

## Danny Iverson's Story

The redemption narrative unfolding in my life is a joy to share because it reminds me afresh of God's faithfulness and the effectual call of Christ despite my own sin and rebellion. I have in no way arrived at home yet and am daily longing for and actualizing this new life given to me in Christ, remembering God's promises that "though my sins are as scarlet they have become (and are being made even as I write this) as white as snow."

I grew up in a wonderful Christian family with two godly parents who loved Jesus, loved each other, and cherished their nine children. My parents were far from perfect, but the humility and transparency with their sin that I witnessed growing up is what God used most effectively to regenerate my heart and bring me to faith. I remember hearing my dad at family devotions each night, faithfully preaching the Gospel to his family, confessing and even weeping over his sin and the idols of his heart. He pointed us to Christ as the Shepherd of our home, leading us to the cross even from a young age. I praise God for these memories; how I long to be that type of husband and father for my family as well. My parents believed in the doctrines of grace and knew they could not make us become Christians or manufacture faith in any of their children. What they did do was work the soil of our home and nurture it with gospel nutrients, unconditional love, and radical grace. In their failures, they were strongest since they themselves were daily running to the cross in need of Jesus. I praise God for this.

In God's timing my heart was captured by the glorious story of redemption and I thank God for the way he used my parents and so many others to announce the Kingdom of God to my heart. I grew up in Japan as a missionary kid with Mission To the World (MTW). Our family had moved there when I was eight years old, and we experienced the many benefits and challenges of living in another culture. One of the challenges was that after going to Japanese school my English wasn't so good (I had forgotten how to spell "the"). My parents wanted me to have a good English education and be able to play sports, so after a few years of home-school they sent me to The Christian Academy in Japan, a school in Tokyo about 2 hours away from where they were planting our first church. I had been well equipped as a pastor's son with lots of knowledge of Scripture and catechism and all the things that good reformed parents drill into their kids' brains, but yet had no relationship with my Savior apart from through my parents. I was very insecure as I entered boarding school, and quickly sought to find my identity in pleasing people and justify my existence based on how other's perceived me. This led to a double life of religious hypocrisy on one end and self-gratifying immorality on the other. As a teenager I struggled with a secret porn addiction (in Japan they sell it everywhere, even in vending machines). Once I had gotten out of the shelter of my home and the watchful eye of my parents, there were many more provisions through which my fleshly desires could find their satisfaction. Despite all the sexual struggles in high school, God protected me from actually sleeping with anyone, but my mind became warped and twisted in the process. I was in a small gang as well and we quite frequently robbed stores through out the Tokyo area (mostly shoplifting of small items). When I would go home to visit my family I was good at putting on my Christian-boy, pastor's-son face. I really didn't know who I was. All I knew was that I wanted to be loved and felt that I could earn that love by behaving the way my various peer groups, teachers, and parents wanted me to behave. I got decent grades, was really good at not getting caught, and very creative and slick at covering up my many sinful habits.

By God's grace, halfway through my senior year my double life was exposed and I ended up in the principal's office about to be suspended. In Japanese culture the firstborn represents the family, and if the firstborn fails the whole family is shamed. I loved my dad, and even as I stood

their waiting for the principal to hand me the phone so I could talk to him, I was afraid of what I had done and the consequences it would have on the way my father viewed me. I had shamed his name, and the whole missionary community would be hearing the story of my behavior and consider him a failure as a father and pastor. When I told him on the phone that I had been suspended for three days, he then asked me what I had done. I couldn't bring myself to mention it over the phone and told him I would explain things when I got home. The other side of the line was silent and then my dad said this: "Son, you are my son and I want you to know that no matter what it is you have done, no matter how bad, I love you just the same. That is the way that Jesus loves me, even though I sin against His grace every day. Come on home and I want you to know that I love you, son."

