

FROM CAPTIVE — TO — CREATOR



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From Captive to Creator

An early draft, shared with trusted friends for honest feedback.



Let me tell you where this ends, before I take you down to where it all began. Fair warning: As we go down as far as we are going, I don't want you to lose heart in the dark, like I almost did while living it. Keep reading because just like with Jesus, there is always redemption on the other side, and this story is no different than many others you've heard or read.

This might seem like an odd place to start, but it is where I feel like kicking the story off, and I don't take this lightly. I have been as lost as a human being can get. Not lost like a hard season. Lost like a man who had misplaced his own soul and didn't even know

it was gone. And to also give you a small glimpse of where this story ends: I can tell you now, having been through this, I now feel that I am more found, more free, and more alive than I ever believed a person could be. I say that carefully, because I know how it sounds. That's not a boastful statement either. It's the journey this entire story is written for. Hold on tight, try to put yourself in my shoes, and this will be a story you will never forget.

I've come to believe those two ends of the book, from captive to creator, are not a coincidence. There's actually a law to it, the same one that governs a pendulum: Simply stated, a pendulum swings back in the opposite direction exactly as far as it first swung out. In this story, the distance of my captivity turned out to be the precise measure of my freedom. The depth of the pit sets the height of the sky. And none of that height was my own doing. It was my Savior's, poured into the exact hollow my own falling had carved out. God's grace gathers in the deepest and lowest places of our souls first. Scripture states the same law in six words: "where sin abounded, grace abounded more exceedingly." Romans 5:20 (WEB).

So, as we go down, and we are going all the way down, hold onto this: the descent is not the enemy of the ascent. The descent is the promise of a beautiful ascent that always follows on the other side. Again, keep this in mind: the further this story falls, and it will fall devastatingly far, the higher you can already anticipate it's going to rise at the end.

Before we start down that steep decline, here are the ground rules we'll follow.

First: I am not going to name the religion I grew up in, and that's on purpose. This isn't a story about one church or one set of beliefs. It's about my experience inside a religious system built on principles I now see are contrary to the true nature of a loving Creator. I'm sure there are other systems that would fall into the

same category, but those aren't mine to tell. This one is. The exact religion doesn't matter. The concepts do.

Second: I'm going to use a lot of the language of that religion. It will sound strange to you, and it isn't biblically sound, and that's on purpose too. Language that makes no sense to the rest of the world is second nature to the one immersed in it—and I was drowning in it from the very beginning.

And third, so you know where I stand before we go down: I don't believe any system built on earning, performing, shame, or fear is the system an all-powerful God would use to get His children safely home to Him.

I'm forty-seven. I left that religion six years ago, and I am only now able to put words to what I lived through. Let me take you back to the beginning.

Movement One: The Ladder

I've been asking myself a question lately that I could not ever form until now: *Where's the line?* Where's the line between a parent teaching a child what they believe is best for them, and a parent handing a child a cage and calling it a home? I don't ask this with bitterness. I ask it as a father to two boys, and as a son who was loved by wonderful and loving parents who were only ever handing me what had been handed to them through generations and generations of similar parenting styles. Because there is no blame or fault in true accountability, this story isn't about that. It's about how lost I was, even with two parents that loved me the best way they knew how.

Because that's the thing about where I come from. I come from **generations**. Generation upon generation, all raised very similarly, in the same religion, each one teaching the next (child, grandchild, great-grandchild) that there is only *one way* to heaven. And that one way was to **earn** it. "*Faith without works is dead*," we would say, and we believed it to our core, and so, we built a whole life around that one simple concept. We attended church virtually every Sunday, whether the desire in me was there or not. It felt like a ledger kept on my soul for as long as I was worried about the number of notches on that belt. The belt of obedience.

And here's what I need you to understand before you feel sorry for me: **I loved it.**

My favorite thing in the world, to learn, to talk about, to teach as I got older, was what we called the Plan of Salvation. The whole map of it. Where we came from before this life. Why we are here: "to gain a physical body, to make covenants, to do every last thing God had commanded," as I was taught. And where we will all end up when this life is over. We didn't *guess* about heaven; we had it **diagrammed**. Three of them, as different from each other as the

stars are from the moon, and the moon from the sun. And for each one, a way in. A price. A list of do's and don'ts to earn our seats in one of those glorious heavens.

I knew practically every detail of the plan. I knew exactly how to get where I wanted to go, to God. And if I'm honest about what we actually believed, to *become* a god myself. Because the "one true way" wasn't only a way to God, it was a way to be a god. I had the answer to every question a soul could ask, and I loved having them. I never once noticed that a map of a cage is still a cage.

For most of my life, it didn't feel like a cage at all. That's the whole trick of it, so stay with me. I *loved* going. Church, Sunday school, weekly activities, all of it. Not because I'd weighed the doctrine and found it all to be true, at a young age, but mostly because everyone I loved was also *there*. My friends filled the pews beside my family and me. We were all cut from the same cloth, raised by parents who'd been raised by parents who believed the identical teaching, so there was never any friction, never any question. Just a warm sea of people who all knew the answers and all knew each other. We participated in all the right do's (the prayers, the lessons, the service projects, the youth nights) like good little children, together. And togetherness felt like God. Belonging felt like being loved, and being loved felt like the right thing to be a part of.

In my experience, nobody was cruel, abusive, or even strange. That's what people who didn't grow up in it can't picture. It wasn't fire and brimstone; it wasn't an obvious set of rules that were clearly wrong. It was choirs and casseroles, and people who'd show up at our door the day we got sick. The love was *real*. And that is exactly why it worked. You don't rattle the bars of a cage that feels like your own mother's kitchen.

But underneath the warmth ran a quiet rule, one I had only started seeing recently as a father staring at my own teenage boys: **tell them what to do; don't teach them to choose.** Choosing

leads to danger. A child who learns to think for himself might get it *wrong*, might *sin*, and we could never allow our children to sin. So my parents didn't raise explorers; they taught obedience. Safer to hand a boy the whole map and forbid him to wander than to trust that the God who made him might actually meet him out on the road.

To be clear, I felt none of this weight as a boy. The tiredness and the emptiness came later, in my thirties, when the sea of belonging had drained out and left me standing on the bare floor of it, still going through the motions, still singing the hymns, wondering why my own soul had gone so quiet. But as a kid? I was happy. Genuinely happy. Fast asleep and dreaming beautiful dreams. That's the cruelest thing about the most comfortable lie: it never hurts going down. It only hurts when you finally wake up.

And it wasn't only that I loved having all the answers, and it also wasn't only the belonging. It was also that it all logically sounded true. Deeply, warmly, unmistakably true. I have to say this plainly, because it's the piece people who've never been inside a thing like this aren't able to accurately picture, the piece that makes the whole deception work: **we weren't faking it. The experiences were real.** When I prayed, I felt God answer, a warmth, a peace, a presence I had no other words for but *God*. When I studied the doctrine, every intricate piece clicked into the next until the whole vast machine of it made breathtaking sense, and I was a boy who lived in his head and loved a system with an answer for everything. I also *saw* things: genuine things, miracles worked through the hands of the people around me, and sometimes through my own two hands. How do you deny someone selling you "God's one true church" when you have knelt in it and *felt* Him, watched Him move, seemingly, seen the logic hold at every seam? You don't. You lean in, just like I leaned in with my whole heart, because I loved the way it felt, and the way it felt was not a lie.

Here's the little trap hiding under the brush, and it took me most of my life to see it. Picture standing in front of a stained-glass window. Real sunlight pours through it, and you can stand there and feel the actual warmth of it on your face. The colors are genuinely beautiful, majestic, gracious; it can move you to tears, and the tears are *real*. But the window is not the sun. It is a picture of the light, cut and colored by an artist's hand, and it only ever lets the shades it was designed to allow through. You can spend a whole life warmed, inside and out, by that magnificent glass window, certain you're standing in the presence of heaven, but in reality you would be standing, the entire time, in one artist's rendition of it.

That was me. I had mistaken the radiant windows for the source of the heat. I felt real warmth and gave the credit to the glass. Similarly, when you look into a mirror, you see what you already want to see. When you feel warmth like from the sun, you assume the source is genuine. When someone hands you something that *feels* beautiful and true, surely it must *be* true. Unless it is something so close to the Source that it acts like the Source, feels like the Source, and looks like the Source, and simply isn't.

I wouldn't understand for decades what I know now: that God never once asked me to feel for Him through a pane of colored glass, or to search for His face looking through a window. He was never in the window or in any other reflection. He is the Light just on the *other* side of it. And nearer even than that, He has been *inside* me the whole time, the one true Source, the only well that never runs dry; He waited for me to stop staring at the beautiful glass and simply turn to look directly at Him. The power to see was never in the window, and it was never mine. It was His, and it was already within me. But that's the far end of the story. And we are still near the beginning, where the glass is beautiful, and I am certain it is God.

But under all that certainty, a second engine was running, quieter, and colder. Fear. That was the two-part system I was raised inside: earning out in front, and fear running underneath it. Because if there were hundreds of things I had to do, there were dozens I couldn't. And if I missed one, did one thing I wasn't supposed to, or failed at another I was supposed to, that was *sin*, and sin made me *unworthy* of the very heaven I was breaking myself to earn. So I kept going. Kept trying. Kept doing all the things everyone around me agreed I should do, because the alternative was to fall off the ladder, and I had never once seen what it would cost me to get off.

And the stakes could not have been higher, because the stakes were *everything*. Not a bad grade. Not a hard year. My **eternity**, where I would spend it, and who I would spend it with, hung on the decisions of an ordinary, fumbling kid. Every little choice was a lever on forever. One sin, one *real* one, and it would all be lost. Not for a while. But for eternity.

For me, “lost” wasn’t just a state of mind—it had a face, and it was always a sad one. It meant I would be cut off from my eternal family, the people I loved the most, gone from me across an eternity of time, because “*families are forever*” came with fine print: only the worthy ones, only the ones who earned it, all the way to the end, after doing all the things they told me I needed to do. It meant I’d be alone. And most of all (this was the one that could stop my breath), it meant I would be **without God, forever**. Because that was the teaching, said to me plainly, more times than I can count: God and His Son could not, and *would* not, dwell in the presence of anyone who didn’t keep *all* of the rules to make it to the highest heaven. I was taught about a God that is too holy to stand near a sinner, which, if you’re keeping score, is every human who has ever lived. So the thing a boy actually absorbed, underneath the lovely words and a beautiful picture of glass, was this: *God is in the room, but only until you slip. Then He’s gone, and it’s your fault, and you’ll have to earn Him back.*

Can you feel the weight of that? Because I carried it for decades. The entire world, the whole of forever, my eternity, balanced on my own small, undeveloped shoulders. Everything was up to me. Every belief had to be *their* belief, or it was wrong; every step *their* step, or it was off the path. Like Atlas with a globe on his back. Except no one told Atlas the globe was his own eternal soul, and that he'd earned the job of carrying it, simply by being born.

I would not learn until much later that the God I was so terrified of losing had spent the whole of history doing the *exact opposite* of what I'd been told: that the entire point of Jesus was a God who could not stay away from sinners. But that's getting ahead of the story. For now, in the story, I'm just a kid holding up my own globe.

Looking back, there's one word that accurately described my state—one I couldn't have said then, because I didn't know there was anything else to be but this: **captive**. I was taught not to make my own choices. I couldn't follow what felt true in my own chest, because my chest wasn't a thing I was allowed to trust. And that's the part that took me longest to forgive: the compass they handed me to navigate my entire life was branded with these five letters, **S-H-A-M-E**. That word, along with guilt, fear, and self-loathing, was what I was trained to listen for. That low, sick feeling was how I knew if I was worthy. If I felt it, I knew I was off the path. Returning to the two-part system, it didn't just run on earning; it ran on the **fear** of never having **earned** enough.



I can still see the office.

I was just twelve years old. A big room, reverent and quiet, the kind of hush that makes a kid sit up straight. On the walls, pictures

of Christ (the soft, handsome, backlit Christ we all knew), and beside Him, framed just as large, the men. The prophet. His counselors. The highest calling there was in the church, faces we were raised to follow and look up to and praise almost the way we praised the Lord hanging right next to them. I never once noticed, back then, how strange it was to hang men on the same wall as God.

Across the desk sat a bishop. I couldn't tell you his name. There would be dozens of them across both my childhood and as an adult, good men, all playing the same role, all asking the same questions from the same chair. I want to be fair to them: I felt love from all of them, and they believed they were playing a part in representing Jesus to help save my soul.

I'd hit puberty about a year before. My body was changing, and I was doing what nearly every boy on earth does, exploring it, alone, behind a closed door, with no idea what any of it meant. Nobody had told me. My parents loved me and could not, for the life of them, talk to me about it; the closest I got to a conversation was a cartoon book handed to me and a "let me know if you have any questions" from my parent. A perfect snapshot of how much room there was for that subject in my childhood home. So I was twelve, and ashamed, and entirely on my own to sit with it.

And then a grown man I barely knew looked me in the eye, across that big desk, under those pictures, and asked me about it. Masturbation. Pornography. Named them plainly, as sins, and waited. The questions went straight past my face and into my soul, and I *knew* what I'd been doing was on the forbidden list.

So I lied.

And I want to be honest about *how* I lied, because honesty is the whole point. It wasn't panic. It was a *calculation*. I can still feel the weight of that moment climbing, second by second, the question just hanging there in the quiet of the large room, and my

twelve-year-old mind racing through every possible answer and where each one led. *Which of these gets me out of this room? Which one costs me the least?* In a handful of seconds, I did the math, and I chose. I took the easy road. I chose not to sit in the discomfort. I chose to run from the pain of being embarrassed, of being *known*, and I planted my feet inside the lie as if it were solid ground.

