

THE BOY

FROM BRAZIL

MARCELO SOUSA

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STEVEN BRAHMA

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Iwould be remiss if I didn't start by dedicating this book to the awesome, mighty God I serve. I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for the grace of God. To my soul sister in Christ, Jacqueline, and her family, for being by my side from the very beginning. To my family in New Jersey for never giving up hope and knowing that God's plan was bigger than I could ever have imagined. To Motivational M.D. Publishing for believing that I had a story the world needed to hear. And to those who picked up this book and thought, just maybe, it would give them a little hope. And finally, to the people who have come into and out of my life and taught me lessons, both big and small.

Think of the figure of a tree. Picture how it stands tall, its roots burying deep below ground, and its leaves reaching towards the clouds. The people I mentioned above are special to me, and allow me to explain why, by using the image of the tree. There are people in our lives who are the roots of a tree. You don't necessarily see the roots, but they always make sure you are standing firm and tall. No matter what storm may come, your roots will keep you grounded. Before the roots could hold you solid, the tree had to be made by the creator and ruler of the universe, and the source of all moral authority. The supreme being. Sometimes, the tree might look sad or lonely, but the light from above never forgot to shine, even if, at times, it forgot its very own existence in the world. The environment wasn't the best throughout the years but in the end, the tree finally

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reached its full potential and bloomed magnificently, thanks to its creator, its roots, and its source of light. The people I mentioned above are my roots and my sunshine.

The special message I want to send to the people to whom this book is dedicated, is that it all started with you. Whether you were there at the beginning or have just arrived, you somehow made an impact and for that, I'm grateful and honored to have known you. It is thanks to you that I am able to write down my experiences and bring hope and joy to others. Each of you played a part in my journey, and for that, I am truly grateful.

FOREWORD

Identity, life, death, peace, sadness, and the pursuit of truth is a journey we are all walking. Every time the mirror looks back at us, we are reminded of a deep-seated need for value and purpose.

Meeting Marcelo in 2020 was one of the serendipitous moments in a long career of countless breakfasts with countless people. We immediately knew we were in for a great visit that morning and possibly the beginning of a lifelong friendship. That breakfast gave me a peek into a life story everyone needed to hear and share. Smart, funny, and even humble, Marcelo captivated me with his tale of a boy from Brazil. This book is essential for anyone who is winning or losing. That's why it's not optional reading but a must. Simply put: Marcelo matters -- and so do you. Dive in.

Over the last twenty-nine years I have been working with kids, teens, men, women, families, and those who wrestle with addiction. One common thread is that identity matters for healing, reconciliation and living on mission. If one cannot identify who they are and whose they are, much confusion and sadness follows. Helping a person connect to their Creator is the greatest healing we offer one another. As we begin to identify as a creation that is loved by our Maker, value and purpose easily follow.

I am thankful Marcelo has not offered us a book about being a better version of himself or even the best version of himself. He is a resurrected man, born again through the

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fires of trial and mercy. He has crafted a faithful narrative of what is possible when God collides with a human.

Pastor Steven J. Kiley
Evangel Chapel Clinton

A LETTER FROM A DEAR FRIEND

My Dear Soul Friend,
I want to tell you that I am so proud of you and very happy about this achievement. Allow me to make a parallel of your life to the phases of the moon. You went through different phases in your life, but just like the moon that no one can touch or truly comprehend, no man on the face of the earth can change God's plans for you. There were several phases when you often thought about giving up, thought you couldn't do it, and in some situations, you felt wronged. But you are just like the moon. Your brightness cannot be touched as it is not your own. It comes from God. So, like the moon, keep positioning yourself before God for he is the sun of justice that rises every day bringing light to the world, may his brightness continue to be reflected through you.

As the phases of the moon govern the tides and elements of nature, your words will govern the lives of other people. May the splendor of Jesus continue to illuminate you. May this radiance be expressed to all those around you.

Go radiantly towards what God has entrusted to you. I wish you the constant presence of God in your life, success, peace, and prosperity. These are my simple wishes from me to you, my friend whom I love very much. In the love of Christ Jesus, and I to you, I wish to remind you of the

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same words that Jesus said to his disciples: 'Go into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature.' (Mark 16:1)

Affectionately,
Jacqueline Oliveira de Jesus Silva

A Letter from a Dear Friend



INTRODUCTION

MOMENTS OF IMPACT

My life has been defined by a series of moments of impact. Moments I've felt collide with me at such force they've reshaped my entire identity. Moments that unapologetically burnt my world, as I knew it, to the ground, leaving me to sift through the ashes.

Each and every time I felt the ground stop shaking, I'd find myself with a paintbrush in my hand, recreating the image of who I was. As I gaze upon the canvas in front of me, I see the significance of each brush stroke-

I see depth, I see character, I see wisdom, I see experience, I see growth, I see humility, I see empathy but most importantly, I see these moments of impact stroke by stroke creating a more beautiful me.

-Cindy Cherie

The postcards' painted landscape made for an unrivaled view. From the window of my mind, I could see the exquisite looking homes, like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was in early November 1988, when I received this postcard from my father in America. It was a masterpiece, the angelic white church on the hill overlaid with the foliage illuminating the beauty of what I thought heaven must be like. A place of peace and tranquility; a simple assurance of the future place that God had created

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for me. It was an eternal dwelling that went beyond my own imagination. It was not a mythical place, but a Holy land. It was something to look forward to. There was comfort to know that I was about to make one of the grandest changes in my life. Little did I know that it was all God's plan and a journey that would have many twists and turns.

I'm a boy from Brazil who always dreamed big and was filled with curiosity about the world around me. I would often sit and watch butterflies, wondering how they stayed afloat, how God designed such beautiful wings and patterns. I was a dreamer with a sincere understanding of compassion. My imagination was an essential component of my childhood. I was great at spending hours pretending and role-playing. I was always lost in the worlds I'd created. I have this vivid memory of being six years old, sitting on the front seat of the car asking my dad a million questions about life, and never being satisfied with quick answers. I had a spiritual depth of understanding that was beyond my own realization, truly out of this world.

I was seven years old when I attended a church service with my mother. The grand architecture of the church was so imposing that it made me grin from ear to ear. The tower on the building, topped by a slender, pointed end, resulted in a polygonal plan of beauty. I was seven years old when I attended this church service with my mother. It was a majestic cerulean-colored church somewhere in central Brazil. Upon entering, I felt as if the heavens opened and I instantly sensed the presence that I never had before. I knew that it was something that would prepare me for the future. I was beginning to understand the purpose of the human experience: to grow into a relationship closer to God.

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My story comes straight from the heart because I know it will heal many. I'm not a writer and I sit here sobbing as I put pen to paper. I don't know how many pages this book will be but I want you to know this, if I can just help you smile a little more, live better, or even provide some hope for you, then I know I have done my job. My story can be related to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The ending is filled with compassion and celebration. It is in our brokenness that we can find our roadmap to healing. The voice of God is full of curiosity. Full of kindness. Full of surprise.

This book is about identity and the challenge to change from the old into the new being. The transformation away from loneliness and guilt, to a world filled with love, instead of hate and anguish. I have always longed for something more but didn't know what it was. It all began with the want. I'm writing this book first for myself. To that little boy from Brazil who never stopped dreaming and who always, and still does, have an enormous heart. This book is my healing and my breakthrough to conquer the next chapter of my life. Coming to the United States, and adjusting to life in America, has been one of the biggest challenges in my life. It has also been unfathomably rewarding. I sometimes wonder how my life would have been different if I had stayed in Brazil. And then I catch myself. It is important to look forward, never backward. Does the butterfly long for his cocoon or does he dream of flying through the air, and drinking the sweet nectar of life?

This book will be candid, open, and honest. I want to have a conversation with you about change and love. I will do that without any animosity or hate. For me, I found a solution where darkness was banished by light. I now fully understand that God is the embodiment of love on earth.

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The mark of a Christian is our love for God, the world, and our neighbor.

I'm hoping this book offers hope to anyone who thinks they are alone in this world. All of us need to stand up for the oppressed. Many times, I sat alone thinking that I was the only one feeling isolated and trapped in who I was. I never wanted to make waves, and constantly just followed the norm. I was okay with being just mediocre; with being normal and fitting in. What I learned later in life was that it takes courage to be different. It takes courage to be successful. It takes courage to win. After many years of searching, I finally broke free from the bondage of that way of thinking and stepped into my true authentic self. I learned that God is present in our broken stories. He invites us to reflect on where we have come from, so that we can join Him in where we are supposed to go.

