

# FROM HOOD TO HOPE

## THE STORY OF DR. DAMON HORTON

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DESIGN: HANNAH DAILY

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# “WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?”

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

For many children across America, this common question is immediately met with a plethora of excited answers: an astronaut, a teacher, a veterinarian, a chef. The list could go on and on.

But for Dr. Damon Horton, professor of intercultural studies at California Baptist University, his response to this question as a child was quite different.

His answer was: nothing.

“I didn’t really have any ambitions or dreams as a child. I tell people — and I know it sounds morbid — but I really didn’t think I was going to outlive my teenage years. I didn’t think I’d live to see 18.”

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Horton grew up in an environment that was ridden with racism, poverty and gangs. He quickly got involved in street life as a young boy and grew accustomed to violence, addiction and death. At the time, he saw no other option, no other alternative in life.

“Growing up in poverty, I would get money any way I could, as fast as I could, and I’d spend it faster than I got it,” Horton says. “I was living the fast life as much as I could because I thought that would be it.”

Dreamless and directionless, Horton lived for himself and his desires and never considered pursuing academics.

“I never had any definitive drive to do anything specifically,” he says. “I never thought I’d go to college. I never thought that I’d end up being a professor at a university or anything along those lines.”

As Horton spoke these words, I eyed the nameplate

**“AND MY HEART WAS BROKE BY THE LORD...I WAS READY FOR A CHANGE. AND EVER SINCE, I NEVER WENT BACK TO THE SAME TYPE OF LIFE I WAS LIVING.”**

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The first spark that lit the fire of change in his life, Horton said, occurred on a Sunday night: March 31, 1996. He had run away from home and had been out on the

streets by himself for over a week, eventually getting caught up in a situation with the police. He was only 15 at the time.

That day, Horton was faced with a paramount decision. He realized that if he continued in his current lifestyle, his path would ultimately lead to a life behind bars — and that was a life he didn’t want. He returned home and told his parents that he wanted to change the way he was living.

That night, he attended a service at his family’s local church.

“I went, I sat on the front row like I always did, and heard the gospel. And my heart was broke by the Lord,” Horton says. “It was the first time that I

was impacted by

the gospel, and I didn’t want to live the way I was living anymore. I was ready for a change. And ever since, I never went back to the same type of life I was living.”

After graduating high school, Horton threw himself into ministry and also decided to enroll in community college. But, being the first in his family to go to college, he had no idea where to begin. Academia was an entirely new field to him, one in which he struggled to find belonging.

“When I began college, my initial major [I] declared was business, because I had no idea what I wanted to do,” Horton explains. “I remember once I was sitting on the sixth floor of a building in my community college, and I could oversee all my neighborhood. I could see the same people on the streets doing what they were doing, and I was just sitting there like, ‘Man, that’s where I’m from.’ And it’s a whole different view of this neighborhood from up here in this space. I don’t even feel like I belong here. I feel like I’m supposed to be out there with them. But I know that’s not who I am or where I’m going to end up.”

It was during this uncertain time that Horton’s first dreams and ambitions began to appear, leading to changes in majors.

“I never really had any ambitions until my mid 20s, when I looked to finish my undergraduate degree and felt God calling me to serve as a pastor in LA,” he recalls. ▶

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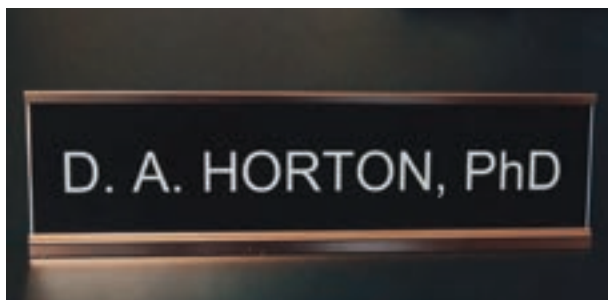
Dr. Horton smiles confidently with the faith he has in Christ.

