



Atlanta Church of Christ in Gwinnett

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The birds of the air come and perch in its branches.

- Matthew 13:32

Issue 44
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Welcoming new disciples!

Pretty much everyone was happy to see the end of 2020, and hoped 2021 would bring a fresh start in as many ways as possible! So far we've seen some of the problems carry over into the new year, but we've also seen greater hope that positive changes could be in sight. With the pandemic still limiting our ability to gather as a congregation, we're planning our next parking-lot service for Sunday, March 21st, so please plan (if at all possible) to come back to Meadowcreek's rear parking lot at 11 a.m. that morning with your own communion supplies, your singing voice, and a heart ready to hear the Word and share socially-distant fellowship with one another!

In the meantime, two people—one a familiar face, one new to AcoCG—have turned to God and started new lives with us this year!

First, Joe Dang, son of longtime members Scott and Kim, was baptized on January 31st—



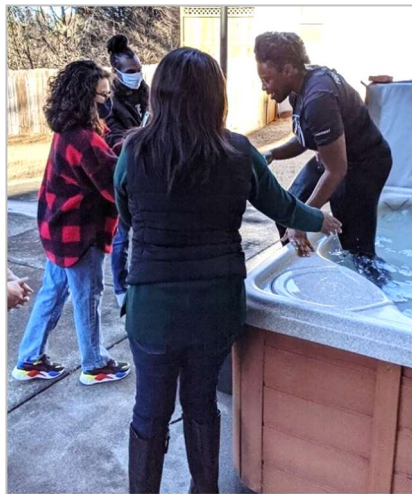


Joe was born in Vietnam and moved to Lilburn in 2010 when he was 6 years old. He could not speak English when he first came here, but he overcame the challenge in a few years and excels in school. He is 16 years old and studies at Parkview High School. He loves to play the clarinet and was in all-state band last year. He started studying the Bible during the summer of 2020 with his dad, Scott, and with John Yang and Austin Hartman over Zoom.

Then Reese Kegal was baptized on February 7th. Between the chilly weather and matters of scheduling and social distancing, not many were able to be at the Rouses' for this occasion, but both disciples and Reese's family were able to watch on Zoom (and Alan, recovering from breaking his leg, watched from the upstairs window).

Reese met Austin Hartman at the game lab on GGC campus before the pandemic; he invited her to campus Bible talks, devotionals and get-togethers. The more events she participated in, the more she built strong relationships, especially with Julia Jennings and Jennifer Rodriguez as they studied together. Reese had a lot of faith from the start, and trusted in God every step of her journey, although she had to wrestle in prayer along the way. She enjoys music and singing, and (of course) good times with friends.





With thanks to Sherry Rouse for the pictures, and to Scott Dang and Jennifer Rodriguez for the information!

Resources for strengthening sisters!

Our website now has a page dedicated to AcoCG's women's ministry: <https://acocg.org/womens-ministry/> One of the resources you'll find there is information about the women's midweek breakout classes available on the fourth Wednesday night of every month throughout 2021. There are four options: Anchored (helping anchor young Christians in the Word of God); Grace Calls (helping heal from past traumas); Prayer (deepening our communication with God); and Finding Hope (exploring mental health and the Scriptures). You can read fuller descriptions of each class, choose whichever one best meets your needs, and find the link you'll use every month to join in the lessons and small-group times.

Catching up with...



Cory, Shakarah & Jaden
Morgan

Where are you from originally? What would you like people to know about where you're from?

Cory: I was born in Atlanta, but grew up in Norcross, all my life. Norcross and Gwinnett County in general is very historic—Gwinnett is the second largest county outside of Fulton—it's a great place to live if you don't want to live right in Atlanta, very thriving; that's why I haven't moved out of Gwinnett County. I've lived in every corner of Gwinnett County, from Norcross to Duluth to Snellville and now to Buford. It has a lot to offer, almost like a second Atlanta. I've never thought about moving somewhere else. My mom is from Selma, Alabama, and she moved over here when she was 18; my dad is from Louisiana, and he still lives there. Everything's here—we found jobs here, the church is here, there are great schools here—I feel like everything is great here, so we really have no reason to move, at least for right now.