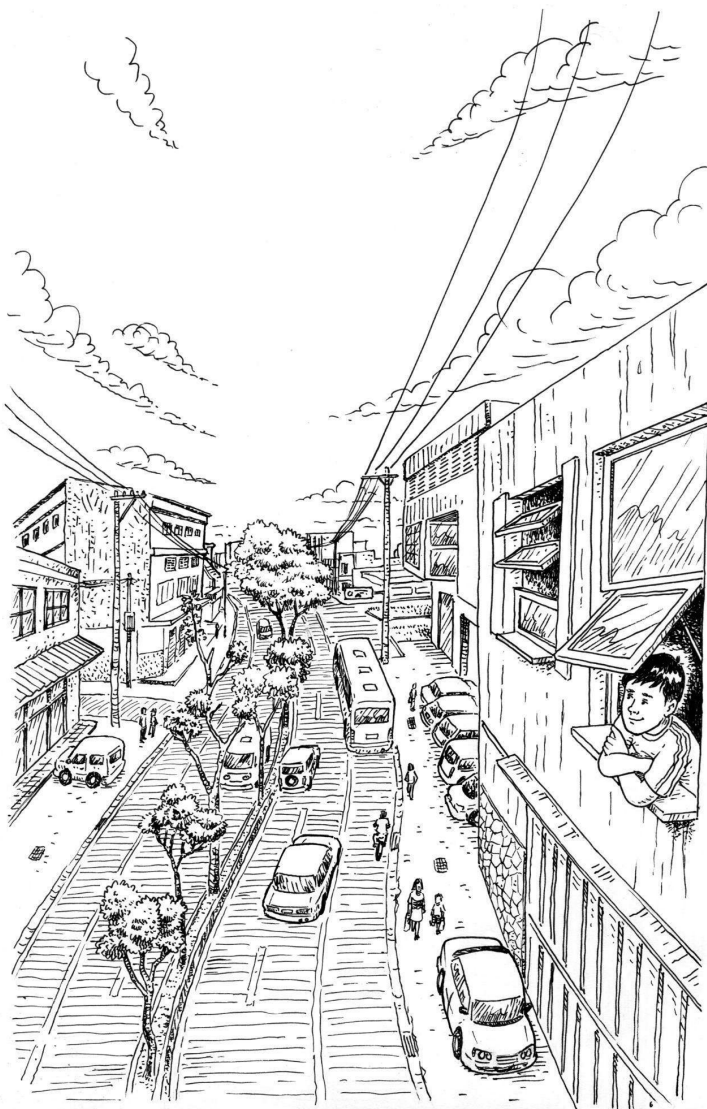
I wanted to write this book as if I were having a personal conversation with you. The story is deeply personal, one I would share with family and friends. So welcome, dear reader. I want you to grab something to snack; maybe and maybe take out a favorite mug and pour some tea or coffee; and picture yourself sitting with me on your porch. The weather is perfect, the birds are singing, butterflies flutter by on the gentle breeze, and I'm sitting next to you. I'm not a mind reader. I don't know how you're feeling right now but give me a little time. Get to know me, as a storyteller, get to know my story as a young boy from Brazil who felt lost in the world. I will make you laugh, perhaps even cry. Allow me to take you on this magic carpet ride.

The thing about life is that it's never perfect. There are always twists and turns along the way that you never anticipated. At times, you will weep and that is okay. It is all part of the

Introduction

deal. We must handle pain in order to handle success. We must analyze life when it knocks us down. I have learned to recycle my pain in the darkest moments of my life and in turn, use that pain to become a better version of myself. So, take a gulp of your drink of choice, sit back, and let me take you on the journey of my life.

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SCENES FROM MY WINDOW

The Boy (Part I)

He is a little boy on a journey through a very
complex world

He is extraordinary and kind-hearted
He is ambitious and unselfish
Who will be at his next station?

He is sturdy and bright-eyed
He is mischievous and adventurous
Who can stop him from dreaming?

He is bright and ingenious
He is sensitive and amiable
Who can stop him from living his wild imagination?

He is self-willed and trustworthy
He is good-natured and bashful
Who can stop him from inspiring others?

He is compassionate and sweet
He is exceptional and gifted
Who can stop him from doing for others?

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He internalized and preserved the special
moments of his youth

O Menino (Parte I)

Ele é um menino em uma jornada por
um mundo muito complexo

Ele é extraordinário de bom coração

Ele é ambicioso e altruísta

Quem estará em sua próxima estação?

Ele é forte e de olhos brilhantes

Ele é travesso e aventureiro

Quem pode impedi-lo de sonhar?

Ele é brilhante e engenhoso

Ele é sensível e amável

Quem pode impedi-lo de viver sua
imaginação selvagem?

Ele é obstinado e confiável.

Ele é bem-humorado e tímido.

Quem pode impedi-lo de inspirar os outros?

Ele é compassivo e doce

Ele é excepcional e talentoso

Quem pode impedi-lo de doar-se pelos outros?

Ele internalizou, preservou os momentos
especiais de sua juventude

Scenes From My Window

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

1 Corinthians 13: 4-6

The butterfly arrived and floated up so high that you simply had to stop and admire its radiant elegance, influenced by the sources of light and energetic currents flowing all around. It peered up and flapped its wings as if calling for attention, conducted by the choir of the heavens, following in rhythmic vibrations. It danced so delicately that I was in awe of its grace and determination. Landing on a single red rose, it stretched its wings like it was preparing for prayer, preparing to tell the story of a boy who would one day share his plight with the world. Its strong angelic presence surrounded me, confirming a message that God was always, and will always, be nearby. It symbolized that God watched over me, offering protection, and sending comfort. An emblem of a journey of change and growth. A story of identity and dreams, and of a being that would one day reach his full potential.

In a world that celebrates ambiguity, I got lost along the way and fell into a deep sleep that lasted over forty years. I speak to you with love and humility. My childhood in Brazil gave me some of the happiest times of my life. If you want to know my heart, and who I truly am, you must understand my childhood and where it all began.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

I grew up in the capital city of Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. I thought I had the best life a little boy

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could imagine. I lived on a busy street called Rua Espinosa where many people would pass by to get from one place to another. We lived above the bus depot. I can still remember the humming of the engines and brakes as multiple buses pulled into the garage. The sound of buses being washed and cleaned before being sent on another journey into the unknown parts of Brazil. This was where buses were stored and maintained. It was the place where buses were washed and inspected; where my dad was busy at work, managing the administration office; and where I met the drivers and got to know each one of them by name. It was a garage that housed epic conversations between drivers and transferring customers on their way to their destination. The place soon became inhabited by a boy so very curious to hear their stories. I couldn't resist spending as much time down there as possible. My dad had a way of imparting wisdom upon us, without even trying. I was the lucky one who got to see the world through different viewpoints, all thanks to him.

I had a profound introduction to understanding who Christ was, at a very early age. I'm the son of a missionary. My mother was finishing up missionary school in the center of town on weekdays, while we attended a renewed Presbyterian church on the other side of town on the weekends. This Pentecostal church was large, tucked away in a busy neighborhood on the other side of Belo Horizonte. It never seemed like it was part of the big city, nestled between the shanty towns and steep hills of a distant location. Growing up Pentecostal Fundamentalist during the 80s was very interesting, to say the least. I developed many perspectives and beliefs that would carry into my adult life. I spoke to God and I was sure God spoke to me. I would learn later in life that my religious upbringing would teach me to be a critical thinker and continue to help me engage in the

Scenes From My Window

world around me. As a child, I wasn't so sure that would be the case.

My father promoted my inner growth and strength by simply allowing me to watch him be a leader. This greatly affected my overall cognitive and social development. It instilled within me an overall sense of well-being and self-confidence. Later in life, I understood his influence and how my future relationships with people are what they are today because of my wonderful role model. I strongly believe that these patterns my father set within me, dictated how I relate with other people today. I grew up imitating these behaviors and how he functioned in this world.

PEERING THROUGH THE WINDOW

There was this window in my home where I observed everything the world allowed me to see. People from all walks of life would pass under my window. I would make up stories about them and come up with so many narratives. I believed every single story to be true. At the age of seven, I thought life was grand and my curiosity never ceased.

One morning, I woke up to hear the rhythm of drums and singing that instantly drew me to the window, peering into the street below. This was the Mardi Gras of the southern hemisphere; Carnival. The increasingly thunderous rhythm of celebration intensified to a point of climax that made me feel anxious and scared. I immediately ran under my bed to hide from it all. I imagined these people were coming to get me and take me out of my little cocoon of comfort. I then reached a point of courage and faced my fears. I ran up to view the situation to find a sea of people celebrating life in its full glory. Amazed, I smiled at the beauty of over two

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hundred men and women dressed in turquoise, the color of sky and water. The color that carries success and good health and a happy life, filled with good fortune. My smile widened that day because I was getting a front row seat as they waved to me at the window above them.

Another morning saw the vibrant colors of yellow and blue stripes of a tent being raised just on the other side of the street. This was the reality of the famous circus coming to town. I kept copious notes in my mind as I observed every detail with full participation. I would hear the launch of the full rehearsal including clowns, acrobats, trained animals, trapeze acts, musicians, and dancers. These rehearsals would go well into the night and I would hear the roaring of motorcycle engines as they ran through their final routine before opening.

My window observations were not always pleasurable. One woman stands out in my memory. She came down the street with her full armor, always waving and yelling some sort of nonsense that could not be understood. She had an exaggerated, absurd movement to her walk. She seemed like a lost sheep but also whimsical in her own way. She always dressed in black and carried a rather large black sack. People tended to move out of her way when she approached from a distance. She was a homeless woman with no destination. Her language was rather foul, frequently yelling obscenities at cars as they passed by. I always wondered what happened to this lost soul.

MEMORIES WITH MY FATHER

My father was, and still is, the best dad anyone could ever wish for. Every morning we would all pray and make our way

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down to the white pick-up truck and head to school. There wasn't enough room for both my sister and me to sit inside the truck, so I stood behind the seats holding on to my dad. These daily trips would often be the highlight of my day. My dad was the first person in my life that had my back, no matter what. Those "best dad" times in Brazil are forever ingrained in my heart.