On the outside, I was flawless: a smile on my innocent face, my head nodding with quiet confidence, every word in its right order. On the inside, the instant the lie left my mouth, I went hollow. I instantly felt like a small fraud sitting in a big chair. And some part of me, the part that always knows, understood that this was not the end of anything. It was the *beginning*. I had a lifetime of these rooms ahead of me, man after man across desk after desk, and the same question would find me in every one of them. *Where does the lie end?* Not, it turned out, for a very, very long time.

Because in that chair I chose a road. Not the road of pain, accountability, and growth. That road was too steep for a twelve-year-old boy, and no one had ever shown me how to walk it. I chose the other one, the one that got me out of there the quickest. The road of shame and guilt. And that single choice, made by a boy who just wanted out of an uncomfortable chair, would be the block in my spiritual growth for the next thirty years. I walked out “worthy,” with a fresh pit in my stomach, and no idea I’d be digesting that same pit for most of my life.

That’s where the masks began. And here’s the thing about masks: once you put on the first one, you never stop adjusting it; you just keep adding layers. Every interview, every lie, another coat of paint, another disguise troweled over the face underneath, until I honestly did not know who I was anymore. A liar. A fraud. A con man running a con on everyone, myself and my God included. And the whole time I was blind, completely blind to the peace and the beauty and the strength that had always been sitting there

available to me, untouched, under all that paint: the true things God had put me together with, and that shame had simply painted over.

Here is the truest way I know to say it. I was a lion, but a caged one, pacing, withering, beaten down at every turn, dead certain I'd been locked in by someone else. But the lock on that cage had a key in it the whole time. And I was the one who had hung it there, at twelve years old, in a room with Christ's picture on the wall. I wanted out of that cage more than almost anything. I just wasn't willing, not for thirty years, to reach up and turn the key I'd placed there myself.

That was the deal I struck that day, before I had the words for it, the one that would run my life: **it was easier to lie and keep earning toward an empty promise, one made to me by men, than to tell the truth and be known.**



And I need to be clear about something, because it changes everything that comes after: **no one forced me.** I was taught it by example, by parents and teachers and friends and every person I loved, but I *chose* it. I drank it down with both hands. I wasn't a prisoner rattling the bars; I was a true believer who *loved* his chains and called them wings. That's mine to own. It has to be, or the freedom at the end of this story means nothing.

And here is the thing I couldn't see then, the thing it took me years and a rescue to understand. So, I'll only whisper it here, and let it come all the way out later: **this was the most dangerous kind of lost there is. Because it never once looked like being lost. It looked like being loved.**

The enemy of my soul is not stupid. He didn't come at me the obvious way. No stealing, no killing, nothing I could point at and fight. *That* I would have fought. He came soft instead, gentle,

reverent even. He handed me a *picture* of Jesus, not the living Source, just a reflection of Him, close enough to kneel to, and let me spend thirty years adoring the reflection. It was like falling asleep at the wheel on a long, tedious road, a hymn playing low in the background, my own lips singing all the right words, and feeling **nothing**. No alarm. No wrongness. Just the slow, warm, comfortable dimming. Until one day I wasn't falling asleep anymore. I simply *was* asleep. Emotionally dead. Spiritually numb. Singing about a Savior I had never actually met, and certain I was the most found man in the room.

That is the ultimate deception. It isn't the lie that looks like a lie. It's the one that looks like the truth, sounds like a hymn, and puts you gently to sleep, without a warning strip to drive over when you get off course. There is a verse I could not have heard back then, and it is the one I would eventually wake up inside of: "Awake, you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Ephesians 5:14 (WEB).

And here is the thing that made the cage impossible to leave, the thing I couldn't have explained to you then, because you can't describe water to a fish. **The religion wasn't part of my life. It was my life.** All of it. There was no "me" standing off to the side of it, no private self who believed one thing while the church believed another. My worth was its scoreboard. My friends were its members. My family was bound to me by its promises. My future (this life and every life after) was its map. My mornings, my calendar, the very voice in my head that told me whether I was good, all of it issued from the same source. I didn't *have* a faith. I *was* a faith, wearing a person.

So understand what leaving would have meant, if I'd even been able to imagine it. It wasn't just about changing my mind about a doctrine. **It was losing my entire world in a single motion.** The family who would judge me. The friends who would vanish. The identity I'd spent every year of my life building. The certainty

that held every other thing in place. And, I truly believed, God Himself, and my seat in eternity beside everyone I loved would vanish in thin air. To pull one thread was to unravel the whole garment. And I *was* the garment.

That's why the sleeping stay asleep. It isn't that I never felt a flicker to feel something different. It's that the price of following that flicker to be different would cost me everything and everyone, all at once. So I did what a captive with a comfortable cell does. I rolled over. I was told the flicker was the enemy, or my own weakness, or a test of my faith. And I went back to sleep, because being asleep surrounded by everyone I loved felt so much safer than being awake and utterly alone.

I didn't know yet that there was one thing in all of it I could never actually lose, and that He was the only thing worth waking up for. But that comes later. For now, in the story, I have everything to lose. So I keep my eyes closed, roll over and I stay asleep.

Everything is earned, the world says, and my religion said it in bold. Status. Money. Respect. Honor. A seat in the top heaven. **"No one is born with everything, you have to earn it."**

I believed that with my whole heart for the first four decades of my life.

I had no idea it was the exact lie I'd spend the rest of it unlearning.

But before any of that unlearning, there was a great deal more sleeping left to do.



I spent two full years of my life as a missionary for that church.

There was never really a question. In the world I come from, a boy didn't turn nineteen and *decide* whether to hand two years of

his life to the religion; he turned nineteen and *went*. It was expected the way breathing was expected. And still, because I've promised to be honest about all of it, I *chose* it. Not because anyone forced me, but because it was who I was, and I had nothing else. The religion was the only self I'd ever been issued. So when the call came to serve, I said yes with my whole heart, and I meant every word of it.

They sent me far from home, to a country whose language I didn't yet speak, for two years. First to a training center, where for three months I learned enough of that language to preach in it, and, just as carefully, learned to be fluent in the *other* language, the religious one: the memorized scriptures, the memorized lessons, the exact words in the exact order meant to open a stranger's heart. My assignment was simple, and it was total. Convert. Baptize. As many souls as I could, in the time I had.

And here is the part I can barely stand to write, the part it took me twenty years to even see: **I was no longer only the deceived. I had become one of the deceivers.** Door to door, in a language not my own, I taught hundreds of people that there was one true church, one man God had chosen to found it, one narrow way, and that to stand outside it was to forfeit your family and your soul to an eternity of separation and damnation. I handed strangers the very fear that had been handed to me. I told them, gently, reverently, with tears in my own eyes, that the God who loved them would *leave* them if they didn't do all of this, exactly this. And it *worked*. It always works. Fear is the most reliable persuasion on earth. More than fifty people walked down into the water because a sincere, sleeping twenty-year-old had convinced them that earning their way to God was the only road home.

I couldn't be more ashamed of that now, on the far side of understanding: a boy so sure he was saving souls, spreading his own cage to strangers and calling it good news. And yet I want to

be gentle with him, too, that kid, because he meant it with everything he had. He wasn't a con man, in this sense. He was a true believer, doing the most loving thing he knew how to do, with a map that was wrong. He just didn't know it was wrong. Not yet. Not for twenty more years. Back then, I was proud of some of the things I chose to do and teaching others what I truly believed was one of them.

I came home from the mission field in the summer of 2000, and there was no landing, no pause, no breath. Just the next rung, already waiting. I walked in the door and straight into the whirlwind, the machinery of the whole thing. My sister was getting married that very week, taking the exact step that sat at the top of my own list. *My* list, I called it, though it had been written for me as soon as I was born into that religion. Because everyone knew the order: come home from your mission, and get married. Fast. Every leader said it. Every parent nodded it. A returned missionary was a marriageable man, and a marriageable man did not wait to find his bride.

And there was a quieter engine under that one, the kind nobody said out loud but everybody knew was running. I had never had sex. It was on the list of forbidden things, guarded harder than almost anything else. If I wanted that, and I was twenty-one and alive, there was exactly one door, and that door was marriage. So I walked through it. Young. Nowhere near ready. Completely out of my depth as a man no one had ever taught me how to be. I got married, started trying to build a family, and put on the face of a worthy man of God, and underneath all of it, something enormous was still missing, and I had no name for the absence.

I had also brought something home with me from serving a mission. Not because of the religion at all. Because of my own curiosity. I chose to explore further the glimpses of nudity that caught my eye on every street corner I walked for two straight

years. I chose an addiction, one that would numb me from all the other shame and fear. Pornography. I kept it in the dark for many years. Just one more thing to hide. One more lie to tell in the next interview, one more secret to carry into next Sunday, so I could stay “worthy” enough to keep earning my way toward a heaven that they said was always just one confession and a set of disciplinary actions away. The twelve-year-old in the bishop’s office had grown up, put on a suit, and married his bride, and was still doing the identical things: lying to stay in good standing, hiding to keep belonging, certain that being known was more dangerous than being lost.

I didn’t know it that summer, but I had just lit the fuse on a **twenty-four-year addiction**, and stepped across the threshold into the worst stretch of my entire life. The part where I was completely, utterly lost. Separated, I was certain, from my Father. From God, due to my own choices, not His.

Which was the cruelest joke of all, though I wouldn’t get the punchline for over two decades. Because the religion had always threatened me with precisely this: *sin, and you will be cut off from God*. And here I was, sinning in secret, feeling every inch of that separation, certain I’d earned my own exile. It never once occurred to me that the God I thought I’d been cut off from had never moved at all. That He was already there in the dark with me. That the whole idea of a God who leaves the moment you fail was the lie. *The* lie I had first been handed in a room with His picture hung on the wall.

But I’m getting ahead of the story again.

For now, this is where it all lands, the deal I’d struck as a boy and would keep for the better part of my life: **it was always easier to lie and stay eligible, and to keep earning that empty promise, the one that had been made to me by men, than to be truthful and be known.**

And so, married, hiding, performing, and profoundly alone inside a life that looked from the outside like the very model of a faithful man, I began the long walk into Lost.

Movement Two: Lost

Here is the strangest thing about those years, and I need you to hold both halves of it at once, because I was living it, two separate lives, like a double-sided buffalo nickel: two different faces stamped into a single coin.

On one side of that coin lived a man who loved to serve. I mean that. It wasn't an act, or at least not only an act. I was the guy you called when you had to move something heavy, a couch, a piano, a whole house full of boxes on a Saturday morning. I would drop everything and be there to help. I taught classes on Sundays, to grown men, to teenagers, to children, and I was good at it, and I meant every word I said. I set a genuinely good example of how a religious man was supposed to live. At least on the outside, I was exactly what the whole system was built to produce.

And almost every Sunday, I would drive home from church with a fresh promise burning in my chest. This week will be different. This week I will control the urges. This week I will not reach for pornography to escape and to hide. Over the years I built myself an entire library of those promises, shelves and shelves of them, and here is the part that still aches: I made every one of them sincerely, and I broke every one of them, too. It wasn't that I didn't want to keep them. It was that I did not know how. No one had ever taught me how. They had only ever taught me the rules, and the shame for breaking them, and neither of those has ever set a single soul free.

So I wore the masks. I put on the costume of the Christian man I so badly wanted to be, knowing even as I fastened that belt around me, that it wouldn't hold for more than a day or two. Because behind closed doors, late at night, alone in the quiet of my own house, there were a thousand opportunities to become the other face on the other side of the nickel, the one I had actually, secretly, become. A masked spiritual crusader who fought valiantly

for everyone else and could not, for the life of him, win a single fight against himself. The mask and the cape looked good on me, though. Didn't they? Everyone else thought so.

Let me show you the machine of it, because the machine is the whole tragedy.

It always started with conviction. Real conviction, white-hot desire to be worthy, to be clean, to actually be the man in the costume this time. And then the battle would come, the way it always came, and I would lose, the way I always lost. And afterward the shame, always a little heavier than the time before, a fresh coat over all the old ones. And then, because a man cannot carry that much shame and still get out of bed in the morning, the justification. I got very good at the justification. *This is my biggest sin, really my only one. I keep every other rule. I do everything else right. Surely God can let this one thing slide.* And then I would revisit the promises, tweak them slightly, tell myself that this new version, this new resolve, this new system would be the one that finally worked. And then I would loop. And loop. And loop.

Twenty-four years of that loop.

I got so dizzy I forgot I was spinning. That's the thing nobody tells you about a loop that runs long enough: you stop noticing it's a loop. It just becomes the daily weather forecast, the shape of every day, the thing I had become. For years I didn't even feel it as a struggle anymore. I was simply stuck, running the same circle so many thousands of times that it had worn a groove I no longer had the strength or desire to climb out of.

And somewhere in there, quietly, I completely gave up on myself and stopped trying to fight it altogether. It was easier to stay in that rut than try to climb out every day and fall right back in without fail. I want to be honest about that, because it's the darkest part. It wasn't that the addiction finally beat me in some

dramatic last stand. It's that I gave up. I gave up on myself. I gave up on my relationships. And most of all, I gave up on God, on the very idea that He could ever, or would ever, reach down into a hole this deep and this old and this self-dug and pull me out. Doubt, deceit, and destruction. That was the trinity I actually served now, and I chose all three of them, freely, every single day.

If you had asked me, in one of those late-night private moments, who I was, I would not have had to think about the answer. I had it memorized. *Unworthy. Not strong enough. Not important enough for even God to bother saving.* I knew He could, but why hadn't He?

That was the man under the masks. And the pendulum was still swinging out.



But why? That's the question that took me two decades and a rescue to finally ask. Not *how do I stop*, which I'd asked ten thousand times and never once received the answer. *Why?* Why did a man who genuinely loved God keep reaching, night after night, for the one thing he swore he hated?

