

## PART 4

This chapter revolves around a few key characters...which I'd now like to introduce.

First, there was God Himself. Though I was ignorantly unaware of it at the time, God was definitely the principle player at work through, 1) my circumstances and 2) the other people He providentially placed in my life...bringing me to my knees and ultimately, into His loving arms. Alongside of God, there were a few of His people...a guy named Nick and his two friends, Dustin and Katy. And last but surely not least... there was a nice young lady named Amanda, and a fire cracker for a pastor named, Jeff. Hey, I think you may know him! □

It was early morning...in the year of 2000. I was lying uncomfortably on my friend's dingy basement sofa, severely strung out from the night before...a night loaded with ecstasy, cocaine and marijuana...and I still had yet to fall asleep. Besides having a jelly fish for a brain, a physically exhausted body and a weary mind that begged for rest, I found myself miserably lying there in the unpleasant company of my own conscience. I felt an unusual sense of dirtiness and shame that I couldn't seem to brush off for the life of me.

And to top it all off, I had to lay there and listen to my friend's mother and sister cheerfully prance around the kitchen, while they chatted amongst themselves and prepared breakfast. They seemed so bubbly and alert, so full of life and zeal for the day's events. And there I was like a lump on a log...practically crawling out of my own skin with misery and discomfort...now fighting to muster up the nerve to head upstairs and face them...as I made a break for my car.

Next thing I know, they're searching the house to help me find my car keys to what I then became convinced was no longer my car but my space ship! What I mean is, I left their house feeling like an extraterrestrial entity...having had its first encounter with normal human life! Talk about awkward, YIKES!

Anyway, heading home...I still couldn't shake the persistent pricks gnawing away at my conscience. I wrestled with shame for who I had become and fear of what still awaited me. So after many painful hours of what I would describe as my own "internal confinement in hell," I made up my mind that I had had enough...that I was done with the fast paced lifestyle of drugs and alcohol...and that I was walking away. And strangely...I did just that.

After years of slavery to the tyranny of addiction, God, actually enabled me to just get up and walk away from it all!!!

So the very next day, I hop in my car and decide to head to the Kenwood Town Center in hopes of landing a job. My very first stop was the department store, Lazarus. And thankfully the hiring manager gave me a chance. I think she hired me just because she thought I was cute, but at this point, I'll take it. ☐

So my first week on the job, I'm headed out of the store towards the mall's food court for lunch, and all of a sudden I hear a soft voice call out my name from behind. I turn around and it was Amanda... a girl that I knew from my youth group days with Jeff Greer. Amanda also worked at Lazarus and the first thing I said to her that day was, "Are you still into the church thing?" "Yes," she unashamedly, but very politely responded with a smile on her face, "I am".

To make a long story short, Amanda and I became pretty good friends...which afforded me the opportunity to "see" Jesus Christ in her life. She was definitely different...and I really admired that about her. She was proud of and open about her faith, yet kind and humble in the ways she shared and expressed it.

Around the same time, I also ran into another person from my past, Dustin. Dustin was polar opposite of me and the life I once lived. He was as straight edged and by the book as you could get. He was also the son of a pastor and Dustin knew all about my past...and certainly that everything I put down on my job application was as true as one of Walt Disney's fairy tales! I nervously thought to myself, "Great!! I'm history...a dead duck...this guy's going to run to our boss and completely blow my cover! And before I know it, the whole store will be singing about me as they walk me out the door, "Another one bites the dust!"

But...you know what? That never happened. Quite the opposite, in fact, Dustin befriended me. And once again I was afforded another opportunity to witness Jesus Christ in the life of one of His children, operating in everyday life. Thank you Dustin!

At this point, things were great! I had a fresh start in life; a new job; lots of new clothes; crystal clear eyes; a clear head that actually sat on my shoulders facing "forward" for once! And I just felt pretty darn good about life in general...and about what was to come next. Having the mall

flooded with countless flocks of girls didn't make matters any worse either! It was Christmas time, so the mall was packed and I was pumped! My job was pretty much to walk around and talk customers into opening up yet another Lazarus' account - the people you probably run from at the mall!

Anyway, all that good and exciting fun came crashing to an end when the holidays ended and the customers dispersed. I soon found myself totally bored and unhappy. I was 20 years old hating my job, my life and myself. I had stopped using drugs, but I had nothing to replace the emptiness that gnawed at me.

So there I was broken and empty and on the phone with Amanda, telling her how I felt...how badly I hurt from all the terrible emptiness inside. She talked me into reconnecting with our mutual friend, Jeff (Greer) and then actually meeting him for dinner at Pizza Tower in 20 minutes.

So off I went and there Jeff and I sat in Pizza Tower where I spilled my guts and gave my desperate cry for help.

So what happened? I said I'm good on the pizza, but grabbed an entire ♥ full of Jesus right there at the table...giving Christ my life!

Jeff and I were super pumped! And we didn't want to delay my baptism. So we headed straight to the gentlemen's room where he then proceeded to give me a sanctified swirly! It wasn't quite a full immersion, but I think it got the job done. I'm kidding of course! Jeff, in reality, called one of the church families asking if we could swing by to use their indoor pool to dunk the first convert of Grace Chapel!

They agreed at once...and so off we went in a hurry. In fact, we were in such a hurry now that I think about it... we ran 3 red lights, 2 stop signs and went 40 miles over the speed limit in a school zone!

Of course none of that really happened either. □ But we did instantly shoot straight to the house of the family who offered their pool. When we arrived it was great. They already had the atmosphere set with worship music echoing throughout the house. And as Jeff baptized me in

the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, they lined up around the pool in support as they shot pictures.

At one point, one of the daughters, Katy, abruptly left the pool area. She appeared to be somewhat upset (emotional)...and I remember being a little puzzled over what could be wrong. The only thing I could come up with was that perhaps she was a bit radical in her belief that Jeff should have only used Jesus' name rather than the entire trinity! IDK! Either that or she thought I was such a dirty sinner that all the chlorine in the entire world could never protect her poor pool from my contamination!

Later on I learned it was neither. She was simply overwhelmed by the moment. You see, dear Katy, at the request of my old comrade Nick, had been praying for me for almost 2 years! She had never met me...all she knew was that I was traveling far down the wrong path and that I needed Jesus Christ! Well, there I was, two years and many prayers later standing in her parents' pool being baptized by another man of God who never gave up on me...Jeff Greer...behold...your pastor!

Thank you Jeff. Thank you Katy. Thank you Amanda. Thank you Nick. And you remember Dustin? Well, check this out my friend, two weeks before I show up to work with Dustin at Lazarus, our mutual friend, Nick, asked him to really pray for me. Nick had a feeling God was about to grab a hold of my life and had been giving him an extra burden to pray for me even harder! Well, I showed up on the scene out of nowhere. It is amazing to see how prayer played such a part in everything working in my life long before anything happened.

Now I have to fill you in on "how" I eventually landed in this place...for something other than preaching the Gospel.

So come back soon and I'll share some of my extremely hard lessons that led to my falling away and then we'll cover how God brought me back to Himself and used of all places, prison, to prepare me to respond to the calling he has for my life.

To be continued...

