

A Prodigal Returns After Combat



Story by Carmel Palmer

The weather-beaten pickup truck bounced over rough terrain at top speed while the soldiers in the back hung on tightly, faces grim. Their squad leader lay on the truck bed, sweating profusely and covered in vomit. Four days earlier, he had contracted VGE, a stomach virus caused by poor living conditions, during a routine assignment at a patrol base in Southern Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The base consisted of a dirt wall and tarps for tents, and flooded easily in the frequent rains. Their medic could not help him in such rough conditions. Unable to wait for an armored vehicle, they borrowed an Afghan Border Patrol truck, the machine gun mounted in back—flimsy protection against rebel forces and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Lance Corporal Keone Samonte described his team leader as “the kind of guy anyone would follow anywhere.” Though Keone had neglected his relationship with God for years, he prayed hard throughout the ride. Looking at the tattoo of Psalm 118:6 on his own left arm, Keone was reassured: “I knew God would bring him through. We arrived safely, and within a week, he was healed.”

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?
PSALM 118:6

The verse was the first one Keone read after boot camp, while still walking with God. Shortly afterward, he became involved in his peers’ party lifestyle. “I went in expecting it to be hard, but I became complacent,” Keone related. “I encourage anyone entering the military to depend on God like never before—you don’t know how you’ll be tested. The Marine Corps for me began revolving around a bar—drinking is a tradition, especially among us infantrymen. I embraced the lifestyle; I started drinking to be cool.” In the years 2010 to 2012, Keone served two 7-month tours in Afghanistan. Though away from the worst fighting, he still faced danger daily. “You live constantly knowing someone is watching you; their whole life’s goal is to kill you. You’re waiting to be shot or hit by a rocket,” he recalled.

“But I also knew God was watching out for us all the time. Though I wasn’t following Him, I never stopped praying.” Keone’s unit sent convoys on patrol multiple times daily. Once while driving an armored vehicle not meant to withstand IEDs, Keone misunderstood his vehicle commander and took a wrong turn. They hit an IED; the 80 pounds of explosives mangled the front of the vehicle and covered it in huge pieces of shrapnel, but left its passengers unharmed. Keone later discovered that if he had made the right turn, they would have hit two IEDs, close together and

packing many more explosives, which likely could have killed them. Another time, Keone reported, “My friends and I were smoking 20 feet from the sandbag wall surrounding the base when a rocket detonated directly on the other side. My life flashed before my eyes.” Though God protected Keone, his shallow faith made him ill-equipped to help others who were struggling. A close friend was transferred to the Afghani/Pakistani border, rife with firefights. “He returned severely depressed and was having trouble sleeping,” said Keone. “It was hard to watch him like that, but because I wasn’t following God, all I could do was sit and drink with him.”

In October 2013, almost a year after completing his second tour, Keone was returning to base after visiting his family. “I turned the music off and spent the two-hour drive thinking and praying, asking God to forgive me, change my heart, and make me want to serve Him again. He did. That’s when the trouble began,” he laughed wryly. “In April, a friend and I had broken into another guy’s car while drunk and stolen \$5,000-worth of gear. After that drive, I knew I had to make things right. I left a note on that guy’s car and turned

myself in. I was stripped of my rank, fined, and sent to the brig instead of deploying. At no point, though, did I doubt God—I knew this was His will for my life, to help me develop self-control, prioritize, and not take things for granted. My biggest weakness before was pride, but a man living for God recognizes the good in his life isn’t

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accomplished by him, but is God giving him gifts he doesn’t deserve.” Keone also quit drinking and apologized to people he had wronged. His relationship with God has made him more compassionate, respectful of women, and equipped to reach out to struggling Marines. He added, “My friends know why I’ve changed and they respect it—I’m not ashamed to speak about God’s work in my life.”

Though his enlistment ends this year, Keone hopes to increase his involvement in FrontSight Ministries, CC Golden Springs, CA’s outreach to veterans. “I’ve talked about the bad things these guys do, but they aren’t bad people. They’re lost, confused, and stubborn like I was—but they’re also the guys who lived in the mud with me, men willing to take a bullet or lose their legs for their country. I love them like family. I think about what it was like for me overseas, worrying about dying—now I know it doesn’t matter who shoots at you, but who you’re serving when you reach that point. You’re either going to be with Him for eternity or in Hell. In the end, it’s between you and God. I can’t thank Him enough for taking what I used to be and making me what I am now.” 