I was learning to ride a bike at the Mineirao, the largest football stadium in the state of Minas Gerais. I didn't want to force the process but I knew that this day was going to be difficult for me as a five-year-old. My dad held on to my seat and simply told me to keep pedaling. I started to feel frustrated and tired and at times I had to stop and take a break. The parking lots seemed to go on for eternity. Turning was always the most intense and difficult part, resulting in falling and scraping my knees. I was determined and continued, more focused than before, until I reached full mastery. My father cheered me on the entire time.

On weekends he would take us to Lake Pampulha on the other side of town. The lake had an abundance of rich plants that covered most of the entry. Often when we arrived, the lake was calm and perfectly transparent. It was just us, the windows rolled down, and the open road. A stream of vendors, selling hammocks and kites, would line the road, offering further adventures to their shoppers. On these backpacking trips, I would often ride my bike and daydream about life. It always felt satisfying to have a lazy afternoon and be filled with the calming sound of nature.

There were Sundays when we went to the airport, usually mid-morning. The view from above featured people moving swiftly toward their destination. My days were filled to the brim being a "plane-spotter," hearing the echoing roar of

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jets overhead. My dad and I would go up to the observation deck to view the airport's comings and goings. We would talk about airlines, airplane models, or flight paths on that given day. Watching planes take off and land at a steady pace like a drum, the rhythm of travel soothing my mind from living in a busy city that hardly paused throughout the week. This was a day of tranquility that marked times of hope and adventure.

Living in Minas Gerais meant frequent trips to the city of Ouro Preto. It was a colonial town founded at the end of the 17th century, located in the Serra dos Espinhaco mountains of eastern Brazil. I was intrigued by the opulence of this city, including its Baroque architecture which was rich and complex. These buildings suggested movement that was not confined by separating walls. This city was complex, surprising, and overall dynamic. As I walked through the city with my parents, I began to comprehend the way the light delicately touched the buildings, it rejuvenated a light in my soul of a passion for the arts. This was my introduction to the arts -- exposure to different types of art that allowed me to use my mind creatively. My continuous curiosity cultivated a lifelong love of learning and supported deep creative thinking and expression that would be carried on into my adult life.

A second grade field trip to the theater completely mesmerized me. The house lights dimmed, and the curtain opened. I was fascinated by the attitude of the actors effortlessly owning every aspect of their lines. There was something magical about this small production, it sparked something in me that I would find very difficult to extinguish as an adult. Live performance was my gateway into my own imagination. It increased my appreciation of ambiguity and sparked curiosity for years to come. Over the years, live

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performances have created a nurturing environment for me to experiment and take risks.

As I look back on my childhood, I now understand how it all shaped me into what I am today. Early interactions and experiences helped shape my brain. These positive, high quality early childhood experiences provided the best opportunity to prepare me for success in life.

MY CHILDHOOD SHAPED ME

I had an amazing childhood. These memories were essential to my development. I learned what it meant to be happy. How children absorb, understand, respond, and react to their environment are all critical factors in how their adult life will unfold, like the wings of a beautiful butterfly. It makes me happy to see families spending quality time together. Those were the moments that meant everything to me as a child, making me feel safe, secure, and loved. I would like you, dear reader, to go walk away from this chapter understanding that no one's childhood is perfect. For all of us out there caring for these little ones, all we can do is be there for our children as best we can and create a loving and safe environment for them to grow and develop into mature, happy adults. We are the cocoon that keeps them safe until they can spread their wings and take flight.

STUDY GUIDE

Our childhood experiences shape who we become. They may not be everything about us, but they have a big influence on how we live our teenage years. This is the moment when parents' involvement is critical, since they may make or break it. It's when a child is like a sponge,

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absorbing everything they see and hear. A child learns a lot from what you say as a parent, but they also absorb many things from what you do. Children are so observant that it's difficult for them to understand those moments when our words do not match our actions. The significant amount of time parents spend with their children has a huge influence on the kind of adults they become. Parents are there for all their child's early learning -- how to speak, walk, and even bike for the first time. Encouragement, affirmation, and applause will boost the kids' self-esteem. Confidence is such an important trait. It is developed at a young age. If you don't allow your child to try new things, they will grow up fearful of failure. If self-esteem is not nurtured in a child's life, they many grow up with low self-esteem.

Most of the world's famous leaders, if not all, had a good childhood experience in contrast to a few notorious historical figures. Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States, and he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that slavery would be abolished in all states. His father was a pioneer and farmer. His mother was deeply religious and died when Abraham was young, but his stepmother is said to have encouraged his love of learning. One of the most influential and authoritarian rulers in history, Joseph Stalin was a dictator and chief architect of Soviet totalitarianism as well as a highly efficient, but ruthless leader. He was one of the founders of Communism, along with Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. His father was alcoholic and abusive, and beat him and his mother. His mother would also beat him to control him. Stalin did not even attend her funeral.

Both of these individuals were endowed with leadership abilities and ended up on the opposite end of the spectrum. The distinction between them is their childhood experiences.

Scenes From My Window

We see that childhood has a significant impact on a person's destiny. This is a useful reminder for parents to nurture your children with God's love. Childhood is the time to expose them to the Word of God, because they are a sponge at this age. But remember to also embody the teaching from the Bible. If you are unmarried, look for a life partner who will be one with you in raising godly children.



Point of Discussion

1. What is the most memorable event from your childhood that you will never forget?
2. What specific event of your life would you want to revisit if you had the chance to go back in time?
3. What was the most embarrassing moment of your childhood?
4. What is the primary role of the parents in a child's life?



2

THE ARRIVAL

“Behold, I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

- Genesis 28:15

My Street

I'll go but I'll return to see you again
But wait, one last look...
Goodbye to busy people heading to work
Goodbye to busses being prepared for trips
Goodbye to busy people working in a garages
Goodbye to daily steaming hot bread
Goodbye to endless trips to the lake
Goodbye to mandatory lazy Sundays
Goodbye to my best friend
Goodbye to my Portuguese
Goodbye to laughter
Goodbye to the best food in the whole wide world
Goodbye to endless bike rides at my favorite stadium
Goodbye to church ladies
Goodbye to cobblestone streets
Goodbye to simplicity

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Goodbye to daily car rides
Goodbye to kite festivals
Oh Brazil you don't know what imprint
you are leaving in my heart.
Ok God, I'll go but please let it only be for a little while
See you soon...

Minha Rua

Eu irei, mas voltarei para te ver de novo
Mas espere, um último olhar ...
Adeus aos ocupados indo para o trabalho
Adeus aos ônibus sendo preparados para viagens
Adeus aos ocupados trabalhando em garagens
Adeus ao pão quente de todos os dias
Adeus às viagens intermináveis ao lago
Adeus aos domingos preguiçosos obrigatórios
Adeus ao meu melhor amigo
Adeus ao meu português
Adeus às risadas
Adeus à melhor comida do mundo inteiro
Adeus aos passeios de bicicleta sem fim
no meu estádio favorito
Adeus às senhoras da igreja
Adeus às ruas de paralelepípedos
Adeus à simplicidade
Adeus aos passeios diários de carro
Adeus aos festivais de pipas
Oh Brasil você não sabe que impressão está
deixando no meu coração
Ok Deus, eu vou, mas, por favor,
deixe ser só um pouquinho
Até logo ...

The Arrival

I settled into a culture that was very different from my own; my new reality eventually hit home. I was in an environment that didn't make sense to me, like a butterfly finding itself in the dark recesses of the Arctic. I had been living in Brazil for nine years and learning to adjust to living in America was going to be no easy task. Our lives are impacted by certain things that are happening, or have happened, to us. We are the sum of all our parts and all experience big shifts that shape our identity. My personal crisis began with an identity crisis. Moving to the United States in 1989 was just that. It was the catalyst that broke everything apart, before I could eventually begin to rebuild.

My life was forever changed.

It was a depressing and heavy afternoon. I remember getting dressed knowing that I was going to make one of the biggest journeys of my life. I wasn't happy about this journey because, for some reason, I knew that it would involve pain. I knew that I would have to say one last goodbye to what I knew was my happy place in Brazil. I had to say goodbye to my favorite window, to my circus, to the funny lady with the black sack, to my best friend, to the bakery next door, to the humming of the busy buses coming in and out of the garage, the Sunday trips to the Pampulia and airport. The famous street where it all happened was no longer going to be my daily view and this crushed me to the core.

On the day of the big move, I remember sitting in the corner of a room depressed with a heavy heart asking simply why. I couldn't understand the reason for leaving such a great place. Nothing was ever explained to me about how things would be in the new world. It felt like everyone was talking and no one was listening. My sister was more excited and ready to start her new journey, but I was not. I wanted to

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stay in a place where it all began. I had to hang in there and have faith that God would bring me back to this place one day, and that I would understand why I'd been forced to leave in the first place. I remember getting in a car and having one last look back at my home. I was the little boy who sat in the back with his face pressed against the glass sobbing. I remember, somehow, thinking the more I cried the more God would hear my plea and instantly fix it, but my actions proved futile. That day I had to be brave and say goodbye; I had no choice.