I hung up the phone as the confusion and mystery of the Gospel began its work. As I rode the train home that day, all alone and very convicted, something happened in my heart. The atonement of Christ made sense. All the knowledge that had been planted in my brain about God, Jesus, the Cross, the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit made its way down to the innermost part of me. I found myself genuinely praying to God, and the reality of His grace and forgiveness washed over me. It wasn't a manufactured religious motion any longer, but rather a heart deep conversion and rebirth. The kindness of Jesus led me to repentance and I felt forgiven and made right with God. I believe that train ride is indeed where new life began for me because from that point on I started actually struggling with my sin. I began battling my addictions and seeking to be holy, not so I could please my parents or teachers but so I could please God. Motives still do get twisted and I have in no way arrived at perfect submission to God for His glory alone and the joy of others, but I do believe that my journey towards such an end began that day and is continuing even as I write this narrative.

I took a year off before college and did short term missions with MTW, all the while struggling with my lust and falling back quickly and easily into habitual sin. Because of my upbringing, knowledge of the Bible, and natural gifting, I taught the Bible frequently and was looked on as a leader and spiritual example. But the stronghold of sexual struggle in my life continued, and the Romans 7 battle between flesh and spirit got vicious. There was a part of me that was so ashamed, so I kept these struggles between myself and God (so I thought), and continued in a secret life of addiction. The sin of wanting to please others once again manifested itself even in ministry, and I didn't want to confess my failures for fear I would lose status as a Christian worker.

After a year of missions, I started school at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg Virginia. My girlfriend at the time broke up with me and I became bitter towards God, deciding I didn't want to follow Him anymore. That lasted about a week. His Spirit would not let me go and God brought a Campus Crusade guy to my door named Kevin Sawyer. I joined Kevin's Bible study and really began finding deep transparent fellowship with other guys struggling just like me. Dan Flynn was the campus leader for Crusade, and God used him to help me in my day-to-day relationship with Jesus. God did a great work in my life during college. I joined a PCA Church (Covenant Presbyterian) and started growing under the grace centered teaching of Dr. Phil Smuland. God used Phil in my life to open up my mind to Reformed Theology and the doctrines of grace. Though they had been taught and modeled in my home, I began comprehending it in college, and God's Word began shaping my worldview more than anything else. I began loving Him more than my sin and started seeing great victory in my life. In response to what He was doing inside of me, I became very active in sharing my faith and proclaiming the gospel to everyone. I started a punk rock band that played in the darkest places possible, announcing Good News in a relevant, contextualized way that God used to bring many un-churched people to Himself. I loved writing and playing music and leading worship, which continues to be a big part of my ministry. During college I was also able to grow closer to my siblings who attended nearby colleges and were also growing in their walks with God which bound us together even more.

I studied business in college and had a deep desire to become a rich business man who loved God and served the Church but never had to stress over finances the way my family had growing up. I wanted comfort, and felt that God owed it to me. I paid my way through college by starting numerous businesses, and found I had a natural gift for entrepreneurship. I loved starting things and leading people. I did really well in all my businesses classes and after college landed a great management position with Enterprise Rental Car in Richmond, Virginia. Quickly climbing the corporate ladder, I made good money, and started buying lots of stuff while attending a suburban PCA Church where I did my religious duties as a good conservative businessman should. I was feeling good about myself. I had lots of different Christian girls I was dating and pursuing, satisfying my emotional needs in them, yet still struggling with porn on occasion. My life and even my struggles felt well managed, and the trap of self-righteousness caught me in its snare. After a year of business, lots of promotions and raises, and excessive spending on things I really didn't need, everything changed.

