



My Story, God's Story—Justin Bonzato

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My parents are from the Philippines and they came to the United States in the 80's. I was born and raised in California and was a first generation Filipino American. My parents grew up in big families with 10 or more siblings and culturally, it was impossible for my grandparents to build a strong relationship with their children. It became disastrous to the relationships in my family because of the complexity of adapting to a new environment.

My parents loved me and they worked hard to provide for me, but they had a difficult time relating to me because they were never shown affection from their parents. I was easily influenced by my friends and as a teenager; I grew bitter, ungrateful, and rebellious towards them. I had built up aggression towards them and had no respect for authority. I would rarely attend classes during high school my last two years and got heavily involved in drinking, smoking and staying out late. Towards the end of my senior year, I had to get my act together to graduate and I did not have the grades for college. I was an angry teenager and I was a wretch to my parents. Out of spite, I decided to join the Marine infantry during the Iraqi conflict and I broke my parent's hearts.

In my first duty station in 1st battalion 7th marines, Twenty-nine Palms, California, I was assigned to Sgt. Perez's squad. Sgt. Perez was an exemplary marine and he was a leader by example. I never dared to test Sgt. Perez and he treated us fairly only wanting our best efforts each and every day. I was blessed to be under the wing of Sgt. Perez and I did my best to emulate him and be an asset to his squad. I worked hard to get physically fit and knowledgeable in my job set and most of all I did not want to let Sgt. Perez down. We had a successful deployment overseas to Iraq, but being only 20 years old and experiencing war, the transition back home was not something the military had taught us.

As with many of the marines, alcohol was the solution to numbing the pain of PTSD. As a relationship with a girlfriend had crumbled during my time overseas, I became depressed and felt hopeless. A teammate named Neil had noticed that I was troubled and invited me to his house for dinner with his wife. When I went over his house, I could not believe the relationship he had with his wife. It was nothing I had ever seen given the fact that 90 percent of marriages fail in the military. They invited me to church and I started hearing the Gospel. However, I was a skeptic and I had many doubts. But Neil was adamant about inviting me every week.

One weekend, I decided to go to my hometown and found out my current girlfriend had been cheating on me. I was devastated because I felt so betrayed. I was furious because all that I had done in service felt useless. In my frustrations, life seemed like it was not worth living and I drank an unhealthy amount of alcohol that night. In the early hours of the morning, I was so angry but I could not stop crying. I remember being in my room and having suicidal thoughts. I cried out to God asking Him what was the purpose of it all. I asked Him to reveal Himself to me and to help me. That was the last thought I remember that night and I fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, something felt quite different; it felt like a ton of weight had been removed from my shoulders. I had a sudden urge to read the Word and a deep desire to learn more about Jesus. I attended church regularly with Neil and his wife and the truth continued to set me free. In a matter of weeks, I realized the sinfulness of my heart and it caused me to see the seriousness of my own condition. In that moment, I cried out and repented of my sin. I decided I wanted to lose the things of the world and follow Jesus.

While in the Marines, I had accomplished four tours overseas, two to Iraq and two to Afghanistan. I had served in the Marine Special Operations Command with the best of the best and God greatly blessed my time in the service. Through the trials of warfare, I had lost friends and experienced the evil man can do to one another and in the darkest of moments, God used the experiences to sanctify my soul for His glory. I matured as a Christian and decided the military was not the best career for me.

I separated from the service January 2015 and on March 10, 2015, I received the news that 7 of my teammates had died in a helicopter crash during a training event. It was devastating and I could not wrap my head around why so many of my close friends were gone so quickly. I became angry with God and the pain in my heart was excruciating.

In my suffering and grief, I was honest with God and expressed my pain crying out for help. I prayed deeply for understanding, authenticity and comfort. One day a friend I had met through Bible Study Fellowship, Tony Lewis, invited me to breakfast to talk. We met at Panera Bread and Tony mentioned how Stonebridge offered biblical counseling at the church and how he wanted to walk along side me during this time. As we were talking, I had met Robin Werling who was also in Paneras having a bible study. Given the situation was not by chance, I concluded God had ordained this meeting and it would be best to walk along side Godly men and seek Him.

As time progressed, God did an amazing work in my life through the biblical counseling ministry. Because Robin and Tony were willing to serve me, I drew my heart, mind, and soul back to the Lord. The restoration that God had brought was a miracle.

Authentic community is what I experienced at Stonebridge. The Werlings have adopted me like their own son and have shown me a tremendous amount of support and love. I have been able to meet so many others at the church who have impacted me in such a short time.

I am currently the president of Ratio Christi, a Christian apologetics organization, at the University of Iowa. I am excited that He has given me an opportunity to serve the young men and women there. I pray I may faithfully share His truth with as many students and show others He is the only way, the only truth, and the only One worth giving your life for.