GOODBYES CHANGE US

Goodbyes make you think. They make you realize what you had, and what you are going to miss. I imagine that a butterfly might find it difficult to leave their cocoon, in which they felt safe and secure, before leaping into the wide-open, scary world. It felt the same. I was dragged away from my safe space and left to flounder.

Deep down I was certain that God knew me and was with me. I had the understanding that I was not just a collection of atoms, and not just a random moment in time. I was a divine-inspired being made in the image of my creator and he made and loved me unconditionally. Even at this young age, I had this in the back of my mind.

I had a strong hope that the postcard my father previously sent to me could be a real place where peace and prosperity would be my reality. I held on to that dream, but soon realized that my reality wouldn't be quite like the picture-postcard image I longed for.

It was a cold February in 1989 when we took our flight to the United States. My greatest desire was the need to

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see my dad. I so looked forward to being able to embrace him again, and for our family to be reunited. Being apart was very difficult, leaving me with an extended period of confusion and conflicting emotions.

What I arrived to, was not the postcard I previously received. This was supposed to be a place full of tranquility and fun. We were all supposed to feel happy and excited to start this new journey. I was wrong. What I had hoped for, couldn't have been further from the truth. As a result, I started to have feelings of anguish, despair, guilt, blame, and depression; I was in survival mode.

The neighborhood was odd, houses so close together like they were hugging each other, pressing to survive the depressed, dark, and gloomy city this was. My window on my second floor didn't provide a view I was familiar with. The views were of high strobes of blue and red flashes that exemplified handcuffs and arrests. I could hear the distant sounds of trains making their zigzag journey into a distant city. This was an echo that penetrated the emptiness in my heart. I wanted so badly to continue my days of climbing my favorite mango tree, flannel shirts, feijoada, lazy days by the lake, but all of that was becoming a distant memory.

EVEN THE PEOPLE WERE DIFFERENT

The people around me didn't know what I carried with me. The weight of being different, of missing my home and my friends, of everything I'd ever known. I missed my window with an aching despair. People treated me like I was weird. And I probably was. I wasn't like them.

My mind went into overdrive. I was thrust into an inner-city school, crowded, and poorly funded. The façade and

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interior looked like a cement prison filled with connecting rooms that eventually led to a dark broom closet, also known as my English as a second language classroom. I didn't need to understand the language to know that these students were suffering from poverty and family instability, along with other health concerns. They were like me. They'd come to school with baggage upon their backs weighing them down and preventing them from learning, from assimilating.

The school was failing to educate the students they served. The nation's lack of a well-developed integration policy exacerbated my challenges and put me at risk. They spoke to me in a language that I didn't understand. They thought Spanish was my first language; I kept correcting them. I recognized the letters that formed the words but couldn't make out the meaning fast enough. They laughed at me when I gave the wrong answer. I was often placed on a computer or given easier tasks, rather than having the opportunity to be with the other students. I was cognitively capable of thinking critically and engaging with my peers, but I had no voice to explain that. Teachers thought if they spoke a little louder, I would eventually understand what they were saying; it didn't work.

Educators couldn't relate to me and, as a result, they simply had me do the minimal assignments possible so I could just get through school. I started to lose my focus on who I was becoming. My relationships with my peers and other adults started to affect the way I thought, learned, and developed. I fell into a downward spiral by believing the voices in my head.

This created major academic gaps in my education.

JUST EXISTING

I often felt like I was just existing. A butterfly floating on the wind, allowing itself to be carried wherever the wind wanted to take it. I was left out. My parents couldn't even pick me up from school. A practical stranger did. She was a neighbor I didn't know well. She picked me up from school due to the hectic work schedules my parents had, I hated it. All my parents did was work. My mother started working at a garment warehouse and my father was doing double shifts as a baker at Dunkin Donuts.

I often came home to an empty house and sat by the window watching life pass by. My physical and mental health were beginning to take a downward spiral. It started to affect how I thought, felt, and acted. If this way of life didn't get better, then my mental health was going to affect every stage of my life, from childhood, adolescence, and all the way through adulthood.

I felt lost. It took us three months of living in Newark, New Jersey when we finally came to an understanding that we had to move. We made our way to central New Jersey, to the city of Somerset. I arrived fully equipped with internal factors to make it there, but I wasn't prepared for the environmental challenges such as social relationships and the vast differences in culture. I was often stuck between two worlds: America and Brazil.

OUR IDENTITY DEFINES OUR DESTINY

With full color: green and yellow. Staggering through, uncomfortable and foolish. He was a fuzzy, funny-looking caterpillar that nobody paid attention to. He was the larva, the immature boy without a voice; sometimes labeled as

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creepy or the ugly immigrant. He entered his cocoon and went through a great metamorphosis hopefully to later reappear with wings. Nobody knew how long it would take to witness this magnificent transformation. What they knew was that God was in control and only He could make the transformation complete. The caterpillar, me, kept squirming, seeking, struggling because he had to. He first had to discover his identity before he could fulfill his destiny. He knew that his identity defined his destiny. Our identity is at the heart of everything. All that we do, all that we are. In order to find our niche in the world, we first have to find our identity and work from there.

STUDY GUIDE

What coping mechanism do you use to handle changes or transitions in your life? Change and transition are often difficult for individuals to adapt to. People get uncomfortable when change and transition happen. Someone said that, 'change is the only constant in this world.' Change is inevitable, it will always be part of our lives. Change can happen in an instant, you may not like your next assignment, your work, or your new environment. Change is something we all need to be good at in life. Easier said than done because when we are experiencing one, life has become challenging.

Changing is both costly and time-consuming. It necessitates the expenditure of time, money, and energy in order to adjust to a new reality. All people, acting rationally, the natural tendency is to be resistant to change. It's never easy to make a change. Oil changes in automobiles are time-consuming and expensive, requiring money as well as

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supplies. Changing your company's phone system required time, cash, and training.

Most of the time, change is removing us from our comfort zone. Failure to adapt to change will keep us stagnant. Someone said that the world is revolving, it is not good that we just stay where we are. The Eastman Kodak Company is a multinational corporation that specializes in analog photography products, founded in 1881 by George Eastman and Henry Strong. It was the most well-known brand in the field of photography and videography throughout the 20th century. Kodak sparked a revolution in the photographic and video industries. Kodak was the most dominant firm in its time in the market, but a series of poor decisions brought about its downfall. In 2012, the firm filed for bankruptcy. Kodak's downfall is often traced back to its failure to embrace digital photography. The management did not adapt to the change with technological advancements.

The change will make us realize that we are not in control of what is happening around us, and this is a frightening reality. When we are in control, we feel safe. But since we are not in control, we will seek someone who can protect us. Individuals with power and authority in the government are appealing to some people, while others choose a company that can secure their finances. Some are their careers which make them safe and secure. Unfortunately, all of these would fail for the same reason: they are not in control.

Thanks be to God because there is someone who can secure us in this life. Someone who is in control and will never change. Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Because Jesus is the only one who will never change, He is always true to His words, He is always faithful even though at times we are not.

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Because He is unchanging, we can hold on to His promises in the Bible. Regardless of our situation, we may like it or not.

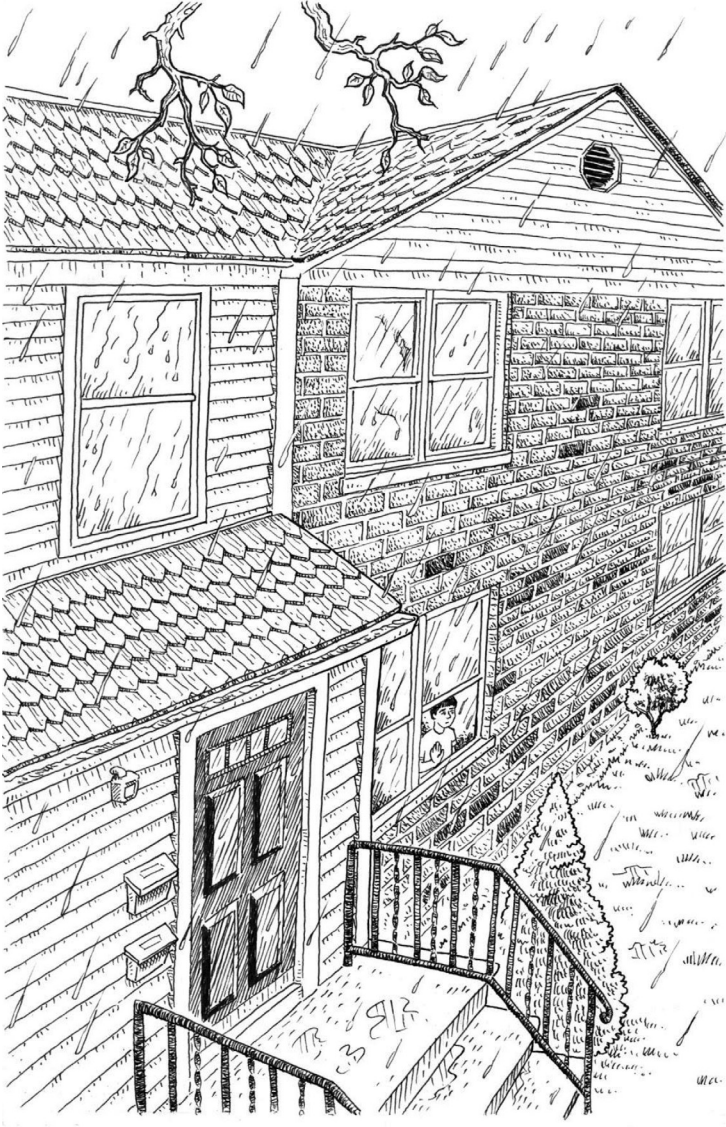
This must be our posture before Jesus, that we will know Him more in our lives, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, because the more we know Him personally, the more we will trust Him.