In Spring of 2003 I found out that my seventy-four year-old grandfather, Dr. Bill Iverson, was trying to replant a run down Reformed Church in Newark NJ, one of the worst cities in America. He had been the president of the Jonathan Edward's Institute in Princeton, a stable and predictable ministry, but chose to leave it in order to keep this old urban church from crumbling to the ground. The RCA, the denomination that owned Trinity (Dutch) Reformed Church, was ready to sell the property and abandon the 150 year-old ministry in one of Newark most needy African American and Latino communities. My grandfather felt led to replant this mess of a church in the hope of reaching the surrounding broken community. There were no other English speaking churches in the area and he had no resources, no team and no plan other than a Holy Spirit led vision given from Isaiah 58 to "rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the streets to streets of dwelling." Like any good grandson would, I got in my sports car one Saturday and drove straight up to Newark from Richmond to tell him he was crazy and that this couldn't be the way God would want him to spend his last years on earth. He was supposed to retire and write books and relax after fifty years of good ministry, not take on the biggest challenge of his life. As I drove into the community I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There were prostitutes hanging out on the church corner, and the parsonage had drug addicts and possibly even dealers living there. The building was such a mess that I was surprised it hadn't been condemned. Dead cats in the basement, fleas, gaping holes in the roof and ceilings, water damage everywhere and a smell that I can't even describe with words. What was this guy thinking?

We had worship service that Sunday and the handful of people there (all elderly white folk) seemed unimpressed with this old bald guy who preached the Gospel with such passion and joy and spoke of renewing and inviting the diverse community in to worship and meet God. I was amazed at his joy as he preached that Sunday, amazed that he would have such a passion for a community that wanted nothing to do with his God and in my mind was so far gone they could never repent and change. They deserved the utter depravity they were experiencing, and my critical self-righteous spirit echoed many thoughts similar to those of the prophet Jonah as he gazed on Nineveh. To my business-minded conservative Christian ego, this was a hopeless cause and a great waste of a good preacher, thinker, and PHD for that matter. He didn't belong here, no one did. This was bound to fail because somewhere deep in my thinking I was convinced that God wanted us to live comfortable, pious lives and enjoy the fruit of our labors and the earthly benefits for those who obey him. That couldn't happen here, so why should anyone be here and why should the Church even try. Yes, I believed that church was for sinners, but only the kind that could at least manage their sin and deal with it in a mature way that didn't affect others negatively.

As we walked out of the building on our way to lunch after service all of my biases came crumbling down. I was working up the nerve to rebuke my grandfather for his foolishness in taking on such a project, when a cry broke through the air and a hideous woman with blood running down her face came stumbling toward us. I realized immediately what type of woman she was; simply put, a crack whore. I backed away in shock at the sight as she came toward us asking for help, my mind screaming “unclean” and my instinct on guard against the (more than likely) disease infested blood running freely down her battered face. She had just gotten beaten up by one of her clients and left on the street in front of our church. She had come for help and that is what my grandfather chose to give her. Instead of turning her away he embraced her, ministered to her, wiped the blood from her face and brought her into the church to pray for her, bandage her and feed her.

As I watched my grandfather, one of the men I admired most and held in highest regard, selflessly minister to this woman my heart began to understand something it never had before. Yes, I was a Christian and desired to please God, but in that moment I realized that I was no different than the crack whore bleeding in front of me. The only difference between her and me was the fact that I had been raised in a home, culture, religion and class that enabled me to effectively wrap up my leprosy and convince myself and everyone else that I needed a savior only to the extent that I was unable to manage my sin and save myself. In that moment I realized that I needed the same Savior to the same extent as that woman; that my heart was just as depraved if not more, and that she was probably closer than I was to knowing the real Jesus and trusting him. She didn’t have to shed all the leprosy wrappings of religion, materialism, education, upbringing and ethnicity that I had used for so long to justify my existence and worth to the planet and to God. Yes, I believed I was saved by sheer grace, but oh how small my view of the Cross truly was and how quickly I justified myself through things other than Jesus.

The incarnation became amazing to me, that Jesus would put on our skin and live in our mess in order to redeem us. That someone so rich and pure would become so poor and vile by fully becoming my sin and filth on the Cross. My identity and future in that moment came to a painful yet fatefully wonderful conclusion. I had always sworn that I would never become a pastor. I come from five generations of pastors and I had no desire to follow in those footsteps. One of my other brothers could carry on that legacy, but not me. God had different plans and in that moment something changed. I heard the same charge that the rich young ruler heard in Luke 18, to sell my stuff, leave my job, my comfort, my religion, my self justification and follow Jesus by loving the poor and the “least of these.” That summer I moved to Newark to learn from my grandfather (and the poor) what it means to die to self, truly know Jesus, and find my completion in His righteousness alone. Newark has done more for me than I could ever do for Newark and God continues to use this city to preach the Gospel to my dark heart and reaffirm that my identity and life must be found only in Christ. I learned and am still learning that I was created to glorify God and live my life for Him and the joy of others.