Because the behavior was never really the problem, I know that now. The behavior was a flare, shot up into the dark, and when I only ever fought against the flare, I would be fighting forever. I never followed the warning signal down to the source of the fire.

So let me tell you what was actually on fire underneath.

When I finally followed my own flare all the way down, here is what I found I was reaching for. Connection. To be wanted. To be desired. But underneath that was something even quieter and more desperate: I never, ever wanted to be turned down, because rejection only fed my own self-doubt and confirmed my innermost wound of not feeling loved or wanted. So, what I was really after was control of my own desires. The when, the how, the who. It was

selfish, every bit of it, but it handed a man starving to be desired exactly what he was starving for. Pornography gave me all of it, on demand. Full control. Anyone, anytime, no risk of rejection. “She” was right there in my pocket, every hour of every day, and all I had to do was reach.

The prophet Jeremiah said it perfectly, twenty-six centuries before I was born. “*They have forsaken me, the spring of living waters, and cut them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*” Jeremiah 2:13 (WEB). That was me, exactly. I was not wrong to be thirsty. The thirst for connection, to be wanted, to feel alive, God built every bit of that into me. My sin was not the thirst. It was that I had walked away from the only spring that could quench it. I worshipped a cracked, dry cistern, drinking dusty, dirty sludge and called it the water of life. And the spring I had walked away from had already made me an offer I would not hear for another twenty years: “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” John 4:14 (WEB).

But there was a second direction to it, and this is the one I could not look at for years, because looking would have required accountability, and accountability was the one thing I was running hardest from. Because I wasn’t only reaching *toward* something. I was running *from* something too. I was running from the truth. I was running from God. I was running from having to stand still long enough to be held accountable for anything at all. And most of all, I was running from myself, from the disgust I felt every time I caught my own reflection, from the man I had become and could no longer stand to look at.

And here is the ugliest part, the part I have to say out loud because it’s true, and because someone reading this is doing the very same thing right now. I was numbing the pain of an unhappy marriage, an unhappy life, and the piles of shame that were

exponentially growing by the day. A man running that hard from accountability cannot afford to let the pain be his own fault. He needs somewhere else to put it. So I put it on her. My wife became the easy target, the reason; I blamed her for it all. It wasn't her fault. I know that now with a clarity that still makes me wince. It was never her fault. But blame is what you reach for when you've decided you'll do anything except turn and face yourself, and I reached for it as reliably as I reached for the screen.

And I owe her more than that sentence, so let me finish it honestly.

I have not spoken to her since our divorce in 2004. Not once. There has been no repair, no hard conversation, no amends. Until I sat down to write this, I am not sure I had ever seriously considered that there might be one owed. She is not part of my life, and I have no reason to think she is waiting for a phone call from the man who left her more than twenty years ago.

I am not going to dress that up. What I will say is this: she married a man who had a costume where a person should have been, and she did not deserve it. The distance between us was never her doing. It was mine, and I built it every night in the dark for the years we were together. And when it finally came apart, I was the one who left.

Whether I ever pick up that phone is something I am still sitting with. I have learned by now not to promise what I have not yet done.

That was the fire under the flare. Not lust. A legitimate, God-given thirst, dragged to a broken well by a man who was running from the truth so fast, and blaming everyone but himself so completely, that he had forgotten there was ever another spring.



I have been officially married two different times. The third time is a little more complicated. I'll tell you about the third much later, because she is not part of this dark stretch of the story. She is part of how it ends. But the first two marriages belong here, in the dark, and I owe them the truth.

Here it is, and it took me years to be able to say it without flinching: I was never truly intimate with either of my first two wives. Not really, not how I know intimacy now. Not how I now experience God's true intention for a man and a woman to be. *"Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother, and will join with his wife, and they will be one flesh"* Genesis 2:24 (WEB). Sad, isn't it? It is. It's one of the saddest things I know about my own life. I spent twenty-four years trying to become one flesh with a fantasy world, through a screen held by my own hand.

Let me be precise, because precision is a kind of respect. I never once physically cheated on either of them. Not a single time. But I absolutely cheated on them emotionally and mentally hundreds, maybe thousands of times, in the dark, alone, with a screen. And the deeper betrayal wasn't even that. It was this: I never gave myself to either of them. I never let myself be fully known. And still I stood there, day after day, asking them to give themselves fully to me. It was the most unbalanced scale in the world. On my side, a man in a full-body costume of perfection, every inch of him covered, not a seam showing. On their side, a woman straining through every lens she could find, trying to catch even one honest glimpse of the real me through the dozens of layers I had troweled over my own face. I asked them to give me everything, and to trust a man who was, in every way that counted, a stranger sleeping beside them by his own careful design.

From the outside, the two marriages could not have been more different.

I walked into the first at twenty-two years young, and I do mean young. No experience. No wisdom. No one had ever sat me

down and taught me the first thing about being a man, let alone a husband. We were two kids, and we fought the way scared kids fight, mostly about money, because money was one thing we could name, and the real thing—the emotional distance my own hiding had created—never was.

The second marriage was, on the surface, another world. I was older, and so was she. We were more mature. We had fun. We loved each other, genuinely loved each other, and we both wanted the same beautiful thing: a healthy, happy, faithful family. That's how it was meant to go. Tanner and Caden came out of that marriage, and they are the best thing I have ever been part of building.

But there was one constant between the two marriages, one variable that never changed no matter who was standing across from me. Me. My addiction. My shame. My bone-deep discomfort with ever being raw, real, or seen. The lies only deepened. The shame that had first taken root in that bishop's office, all those years before, had swelled from a pool into an entire ocean, and I need to be honest with you: I was going to drown in it. It was no longer a question of whether, but when.

Because without ever meaning to, I had run the very same con on both of these women. I had convinced each of them that I had it all together. That she would be safe with me, body and soul. And it was a lie, the cruelest kind, because I could not even keep myself safe. I didn't trust myself, so how on earth was I going to trust her? I didn't honor myself. I didn't serve myself. By the end, I could not even love myself. And you cannot give another human being what you do not have. It isn't stinginess; it's arithmetic. There was nothing in the account, so every withdrawal bounced. For sixteen combined years, across two marriages and the two boys inside the second, I failed at the one thing on this earth I most wanted to be good at: being a faithful husband, a great example to my kids, and a safe, loving place where people could trust.

That's the part that still costs me something to write. Not the addiction or the lies. The people and relationships it cost me along the way.



Movement One promised you this part, so let me keep that promise.

The emptiness inside me didn't arrive all at once. It seeped in the way water seeps into a boat, so slowly that for years I never noticed I was riding lower and lower in the water. And I want to be fair to myself here, because there was real good in me, and I could feel it. Underneath all those masks, I always sensed there was a good man in there somewhere. I had no idea where he'd gone, but I could feel him, faintly, like a heartbeat under the floorboards. I knew I had a lot to offer. So I spent an enormous amount of energy offering it.

I became charming. Funny. The one who planned the adventure, who lit up the room, who was the life of every party. I could walk into any situation, meet a total stranger, and have them liking me inside of five minutes. I was good at being liked. And here is what I genuinely believed for years: that all of it, the charisma and the laughter and the fun, would feed me. That being loved by the room would finally fill the hole in my soul. It never did. Not once. I was an empty vase stuffed with a gorgeous armful of flowers, and every one of those flowers was wilting almost as fast as I could put them in, because a vase with no water cannot keep a single blossom alive. I had everything but the one thing. Jesus was the well the whole time, and I was out wandering the desert, going door to door, person to person, party to party, looking for water absolutely everywhere except the one Source who could actually quench my thirst. My own Creator, from a place I never expected Him to be. Yet He has been there the entire time.

I had grown so used to the numbness that I stopped registering it as numbness. It came every single time I acted out, that grey nothing afterward, but I had learned to paint right over it with the next bit of fun, the next trip, the next adventure, telling myself the fun was healing me when the fun was only a brighter, more adventurous mask.

It wasn't until after my second divorce, and after three more years of empty, meaningless relationships that went nowhere and meant nothing, that the truth finally broke through the noise. Something major was missing. And when I forced myself to look at what it was, the answer was not complicated. It was me. I was missing. The good man under the floorboards had gone so quiet I could barely hear him at all anymore. And it wasn't only people I had lost connection with. It was God.

Here is the difference that made these the truly darkest hours. It wasn't that God had gone quiet. It's that I had given up on Him. Somewhere in all those years of losing the same fight ten thousand times, I had quietly concluded that He was never going to save me from this, that He couldn't, or wouldn't, and so, one finger at a time, I let go. I stopped praying. I stopped believing. I stopped hoping. And eventually, God help me, I stopped caring about my own soul almost entirely. That is what a drowning man does once he has decided no one is coming. He stops fighting the current.

And into the space where prayer used to be, I poured blame. I blamed God for not helping me. I blamed Him for the hard things in my life. I blamed every person and every circumstance I could reach, for all of it, because that was the one skill the whole system had trained into me to perfection: blame-shift. Point at someone else. Never, ever take accountability, because accountability is hard, and in that world the failure was always somebody else's rule to enforce and somebody else's fault to carry.

So there I was. Charming and dead. The life of the party and a stranger to my own soul. Wilting in a vase with no water, blaming

the drought on everyone but the man who had walked away from the well. I had let go of every last tassel. And a man who has let go of all hope, who has stopped praying, stopped caring whether his own soul lives or dies, is not standing on solid ground. He is standing on a trapdoor.

My trapdoor was about to open. But before I talk about the moment it did, I want to make something else very clear. I have purposefully and intentionally detailed two different areas in my life when I chose to lie, when I chose to act on things that I knew were against what I believed to be true. Those decisions are on me. I now take full accountability for my choices, and as a man of my word, I will never again place blame on anyone for my actions, not even me. There is no room for blame or fault in accountability. Those choices were mine and mine alone. It took me boldly running out of the obscurity to see that little sliver of enlightenment.



Now back to the door I was standing on. A trapdoor can hold a man's weight for a long while before it finally gives way, and I stood on mine for thirty years before it did. Let me tell you how I spent them, because it is the part of this whole story that I am least proud of.

For the first time in my entire life, I was actively choosing to avoid God.

Sit with how strange that is for a man like me. I had been aimed at Him, or at least at a painting of Him, from the day I was born. I had never made a single decision without running it past the system first. And now, out here in the dark, I was thinking for myself for the very first time, and the first thing I did with that freedom was turn my back on the light, on purpose. Not one prayer, for many years. Not one. Just decision after decision after decision, every one of them built on the same handful of words:

what I wanted. What I thought was best for me. What I could finally do for myself that no one else had ever done for me.

How often are we sitting in the dark with a light switch, inches from our hand, and still, we don't reach for it? I didn't reach at all. I sat down in my self-made pit and made myself a home in it. I invented my own small ways to feel something, to reward myself, to hand myself the things I was certain I was owed. I put the same old masks back on, except this time I wasn't hiding them. I was showing them off. Drinking with my friends, throwing away every last ounce of virtue I had ever held in my heart, doing everything I wanted to, all of it, my own way, and daring anyone to say a word about it.

I was like a bird that had finally found its wings and was proud of them, far too proud to notice I was dropping out of the sky faster than those wings could ever hold me up. I stopped caring what anyone else thought of me. Then I stopped caring about what I thought of myself. Every hand of connection that reached in my direction, I dodged. I avoided everyone. I avoided myself. I avoided every good thing in my path, because every good thing asked something true of me, and true was the one thing I had no history of being.

None of it felt like living. Not one day of it. It was survival, start to finish, the bare mechanics of dragging myself from one grey morning to the next. That was all it was. That was all I was.

As I sit and write this part of my story in more detail than I ever would have thought would be comfortable, I ask myself this question: *Were my outcomes solely based on those specific acts of defiance?* I try to imagine my life and what would have become of me without those two specific areas where I chose to lie and hide from God. Yes, the day-to-day would have been exponentially different, but were the words above my cage related only to those two choices? Looking back, the words written on my cage were

Guilt, Shame, Pornography, and Lies. But, what was the cage built from? D-I-S-T-R-A-C-T-I-O-N!

Those are the letters I see now. Written on every board, every pipe, every nail. The cage I learned to survive in was never built by the actions I chose to embrace as comfort. It was built by a much more powerful influencer, the original creator of ultimate distraction. Satan.

Distraction is synonymous with deception. It is not an effect of choice; it's a creation of intent. The author of the ultimate deception has had his plan in place since almost the beginning of time. Lucifer, the "shining one, the son of the dawn" (Isaiah 14:12, WEB), one of the most beautiful of God's creations, wanted to have his own plan. Satan fell away from God because he got **distracted** with his own agenda. Lucifer enticed Adam and Eve with the exact same distracting plan, and it worked. *"For God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* Genesis 3:5 (WEB).

The serpent created a **distraction** of lack for Adam and Eve and led them to believe that they didn't have all the light and knowledge that God had, therefore lacking it. As people, when we feel like we don't have something we desire, what do we do? We figure out a way to gain that thing we don't currently have. Lucifer wanted to be God; Adam and Eve wanted to be like God and know good and evil. I wanted to be loved and desired. We are all susceptible to **distraction**.

A mindset of lack, or scarcity, is only the first step to the pit I had dug. Certainty was the next step. *"You won't really die," the serpent said to the woman.* Genesis 3:4 (WEB). Lucifer offered certainty to Adam and Eve that they "won't really die." He offers certainty in the religion that taught me that "this is the only true path to God, and the only true church." Certainty in self is the same distraction Satan, Adam and Eve, and I all fell for.

Perfectionism is next. Talk about a **distraction**. “You will be like God,” sounds like an amazing goal, right? Becoming perfect, like the only one who is. That was the end goal for every person in the religion I was raised in. Do all the right things, don’t sin, earn your way to the highest part of heaven, and you will become like God. That was the promise. The same promise the serpent gave to Adam and Eve. A promise he will never be able to secure.