Point for Discussion ❄️

1. What's the most painful change or transition you've undergone in your life?
2. What was the most difficult adjustment you had to make when you became a follower of Jesus Christ?
3. What is your usual response when you're facing a tough decision or situation?



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3

ADOLESCENCE

“And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

- Genesis 11:6

Growing Up

He does not know his own beauty
The image presented to him had not been granted
The little boy inside of him sits and weeps for acceptance
He longs to fit in
They can't find a solution for him
He sleeps in a corner in silence
Trapped in his own imagination

The apartment doesn't have a garden
Butterflies don't fly in that part of town
His window must remain closed
Days are filled with long television episodes
Overwhelmed by fear, pain, and shame
His world became inconsequential and claustrophobic

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He cannot see his own wings
He can't see his own beauty in the image of God
Little did he know his tears were
watering tomorrow's garden
Seeds of growth God had already
been planted years before
He rested in the shadows of a promised tomorrow
He knew like a flower knows when its butterfly will return

He waited and waited for the sun
For the metamorphosis
For the survival and transformation
Over and over, he wanted to fly
Cocooned in isolation
In darkness, still alone, broken, and small
He rose slowly
Slowly he started rising

Crescendo

Ele não conhece sua própria beleza
A imagem apresentada a ele não havia sido concedida
O garotinho dentro dele clama por aceitação
Ele anseia por atenção
Eles não conseguiram encontrar uma solução para ele
Ele dorme em um canto em silêncio
Preso em sua própria imaginação

O apartamento não tem jardim
As borboletas não voam naquela parte da cidade
Sua janela permanece sempre fechada
Os dias são preenchidos com longos episódios de televisão
Oprimido por medo, dor e vergonha
Seu mundo tornou-se inconseqüente e claustrofóbico

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Ele não pode ver suas próprias asas
Ele não pode ver sua própria beleza na imagem de Deus.
Ele jamais imaginaria que suas lágrimas
regaram o jardim de todas as manhãs
Pois as sementes de crescimento
Deus já havia plantado anos antes
Então, ele descansou nas sombras
de um amanhã prometido
Ele sabia como uma flor sabe quando sua borboleta voltará

Ele esperou e esperou pelo sol
Para vivenciar a sua metamorfose
Para a sua sobrevivência e transformação
Tudo que ele queria, era voar
Enclausurado em isolamento
Na escuridão, ainda sozinho, quebrado e pequeno

Ele se levantou lentamente
Lentamente ele foi se levantando

She arrived, self-poised in her elegance of luminosity and delicacy with full glory and splendor. Her lustrous, wide wings exemplified a beauty that only God could create. It was nothing short of inspiring. It was a prolonged radiance that cascaded through the clouds and penetrated the heavens. He witnessed her manner of flight, combining pulses of successive groupings as she waltzed with grace and perfection, fluttering and dancing in the breeze. She looked like an angel coming to deliver a message to a little boy who had to endure a very difficult journey through the unknown. She came whispering a confirmed message from God.

“You are going to have a wonderful life. There are going to be sunny days and dark days, you will have to pull through

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and listen to the voice of God. It's going to be a flight you will have to discover on your own; it's going to be a real adventure. Just know that I will always be here thinking and praying for you. One day, I will be sitting by your side rejoicing in the radiance of your beauty and, together, we are going to write your life like a story. It's going to be okay, I promise. Fly high and proud my soul friend."

She simply stared into his soul and wept. Her wings suddenly felt weak and fragile. The pain made her eyes unsure. Her silence was deep. She felt the emptiness unraveling the colors of her world. She heard the crescendo of the heavens calling her back to her place, the southern continent. She ascended into the heavens and delicately made her departure by joining the kaleidoscope of butterflies.

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING... BUT IT CERTAINLY HELPS

We were poor, very poor. The neighborhood we lived in was just okay. We had to move into a two-bedroom apartment and stay there for a very long time. My solace came when I was able to replicate my days in Brazil by taking refuge in the woods, and by climbing as many trees as possible. It was the closest I could get to Brazil and I would often ride my bike into my world of make-believe and pretend to be King Arthur getting ready for battle against his friend Sir Lancelot. I would round up the neighborhood kids and build on my idea of having our version of a 'Round Table' by gathering and training our neighborhood buddies in our democratic way of activities. I thought back to all the tales of Camelot I was told in Brazil. I relived all those moments in my imagination. They held a place in my memory where it never lost their luster and glory. I will never forget those once

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shining moments where my soul danced to the rhythms of the flavors of being a Brasileiro.

Looking back on this time, I can see that I made the most out of my childhood in America. While I was desperate to be back in Brazil, I simply had no choice but to try and make things a little better. My teenage years were different and difficult. Being thirteen was difficult. It was an awkward transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. I felt trapped in these years for a long time. A butterfly stuck in the cocoon, unsure of whether or not it is ready to break free.

I complained, I cried and mourned. Going through this difficult period in my life left me with many questions regarding difficult choices of friendship, sexuality, gender identity, drugs, and alcohol. I grappled with insecurities and feelings of being judged. I didn't have anyone to answer those difficult questions to. I desperately needed somebody to ask these questions to. My quest to find the right person proved futile. Being disengaged cut me off from being known and as a result, I went out looking for attention from others. This created fertile territory for lust to emerge in my life.

Coming from a very rigid family, I had to follow strict rules about conduct and behavior. My mother did the best she could, she was the autocrat who made all the decisions and punishments. The rules were always rigid with no exceptions or flexibility. Some rules left me feeling unloved, unwanted, or simply put, bad about myself. My mother was strong in her faith and any deviations from the scriptures caused major distance in our relationship. This left me feeling unloved and misunderstood in the process. I understood that she had goals for me but her real struggle was in reconciling her religious ideals with the choices I wanted to make.

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I was now the prodigal son, bewitched by the temptation to separate myself from this rigid and lonely family life; this was now going to be my own independent existence. I was disappointed by the emptiness but fascinated by the smoke and mirrors the world was showing me on the other side. Alone, dishonored, and exploited, I started to build walls to create a world all by myself. Sensational behavior brought me quick intense emotional reaction and comfort. It was a false world that welcomed all those who were disengaged and gave them rest. Through the fog and smoke, I walked in, I spoke of my anger and it relieved me from my struggles. It allowed me to create a world where I could be my very own God.

Lust has this weird way of getting under the skin of teenagers. It's like their entire life revolves around it. Who is attracted to who? Who is sleeping with who? Those lurid whispers in the school corridors had us all hooked. I was unable to separate myself from my lust. I felt like it was as much a part of me as anything else. Why wouldn't I follow it? It gave me gratification in a way that nothing else did during this phase of my life.

Simply put, I was hooked.

THE ENEMY ATTACKED MY THINKING.

The battle began in my mind. I didn't see a model of healthy emotional intelligence -- I lost my sense of self. Without somebody to look up to, somebody who exemplified what it meant to be emotionally intelligent, how was I supposed to develop into that? The enemy shifted my thinking and placed my mindset firmly into negativity. I felt unloved, unwanted, neglected, and abandoned. The challenges in

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trusting myself and others widened further, causing a huge disparity between what I wanted to be, and how I was acting.

It was there in the short bios, free of charge, where I searched for something to fulfill my lust. They too were craving affection and intimacy. I dialed the number and set up a mailbox. I listened first and looked later. Physical attributes were not important. I was loving too fast and forgiving too easily. These were the emotional scars that would last most of my life. I often looked back at past mistakes, missed opportunities, and unhealthy relationships as redirection. I kept looking back; it was my Egypt. God never intended for me to be there. And yet, there I was.

If you don't have self-worth in who you are to God and who God is to you, you will walk around starving, lacking courage and purpose. The only way I knew, at this time, was to seek external validation. I lacked the validation from the inside and needed somebody else, anybody else, to validate who I was; to show me that I was worth loving, worth being around. The momentum of shame carried me into a deeper place of despair. My relationships kept falling short of what I needed them to be.

They thought I was simple and ordinary. They thought I was like them. They thought that I would like what they liked. So they only prepared me for the level of their own experience. When the little boy from Brazil showed up, everything in the family had to be readjusted because there was something different about him. I would be the generational curse breaker. The one who would decide to step outside the dysfunction and break it.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

You might have heard of the butterfly effect. Essentially, a butterfly flapping its wings in one corner of the world can cause a tsunami in another. While it is an exaggeration, this is what it felt like in my teen years. I wanted to flap my wings and have it change the course of my life. I wanted to be loved, and happy, and fulfilled. But I wasn't. I so desperately sought validation from others that I neglected trying to love myself. It's easier to see now, with the hands of time working on my memory, that God loves me and so I should love myself because I was created in His image. However, as a teenager, I didn't have that. I loved my appearance and the way I could make others feel. But I didn't love the person I was on the inside. I felt hollow. It would take years for me to feel whole again.