But even after graduation, his dreams continued to change and mature with time. After serving as a pastor for a time, he began to realize a new calling: the possibility of pastoring but also having a full-time job as a professor. This idea of bringing the church and the classroom together was a perfect mix for him.

At 37 years of age, Horton realized his purpose. “I finally see what it is that I’m called to do,” he recalls.

Horton went on to earn his Ph.D. and plant a church in LA. In 2017, he was contacted to do a Chapel service at CBU, and later, an opportunity to teach adjunct that fall opened up.

“I prayed about it, talked to my wife about it, talked to



Dr. Horton’s nameplate shows how far he’s come.

the other leaders in the church about it, and presented it to our whole church,” he says. “I told them that it had always been my heart to start a church in LA, but eventually step back to let the local people run it. The church gave me the green light to apply, and from there, the Lord opened the door.”

Now in his fifth year of teaching at CBU, Horton says it is his dream job.

“I never hate coming to work. It’s hard to leave some days,” he says. “The conversations I have with students are life-giving. My greatest joy is seeing students wrestle with material and then have ‘ah-ha’ moments where they get it and are able to communicate it in their own heart language.”

Throughout his journey, Horton did not have an easy ride. He dealt with family illness and lost multiple loved ones. He also has had continuing struggles with mental health, including depression, anxiety, survivor’s guilt and imposter syndrome. But through it all, Horton is unwavering in his commitment to give back to others.

“It’s a battle I still wrestle with, but it keeps me grounded, keeps me humble, keeps me broken and keeps me focused,” he says. “I take my experiences and I take the memories of everyone that I lost and I realize that I’m still here, and I need to do something ... to help people where they are.

In the classroom, Horton sees it as his mission to pass on what he has learned.

“A lot of things I learned later in life. I want to introduce them to my students at 18, 19, 20 so they don’t have to wait until they’re 38, 39, 40 to learn it,” he says. “I’d rather they learn it now so they can

work with it, master it, and then they’ll be three times ahead from where I am by the time they get to my age. And that’s the goal. That’s how I pay it forward, that’s how I give back — by constantly giving myself and the whole of myself. I learned this by looking at the example of Christ — this is what the Scriptures call us to do.”

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Walking out of Dr. Damon Horton’s office, I couldn’t stop thinking about his story — the hopelessness of his youth, the change and the growth, the struggles and the hardships, all of which shaped him and continue to fuel his life’s work.

Maybe your story doesn’t look like Horton’s, but perhaps you’ve had similar moments of hardship, doubting, struggles and uncertainty. Maybe you’ve wondered where

to go in life. Maybe you aren’t sure of what you’re supposed to do yet. Maybe you don’t know what to major in or what career to pursue — or maybe you do know, but you feel like you’re lagging behind everybody else.

If that’s you, Horton shared one more piece of advice.

“My wife always says comparison is the thief of joy.

You might be comparing yourself to peers who come in knowing what they want to major in, who’ve known since they were little — and there’s nothing wrong with that — but that’s not everybody’s story. Some people are like me. I got my undergrad in one thing, my master’s in another and my Ph.D. in another. Students ask me, if you had to do it all over again, would you do it the same way? And I’m like, absolutely not!” he said, laughing.

“But I didn’t,” he continues. “We change majors, and that’s OK. We discover ourselves as it relates to the failures and mistakes that we make. Don’t compare yourself to anybody, don’t beat yourself down. When you entrust your whole life to the Lord, he has a way of making every experience, no matter how hard or how helpful, part of your story and journey.”

That journey is a story with ups and downs, moments of laughter and moments of tears. It’s not always easy, but through it all, God is shaping us and changing us into the people he wants us to be. So, take a step back. Breathe. Remember that your life is not defined by one single moment, one single decision, or even one single period of time. Horton’s wasn’t. And neither is yours. ♦

