

NFL Running Back Chooses Pulpit Over Playbook

Pastor Napoleon Kaufman of The Well Christian Community Church says, “Too many people are trying to walk with God but they’re in a wrestling match with Him because they haven’t died to self yet. Generally in people, the last thing to go is their will. Where they surrender it. Jesus said ‘if you’re going to follow Him, you got to deny yourself, take up your cross.’ You’re not truly going to live until you die.”

It’s the mandate one might expect to hear from a pulpit or shared from personal, pastoral conviction, but Napoleon learned to surrender his will at the peak of an NFL career while playing for the Oakland Raiders. Napoleon recalls, “I really, really, loved football. And I think my biggest thing was I wanted to play in the NFL. I’ve always been a Raider fan my whole life and so I had a chance to play for the team that I always wanted to play for. I wanted to win the Super Bowl. I wanted to play in the league, you know, 10 to 12 years. I had a lot of fun, living my dream.”

The former All-American and 1995 first-round draft pick played six seasons with the Raiders, half as their primary running back. His career yards per carry average still ranks among the league’s top ten. Despite statistical success, it didn’t satisfy Napoleon’s soul, saying, “I started realizing that there’s more to life than just football. Once I had kind of reached that pinnacle, it was like, man, something’s missing. Something in me is not right. And I started realizing that man, something needs to change in me. That’s the reason I’m not happy.”

A teammate got him to think about his faith. Napoleon committed to actively follow Scripture in transforming his life, evident by a growing compassion for others. He describes

a pre-game memory as, "I can remember vividly coming out for a football game and they would announce us from The Black Hole and looking up in the stands, my heart just started sinking for the people, and I literally started to tear up right before the game. It was a moment in my career where I say something really shifted in my heart."

Napoleon caught the league by surprise, retiring in the prime of his career at 27, leaving the Raiders just two years before their 2003 Super Bowl appearance. He recalls, "I'm watching ESPN and my name comes across the bottom of the ticker tape, 'Napoleon Kaufman retires after 6 seasons,' and when I looked at that, I said, 'Here I am, Lord, use me.'"

He has. Napoleon didn't become a pastor when he retired—instead—he retired to become a pastor, saying, "When God started dealing with me about retiring for ministry, I tell people all the time, for me it was not a matter of reason; it was a matter of obedience. I knew this is what God had called me to do and my life was His."

His obedience is diverse and far-reaching. In addition to pastoring, Napoleon is the Raiders Chaplain. He's also Head Coach of Bishop O'Dowd High School football, recent California state champions. Napoleon says, "The simplicity of just doing what God says, I think I get that from playing football for 20 years, and your coach says run through the A-gap, you got to run through the A-gap. So my relationship with God has been run through that hole. Go there. Often times God tells you to go and the picture's not always clear. But you do know that this is what God's asking you to do."

His run has transformed the halfback into a carrier who shares a message of freedom, strength and power. Napoleon believes, "When we look at grace, people just see it as His unmerited favor and benefit. But that's just one side of the coin. God wants His grace to be an empowering influence in our lives. That I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me."

If it's an addiction, bondage or whatever it is, Jesus gives you the power to overcome. And that's what grace does. It doesn't excuse me; it empowers me."

The guy they call "Nip" empathizes with emptiness and pain, explaining, "I want to feel the way God feels about something. You know, here at our local church or if I'm out in the community you're dealing with people that are going through a tough situation. And the thing I love is the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to come in and heal anyone's hurts."

Napoleon Kaufman has exchanged football's yards per carry for a life of surrendered availability, stating, "God has a proven track record in my life—it's just to be obedient to God. Be where He wants you to be. And if you do what He says to do, all things are going to work together for your good."

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