STUDY GUIDE

How do you handle depression? Is this typical? Or am I the only one who's feeling this way? Depression is a part of our existence. Even Christians, who are devoted followers of Jesus Christ, experience it.

Depression according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and home.

There are various reasons people get depressed. Some people develop depression during a life-threatening disease. Others may become depressed when confronted

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with changes in their lives, such as relocating or the death of a loved one. Other individuals have family histories of depression. Those who do, may experience sadness and loneliness for no apparent reason. We should not be surprised if we feel depressed because any of these things might happen to anyone. The real question is how to be prepared when depression hits us.

Proverbs 12:25 (NKJV) says, “Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad.” We can see that depression is caused by anxiety in the heart of individuals. Anxiety, as defined, is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. Anxiety is the fear of not knowing what to do when we are confronted with issues beyond our control. It’s also known as fear of the unknown. Good thing that the scripture above offers us the solution: “But a good word makes it glad.”

What is that good word? It may be a piece of good advice from a friend when we are depressed or a therapeutic word from an expert or professional like a psychiatrist. Those are good but the good word we all need in life is the good word of God in the Bible. It is from the Bible that we discover this: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7). Reading the Bible every day is not only for the pastors and ministers, it is for every follower of Jesus Christ. It is our daily food. As food makes our body strong and healthy, the word of God makes our spirit healthy and strong.

When Jesus was trying to be tempted by Satan in the wilderness and was hungry, for He was fasting for forty days,

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“Jesus told him, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Matthew 4:4. The Bible is God’s word that we must read every day so that when depression strikes, we may realize that God is greater than the problem that generates our depression, according to God’s word in the Bible. Like Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Point of Discussion

1. Who are the people you share your problems in life with?
2. Do you find it challenging to read the Bible? Why or why not?
3. What is your best time to read the Bible in a day?



GLIMMER OF HOPE

The Circus

He cried when the circus came to town
The clown portrayed the reflection of his own identity
Behind that smile hid an abstract soul
He needed to smile in the midst of the crowd
He painted over the despondency with each brushstroke
Sheathing dark shades of fear and depression
Obscure colors of the plague insisted
on lingering in his soul
Elements of charred animal bones
Burnt vegetative matter
Provided the consistency of the sagging, morbid shades
under his eyes
His emancipation of colors took full transformation
Pink for passion
Yellow for his spring flowers and dancing butterflies
Green for South America
Blue for his sea and sky
Lavender for serenity
Lots and lots of white for purity, the new, and perfection
His mini hat sat perfectly poised
Still adorned by an impersonated butterfly dancing in its
sparkling glittering form

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suspended in a trapeze of perfection

O Circo

Ele chorou quando o circo chegou à cidade
Ele viu no palhaço o reflexo da sua realidade
Atrás daquele sorriso escondia uma alma abstrata,
lágrimas sofridas e sentimentos obscuros
Mas ele precisava sorrir no meio da multidão diante
daquele espetáculo
Mesmo tomado pelo desânimo e tons escuros
do medo e depressão
As cores obscuras insistiam em permanecer
cravadas em sua alma
Elementos de ossos de animais carbonizados
Matéria vegetal queimada
Forneceu a consistência das sombras
Flácidas e mórbidas sobre seus olhos
Sua emancipação das cores sofreu uma
transformação completa
Rosa para paixão
Amarelo por suas flores de primavera
e borboletas dançantes
Verde para América do Sul
Azul para céu e mar
Lavanda para sua serenidade
Branco para sua paz e purificação
Seu triste mini chapéu perfeitamente equilibrado
Ainda adornado por uma borboleta dançando em sua
forma cintilante e reluzente
Suspensa em um trapézio de perfeição

They were applauding for us; for me. They were affirming the director's good judgment, her judgment of me as a person. The house lights

Glimmer of Hope

were up and the approval on the faces in the audience was all the nourishment I needed. I closed my eyes and remembered what it was like to start school in America with no understanding of English, to be considered cognitively impaired, to be sheltered from the world to the point of suffocation, in the tiny universe of a Pentecostal 'paradise.' It wasn't paradise, like they wanted it to be, it was a prison. "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie." (Revelation 22:15). Sheltering inside the church was being in the ark, the boat of safety that wasn't safe at all. It was a box where one cannot stand up or see the outside, trapped with people who all see the world the same way, and experience the same things.

But I had become somebody. I was told it would be too hard. The most talented kids got lead roles. I would have to brace myself for disappointment. But I was not disappointed. I was elated. I felt I was finally where I was meant to be, emerging from my cocoon and embracing my true self.

PARENTAL CONTROL

When I was born in Brazil, my mother practiced Macumba, which is considered by Christians to be a form of black magic or witchcraft. Macumba had evolved as a combination of a few different African religions imported to the Caribbean with the slave trade. My mother had a reputation in our town for always being always highly made up and dressed as provocatively as possible. She was always drinking this or that tonic or concoction, ritual-killing some poor chicken or performing some other sort of 'religious' rite. She claimed to see dark spirits, and she solicited their help whenever she needed something.

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I was born with a host of health issues, including immune system and neurological problems, and the doctors gave me six months to live. True to fashion, my mom took me to the dark spirits of Macumba, but they were unable to cure me. As she despaired for my life, some local Christians came knocking. My mother, desperate, promised that if God healed me, she would declare her life for God. The Christians had visited before, but she had been unwilling to let them come into the house. Now she was desperate, willing to do anything to cure me.

Long story short, they entered the house, laid hands on me, and prayed, and I got better. My mother, true to her word, joined them in their church and their crusade and became a radical, God-fearing, world-shunning Pentecostal. She was afraid of everything after that, including short hair and pants on women. My father was even changed too. He had been a heavy drinker, but as he got involved in the church, he gave it up. They were caught up in the explosive trend of converted hippies known as “the Jesus Movement.” The 60s flower crusade had given way to the born-again hippie crusade. This was a very isolated world of religious fundamentalism with its doom, gloom, and preparations for the imminent rapture of the saints and the return of Jesus. While other kids were watching “The A Team” and “Knight Rider,” I was watching sermons at church nearly every night and dissecting biblical prophecies. My parents were wallowing in guilt, their senses disoriented, and were overcome with doubts about their moral identity.

Soon after that, we moved to America, to New Jersey. Our church was more and more concerned about the spiritual state of the United States and decided to send in missionaries to start a Brazilian Pentecostal Church. But if we were supposed to be missionaries, I’m not sure how the sectarian

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isolation was meant to accomplish it. My mother would not allow me to do anything, or go anywhere, except for church and school. At first, she strictly forbade me to do theater, but I was able to try out for the choir. Until then, I had suffered terribly from a total lack of identity. At church, God and the Bible (especially their interpretations of it) were being shoved down my throat, spoon-fed to me. I was choking on it. Scared, behind my peers, and empty of self-esteem, I needed to accomplish something I could call my own.

THE FOREIGNER

It is typical for English as a Second Language (ESL) students to struggle academically and fall behind. I could communicate verbally with great ease, but as I began high school, I lacked the educational experience due to my very un-American cultural upbringing. The multiple demands of language learning were overwhelming. In my native language, I was 'normal', but in the foreign language of English, I was struggling and vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy, who capitalized on my fear -- paralyzing, owning, and controlling me.

Were there defects in my cognitive processing systems? That was what my teachers thought, but they were confused when my performance on tests that measured such things as memory, phonemic awareness, and processing speed, placed me on par with my peers. It was incredibly confusing to be questioning your own mental capacities at the same time as being plunged into a foreign education system. Eventually, my teachers said I was above average and moved me from remedial to honors courses. From this point, my schooling went far more smoothly. My language and writing skills began to develop, but outside school, my life was church, church, and more church.

THE CHOIR AND THEATER

Often, we have experiences that stick in our minds and change the way we think. I heard a talk once called 'When the Chips are Down' by Rick Lavoie. He said that kids carry self-esteem like bags of poker chips. For the popular kids, the captains of the football team, or the cheerleaders, their bags are heavy with chips. If they sit in a classroom and the teacher asks them for the answer to a question they don't know, it matters very little. Their bag of 'chips' is so full that they don't notice a loss. But for other kids, who don't have many chips to start out with, the same situation is devastating. That was me before I found something I was good at. Parents are the primary ones responsible for filling those bags at a young age. Unfortunately, my mom was afraid to let me become prideful, and if anything, she removed what chips I had when she could. My dad simply was not present in my life. This didn't help either. While others seemed to be thriving, it took everything in me to just get by at school.

I wanted so badly to enter the theater department. I longed to be on the stage and to belong. My mother strictly forbade it. I was also not allowed to participate in any sports because it was considered 'worldly,' and an idol. Fundamentalist parents worry about 'the world.' They worry about drugs, sex, rock music, but they never worry about overdosing on the church, but this was having a huge impact on me. Looking back, it was the source of my lack of identity, which I know is ironic, because today I believe with all my heart that identity in Christ is what saves.