The promise to become perfect was always on the table, for as long as I remember. And all I needed to do was rely on myself to become it. “For God knows that in the day **you** eat it...” Genesis 3:5 (WEB). Who was it up to? According to the serpent, it was up to Adam and Eve to take it upon themselves (even though they knew it was against God’s instructions) **to eat**. It was always logically obvious growing up that my progress, my end place, wherever I wanted to be in heaven, was solely and completely up to... me.

Lucifer was cast out of heaven for his plan. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden for following the same distracting plan. And I, and my soul, were separated from the presence of My Creator for being taught that following that same plan would somehow end up different for me.

The Ultimate Deception is believing that any of us have a better plan than our Creator does. What is His plan? To fully depend on Him and Him alone. Look to Him in all things. Surrender to Him. Lose your life, in Him, and your life will be found. Matthew 10:39 (WEB). Nothing, absolutely nothing, is up to us. It is all up to Him, the only one able to save us fully from our own demise of earning.

So, what am I trying to get at here? What I have come to realize is this: I didn’t choose this cage; I was born in it. The one with big letters on the door, and initials on every piece.

DISTRACTION

Yes, I drove many of the pain-sculpted nails in with all of my life choices, and I do intentionally take accountability for them. But I can't help but ask the question. Even living a "perfect life" in a religion built around distraction, would I ever have been truly filled with the peace, love, acceptance, and oneness I truly desired? I can honestly say, I know I wouldn't have felt anything like what I now experience daily if I had chosen to stay in that cage. The addictions would have been replaced by another distraction. Shame would have come in one form or another because running on a treadmill that never stops is exactly how Lucifer **distracts** us with all the rules until we stumble on just one. Then, we get tired, beaten up, slow our legs, and eventually fall; no matter what the distraction is, it's still a distraction. "For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." James 2:10 (WEB). That is the trap, stated plainly, and I lived inside it for three decades.



And then, in September of 2022, God did the thing He so often does when a man has stopped looking for Him. He did not send a lightning bolt or a voice out of the clouds. He sent a person.

Remember the third marriage I promised you, the one I said did not belong in this dark stretch but to how the story ends? Her name is Raine. Raine is my wife. Here is the complicated part I owed you: we have not legally married. No license. No paper. Not yet. And I call her my wife anyway, without flinching, because we honor each other through who we truly are and through the experiences we've had together, and through our personal and combined commitment to each other physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I signed the paper twice. Both times I stood at an altar in good standing, fully worthy on the record, and never once gave the woman across from me the man behind the mask. I had the form and none of the substance. This time I have given her all of me, and the paper is the only thing we are missing.

I will spend the back half of this book telling you what she truly is to me, because she is the whole reason I am able to. But before she was any of that, before she was my wife, she was simply an angel who began planting seeds in me from the moment we met, quietly, patiently, never once forcing a single one into the ground.

And the seeds were the hardest thing I had ever been asked to hold. Gently, across a hundred ordinary conversations, she started to lift up in front of me a possibility I had spent forty years being physically unable to look at: that the religion I had given my entire life to was not God's at all. That the thing I had served, defended, preached across another country, and built the whole of my identity upon might be the very deception I had been asleep inside the whole time. The enemy's masterpiece, cut and colored to look exactly like heaven.

I refused. Of course I refused. You do not tell a man the house he was born in is not a house at all but a trap, and expect him to stroll calmly out into the yard. I fought it. I dug in. For nearly two years those seeds sat in the ground while I did everything in my power to keep them from ever breaking the surface. Because if she was right, then I had not merely wasted my own life. I had spent it walking other people onto the same leaf-covered trapdoor.

But seeds planted by an angel do not rot. They wait. And after almost two years of fighting them with everything I had, I finally agreed to take a look and all of a sudden, they all sprouted at once, and I could not push them back down.

I had no idea that a chest full of seeds could ever grow into an entire forest of beautiful and vibrant life. It didn't take long either; about a year after those seeds started sprouting, I would sit down and put every piece and every lesson of the deception into words, so that maybe one other sleeping person might wake a little sooner than I did. The moment they first cracked open inside of me, I had no words at all. I only had the ground giving way.

Movement Three: He Left the 99

For the first time in as long as I remember, I truly felt His hand reach for me, and there was no dark water at all. There was a warm bath, and a thin blade of light.

Let me back up a bit, because the timing is the whole point. It was December of 2024; I was forty-five years old. The seeds Raine had planted a couple years prior were up and growing now, and for the first time in my adult life I felt I was beginning to come awake, both emotionally and spiritually. And the strangest thing about coming awake is what you finally become willing to admit. For twenty-four years I had carried the addiction, and if I am honest about why I never once handed it to God, the answer is not a flattering one. Some part of me did not want to. I had grown comfortable being a victim to it. I liked how it felt. I had decided, somewhere along the way, that this was my one flaw, and that a man doing everything else right was allowed to keep exactly one. So I never brought it up with Him. I was too ashamed to start the one conversation I had been dodging for more than two decades.

And then, with no warning, it was simply time. It came before I was ready, which I have since learned is the only way it ever comes. I was lying in a warm bath, and I noticed a thin blade of bright light slipping in between the blinds and the window frame, and with nothing left in me but the truth, I fixated on that light that was nearly blinding, and I said the most desperate words I owned. Six of them. *God, I can't do this alone.*

That was all. I did not perform it. I did not earn it. I did not clean myself up first, or promise Him a single thing. I just finally told the truth, and let it be heard.

And a twenty-four-year weight fell off my shoulders in an instant. I need you to hear how total it was, because I would never have believed it if another man had told me. The barbell I had carried since I was barely grown, gone, between one breath and

the next. The white knuckles, gone. The pull to sneak off, gone. The automatic reach for the phone out of nothing but boredom, gone. Not managed. Not white-knuckled into submission. *Gone*. All of it. I felt a peace and a freedom I had never once felt in my whole life, and I felt the thing I had long since given up ever feeling again. *Him*. He had waited since I was twelve years old for me to run all the way out of my own strength, and all the way out of my own methods to quit, and say six honest words. The instant I did, He was right there, exactly as close as He had been the entire time, right in the middle of my entire being. Part of me, never separated, just waiting for me to surrender everything I am, to Him. He asked for nothing in return. I couldn't believe it. I expected a feeling of "if you promise this, or if you do that, then I'll take it from you." No such condition came. There was no bargain on the table, because there had never been one. God has never required a single thing from me in order to love me, and He never will. He does ask one thing, and it is not payment. He asks me to stop carrying what I was never built to carry, and to hand it to Him. Surrender. Look to Him in all things. Dependency by design. In forty-five years I had never felt unconditional love like I did, lying there in a warm bath and in a pool of my own tears.

Raine had already shown me that being fully known by another person was even possible. Now God was showing me it was possible with Him, too. No more mirrors. No more reflection I couldn't stand to look at. Just me and my Savior, and a lightness I had never earned and never could have earned, walking together out of a room I had been locked inside for thirty-three years.



You would think that would be the end of the story. The addiction was the thing I had always believed was my deepest problem, the root of everything wrong with me, and now it was simply gone. Surely the war was over.

It wasn't. It had barely begun. Because here is what freedom does that captivity never allows: freedom gives you eyes. With the addiction no longer running me, no longer devouring every ounce of my attention and energy, I could finally *see*. And what I began to see, slowly at first and then all at once, was that the addiction had never been the real cage at all. It was one bar of it. The cage itself was something far larger, something I had been standing inside of my entire life, something I had loved and served and defended and could not yet bring myself to name.

It would take another seven months—and it would take me all the way down to the darkest moment I have ever lived—before I finally saw what that cage had been made of, and, more importantly, why it was so hard to get out of it.

Here is what I could not have told you at the time, because I had no distance from it: to walk away from that religion was to walk away from myself. It had never been one part of my life. It was the whole house I had lived in since the day I was born. My identity, my beliefs, my history, my future, every room and every wall of me. It was everything I had ever been, and I had chosen it, over and over, with both hands. So when I finally walked out of it, I wasn't leaving a church. I was leaving *my entire identity*, every last part of the man I thought I knew, and I stepped through that door into nothing.

Have you ever seen a total solar eclipse? The moon slides across until it fits the sun's shape exactly, and the whole world goes dark in the middle of the day, and all that's left of the sun is a thin, desperate ring of light leaking around the edge of the black, lifeless object in front of the light. That's the only way I know to say it. Except I wasn't watching the eclipse from the ground. I was on the far side of it. I was standing on the dark side of the sun, in a blackness so total there wasn't even a ring of light to reach for. No hope. No direction. No Savior. Not one single hand to hold. I

looked into my future from that place, and every inch of it was dark.

As I floated in the space of complete darkness, admiring the views, the lowest and most terrifying moment of my entire life arrived.

It was July of 2025, and something in me finally cracked open the one question I had spent forty years never letting myself ask: whose influence had I actually been under this whole time? As the question landed, a dark cloud came down and split the room clean in half. Raine and I were sitting in the same tub, wrestling with this question that I couldn't avoid any longer. On one side of that black veil sat Raine, my wife, in complete and total peace. On the other side was me, in complete and total turmoil. And I could not stop the question from repeating, louder each time. *Have I been under the influence of Satan my entire life?* It made no sense at all. *How could that be? I've been serving the Lord. I've been doing all the right things. I've been earning my way this entire time.* In the space of a few short moments, I doubted every single thing I had ever been taught. I looked at Raine, and her face was half in shadow and half in light, and it was glitching, flickering in and out like a screen when the signal fails, and every person and every lesson from my entire life was glitching along with her, breaking apart right in front of me. I was questioning the reality of everything I thought I knew to be true.

Now sitting in the very darkness I described, I could only focus on one thought. It was clear and quiet, solid in the middle of all that mental chaos and spiritual warfare. The single most important thought I have ever had in my life.

Jesus will always be brighter.

And the instant it landed, I felt them. Two enormous, powerful arms, already wrapped around me from behind, tightening, pulling me down, down into a dark body of water. I could not

move. I could not speak. I have never been so terrified in all my life; I thought I was going to drown. Raine simply sat, watching it happen. And in that moment, I believed I was feeling Satan grab me one more time to pull me down.

It was only later that I understood what had actually happened. That was not one more grab. That was the first time in my entire life I realized the arms had always been there. This time, he was showing off. Satan wasn't disguising himself this time. He was showing me that I had been held in that grip since before I could remember, so comfortably, so completely, that I had never once known I was being held at all, especially by the enemy. That was the moment I knew it was true, all the way to the core of me. I had been under Lucifer's control this whole time. My whole life. Every bit of it. Just like he designed for himself in heaven, just like he got Adam and Eve, I too had been so distracted from the one being that mattered that I didn't even stop to think I could have been pointed in the wrong direction my entire life.

I have never felt so lost, so betrayed, so completely undone, as I did in the black water of that realization. Sinking. Certain I had been working for the enemy every single day. I had believed I was serving God. My results showed me exactly what I feared. The way I learned to earn God's love led me all the way to the darkest part of the universe where I couldn't even see the sun.

That is the farthest the pendulum swings. There is no darker place than that one, and I had been in it virtually my entire life without even knowing it.

And then, immediately after I uttered those words, "Jesus will always be brighter," through the black veil and the muddy water, I saw a hand.

I saw it come through the black veil and pierce the water's surface as nothing but light. The same hand that had reached into a warm bath seven months earlier, the moment I finally ran out of

my own strength, was reaching now into the deepest, darkest water there had ever been. His hand closed around my wrist, and pulled. Not gently. Firmly, the way you take hold of someone who is actually drowning. Christ's hand, reaching through the very water I was sinking in, taking me by the wrist and pulling me up and out of Lucifer's grip.

I came up gasping, back into myself, back into the warm water, in the small, ordinary bathroom where my body had been the entire time. Because that is where all of this had happened, both times. The tub had become the one place on earth I was ever fully alone and fully honest, no mask, no audience, nothing to perform, and so it was the place He kept choosing to meet me. Seven months after a twenty-four-year addiction fell off my shoulders in this very water, I was in it again, and the water had become the deep, and I had just been hauled up out of it by a hand I could not see, but will never doubt.

Raine was right there with me. She had been the whole time, resting on her side of the veil in that unbroken peace while I drowned on mine. And the first thing out of my mouth was not worship or praise. It was an accusation. I looked her dead in the face, shaking, soaked, undone, confused, still grasping for any hand I could reach, and I asked her the questions burning in me: *Why did you just sit there? Why did you let all of that happen to me?*

She looked back at me. Not into my eyes. Into my soul. And what she said next reorganized my entire universe.

"Because I am not your Savior."

And the floor fell out a second time. Except this time, it fell out of a lie.

Because she was right, and in a single instant I saw exactly what I had done. I had walked out of one religion and, without

ever noticing, walked Raine straight into the empty room it left behind. I had taken this woman and set her precisely where the church had always stood. She had become my everything. My belonging. My meaning. My well. For years I had knelt at broken cisterns, at a screen, at applause, at my own performance, and now I had simply found the most beautiful cistern yet and tried to move in. And she quenched the thirst, too, for a while. But she knew what I did not: that there is not a person alive, not the kindest, most Christlike soul who ever walked, who can be the water a human being is actually dying for. She loved me far too much to let me drink her dry in the trying. She refused the throne I kept trying to hand her. She stepped back, and let me go all the way down, and let the only One who could actually reach me be the one to do it.

Then the dark cloud lifted from between us, and we told each other what we had each just experienced, and the two stories could not have been further apart.

Raine had sat in perfect peace. She had felt nothing but love. She had known, the entire time, that nothing in that room could touch her, because she knows exactly who she is to the One who made her. He calls her Daughter. And a daughter does not panic in her Father's house. It is what He called the woman who reached for the edge of His coat: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." Mark 5:34 (WEB).