Shakarah: I have the exact same answer as Cory; we grew up on the same street in Norcross, and we've both lived in Norcross, Buford, Snellville, and I also lived in Loganville. I've never known anything other than Gwinnett, so I'm used to meeting people from different cultures and countries; if I went somewhere that there wasn't a lot of diversity, I wouldn't know what to do! I feel safe here, and I could move somewhere else and not feel safe because it's not familiar anymore. And as far as natural disasters and things, I feel like this is a safe spot. If you go too much one way, you get tornados, and too much another way and you get hurricanes. This is just like a neutral zone, in my opinion! And most of my family is here—my mom, my dad, his mom—and now that we have Jaden, we have all the help we can get around here, so it just makes sense at this point. And obviously we're very close to a lot of people in the church, so it would be hard to leave our friends as well.

Cory and I have known each other since we were nine or ten years old. We actually didn't know we lived on the same street till much later, when we started driving. It was like, "Oh, we lived on the same street all this time, and never knew it!"

Cory: We sort of knew of each other when we were younger. We have a mutual friend—

Shakarah: We have a mutual friend, Chelsea Brown, and she goes to North River. She's really big about birthdays, so every single year her mom would throw her a birthday party, and we were both invited. So that's how we knew of each other. But we didn't have the same classes—

Cory: We never had the same classes.

Shakarah: But we've always gone to the same school except for the last three years of high school, and then we went to different colleges. We didn't like each other until college. We both had some pretty bad break-ups, and we started spending, like, a crazy amount of time together, and we were like, "We kinda like each other! We should try this out!" It was scary, because we were best friends, and we didn't want to ruin the friendship, but it felt worth exploring.

And then in college was when Cory was reached out to, and we were hanging out, and he was not cussing and not listening to the same music when I was in the car with him and different things like that. And I said, "You've changed; what's up with you?" —like, "This is our song, why aren't you listening to our song?" And he's like, "You know, I'm different now, I don't do that anymore." And he did a three-way call with me and our mutual friend Chelsea, and said, "I want to show you this scripture in John that says you won't get into heaven unless you're baptized." And immediately Chelsea and I were like, "All right, guess we have to get baptized!" And I ended up studying at Georgia State where I was going, and then I came to Gwinnett to visit Cory. Chelsea ended up studying that summer when she came back, because she was actually at Howard University in D.C. So I was baptized within six months of Cory, and Chelsea was about three months after me.

What do you do for a living? How did you come to be in that field?

Cory: I'm in IT and marketing; my job title is Web Developer. I've known I wanted to be in IT since I was a little kid. I had a computer at a very young age, and from then I was kind of amazed; I've always been keen with technology and with how that part of the world works, so I had no problem studying that all throughout high school and college, so I have a degree in Information Technology. Once I got out of school, I worked at a marketing company as my first job, and then I fell in love with marketing, so now I kinda do a little bit of both—IT more in the corporate world, and marketing more in my personal time.

Shakarah: I am an accountant. In college I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and I knew that I liked math and I wanted to make good money, so I said, "Why not do accounting?" My mom was a single mom, so we struggled financially most of our lives, and I just knew that I wanted to get into something where I could make a decent salary and try to avoid living that kind of life again, so that was my motivation. Anytime I did one of those big aptitude or career compatibility tests, I never got "Accountant"—I always got "Teacher," "Counselor," "Nurse," all the things that are very people-oriented because I'm very good at that kind of stuff, but I kinda went away from that.

Tell us how you first got involved with disciples – what was your first impression of them and of the church?

