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After dropping out of high school, and being kicked out of my home, God saved me at age 21. But I never would have dreamed what God had in store for me. With an overwhelming hunger to learn after becoming a Christian, I wanted to go to college but didn't think I'd get accepted. Columbia International University accepted me on probation, and three-and-a-half years later, I graduated with a degree in philosophy.

My time at CIU was absolutely foundational for me, both academically and spiritually. I was challenged by professors who invested in my life outside the classroom. One of those professors, Dr. Jack Layman, opened my eyes and mind to God's providence throughout history. He inspired my passion for history and philosophy in a way that still affects me.

As my time at CIU came to a close, I begged God to use me in whatever way He saw fit. I sensed that the investment CIU made in me not only gave me the resources to do ministry, but also sparked in me a desire to minister. In addition to equipping me with tools for ministry, the ethos of the school made me want to be part of something world-changing.

I'd like to believe I'm involved in a world-changing ministry now at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church where I serve as the lead pastor. Here I daily put to use the tools God gave me at CIU, but it has not been an easy road. It was during the beginning of my time at Coral Ridge that I experienced the most painful six months of my life. I never realized how much I had come to depend on human acceptance and approval until God took it away. This challenge showcased the idolatry inside my heart that needed to be dealt with. God used Colossians 1 to help me discover the liberating power of the gospel in new ways.

Because of the profound impact this trial had on my life, if I had one sermon left to give with a worldwide audience, it would be titled "Jesus + Nothing = Everything." I would demonstrate through Colossians 1, and my personal experience, how in the person of Jesus, God comes after sinners like me – not to strip away our freedom – but to strip away our slavery to self so that we can become truly free.

Life and ministry are full of joys and challenges – no one is exempt. Some of our struggles are self-imposed while others come at us from the outside. When the difficulties come, I'm grateful for the people and places God has used to prepare me, and CIU is certainly one of them.

Visit www.ciu.edu/impact to read more inspiring stories of how graduates are using their CIU education to "impact the nations."