That first year of ministry in Newark, my sister Sara-Beth and her roommate Kimberly came up to do outreach to the many at-risk youth in the area. I had always admired Kimberly throughout her two-year friendship with my sister and in the weeks before she came we had been emailing and talking on the phone. As she came and ministered with me something wonderful happened: Kimberly and I fell in love. After three months of courting, I asked her to marry me and she showed me great grace by accepting. She was a junior at James Madison and we courted long distance until our wedding day in September of 2004. God had really cleaned me of my emotional and psychological adultery and I was seeing deep heart change and victory over the habitual sins of my past. I see now that all my struggles and the challenges I faced in Newark were there to make me into the man I needed to be for Kimberly. Besides the Cross, God’s gift of Kimberly has been the most tangible display of His grace in my life and there is not a day that goes by that I don’t thank

Him for blessing me with my beautiful bride. I love her so much and love the way we keep growing closer to each other as we each grow closer to God.

I moved down to Virginia as she finished her last semester and we worked with her father's church until she graduated. God confirmed in both of us the burden for Newark and ministry to the poor. Fall of 2005 we moved back to "my hood." I took a job as a manager for an educational business and became an elder at Trinity (still under my grandfather.) We had our first son Daniel Josiah Iverson V and loved raising our family (six of us now) in the ghetto. In fall of 2006 God led us to begin our own non-profit youth focused community development organization called Safe Haven Urban Redemption. We started it as a separate organization under the authority of our Church and God has blessed it in wonderful ways.

About the time Safe Haven started, my grandfather chose to move on in ministry and began helping another church in Newark. I started preaching, sharing the pulpit with elder Walter Howard, a 50-year old ex-NFL African American my grandfather had disciplined as well. The Church continued to grow and the denomination ordained us as pastors specifically for our church. We both were taking seminary classes and working as lay pastors. Our congregation and ministry started thriving (not without weaknesses of course) but was filled with the poorest of the poor. The more we grew the more needs we had. Over 400 people were being impacted by the Gospel each week through the various outreaches and worship services. We started asking ourselves this question. "If our church disappeared from the community would the community weep? If they wouldn't, are we really being the Church?" The Good News continues to go forth from Trinity and Safe Haven with power and organic growth (not much organization) as we seek to serve, disciple, and empower the people from the community to come and participate in the amazing redemption happening here. Whole families have been baptized at once, and children and adults are coming to Christ on a regular basis and joining our church family. Crime has been down and we have seen our community school changed, the streets cleaned up and many families and addicts made whole through the power of the Gospel. The challenges and opposition is there and growing as we grow, but God has shown Himself faithful yet again, and we love witnessing His power as our community is reached.

Seven years later I am writing this essay with great joy and a deeper passion to reach Newark with the Gospel than ever before. Through this ministry and preaching regularly, God has shown me the need and given me a desire to plant a city-centered church in Newark that will spearhead a church planting movement. We want this city redeemed for the Glory of God and the joy of the nations and believe that Jesus, through His Church, will break the generational curses that have reigned here for so long. My mentors and our leaders confirm that our passion and gifting for church planting is from God, and have encouraged our family to break away from Newark for a season that I might work on my Masters of Divinity full-time and submit myself to study and training that will fully equip me to lead this church-planting movement. I am a very weak studier and have learned most of my theology by doing and listening instead of reading and writing. I am a natural leader and visionary but I see the need to come under the authority of professors and be challenged in my thinking and studies. I want to be shepherded so I can shepherd others. I have much to learn and much preparation to do if I am to be faithful for the long run in the calling we believe is laid out before us. My heart longs to know Christ more and to become better equipped to serve His Kingdom and shepherd my future flock with truth and grace.