Cory: I met John Gerard at Georgia Gwinnett College in Lawrenceville—I think we met in 2011 or early 2012. You know, when you're 18, 19, you do a lot of things just to get accepted by your friends, but then things are changing, friends are going off to college, a lot of stuff going on, so it was great and fun and all, but there was no direction in my life. When I got to GGC I was actually doing pretty bad because I never liked school to begin with, I was kinda the smart but lazy kid, so I did very poorly in school, and I was just looking for some direction. I went up to the church nearest my house—I grew up going to church, but it was more the Christmas-Easter kind of church, so that was my first time going in a long time. It was great, I felt good about it, but still I was asking God, "What should I do? Where should I go?" And then one day I was late for class, as usual, and I ran into him—I was probably the only person in his line of sight because everybody else was in class. So he stopped me, and I think he asked me if I wanted to come to Bible talk first, and normally I'm a pretty accepting guy, not stand-offish or anything, so I said yeah, and I went. When I came, I saw this church was different, but I didn't think so much of it; the real difference came when I started reading the Bible, because growing up you read the Bible or listen to your preacher but it doesn't really make sense until you read it for yourself and really understand what the Bible is saying. You know, you read certain scriptures and you say, "Oh, man, I didn't know that was in there," or "I didn't know that's what that meant," or "I didn't know you had to do this or that." I always like to compare it to one of my favorite movies, called *Limitless*, where this guy is at a dead end in his job and someone offers him this drug that basically allows him to utilize 100% of his brain power instead of only 10%. And so he takes the pill and sees the world in a whole different way. But the great part about the movie is that when you're watching the movie it's very dull and dark, and when he takes the pill everything seems so much brighter and vibrant. And that's literally what this is—your life is maybe kind of dull and dark, but after you read the scriptures, everything is so different and you realize you can't go back. Like what Jesus says in John 9:41, once you see the truth, you can't un-see it.

It was very weird at first, but slowly it started to pierce my heart and my mind, and it started to make sense and became very real. John and I studied a little bit, and then the summer came and we didn't see each other so much. Once we got back into school in the fall, the studies picked back up and I got baptized November 4, 2012, so it's been about eight years now. Some days it feels like a long time, some days it doesn't, but it's definitely been the best decision I've made.

Shakarah: Cory invited me to a Bible talk at GGC. Everyone there was extremely welcoming, and at the end, I was invited to study the Bible. I was being stubborn about it though. I felt like the girls came off eager and weird. I wanted to do it a different way than Cory, so I said, "I'm going to find my own group to join, and find my own Bible talk to go to!" So I started looking at Georgia State's clubs, and there was Alpha Omega. And I was like, "Oh, this one looks cool, these people look really fun." There were a ton of religious clubs, but that was one that really just stood out to me. I thought I had found something different from what Cory was showing me, and it just so happened that I did not—it was a sister church to our church! So I got in contact with the leader, who was Latoya Massey, and I texted her and she gave me the information. At the end of Bible talk, Latoya asked me, "Would you like to get together and do some Bible studies?" I said, "Yeah, of course!" And I thought she was really cool, she was laid back, super-pretty, and I was super-vain, so I thought, "I totally want to talk to this girl." So then I shared this with Cory, and eventually find out that they're sister churches, that I didn't get away from his church at all! It's a very fun story that I tried to do it my way and God still brought me back to this fellowship.

What has surprised you most about life as a disciple?

Cory: Once you realize that we're living in the world and not of it, you kinda see the world from a new viewpoint, and you really notice how the world is. When you're in the world you're just living life, you know, the same as anybody else, and once you turn to God you just see that things are just different, and I think that's what surprised me the most—that you really see how you were, and how the rest of the world lives, not in a judge-y way, but your eyes are opened and you see, "Hey, we all really need God, we all really need help." It just makes the Gospel that much more important. The biggest thing is, every day this world we're living in just gets tougher and tougher to be a disciple, stay a disciple, and every day it gets more important to stay close to God, to read His Word, and stay close to the brothers and sisters because these are the last days and it seems that everywhere you turn Satan is trying to sway you from God. The pandemic hits and everyone's inside, people aren't going to church or whatever, something is always costing you more money, more this, more that, TV, media, social media, too many things to mention—it gets tough every day, so it's just so important to stay close to God.

Shakarah: For me, I think what's been most surprising, when I first got baptized I was so happy—the sun shone brighter, it just seemed like, "This is the perfect world now that I've gotten baptized!" But it's the same world; *I'm* just different! So it took me by surprise when I did have struggles. I came to realize that just because you've been made new doesn't take away the fact that you're human, that you're in the same world. So it was kind of a shocker for me. I've always been very big on fairy tales and happily-ever-afters, that kind of thing, so it was a little reality check for me that those don't really exist except in Disney.

What is the biggest lesson you've learned as a disciple that continues to help you today?