I asked her once where that came from. She could not point to a moment.

"I don't even remember my born-again moment. It was when I was in elementary school. I always remember feeling saved, forgiven, and loved by my Savior and Redeemer. I have always known I am His Daughter and chosen. It was just a fact that I always knew."

Read that again, and then put the two of us side by side in that water. I spent forty-five years trying to earn my way to a table I

had been seated at since before I was born. She simply never got up from it. That is the whole difference between us, and it is why God had to divide that room. She had nothing to unlearn. I had everything.

I had sat in devastation. Confusion, terror, and grief pouring out of me for every way I had lived, every thought I had ever thought, every belief I had built my life on top of. And I understood then why God had dropped that veil between us in the first place. He had divided that room on purpose. Because this was the one thing in all of life I could not do beside her, or through her, or because of her. I had to meet His saving grace alone. No one else can save me. No wife, no church, no good works, no spotless record. Nothing and no one but my Savior could have reached down through that black veil and the dark water and closed His hand around a man who could not lift a single finger to save himself.

This is the thing I have turned over a thousand times since, because it is the whole gospel in a single motion. He did not wait for me to climb. He did not wait for me to earn it, to clean myself up, to say the right words in the right order one more time. For forty years I had been straining to reach *up* to a God I'd been told stood at the top of a ladder with His arms folded, waiting to see if I would qualify. And in the one moment I finally stopped reaching up and simply let the truth about how far down I was be true, He came *down*. All the way down. Into the muddy water where I actually was, inside the grip I had never even known was around me, and He took hold of my wrist, because a drowning man cannot grab back. He can only be saved.

And He did not send someone else to do it. He did not delegate it to Raine, who loved me, or to a church, or to a program, or to one more heroic effort of my own. He came Himself. My whole life I had been handed a God who kept a careful distance from sinners, who stood at the top of the mountain with folded arms and waited

to see if I would climb. But the God who actually showed up in that water was a Shepherd who could not stand to lose even one. There were ninety-nine He could have stayed safely beside. Raine was one of them, sitting three feet away from me in her Father's unbreakable peace. And He left every one of them exactly where they were, safe, and came all the way down the mountain and into the black water for the single sheep who was too far gone to even call out. That sheep was me. I had wandered so far past the edge of the flock that there was not another sheep in sight, not one, only me, alone in a part of the universe I never knew existed until I woke up lost inside it. And for the first time in my entire life, I was not earning anything, not performing, not climbing. I was simply a sheep in the dark, bleating to be found. And He came. He left the ninety-nine, and He came for me.

That is the name I have given this whole chapter of my life, and I did not choose it lightly. He left the ninety-nine for me. "Which of you men, if you had one hundred sheep, and lost one of them, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that was lost, until he found it?" Luke 15:4 (WEB). I had read that parable my entire life as a good story about somebody else.

As far as I can tell, the only reason the hand came at all is that I had finally let one true thing be true. I had to question the whole thing. I had let myself wonder, for the first time, if I had been deceived my entire life. And that one crack, that single honest question, was apparently the opening in the armor that grace had been waiting for. *Jesus will always be brighter*. I thought it down in the dark, murky waters, and the brightest being came all the way down, just to save me.



I came up out of that water a different man, and I have not gone back down since. Not a single day has passed that I have not given my Savior every ounce of the credit for reaching into my darkest hour and pulling me out of it Himself.

I will not pretend it has been easy and full of nothing but light since then. As deep and dark a place as I came from, the newly found peace felt like being born again. On the other side of the water's surface, I came up into a world I no longer recognized, because the only map I had ever used to cross it had just been burned to ash in front of me. Everything was new. Everything had to be learned again from nothing. Who am I, if I was not the thing I had always been?

And here is the very first thing the new man did, once the shock began to loosen its grip in the days that followed. Exactly what the old one would have done. I reached for my earning speech.

I had it ready, the way I always kept it ready. If God had truly saved me, then I owed Him, and I knew precisely how to pay. I would read and pray every day. I would study and learn of Him the way I had once mastered the doctrine. I would be a better father, a better husband, a better man. I had been taught this method since the cradle, not by my parents, but by society as a whole. I knew the choreography of earning by heart. So I turned around and started clawing my way back up the mountain toward Him, renewed, energized, certain that this time I would not fail Him.

And that was the exact moment I finally understood the thing this whole story has been circling. Earning was the opposite of what He wanted from me. It always had been. Apparently, my wires had been crossed, the entire time.

Because the God I had feared my entire life, the one at the top of the ladder with His arms folded, waiting to see if I would qualify, had never once existed. I had made that god up in my head, but he wasn't the real God I would come to know very quickly. I had felt the real God come running for me in a way I had never experienced in all my years of religion. And I want to be careful with that word, because running is a human word. It is only what it feels like from down here. But I love the visual I have in my head of a Savior, running, with all His strength and

determination to save just one of His sheep that He has been missing for a very, very long time. But the truth is even nearer than that. He was never at the top of any mountain. He was never across any distance I had to cover. I realized I, myself, could never cover the ground needed to be with Him. He had been within me, in my chest, where my soul was created, the entire time. Closer than my own breath, His gift for me had been resting in His open hands the whole time. There was never anywhere for Him to run to. He was simply, endlessly, waiting for me to stop climbing, turn around, and receive what He had been holding out for me since before I drew my first breath.

And what He was holding out was not a list of things to do. It was Himself. All He had ever wanted was for me to depend on Him. Not to perform for Him, but to need Him, the way a branch needs the vine it cannot survive a single day apart from. "I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5 (WEB). My whole life, my religion had sold and convinced me of the direct opposite of that. It had promised me that if I earned enough, and climbed high enough, and kept the rules cleanly enough, I could one day become a god myself. Self-made. Self-sufficient. My own source. And I saw at last that this was the oldest lie ever told, the very first one, whispered in a garden at the beginning of everything: "*You will be like God.*" Genesis 3:5 (WEB). *The wound was never* that I needed Him. The wound was the day I was taught that I shouldn't depend fully on Him. Independence was never the prize. Independence was the fall.

So being found turned out to be two things at once, and I needed both of them. It was walking out of the counterfeit, leaving the beautiful reflection I had knelt in front of for forty-five years. And it was becoming a branch again, letting myself need Him, depending on Him for everything, which was never the weakness I

had spent my whole life hiding. Turns out, it was His design all along.

And one thing more was settled that night, and it has not wavered a single day since. From that night in the tub, Raine and I have not let one day go by without praying together, without stopping to thank the same Creator who reached into two people's very different darknesses and saved each of us in our own way, in our own perfect time, exactly as it was always meant to happen. Two stories. One table. One Savior between us now, standing in the very place I had once tried so hard to make her stand.

My pendulum had swung as far out as a pendulum can go. All the way to the cold, dead, far side of the sun, to a blackness with nothing but a thin shimmer of light bleeding around the rim of the dark. And a pendulum that has swung that far in one direction does exactly one thing next.

It comes back.

I was not done swinging. I am still not done swinging. But that night, for the very first time in my life, I was finally swinging toward the light.

Movement Four: The Remembering

The hand pulled me out of the water in an instant. The remembering of who I really am took over a year.

That is the part nobody warns you about. Grace is immediate. Healing is not. Being hauled out of the enemy's grip was the beginning, not the end, because my spirit came home in a single moment, but the rest of my soul needed time to catch up to it. Forty years of a false map does not clear overnight. So I spent that year doing the slowest, most patient work of my life. Every free moment, I went back in. I picked up each thing I had once believed, every doctrine and rule and fear that religion had handed me, one at a time, held it up to the light, and asked it a single question. *Is this actually true?* Not because I believed that understanding would earn my way this time, but because I truly feel drawn toward knowing, feeling, and experiencing my Savior as He intends for all His children. It's not about religion; it's about a relationship. It always has been.

I have always had a unique and wonderful way of knowing. I have felt it my whole life, though I never had the words for it until now. There is a vibration inside me, low in my chest, like a tuning fork. When I hold up a thought that is a lie, the fork stays silent. Flat. Dead. But when I hold up something that is actually true, the fork begins to ring, and the ringing is not mine. It is His. I have come to understand that the pitch my fork spends its whole life searching for is God's truth frequency, and that when a thing I am holding matches His pitch, my fork and His ring the very same frequency, and my whole chest hums with it. One fork is mine. The other has always been His. And truth, it turns out, is simply the moment the two of them ring as one, and I experience Him within me, in tune, same vibration, unmistakably unique, and felt deep within my soul all the way to my physical chills running over my entire body.

For forty years I had navigated my entire life by a different instrument altogether. Shame. That low, sick feeling in the gut that the system had trained me to read as the voice of God Himself. I had it exactly backward. That feeling was never God. It was the static that drowned Him out. And now, one note at a time, I was learning to hear the real signal underneath the noise, to tell His actual voice from the counterfeit I had obeyed my whole life. I would sit with a single concept for hours, sometimes days, turning it over in the light until the fork either fell silent or began to sing. And slowly, one true note after another, I rebuilt a whole new picture of God out of the rubble of the old one I had created out of fear and shame.



I should tell you how I actually left, because Movement One promised you this reckoning, and I mean to keep the promise. There was no single dramatic door I walked out of. It was closer to a tide going out. Three things happened at almost the same time, right around 2020, and I have never been certain whether that was coincidence or design. My second marriage ended. The world locked down for the pandemic. And somewhere inside those two, quietly, I stopped going to church.

The divorce broke the math I had been running my whole life. If the religion that had promised me specific outcomes had now failed twice, I could not make myself believe a third walk down that same aisle would somehow come out differently. And the lockdown handed me the smallest, most ordinary permission I had never once given myself: the doors were closed, so I did not have to go. And the moment I did not have to go, I finally admitted I did not want to. So I simply did not go back. The most consequential exit of my life happened not with a bang, but with a man sleeping in on a Sunday.

My family knew what it meant long before I said a word. I started drinking. I put a few tattoos on my arms, right where a

sleeve could never quite cover them, both on the religion's long list of forbidden things. And the comments began. My mother told me, more than once, that I had lost my way, that I was setting a poor example for my boys. There was real judgment in it, and it stung, because some part of me still measured myself with the very same ruler she was using.

I lost some other people in my life too. Not in a single dramatic falling-out. It was quieter, the way it usually goes. Two friends I had known since high school, men I once spent real time with, slowly went quiet. One of them I used to see often. Now I am lucky to get a text message returned. No one declared anything. The invitations just stopped coming and the silences stretched longer, until one day I understood the friendship had mostly been about the thing we no longer shared.

My father has never said the specific words either, but I feel it in every conversation we have about what I now believe: a quiet disappointment, a sense that he cannot agree with the road I have taken. And here is the strange thing. I understand him completely. I stood on his exact dark side of the sun once, too, just as certain that a son who left was a son who had lost his way. I cannot be angry at a man for seeing me the way I would have seen him too. My intention with my father is to continue to show him who I am, and I will continue to show him that I am a son worth being proud of. My prayer is for him to open his big soft heart and feel me through it, instead of only seeing me through the lens of obedience to something that doesn't work for me.

After the rescue, once I had truly given my life to Christ, I did one last thing to make it real. In 2025, I formally had my name removed from the membership records of the church I had given forty years to. On paper, at last, I belonged to Him alone.

And here is what was actually waiting on the far side of all that fear of losing everything. **Nothing.** I mean that as the best news I know how to give. Movement One told you what I had been taught

to fear: that leaving would cost me everything, my family, my friends, my seat in eternity beside the people I loved. That threat was the lock on the whole cage, and it is the most effective lock there was, because it made the door itself look like the danger. But it was a fear tactic, and I can see it clearly now in a way I never could afford to while I was inside. The one thing they swore I would lose by leaving, my family, forever, was never theirs to grant or to take away in the first place. Families **are** forever. They were right about that. They were only wrong about the price. It was never a thing I had to earn my way into by keeping every rule to the end. It was already given, for free, the way everything He gives is given. Which means the threat has no teeth at all. You cannot lose by walking away what was handed to you for nothing to begin with.

I lost nothing I can't live without, and I have gained everything I desire to live in joy and peace. That is the honest ledger on my soul now.

There was even a mercy in it I never saw coming. My mother and I, through all the sideways comments, are closer now than we have ever been. Because I stopped trying to win the old argument and simply started letting her see me. Not the son she feared I had become the instant I walked out, but the man I actually am on the other side of it. And slowly, she is beginning to see him. She is watching me turn out to be more than the boy she raised, not less, and there are few things more beautiful than watching a mother's fear lose its grip on her, one honest conversation at a time.

So how do I carry the ones I love who are still inside it, my family most of all? With every ounce of compassion I can find. Because I know exactly what they are feeling, and exactly what they are not. I know the numbness. I know how it feels to be dead certain you are awake while you are sound asleep. How could I stand in judgment of a single one of them for doing the very thing I did, wholeheartedly, for forty-five years? I cannot. There is no

blame left in me to give. There is only love, and compassion, and the quiet work of being a living example of the Christlike man I used to only perform. And this: if any one of them ever turns around, ever reaches so much as a hand back toward the light, I will be there faster than they can blink to show them the glimmer of light I once saw lying in a bathtub of hopelessness.



Now I have a new map of life, and nowhere do I see the words distraction, shame, fear, or earn. The first stop on my new journey led me back into the water. On purpose, this time.

In January of 2026, I chose to be baptized. Now, I had been baptized once before, as a boy, in the religion I was raised in. But that baptism had been just another rung on the ladder, one more box checked on the long climb to earn my way up to a God who stood at the top. This was something else entirely. This time no one was keeping score. This time I was not being processed into a system. I was simply a son walking down into the water to say, with my whole being, that the man who used to live in me had drowned, and the one coming out of it belonged to Christ, and to nothing and no one else.