I understand that the authority of the parent is unquestioned throughout the Bible. The fifth commandment says we are to honor our father and mother (Exodus 20:12), and we

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are told in both Colossians 3:20 and Ephesians 6:1-2 that children should be obedient to their parents in all things. Parents are also commanded to properly train their children to love the Lord. We see this in Deuteronomy 6:7, where God commands parents to teach his laws diligently and constantly to their children. But, I also believe that parents must allow their children the freedom to develop their own identities in Christ.

A parent's desire to guarantee a child's spiritual success prevents the child's own development and actually runs counter to the way God raises us. Does God control our every decision? Or does he give us free will, the autonomy to choose him freely if we choose him? We must lead our children to love the lord by example. They are stunted if we don't hold them with an open hand and trust God to draw them when it is time.

FINDING MY IDENTITY

The choirs at my school had won many awards and were very competitive to enter. I loved music and singing, so the first brave thing I ever did was in my freshman year, when I auditioned for the choirs. My sister, who loved me but was a pessimist, did not want me to be disappointed. She constantly said, "Oh Marcelo, you are only a freshman. The singers in the concert choir are so good. You will probably not get in." At that moment I understood that I was in the midst of a transformation. This process was natural that the cocoon did not arouse any kind of admiration. But I began to realize that there were important lessons that life wanted to teach me through this metamorphosis. In order to transform into a butterfly, the caterpillar needs to build its own cocoon. It must do this on its own. There was no easy solution in this process.

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I had no way of knowing the size of my wings trapped inside that cocoon, or even if I would have the ability to fly free. There was confidence building up within me, a flame that burned inside me that made those uncertainties cease to exist. Just like a caterpillar requiring a resolute decision to evolve, this was a step in faith. I had two choices: become a beautiful butterfly or remain in my comfort zone, stuck in my cocoon for eternity. Sometimes fear of making mistakes, not believing in ourselves, and only listening to the voices around us, cause us to become unbelievers and remain stagnant, not reaching our full potential. Change doesn't happen overnight. It is important to respect the time and the process. We must take value in the small stages of transformation that life presents us. Although I sometimes had to fight alone, I was sure of what I wanted. The time to leave the cocoon had arrived. I just had to believe that I could fly.

There is something you should know about me -- if someone says I cannot do something, it makes me determined to do it. The first battle was to conquer my fears and audition. I shook as I entered the room, hoping my sister was wrong. But I passed the audition and got into the choir. For the first time, my little bag of 'poker chips' got just a little bit heavier. I started to gain self-confidence for the first time in my life. I couldn't have been more proud of myself for getting out there and giving it a go. If I hadn't, my life would be considerably different now. I wouldn't be the person I am today.

In finding the choir, I found my first 'people.' Until then, I only knew church people, and the other kids I knew were as stunted as I was. Making choir friends added more chips to my bag, and I was doing better than I ever had. Joining the choir, making friends, and touring around New Jersey with them was huge for me. I signed up from there to join the state theater, where I got to learn about lighting, set design,

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and make-up. There were workshops I got to attend; and the whole enterprise mesmerized me. I had found a world where I could belong, filled with talented and hard-working people.

I still didn't have a rooted identity, but at this stage, I felt I was on my way. When I heard about the auditions for the play, 'Alice in Wonderland,' I stood up to my mother for the first time in my life and said that I would be auditioning. She was adamantly opposed to this, and my insistence struck her poor heart with fear. She had done everything possible to protect her "miracle child," and she was failing. I still struggle today to be understood by my mother. On one hand, I completely understand her, but on the other hand, her fearful parenting caused me great harm. Having a sick child did a number on my mother. It has been a spiritual battle to forgive her for this, which, by the grace of God, I have. I went against her word -- which pained me to do -- and got into the play. I was assigned three roles. My mother was conflicted because she didn't want me to do it, but she also attended the performance and had to admit she was proud of me. I witnessed the inner struggle within her first hand.

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Though my talent was obvious, I was still hindered by the language, and I was determined to make up for this. I began reading plays and musicals—Thornton Wilder, Neil Simon, and the other greats. Our school put on 'Our Town,' 'The Wiz,' and 'The Music Man.' Each time, the auditions would come up for these plays, I would get my hopes up, and my sister would try to bring me back down to earth. She'd say, "This will be too difficult. The people that get these roles are going to go to college to major in theater. Don't be surprised if you don't get a part. I don't want you to be hurt." Again,

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she underestimated my determination. I remembered going to see the high school plays when I was in middle school. I'd see that the actors had their names written on stars on the theater wall. I could picture my name on one of those stars, and I knew that, one day, my name would be on one.

My teachers and I finally made a discovery that made all the difference in my ability to learn. No one had realized that being from Brazil, I always thought first in Portuguese. Whenever I had a lesson, I translated it in my mind to Portuguese, and then to English, slowing me down to half the processing speed of everyone else. Overcoming this was huge for my progress and my confidence. My "bag of poker chips" increased by a million when I began to get lead roles in the plays. Eventually, just as I'd hoped, my name was finally on one of those stars! I can't accurately describe the feeling of accomplishment and pride this gave me. If life could have stopped there, I'd have been on the mountaintop forever. But life goes on.

APPROACHING ADULthood

I graduated high school full of hopes and dreams, carrying my full "bags of chips" into community college. I knew I would go into the arts. Theater gave me the closest thing to a self-justifying identity that I'd ever had. I would continue to find it there, all the way to New York, Hollywood, or both. I got into a play called 'Enter Laughing.' My parents, who had finally accepted my love of theater in high school, were now concerned all over again, trying to convince me to go to business school.

I was coming into adulthood and happy to get out from under the weight of the religious fundamentalism of my parents. But I was also facing the scary world, and immediately I

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became aware that the “world out there” was not like high school. The balloon was deflating. The “bags of chips” were getting lighter and lighter. All my friends from school had moved away to college and were making new friends. I was alone and lost. I couldn’t quite get a grip on where I was supposed to be. The theater and music career that was to be my identity was more than elusive. It seemed so far out of my reach. I began taking voice lessons in Manhattan and doing cabarets in the city, but I was spending more than I was making, and I had to drop out of college to get a job in real estate, in order to keep my dream alive.

I went on as many auditions as I could, but once again, my English skills were proving to be a hindrance, and I could never read fast enough. The feedback I received was that I was not authentic enough. This is one thing most non-theater people find difficult to grasp. The best actors are thought of as “honest,” despite playing a character. Isn’t that inherently dishonest? You have to find a way to get extremely present and real. It’s hard for many people to understand. I had no real identity except in being a performer; I didn’t know myself well enough to be authentic, and honest. Ironically, it would take finding my identity somewhere off stage for me to be any good on stage, but I don’t want to get too far ahead. That comes later.

I vividly recall sitting in my little cherry red Mustang sobbing after yet another failed audition. My whole existence was wrapped up in being successful on the stage. It was the one thing that had given me identity and purpose, and it was draining away. I was apparently not as good as I thought I was, and this was not turning out to be the thing that justified my existence. The applause and approval that the theater had promised were failing to deliver now, and I was depleted. I think on some level, we

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always feel we are going to be the exception to the rule. The one who makes it. I certainly did. The knockbacks were not a part of the journey I'd planned.

FINDING MYSELF THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

I did get into some shows, but even those weren't making me happy anymore. The chips were being spent faster than they could be made, and I was unfulfilled and depressed. I began looking around for another way to find identity and fulfillment. I turned my attention to relationships, hoping that perhaps they were the thing I would find myself in. Maybe I could live my life through a romantic partner and see myself through the eyes of someone who loved me, or at least lusted after me. I knew I was deviating from the faith of my childhood, but what had my faith ever done for me but put me in a box and locked me in?

When there weren't enough women to fill the void, I began to wonder about men. Maybe that was what was missing. Maybe my real authentic self was gay. This was scary, but I hoped there would be something there to make me hate myself less. It was simply an open door for Satan to attack me with full force. The enemy capitalized on my fears. He owned me.

I would learn much later that the model for true identity was Jesus. When Satan tried to do to him what he was doing to me, Jesus was able to withstand him for one reason: he knew he was a child of God. The Fundamentalist church of fear did not equip me to know the love of God. I was taught that he had standards for me, not that he loved me unconditionally. The two-hour sermons on Sunday nights

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were not about God's love and acceptance of me, not about his forgiveness for my sin. They were only about his wrath and his hatred of worldly things. So, unfortunately, when I was desperate to fill the proverbial God-shaped void, God did not occur to me as a possible answer. I was lost. I was the prodigal son and I was nowhere near ready to come home. What reason did I have to come home?

TOWARDS MY NEW IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Without an identity in Christ, we are lost souls. Finding who we truly are, opens the world up to us. In order to learn about ourselves, we need to experience things, and be given the freedom to do so without fear or judgment. Looking back at my teenage years, and my rebellion through entering the theater, I can see now that I was years behind many of my peers. They'd long since been allowed to explore and discover their true selves, but I started late, and in a foreign country. While they were spreading their wings, I was trapped in my cocoon, unable to take flight. As painful as it may be for parents, children need freedom and understanding. Yes, they'll make mistakes, but they'll grow and learn. This is one of the greatest gifts parents can give.

STUDY GUIDE

Dreams and visions should always be present in our lives. Without them, life will be stagnant, mediocre, and miserable. Helen Keller said, "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." This is a revealing statement from a blind person about the distinction between seeing and having a vision. It is preferable to be blind and have vision, than to have sight, but no vision.

