdom.

So I honor Your Name, Your grace, and Your wisdom.

You descended from heaven and were born into man.

Your voice became legend – the most blessed understand.

Your sacrifice was unparalleled and thus we were made new.

So my life - has been borrowed – its glory given to You.