And I need you to feel what water had come to mean to me by then. Water was the black deep the enemy had dragged me down into. Water was the warm bath where the hand first found me. Water was the murky dark I had been hauled up out of, gasping and reborn. Water had been the place of my deepest terror and my deepest rescue, both. And now, of my own free will, I walked back down into it, and let myself go all the way under, and came up new. The very thing that had so nearly been my grave, I chose as the place to be born again. “We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” Romans 6:4 (WEB).



The next stop on my new map led me to a desk, and to the strangest redemption of the whole story. But before we go straight to the destination, let me tell you how I had to get there: through unemployment. For the previous three years, I had been unhappy with my job. I had been praying and searching for a new opportunity, and as God does, He led me down a road I didn't want to go down ever again. The last time I got laid off in 2008, I lost everything. I lost my house, everything in my bank account, and I definitely lost my self-confidence. I was unemployed for eleven months that time around.

When I received the call from my boss with the bad news in October of 2025, my heart sank. Worse than that, all the fear from the previous stint of unemployment came rushing back in. I was in the dead middle of rebuilding everything my heart and soul needed to reconcile. Why would God put this on my plate too? I quickly realized what prayers Raine and I had been asking for over the previous six months or so. We had spent the entire Spring and Summer of 2025 studying three books a trusted friend had put in my hands. Those books assisted me in deconstructing every old belief into new ones. One particular lesson taught me about “camping.” Not the outdoor weekend adventure that we all first think about when we hear that reference. But the one a warrior experiences. The concept describes the importance of “camping” between battles. The war is never over until it's over. And a warrior in between battles needs to rest, sharpen his sword, reinforce his armor, replenish his strength with food and sustenance; because the next “battle” would be here before anyone is ready for it. I was definitely not ready for this next battle. Or was I? My fear quickly turned to faith. Faith that I had been “camping” for months, faith that while camping, I had rested and prepared for the next battle. And it came before I knew I was ready, but I was absolutely ready to take on my next opponent.

I chose faith over fear, every day for six months. I knew God would provide in the right timing, His timing. Instead of self-doubt, I chose surrender. In place of sleeping, I chose service. And in those moments I chose Christ over chaos.

Honestly, those were the best six months of my life, to that point. I was closer to my Savior than I had ever been. Dependency by design was the lesson I learned while I watched my bank account slowly dwindle to almost all zeros.

And I want you to see where the baptism falls in all of this, because I did not see it at the time. January. Three months in. No job, no offers, no income, and an account emptying a little more every week. That is when I walked down into that water.

The old me would have waited. The old me would have wanted something to bring—a title, a paycheck, a plan, some evidence that I had my life back in order before I made a public promise to God. That is the same instinct that kept me lying in a bishop's office at twelve years old: don't be seen until you're presentable. I did not wait this time. I went under with nothing in my hands, which, as it turns out, is the only way anybody ever goes under.

I put on my armor, grabbed my sword, submerged myself in the Word, and marched into battle. I must have applied to over five hundred different jobs in six months. Not a single offer came my way. I marched on. I prayed for simple surrender. "I can't do this without you, God." I knew it, and I didn't doubt for a second that He was still carrying me through this entire stage of life. I asked Him if I should be a preacher. I asked Him if I should sell everything and live a simpler life. I offered to give it all up just to serve His children. None of those things, or anything else I could think of myself, rang that tuning fork until one small prompting crossed my mind. "Teach others what you have learned about Me." "Huh? I don't know how to do that." I thought. "How am I supposed to support my family teaching others? I'm not qualified for that." And many more doubtful thoughts rushed through me. I

continued to ponder that prompting for days, and I finally bought into the opportunity to try something I had never done before. After a few days of research and prayer, I decided to sign up with a faith-based coaching program. “Here we go,” I thought. “I will have to build this up really fast before my bank actually reaches \$0.00.” I was excited and ready for the challenge.

That is when the least likely thing in my mind happened. Less than ninety minutes after paying the entire price of the coaching program, which was not cheap, especially for someone who didn’t have much money coming in for five months now, I received a call from a job recruiter with an opportunity that seemed perfect for me. Ten days later, I had an offer for more than I have ever made in my twenty-five-year career. My first thought should have been praise, but it was actually confusion. “Do you want me to coach or work, God?” Why would God prompt me to coach, have me sign up with a coaching program, and then give me a full-time job all at the same time? “YES!” is all I heard to that previous question. “BOTH!”

In ten short days, I had two full-time jobs. Income from one that would support the purpose of the other. My purpose is clear: to share what I have learned with as many of God’s children as I am able. My brain felt like I was on a “limitless” drug. I was firing on all cylinders, creating content for coaching and excelling at my day job.

Joshua chapters 3 and 4 describe what happened when Joshua led his people, with the instructions from the Lord for when the time was right to cross the Jordan River, to simply step into the water. The Jordan waters were at flood stage during harvest. “...*the feet of the priests who bore the ark had dipped in the edge of the water... the waters which came down from above stood, and rose up in one heap... the soles of the priests’ feet were lifted up to the dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and went over all its banks, as before*” Joshua 3:15-16; 4:18 (WEB).

For me, the river represented the many things that could have gone wrong spending money for a program I didn't have. The step represented the faith I had in God that He would stop the water's flow, just long enough for me to cross the river, reach dry ground, and assist others in reaching the other side before they drown too. A valuable lesson I learned that day: Across six months, the Lord was just waiting for me to take one step into that river, because He had something planned for me that I never could have thought of or planned out myself. Complete command of His universe, in every way. The faith over fear, the step of decision, the call from upstream to stop the flow, and the result of safety and peace on the other side of it all. A coaching program and a written story were waiting for me on the other side of that faithful step. I made it safely, no drowning, no fear, just more steps into the direction of more rivers waiting for me to cross while keeping my eyes on the only One who can stop the raging rivers of life, Jesus Christ.

Another lesson I learned through all these experiences: The metaphors, parables, and "stories" in the Bible aren't representations or stories at all; they're truth and lessons that each and every one of God's children is capable of experiencing themselves. I have experienced more miracles in my own life that I believe would rival any miracle in the Bible, and I'm here to share them with anyone who will listen.

By summer of 2026, I had started a coaching practice, a Christ-centered one, built for the single purpose of helping other people find their way out of the exact cage I had trapped myself in. And I began to write. I have written more than a hundred coaching programs now, and I am nowhere near finished, because every last one of them is a similar act repeated. I take a concept I used to believe, hold it up against something I now experience differently, hold up the tuning fork to my Savior's, and write down the differences, so that someone else might find the door of their cage a little sooner in their life than I did in mine.

Here is why I call it the strangest redemption. Once, a lifetime ago, I had been the most sincere recruiter the distraction cage ever had. I had crossed another country's border and given two years of my life to walking strangers, hundreds of them, through a door that only ever led deeper into darkness. I had a gift for it. I could make the earning sound like grace and the cage sound like home, because I believed every word of it myself. That gift of persuasion had been the enemy's favorite tool in me for most of my life. And now, piece by piece, program by program, I watched God take that exact same gift, the teaching, the persuading, the ability to make a hard truth land square in a stranger's chest, and turn it clean around. The recruiter for the cage had become a guide toward the door out. Nothing about me has changed except the direction I am aimed. It is the same voice it had always been, and I am finally telling my truth.

But there is one debt in all of this that I cannot pay, and I am not going to pretend otherwise.

There are more than fifty people on the other side of an ocean who walked down into that water because I asked them to. I cannot un-ask it. I have wished, more times than I can count, that there were some way to reverse the thing I set in motion in those doorways—to climb back up every one of those steps and tell them what I know now. There is no such way. That door only opens one direction, and I am standing on this side of it.

So here is what I have instead, and it is all I have. I pray for them. Not that they would leave something, or join something, or trade one set of walls for a better-lit set. I pray that every one of them finds the real Jesus, the living one, already deep within themselves, where He has been the entire time—and that they find Him a great deal sooner than I did.

And I am writing this. That is the other half of my answer, and it is the honest reason this book exists. If you are one of those fifty, or if you are standing today in a room I would have recognized

instantly at twenty years old, then this is me climbing back up those steps the only way I am still able to.

And the writing was never only for them. Every program I write, I am preaching to the one man who most needed to hear it. I was remembering. Putting the truth into words was how the truth finished settling into myself.



And then, a full year into the remembering, I walked into a room to experience the hardest six days of my life—two weekends, three days each—on purpose, and with purpose. My intention was to be open to anything and everything that I needed to heal, learn, or grow through. And I did; more than one hundred thirty-five individual lessons were either learned, deepened, or branded into my soul over those six days that I am confident will continue to shape the rest of my existence.

It was an experiential training, a secular one, nothing at all like the religion I had left. No doctrine to memorize. No worthiness interview at the door. Just a room full of strangers and an invitation to finally stop performing and feel everything I had spent forty-seven years refusing to feel. I want to be honest that I went into this experience bracing for the unknown. Some part of me still half expected a system, a fresh set of rules, one more cage with better lighting. What I found instead was a mirror I could not talk or think my way out of.

During those six days, the facilitators walked right by my side and helped me in removing every mask, every doubt, every belief I had ever held. I uncovered every wall and mask I had been building constantly for forty-plus years. I had never felt more uncomfortable than I did for those six days. Why? Because they invited me to look into that mirror as deeply as I could physically and emotionally endure. I saw something, someone that I never

would have recognized through any other experience than in that room. I saw myself.

What follows are a few of those one hundred thirty-five lessons. I had worn a beard for the last fifteen or so years of my life. I told myself it was a style, a trend. I looked better with a beard. In reality, I discovered that it was a wall that I never saw I was building. Behind it was a face I could not stand to look at, and I had built a whole quiet theology of reasons why. My nose was too big. My ears were too small. I had a crease in my chin that I'd been mocked for as a child. And here is the thing I only saw in that room: not one of those judgments had ever been my own thought. They were things other people had said to me, decades ago, that I had picked up and carried and eventually started repeating to myself in their voices. The beard hid the evidence. It was the last and most literal mask I owned after digging so deep into my soul. I had found my light again. I found my inner child, reaching up and holding Christ's hand, right in the middle of my own heart. The six-day process is something I could never explain; it can only be experienced. On the third and final day of that first weekend, they asked me to take it off, the last one. The mask I had been using to cover all the other masks. So I shaved.

I stood in front of a mirror, and the masks came off my face in strips, and when the last of it was gone, I looked at the man underneath for the first time in longer than I could remember. And the words that rose up out of me, unbidden and quiet, were not the ones I braced for. They were not out of disgust. They were these exact words: *"I haven't seen you in a long time."*

There he was. Not the fraud I had spent a lifetime memorizing. Not the caged, withering thing walking out of the bishop's office. Just a face. My face. The one God had actually given me, under all the paint, under all the borrowed insults, under the last wall I had built to keep from being known. I had spent my whole life certain that if anyone ever saw the real me, they would turn away. And

here I was, finally seeing him myself, and I did not want to turn away at all. There is a picture of the old me in the book of James: a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror, “for he sees himself, and goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.” James 1:23-24 (WEB). Forty years of walking away from the glass. That day I finally stood still in front of it.

But the remembering was not finished, because seeing your own true face is one thing. Letting someone else see it, and love it, is another entirely, and that was the wound underneath the wound. For forty years I had believed, all the way down, that I could not be loved without a costume, and so I had made certain no one ever got the chance to try. You cannot be loved for a self you refuse to show.

That healing came on the second weekend, and I will never forget a single second of it. They asked those of us who had taken our masks off to come to the front of the room. And when I walked up, my bare face—the face I had hidden my entire life and had only just met again—was there for everyone to see. The same people I would normally hide from. What did I feel at that moment? The most pure, God-like, motherly love I have ever felt. I stood there, and I smiled for ten straight minutes. I could not have stopped if I had tried. I felt the thing I had ached for my whole life and never once believed I would feel. I felt loved, on the exact part of me I had hidden the longest. A room full of near-strangers, pouring a mother’s kind of love into the one part of me I had spent thirty-five years covering up.

That is what the enemy had stolen with the very first mask, back in that office when I was twelve years old. Not only my honesty. My chance to ever be loved as myself. And that is exactly what was being handed back to me now, in a room full of people who just learned my name and loved my face anyway.

No more beard. No more wall. No more mirror I could not stand to look into. Just a face, met and seen and loved at last. The

good man from under the floorboards had finally climbed all the way up, and he was wearing my face, and he was smiling so big it physically hurt his jaw and cheekbones.



Being seen was the first half of remembering. Being connected was the other half, and it came in that same room, in ways I could never have engineered if I had tried.

For most of my life I had been profoundly, secretly alone. I have already told you that: the man in the costume who dodged every hand of real connection, who could work a room of a hundred people and walk out of it known by none of them. Connection was the thing I wanted most and trusted least, because to be truly connected to another soul I would have had to let it see me, and that was the one risk I would never have taken before that weekend. I realized I had been performing intimacy for decades and never once tasted it.

Every wall came down in pieces over those six days. At one point I had the opportunity to participate in a process that narrowed my sight down to almost nothing, so that I could see only whatever stood directly in front of me and nothing else. No room full of faces to perform for. No crowd to read and manage. Nothing to earn. Just me, and whoever was right there in front of me. And it undid something in me, because I understood all at once that this is what connection had always required and always been. One soul, turned fully toward one other soul, with the whole judging world blacked out. I had spent forty-seven years unable to connect because I could never stop watching the crowd. The narrowed vision took the crowd away, and for the first time in my life I could actually see a person. Just one. All the way to the bottom of them. The one right in front of me, and I wasn't scared of them seeing me too.