Cory: That I can't do it alone—I wouldn't say I'm the most independent person, but I'm very introverted and I like doing things alone. I tried to do a lot of stuff on my own growing up—that's another reason I liked IT, because you can kind of just sit there at the computer and no one really bothers you. Like at my job, I wear headphones and just code all day long and no one really bothers me unless they really need something, and that's kinda it. But before I became a disciple, when I was coming to church, I told John, "Ok, I'm going to church from 10 to 12, that's it, I'll see you guys later," and that's what I wanted to do—go to church, then see you guys Wednesday or next week or whatever. But it's nowhere near that; you need people beside you—not just spouses, or people your age, but older disciples, younger disciples, you need the elders, you need the evangelist, you need everybody. Relationships is what I've learned you need all the time, and ever since I've learned it I've tried to work on my relationships at every single level: family group, the younger disciples, I try to hang out with the teens, campus, singles; we have a couple that we get with, and I try to talk to the leaders a lot. I think it's so cool that we can talk to our evangelist, talk to the elders—it's very important to have relationships, because you can't do it alone.

Shakarah: My ongoing lesson is that God is in control. I *love* to be in control! I'm always telling myself, if we have a hardship or something, "God is in control." When we got pregnant, it was a surprise pregnancy—"God is in control." It's just this ongoing thing, whatever I'm going through, whatever stage of life I'm in, God is in control.

What do you wish other people outside the church knew about following Jesus?

Cory: I would say accepting. I know a lot of people are fearful of who they are, and feel like they can't follow God because of their behaviors, what they're currently doing or about to do, and so they just choose to stay away altogether. Yes, there are changes to be made, but God wants you regardless—I can't tell you how many times God has done something for me when I haven't done anything for Him, and what He does for a lot of people who don't even acknowledge Him or even think about Him. So for the people who sort of think about God, go in and out of church a little bit, but feel like they can't fully follow God because of who they are or what they do, God is accepting.

Shakarah: I want people to know that following Jesus is fun. There is a scripture (Titus 2:10b) that talks about making the Gospel attractive; that's so important because I was converted in campus, where the world was telling me that parties and alcohol and drugs and everything that is *not* of God is fun, so I feel like if people my age and younger and whoever knew that following God can be fun, I think that a lot more people would be open to it. For some reason there's this notion that, "If I follow God I'm going to be boring, I go to church, I don't hang out with people, I don't have friends," things like that. So, changing the perspective of what it looks like to follow God.

What has been your biggest challenge in following Jesus? How do you deal with it?

Cory: I think just building relationships, maintaining relationships, having deep relationships has been a challenge for me—those deep relationships that all disciples have, because those aren't conversations I probably would have ever had with my family or friends. I just pray to God to help me with that, and He's presented opportunities to build new relationships and deepen my relationships with my friends and my other brothers and sisters, so that's definitely something that I've been grateful for—just asking God, "Hey, God, I need relationships, I can't do this by myself." But I struggle sometimes with having those conversations, those deep relationships, and He's definitely helped me with that. It's interesting, because He always helps, but most of the time He does it in a way you don't expect—sometimes someone will come out of left field with something, and I'm like, "Whoa!" And then afterward, I'm like, "Oh, that was pretty much God—I didn't make that happen!"

Shakarah: My biggest challenge is my laziness, because everything about discipleship is very intentional. If I want to have deep relationships, I have to be intentional; if I want to be close to God, I have to be intentional. So just doing the work of praying, reading my Bible, connecting with others, I'd say that's the most challenging for me, because you can't just cruise as a disciple—that would be lukewarm! So now, with Jaden, what helps is if I pray out loud with him; if I'm reading scriptures or a Bible study, I'll read it and be talking with him about it—including someone else is helpful. And then just checking in with friends; I'll check in and ask, "How are you doing?" And then I also get to share how I'm doing. ~~Just~~ having that accountability helps.

What is your favorite scripture?