And then came the part of it I will carry with me for eternity. Going into that particular day, I had set an intention for myself. I committed to creating three things that day. Love. Connection. Oneness. Not to earn them, not to wait and hope for them, but to create them, on purpose, out of what God had put inside me. And I watched it happen with my own eyes. I faced person after person, one at a time, and let each of them see the real me, and let myself see the real them, beings of light, every single one of them, and something passed between us in each of those meetings that I have no earthly words for except the nearness of God. And at the very end, I was able to reach my arms out and gather every soul in that room into a single embrace. Forty-five people who had walked in as strangers, folded into one body, weeping and laughing at the very same time, and for a few minutes there was no such thing as separated humans. There was only us, a group of souls, as one. I experienced love, connection, and oneness. And I had created that out of nothing but the willingness to be truly seen.

At one point it felt like everyone in the room lifted me clean off the ground. A whole crowd of hands, raising me up over their heads, and I am not ashamed to tell you what it felt like, because it was not pride. It was Christ. Not because I imagined myself in His place. The last time a crowd raised a man over their heads in this story, it was a cross, and those hands were not loving ones. It was Christ because this is exactly what He bought. He let Himself be lifted by hands that wanted Him gone, so that a man like me could one day be lifted by hands that simply loved him. I had spent my whole life certain I was too much of a fraud to be carried or loved by anyone. And there I was, held up by a whole room, feeling the exact love I had preached about for thirty years and never once let myself receive.

I did not know it at that moment, but the words I would go on to build the entire rest of my life around were being forged right there in that room. Love. Connection. Oneness. And beneath all of them, running through all of them, the Christlike love I had finally

stopped performing and actually started to carry. Those are not slogans I dreamed up later at a desk. They are the plain report of what I felt in that room, on the day I remembered that I had been built for exactly this, and had spent my whole life running from, in the entirely opposite direction.



On the last night of the training, I felt my pendulum reach farther into the light than it had ever swung—as far as it had once swung into the dark. This time toward the light into my true self, the divine image God had stitched into me before I was born. The exact measure of how lost I had been turned out to be the exact measure of how found I now felt. The pit had set the height of the sky, and I am not done flying upwards.

And here, at last, is the thing that the whole long year had been guiding me toward. I did not become someone new in that room. I remembered someone old. When I finally saw my true self, clear and unhidden, I was not shocked. I landed within myself as a confirmation of something I had somehow always known. I recognized my childlike self instantly because he was not a new invention at all. He was who I had been underneath all of it the entire time, the image of God I had been stamped with in my mother's womb and had then spent forty years painting over. "For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb." Psalm 139:13 (WEB). I remembered that I am made of two things, and only two: God, and myself. His life and my own, woven together so completely that I had never once been alone, not for a single second, not even at the very bottom of the black, murky water. I had only ever been hiding from the One who had never left.

That is the remembering. Not that I climbed my way up and became something. That I finally stopped hiding, and saw what I had been all along. His. Made of Him. Carrying His very light around inside me the whole time.

Which left me with the only question I had not yet answered. If His life was truly in me, and had been in me the whole time, then what on earth was it *for*? What was a man supposed to do with a self like that?

That question is the whole of what came next.

Movement Five: The Creator

Here is the answer I found to that question, and I want to hand it to you carefully, because it is the most easily misunderstood thing I know, and getting it wrong is how a person walks out of one cage straight into another.

What is the life of God in a man *for*? It is for creating. Because that is what God does. From the very first moment of everything, God is, and always has been, a Creator. He speaks, and there is light. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Genesis 1:3 (WEB). He is the maker, the author, the one who calls things that are not yet into being. He made me, and He made you, in His image. “God created man in his own image. In God’s image he created him.” Genesis 1:27 (WEB). We say those words so often they go dead in our mouths, so sit for a second with what they actually mean. To be made in the image of a Creator is to be made as a creator. It is stitched into our DNA. It is the family resemblance that we see when we see His light.

So yes, I will use the word, and I will let it be as big as it truly is. I am a creator. I create my life. I create joy, adventure, connection, and oneness. I create the atmosphere of my own home and the tone of my own days. That is not arrogance. That is my design, finally switched on after forty years of being told my only job was to obey.

But now hear the guardrail, because everything, and I mean *everything*, hangs on it. **I am not the Creator. I am a creator only because the Creator lives in me.** The power is not mine, and it never was. It is His, in me, for what He allows. I create what He allows me to create, in alignment with Him, and not one inch past that line. The moment I forget that, the moment I begin to believe the power is my own and that reality is mine to bend to my will, I have not become anything at all. I have simply believed the oldest lie in the garden all over again. *You will be like God. Genesis*

3:5 (WEB). *I have already walked* the whole length of the road that exact lie leads me down, and I am never setting foot on it again.

This is the razor's edge the entire truth balances on, so I want to be plain about which side I stand on. I do not manifest my own reality. I am not the source of anything. I did not save myself; I cannot heal myself, and I hold no power that did not first come from Him and does not still belong to Him. What I have is His life inside me, given back to Him, and turned loose to do the one thing His life was always going to do, which is make. Create. Bring good into being where there was none before. A branch does not manufacture the fruit. It simply stops fighting the vine and lets the life of the vine flow through it, and then the fruit comes. I am a branch that finally remembered it was connected. The fruit is real. The Vine gets the glory.



So how does it work, being a creator? I found a way of it that has not failed me once since I learned it, and it is almost embarrassingly simple. It goes like this, in order: set an intention, then commitment, then bold action, then results. In that order, every single time.

It begins with an intention, which is not a wish. This is where most people stop, at the wish, at the vague hope that things might somehow turn out nicely. An intention is a different animal. An intention is a decision about what I am going to create, made before I have any idea what it will cost. And it always costs. There is always a price, and I have learned exactly what the price is. The price is me. My comfort. My ego. My fear of looking foolish. My need to stay in control. Setting a true intention means agreeing to pay that price before even knowing the size of the bill.

Then comes commitment, and I mean the kind with no exits left standing. Whatever it takes. Not "I'll try," not "if it's

convenient,” but the type of commitment a creator is made of. Then bold action, because an intention I am not willing to move my feet for was only ever a wish wearing a costume. And then, as reliably as the sunrise, the results. I used to say, “If I put my mind to it, I can do anything.” I do not say that anymore. Now I say, “If I put my *heart* to it, I will create it.” Because my mind was where I hid for forty years, my heart is where He lives, and I now live the way my Creator created me to be.



And underneath the whole method is a reordering of my life that I can only describe as taking one sentence and turning it completely around.

My entire life, I lived by three words in a fixed and brutal order: *do, have, become*. I believed if I could *do* enough, the right works, the right performance, the rules kept clean, then I would *have* enough. Enough worthiness, enough approval, enough of a case to plead at the top of the ladder, and then someday, finally, I would *become* someone. Someone good. Someone whole. Someone God could at last love. I chased that order for forty years and it never once paid out, because it cannot. It is a treadmill painted to look like a staircase. You never arrive, because arriving was never the design. Lucifer’s design of earning is to keep you climbing—on that path, I will never reach high enough to become a creator. I already am, because I am already a part of Him, the Creator who created me in His image.

Grace took that sentence and turned it all the way around. It is not: do, have, become. It runs be, do, have. Scripture had that order right the whole time: “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them.” Ephesians 2:8-10 (WEB). Saved first. The works after, and because of it. Never the other way around.

First, I simply *am*, a son, loved, made of Him, complete before I lift a single finger, because that was never mine to earn and was always His to give. And a result of being is *doing*, not in order to earn anything or become anything, but as the natural overflow of already being. And from that doing, I discover I already *have* everything I was once killing myself to chase. I will never *become* anything, and I mean that as the best news I have ever been handed, because I already am everything I was made to be. There is nothing left to become. I create now, not to fill an emptiness, but out of an abundance God handed me for free. I do not perform joy anymore to feel worthy of it. I overflow it, because I am already full of it.

That is the whole difference between the man who began this story and the man telling it to you. He created to earn. I create because I am loved. Same hands. Opposite direction.



So let me show you what all of this actually looks like on an ordinary week, because a theology you cannot live in is just a prettier cage. It looks like the four things I have built my life and my work around. Joy. Adventure. Connection. Oneness. Small words. I create them on purpose now, and here is what that looks like on the ground.

Joy. Raine and I walk our dogs nearly every evening. We have done it hundreds of times, the same lawns, the same loop, the most ordinary ritual there is. And on a hot summer night last week, on something like the three-hundredth of those walks, the neighbor's sprinklers were throwing arcs of water across the grass, and I did not stop to think about it. I just got down on my hands at the edge of that lawn and stuck my face into the spray and drank from it like one of the dogs. Right there in the dark. A grown man, a coach, a father, on his knees drinking from a sprinkler and laughing. Some people would call that silly. I call it joy, and I want you to understand why. The man I used to be could never have

done that. He was too busy managing what the neighbors might think, too armored, too fast asleep. Joy like that, unguarded and a little ridiculous, is only available to a man who has finally stopped performing. It is the childlike heart, the one that grew too big for my chest to hold back in that training, finally let out to play. I could not have manufactured that for thirty years. Now I can drink it straight off the grass.

Adventure. I have created a thousand of these with Raine, trips and dates and long nights out on the patio, but here is a recent one I love. I asked her what her intention was for the evening, and she gave me one word. “Magic.” So I made her some. I turned our basement into a theater and became a magician for a night. I looped a tie around my neck and pulled it tight, and it came away clean, not a mark on me. I vanished a cotton ball from under a cup, had her tap one of my empty hands and then the other, both empty, her saying “*what?!?*” out loud, and then I lifted the cup she had forgotten all about, and there it sat, having been there the whole time. And for the finish, I had spent the whole day preparing two thousand tiny glow-in-the-dark stones bundled into a sheet, and I danced that glowing bundle around the dark room like a friendly little ghost, then set it in her hands and helped her lift the sheet until all two thousand of them rained down and scattered across the floor, glowing. I stood there with my arms in the air while my wife clapped in the dark like a kid at a magic show. She had asked for magic. I created her some, on purpose, because I could, because I love her, and because that is exactly what the life in me is for.

Connection. This is the one that still stops me in my tracks, because connection was the precise thing I spent my entire life running from. Within days of walking out of that training, I asked my brother if we could sit down and talk. And before I ever stepped into the room, I set an intention: that no matter what got said, no matter which old wounds got bumped in the saying, this conversation would end in love and connection. Not that it might.

That it *would*, because I was going to create it. And I will tell you plainly, because it is a small miracle to me, that it became the single most connecting conversation I have ever had with my brother in the forty-four years I have known him. That is the method made flesh. I set the intention, I committed to it, I acted on it, and the result was the exact thing I had decided to create, because the God who is love was more than willing to pour love through a man who finally showed up ready to carry it.

Oneness. This is the deepest of the four, and I am going to save the fullness of it for the very end of this story, because it has earned its own place there. But let me give you the edge of it here. Raine and I have created a closeness I do not fully have words for. The nearest the world can reach for it is a phrase like “twin flames.” I would say it more simply, and more truly: we have become, in the oldest and most biblical sense there is, one. Two people, one soul. We think the same thoughts. I feel what she feels. There are moments she knows my intention before I have said a single word, because on some level beneath words we are no longer entirely two. Scripture named it long before either of us ever felt it: they will be one flesh. Genesis 2:24 (WEB). I used to read that as a rule to keep. Now I live inside it as a reality we built together, on purpose, with God Himself in the middle of it. But that, as I said, is where this whole long road has been quietly heading all along.



There is one more connection I wish to tell you about, and it is the one this whole book opened on. I began all of this as a father, standing in a doorway wondering where the line is between teaching a child what you believe and handing him a cage and calling it a home. I owe you the honest answer to my own question, and it is not the one I expected to give.

Because here is the strange mercy of it. Of all the things my sleeping cost me, my two boys are what it never really touched.

Tanner is my oldest, in high school now. Caden is my youngest, in middle school. They both play football, they are both far better students than I ever was, and they are sweeter-spirited young men than I had any right to raise. Whatever went dark in me over those years, it never went dark toward them. I always felt close to my sons, and I believe to my core they always felt it back. The dead part of me was never in my love for them. It was in what I was teaching them while I loved them.

Because I was raising my boys in the very cage I had been raised in. Same walls. Same map. Same unspoken rule: tell them what to do, do not teach them to choose. I was handing my sons the exact thing I would spend the rest of my life fighting my way out of, and I was doing it the way it had been done to me, tenderly, lovingly, certain it was for their good. That is how the cage always gets passed down. In love. That is what makes it a cage and not a crime.

When I came awake, that was the first place grace went to work. I started with the smallest, most honest thing a father can do. I apologized. I had been short-tempered with them, quick to raise my voice, the kind of dad who could not stand the sound of his own sons being boys, wrestling and running and filling the house with the noise of being alive. I had yelled at that noise. So I told them I was sorry for it, plainly, with no excuse attached. And they did what children do when they have always known they are loved. They forgave me before I had finished asking.

Then I loosened my grip. I stopped handing them the whole map and forbidding them to wander. I let them seek, and choose, and get it wrong, because I finally understood that getting it wrong on your own is the only way any of us ever learns a single thing. The compass I had been raised to read had five letters stamped across it, S-H-A-M-E, and I had been within an inch of handing my boys the very same instrument. So I broke it. Now, when one of them makes a mistake, I do not reach for shame. I say to them two

things. First, Good job. And second, what did you learn? And I watch the fear drain out of his face, because he knows the choice was his to make and the lesson is his to keep, and that his father is not standing over him with a ledger. We have a trusting relationship now, in place of a judging one. It is the exact reverse of the one I grew up inside.

The deepest of it came with Caden, over the hardest thing we have had to talk about. He had been carrying a quiet confusion about why his mother and I divorced, the kind of weight a boy will drag for years if no one ever hands him the truth. So I handed it to him. All of it. My part, the addiction, the hiding, the ways I had failed his mother. I told him I did not blame his mother for leaving, that she had deserved far better than the man I was giving her. And I told him the one thing every child of a divorce needs branded onto his heart: that none of it, not one inch of it, ever had a thing to do with him or his brother.

And then I did what the old me never could have done. I did not ask him to take my side, or my version. I encouraged him to go to his mother and ask her for hers. And he did. My boy walked up to his mom, told her what I had told him, and asked her if it was true. And she told him, gently, that yes, that was pretty much it. Sit with what that took. Two divorced parents, each honest enough and healed enough to tell their son the same hard truth from both sides, so that the truth could set the boy free instead of tearing him down the middle. I did not build that for my sons. That is a miracle, handed to a family that had every reason to stay broken, and it healed something in my son that shame would only ever have driven deeper.

So here is the intention I have set for my sons, the boldest one I carry, and I commit to create it the way I have learned to create everything now. My intention is for my boys to grow up knowing they have two fathers who would do anything for them. One in heaven, who already has, who came all the way down and laid

down His own life for every one of their misses before they were ever old enough to make them. And one here on the ground, who will spend everything he has assisting them to know who they are, who their Creator is, and who they get to be, because that Creator lives inside each one of them too.

I am not their savior. I learned that in a bathtub, from a wife who refused the throne I kept trying to hand her, and I will not go climbing onto it now in front of my own children. I do not intend to be their source. I intend to be their arrow. I intend to point them at the One who has been inside them the whole time, and then step back and watch them shine and hit their mark.

They carry no religion, and I thank God for it. What they have instead is the thing I did not find until I was forty-five. They know the sound of peace. They feel God when they pray. I spent most of my life lost, and it is the one inheritance I am determined never to pass down. If I do nothing else as their father, my intention is for Tanner and Caden to spend the years of life I wasted already awake.



All of it, the whole of who I am, I have tried to distill down into a handful of sentences that I now live by. Not a creed handed to me by someone else, the way all the old ones were. This one came up out of my own healed heart, and I say it like a vow.

I am a loving, powerful, divine being of light. As a loving, powerful, divine being of light, I radiate Christlike love by creating joy, adventure, connection, and oneness, so that all of God's creations can experience His energy of love.

Let me guard one part in it, one last time, because I placed it right in the center of my own vow and I will not let it be misheard. "Divine being of light" does not mean I am a god. It means the very thing this whole book has been fighting its way toward saying: that

the living God poured His own life and His own light into me, and calls me His son, and now shines through me the way light shines from the source. He Himself designed and built me as His light. The divinity is His. The light is His. The love is His. I am a light, created to let the true source of light pour through me, in place of the painted glass or window I mistook for Him, for forty years.

And notice where my vow ends. It does not end with me. It ends with *them*. *So that all of God's creations can experience His energy of love*. That is the part that tells me it is finally real, and not just one more clever way of making myself the center of my own private religion, because the whole secret aim of the earning cage was always, underneath everything, *me*. My worthiness. My heaven. My standing. My soul, saved. And the whole aim of the life I have now runs the opposite direction. It points outward. I was not dragged up out of that black water so I could sit safely on the shore and admire my own rescue. I was pulled out so that I could turn around, and reach my own hand back down into the dark, and assist anyone reaching for the light. “who comforts us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, through the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (WEB). Everything I create now, I create so that someone else might feel the love from the source that came all the way down, running desperately for me, so that I could remember who I am created to be. And when they're ready to turn around and receive the thing they've been running from the longest, they too will see their Savior there, right in the middle of everything they are, and He has been there, their whole life.

Which brings us to the last part of the story.

Movement Six: Oneness

It was the eleventh of September, 2022. Fall was just coming into the air.

I was at a local bar with a buddy, shooting pool, grabbing something to eat, not looking for a single thing. Another friend texted to say he was on his way and wanted me to meet someone, a woman he had met only days before. When they arrived, we headed down and out onto the patio, and that was the first time I ever laid eyes on Raine, sitting at the corner table.

I have to be honest about that first impression, because it makes everything that came after so much sweeter. She was not exactly welcoming. She had, as I like to put it, the biggest “keep your distance” sign a human being can wear stamped right across her forehead. Every wall she owned was up, and she owned a great many of them. I would come to understand why. Raine’s heart is like Fort Knox, and Fort Knox is not built out of fear. It is built because there is something so precious inside that it takes an army to guard it and many walls to protect it. I just didn’t know yet that I would spend the rest of my life happily enlisting in that army.

What I did know, and I knew it that very first night, is a hard thing to explain to anyone it has not happened to. I looked at her, walls and all, and a quiet, certain thought moved through me. *That is the kind of woman you marry.* Not date. Not chase. Marry. I had been divorced twice already. I had no business thinking it, and I thought it anyway, with a calm I did not even recognize in myself.

And here is the part that still undoes me. Months before the two of us ever met, long before she had heard my name, Raine had sat down and written out a list. Not a girlish fantasy. A clear-eyed accounting of what she had finally decided she deserved in a partner, after a whole lifetime of accepting less. She wrote it, she meant it, and she handed it to God and let it go. And when she and I eventually compared our stories, we found something I can only

call evidence of her being a creator as well. I matched that list. Not most of it. Every line. The exact man she had described to God half a year before I walked out onto that patio was, somehow, standing on it right in front of her.

I did not chase her, not really. It felt much more like the two of us were being slowly, deliberately handed to one another. In fact, we were friends for seven months without even the thought of dating each other. I will tell you one thing, though: in her presence, I was different. I felt different, and I knew I had to be different than I ever had been if I ever wanted her to see the real me. Not the one I showed everyone else, but the one part of me that I had been hiding for most of my life. She somehow created that want inside me to be myself. We had both spent our entire lives building walls, hers on the outside where you could see them coming, mine on the inside where no one ever could. And God, who I now know had been arranging this long before either of us was awake enough to notice, sat two of the most guarded people alive down across a patio table from each other, and began, patiently, to take the walls down.



Now I have to try to describe the part of my life I have the very fewest words for. Raine warned me that it cannot really be explained, only experienced, and she is right, so I am simply going to tell you what is true and let it sound every bit as impossible as it sounds.

Raine and I are one.

I do not mean that the way it gets printed on anniversary cards. I mean it closer to the way Scripture means it, when it says a man and a woman “will be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, WEB), except that we have actually felt the seam between us disappear. The world has a name for this. It calls it “twin flames,” and that is the nearest the world can reach for it. I would say it more simply and more

truly: somewhere along the way, we stopped being two separate beings. We have become one soul in two different bodies.

Let me give you a few of the ordinary miracles, because the ordinary ones are the ones that wreck you. One evening I was in one room of our house, and Raine was in another, out of sight, out of earshot, and a question drifted through my mind that I never once said out loud. *I wonder how far apart we can actually be and still hear each other.* And from the other room, answering the thought I had not spoken, Raine called out, “Well, I guess that’s your answer.” I came around that corner like I had seen a ghost. “The answer to what?” “To your question. About how far apart we can be.” I nearly went down against the wall. I was in complete and utter disbelief. How is that even possible? We didn’t know the answer then, but we do know exactly how now.

And that is not some one-time parlor trick. We finish each other’s sentences, which everyone’s grandparents do. We also finish each other’s *thoughts*, which is a different thing entirely. I have felt what she is feeling from clear across a room, a joy or an ache that was hers a moment before it became mine. We have dropped together into a stillness I can only describe as a deafening peace, the kind of silence you notice only when the sound of chaos suddenly stops, and oddly enough, peace actually sounds more defining than the chaos did. We have known each other’s minds so completely, so often, that there are stretches where we genuinely could not tell where one of us ended and the other began.

For a long time, we had no framework at all for any of it. We just kept turning to each other and asking, “What *was* that?” We knew it was real. We knew it was rare. We had no earthly idea what it was *for*.

And then we did the one thing that changed all of it, the very same thing that had changed everything for me in that bathtub. We invited God into the middle of it. We began praying together, out loud, handing our union and our whole selves back to the One

who had so obviously built this phenomenon. And the moment we did, the connection did not get stronger. It got *holy*. It finally made sense. Because it had never really been ours to explain in the first place. It was His. A gift. A small, living picture of the very oneness He has been longing to have with every one of His children since the beginning of everything. We had stumbled into a foretaste of it, and the instant we handed it back to Him, we understood at last what it had been pointing at the entire time.



Because here is what the oneness with Raine finally taught me, and it is the truest thing I know how to hand you. Every impossible thing she and I share, the wordless knowing, the single heartbeat, the walls all gone, is a small and human echo of the oneness I was actually built for. The oneness my soul had been screaming for my entire life, down every wrong hallway, on its knees at every broken cistern. Not only oneness with a woman. Oneness with her AND God.

God made us creators, and we created what we both desire the most. Connection, with each other and with our Creator. There is no greater love than the love of our Savior. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13 (WEB). He’s allowed us to tune our forks to His frequency, see each other the way He sees us, feel each other the way He felt every bit of us on the cross, and love each other the way He loves us. To our core, unconditionally, as one, as part of Him, consciously aware of the power to create that He gave us.

That was the ache underneath all of it. Under the religion, under the addiction, under the masks, under the forty years of earning, there was one single hunger driving the whole machine: I wanted to be fully known, and fully loved, and never left. I wanted to belong to something so completely that there was no seam left in it, no distance, no performance to keep up. I went looking for that in a church that only ever measured me. I went looking for it

in a screen that never once saw me back. I went looking for it, for a while, in Raine herself, until she loved me enough to tell me she could not be my Savior. And the entire time, the very thing I was starving to death for had been living inside my own chest.

That is the secret the enemy spent my whole life distracting me away from. I am not merely forgiven by God, standing at a polite distance, hoping to be allowed a visit to heaven someday if my record holds up. I am one with Him. His own life lives inside me. Christ in me. “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Colossians 1:27 (WEB). Nearer than my breath, closer than my own thoughts, the same presence I now feel humming in my chest like a tuning fork tuned to His exact pitch. The oneness Raine and I stumbled into is real, and it is a gift, but it was never the destination. It is a road sign. It points past itself, to the union my soul was made for and had been hiding from the whole time: to be one with my Creator, who was never once far off, who never left, not even at the very bottom of the black water.

And that changes what this entire story ever was. It was never really a story about leaving a religion, or beating an addiction, or even about finding Raine. All of that is true, but all of that is the surface. Underneath, it was only ever one story, the oldest one there is: a soul made for oneness with God, distracted away from Him for forty years, and finally, mercifully, carried home to the only union that could ever fill it. I did not find a better set of beliefs. I found *Him*. Or truer still, I finally stopped running long enough to let Him show me He had been holding me the entire time.



So that is my story. And now, at the very end of it, I want to tell you why I told it to you.

I did not write this so you would admire my rescue. I wrote it because of what I understood the instant His hand closed around

my wrist and drew me up out of that water: that I was never meant to keep the light to myself. The moment I could breathe again, I knew the assignment. Turn around. Reach back down into the same dark I had just come out of. And help pull out whoever is still down there. I know I can't save anyone, but I know I can point them in the direction of the one who can. He lives inside each and every one of us, and He's there to be found.

That is what this is. An invitation, and it has your name written on it if any of this has sounded like your own life. If you are lost, or numb, or bone-tired from earning a love that keeps moving the finish line on you. If you are wearing masks so old you have honestly forgotten your own face is under there. If you are living a whole double life that you are certain would be the end of you if a single soul ever saw it. It could be that you have quietly given up on God, or on yourself, or decided somewhere along the way that no one is ever coming. I am not calling down to you from a mountaintop. I am just a few steps up the same trail you are standing on, turning around to tell you: there is a way through this, and it is realer and nearer than you dare to let yourself hope.

And hear the exact shape of the invitation, because it is not the one my religion held out to me. I am not inviting you to try harder to *become* someone. That was the lie the whole time. You do not have to become anything. You are already, right now, this very moment, carrying the very thing you have spent your life searching for. The light was never at the top of a ladder. It was never on the far side of enough good behavior. It is *within you*, placed there by the God who made you and has never once left you, waiting for you to simply stop running long enough to turn around and receive Him.

I cannot do that turning for you. No one can. I had to meet His grace alone, and so will you. But I can walk right beside you while you do it. That is the entire reason I became a mentor, and it is the only work I do now. If you want someone to walk with you up out

of your own cage, through the hurt instead of around it, and into the light you have been carrying all along, then that is exactly what I am here for. The door was never locked. The key has been in it the whole time. And you are the one who gets to reach up and turn it.

And the lion I told you about back at the beginning, the caged one, pacing and withering and certain someone else had locked him in?

He walked out. He is not pacing anymore. He is not withering, and he is not waiting on anyone's permission to be what he was made to be. He knows exactly who he is now, and exactly whose he is, and those turn out to be the same fact. The roar was never the cage rattling. It was always the sound of the One who lives inside him.

That is the whole difference. A caged lion spends his life proving he is a lion. A free one simply is one, and everything around him knows it the moment he walks into the room.

Come out of the dark. I will hold the door.



From captive to creator. That is the whole distance a single soul can travel, the moment it stops earning and finally starts receiving. And if it can happen for a man as lost as I was, as far out on the dark side of the sun as I went, then it can happen for you. That is not a wish. It is a law, the same one that has run underneath every page of this book.

The pendulum always swings back exactly as far as it first swung out.

Mine is still swinging, higher into the light every day. Yours is ready to begin.

I will see you in the light, as I see it inside of you. It's been there the whole time. It's time to let it shine. God is in you. God is in me. We are all one through our Savior. We are love, light, creators, loved by the Creator, in His image, made to shine.

Shine on, my friends. I see you.

If this story stirred something up inside you, no matter where you are in your journey, I would love to assist you in your next swing of the pendulum. Remember, I'm only a few steps ahead of you, on the same trail. You can find me at www.ccrcoaching.com, where I guide and mentor others through similar work and scenarios. Come find me, and I'll assist you in finding yourself and the Creator in you too.