Cory: **2 Kings 6:16**—when Elijah and his servant are trapped by the Arameans—"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." I think Richard Alwaye shared this with us one time when we were in Campus, a long time ago, and it kinda just stuck with me because sometimes I just get crippling fear, depending on the situation—speaking in front of people, job interviews, having a child — you know, a lot of things, and this scripture just sticks in my mind because we're on God's side and, being on God's side means, even if it seems like it's just me, it's more than what the world and Satan are putting against us. I like that scripture because they were trapped by all the Arameans, they saw all the stuff around them, all these chariots and stuff, and when they prayed, God had all these chariots of fire and stuff around them. So that's one of my favorite scriptures I read all the time.

Shakarah: **Psalms 139**—when I feel sad or alone, this scripture always helps me. I feel like it ~~just~~ speaks to my heart in those times, and then when other people are struggling, I like to share it with them as well.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Cory: I enjoy playing any kind of sports I can get my hands on. I was in a kickball league with some brothers and sisters the other year down in Atlanta—I don't know if you know this, but the Tampa church put on a flag football tournament every year, and all the churches from the southeast go down there once a year, so I enjoy doing that. And playing video games whenever I get a chance; I love playing them with other brothers and sisters as well.

Together we enjoy spending time together with one another and our friends. It's interesting because we have a lot of friends, some we grew up with, who have trickled into the church, so even though we're in different family groups now we have tons of friends we hang out with in the church and in neighboring churches we hang out with all the time. When we were in campus, I thought it almost felt like when you were in high school, sometimes you'd go to other high schools and do stuff, so it was so cool that I could go to North River and hang out with other campus people, other single people; go to the Path, do the same thing; go to Athens...We love going to the conferences and building relationships.

Shakarah: Watching TV, hanging out, relaxing—that's kind of where I'm at these days. Pre-COVID, we'd probably be going to restaurants with friends, but post-COVID, we're just relaxing around the house.

What might someone be surprised to know about you?

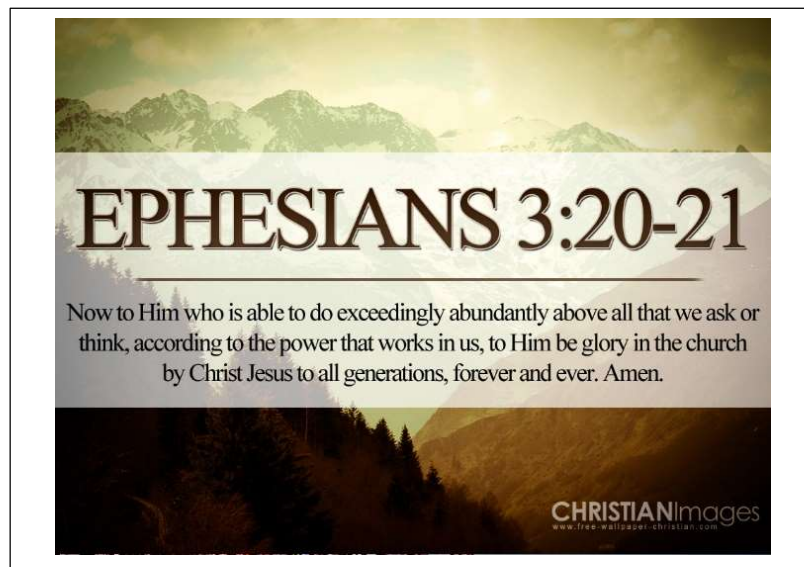
Cory: I actually enjoy classical music. We try to go to the Atlanta Symphony once a year; it's very enjoyable. And I played the violin—in school, Shakarah played the viola, and I played the violin. We were first chairs.

Shakarah: I can sing alto. I have a high-pitched speaking voice so that's why it's a surprising thing.

If you could speak to yourself as you were five years ago, what advice would you give yourself?

Cory: Obviously, "Become a disciple!" But if that's a given, I could tell myself a lot of things, but definitely to read more, because I always dreaded reading when I was growing up—maybe because I didn't like the information I was reading, or the way school worked or whatever, but now I read books all the time, from financial to history to Biblical books. Reading is important and very valuable, and with audiobooks you can read, like, 60 books a year. So I would tell myself, "Just read more—and here's a list of books to start!"

Shakarah: I would tell myself, "No student loans! Keep under 30% utilization of credit cards, and save, save, save!"



We welcome news and pictures on interesting personal stories, family group activities, and more. Please send them to Nancy Berry, nberry2@gmail.com. Thank you!

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