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Dreams and visions will also lead us to our purpose in life. Everyone has a purpose. Usually, our dreams and visions will lead us to discover our skills and talents. These are important to discover because our purpose is always connected to our skills and talents.

Basketball great Michael Jordan is a living legend. He won six National Basketball Association (NBA) titles as a player and three times awarded Most Valuable Player (MVP). He was rejected by the sophomore basketball team at school because he was too short. He wasn't disappointed about it; instead, he opted to join the junior basketball team. Rejections did not stop Michael Jordan from pursuing his dreams and visions to play in the NBA. His talents and skills in basketball matched his dreams and visions. That is what we call the "sweet spot."

Dreams and visions will be challenged along the road. But if you know they're from God, nothing and no one can stop you. It may take time to get there, but keep holding on. It will eventually happen if you don't give up.

Joseph is also known as Joseph the Dreamer. When he was young, one of Jacob's (Israel) sons dreamed that he would be a powerful ruler in the land. He was sold by his brothers, jealous because of his dreams and visions. He was wrongly accused of rape, and was imprisoned. It took seventeen long years before his dreams and visions came to pass. Imagine if Joseph had quit after fifteen years – fulfilling the promise of God was just two years away.

Continue to dream – not just ordinary dreams, but big dreams. In fact, dream for something beyond your lifetime. Because dreams and visions won't happen apart from the guidance of God. Having big dreams will lead us to seek

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God in our lives. It will lead us to realize that we need someone who knows the future, someone who is in control of everything, and that is God.

Spend time every day planning your life, but don't forget to be practical. Share your dreams with someone you know who might help you in achieving them.



Point of Discussion

1. What was your dream job when you were a child? Is that different now?
2. Can you honestly say that you are enjoying your career today?
3. What would happen if you dream apart from your identity in Christ?



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“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”

- 2 Timothy 2:24-26

“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

- Nelson Mandela

Wounded Soldier

He’s not what he looks like
They searched for a king
His brothers looked perfect for the mission
It still was not who God wanted
He faced the world alone
He fought through desolate lands
Lakes of sewage penetrated his disillusioned soul

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He never missed the unbeatable foe
He knew evil and fought it daily in the field of darkness
His dismembered soul couldn't be alive and whole
What was the nature of the demons that possessed his soul?
Telling him he was not whole
He allowed them to make him less
His hands were always close to the flame
The world showed no compassion
They called him from the field
They laughed
They gossiped
They belittled
God ordered the oil to be poured over him
They never saw his power
They didn't know he had it
They hadn't seen him at his worst
Because he has been defeating giants his whole life
With the first sword he ever touched
He got the job done
...and won

Soldado Ferido

Ele não é o que parece
Procuraram um rei
Seus irmãos pareciam perfeitos para a missão
Ainda não era quem Deus queria
Ele enfrentou o mundo sozinho
Ele lutou por terras desoladas
Lagos de esgoto penetraram em sua alma desiludida
Ele venceu o inimigo imbatível
Ele conhecia o mal e lutava contra ele diariamente no
campo das trevas
Sua alma desmembrada não podia estar viva e inteira
Qual era a natureza dos demônios que possuíam sua alma?

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Dizendo-lhe que ele não estava inteiro
Ele permitiu que o diminuíssem
Suas mãos estavam sempre perto da chama
O mundo não mostrou compaixão
Eles o chamaram do campo
Eles riram
Eles fofocaram
Eles menosprezaram
Deus ordenou que o óleo fosse derramado sobre ele
Eles nunca viram o seu poder
Eles não sabiam o que ele tinha
Eles não o viram no seu pior
Porque ele tem derrotado gigantes a vida toda
Com a primeira espada que ele tocou
Ele fez o trabalho
... e venceu

The world had begun to seem like a cage of temptations. Before I ever knew to start looking for the key, or for some way to break myself through those heavy bars, the walls closed in on me. All of the anguish I felt became more horrific than before, when I was baked under the hot coils of lust.

Lust was my first giant step in the wrong direction.

I felt it boiling up inside me. Alone in my bedroom or out roaming the streets, I knew that I was succumbing to it because of the way that it made me feel in my knees. I could hardly walk when it had crescendoed to its climax. My forehead would burn up, turning bright red, as if I was coming down with a fever, but there was no queasiness to go along with it, nothing like a cough or a tickle in my throat. Instead, there was only blindness. Lust prevented me from seeing the world through the same eyes I was used to. Soon,

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colors became so bright that I could hardly distinguish them from each other. It felt as if I was staring at the sun, spots clouding my vision, something else taking over from me and moving my body this way and that way. I felt entirely out of control.

It took me some time to realize, but the worldly lifestyle was not for me. The guilt that I felt was too enormous. My understanding was not as complete as that at the time, though. I was, instead, seeing my situation in much simpler terms. There was something missing. It felt like something big and important – but what could it be? In the midst of all these powerful feelings, the best thing I could do was allow myself to ask deeper and deeper questions of myself.

Who was I? Who did I want to be? What was my direction in life? What did I value?

The sad reality of my situation was that in asking these questions, I was coming up with superficial answers. Every time I passed a window or opened my phone, I would get stuck on the image of my own face. It became an idol to me. I wanted to look my absolute best, to sharpen my appearance until I was irresistible to other people.

Why did I want to do that? The answer was fairly straightforward -- lust was my primary motivation. It was my reason to be. Imagine if a butterfly could survey its own beauty once it emerges from the darkness of its cocoon. The butterfly is lucky, for it cannot see itself. It can't get drawn into something superficial. While I envy them of that, without the opportunity to experience lust and self-absorption in this way, I wouldn't have grown and learned what it truly meant to be human.

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These dangers, the ones that are inherent to unbridled lust, can fall on anyone. It is only now, in retrospect, that I see what I did wrong. By giving in so much, and so often, to my lust, I was putting my own needs ahead of God's. In my unregenerate mind, I sorely misunderstood the difference between the "needs" I was satisfying, as opposed to my true needs. My needs had been needs of one who lives for subjective pleasure-seeking. I needed to be loved by romantic partners. I needed to believe I was attractive and talented. Those needs came before all else, and nearly destroyed me.

WHO AM I REALLY?

My mother, who was a missionary, could have told me as much. When I was a child, however, religion was unattractive to me. During my early days in the United States, the mainstream world made plenty of sense to me. I wanted, above all else, to be like my peers. They were into their appearances, plagued by relationship drama, and superficiality.

Again, I asked, "Why?" Why would something so thin and so fleeting, something like physical appearance and external validation, carry so much weight with me? Why was I willing to sacrifice so much for these things? It is easy to reflect upon this, in hindsight, but at the time, I was hooked.

I prayed to God, asking that He reveal things to me. While lust was still overpowering me, I longed to understand my experience – and to understand what I needed to change about my lifestyle. Around the age of thirteen, I felt different about myself. I was suddenly insecure in my self-perception. My identity seemed to escape me, and to get a hold on

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myself, I had to go looking for some fresh ideas and new perspectives. As a butterfly flies far and wide to taste the nectar of unfamiliar flowers, so did I.

I talk more about this in other chapters, but here I'll say that God gives us one true identity. We were made to be children of God and His very image-bearers. Anything short of that will leave one empty and confused.

In the course of my search for my identity, lust and anger led me to make terrible decisions. I did, for a long time, fail to make the connection between what I was feeling and what I was doing. The more chaotic my life became, the more inclined I felt to venture out into the world, casting away all of the painful emotions I was experiencing, trying to cover them up with one bad habit or another. Before I was able to come to terms with the truth, I just wanted to escape those feelings.

MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL, AM I THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?

Dreaming of a life in New York, I would look in the mirror and think to myself, "There is nothing I can't do with this face." That was my whole thought process: as long as I remained youthful and attractive enough, I could set any goal for myself. Everything would fall into place for me, filling up the hole that I sensed was forming inside me. The prophet Jeremiah wrote about this in Jeremiah 2:13. He said, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."

I had not forsaken God, because I never really had Him. But I had most assuredly 'hewed out...broken cisterns that can

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hold no water.' The people of Jeremiah's day were just like the people today, thirsting for things that fail to satisfy them in the long term, but leave them hollow and broken in the long term.

My life looked like this: party on Friday, party on Saturday, and then get ready for the rest of the week – a party every single night, as long as there was one worth attending. I flitted from one party to the next, just as a butterfly flits from flower to flower. But instead of gaining sustenance and nectar, I gained nothing. None of it seemed absurd to me because, in my mind, I could get away with anything. My mother's missionary work seemed ever more distant. It had, after all, never meant much to me anyway.

At that time, I thought that I had it all. That is one of the most injurious things about temptation -- it is invisible when you are under its spell. We have all been there, in our own ways. The Bible talks about something called a "seared conscience" (1 Timothy 4:2). That is what I had.

Most of us have fallen into an unhealthy, damaging habit, only becoming conscious of it after it has hurt us over a long period of time. I thought that I had it all, in spite of all the pain that my shame was causing me. It hardly seemed like I was blocking out any significant part of my truth.

Yet, I was.

Faith was missing from my life. One day, my apartment caught fire. A contractor had come in to sod the decks, and I lost my whole apartment as a result. I lost the only place that felt comfortable to me. That made only a dent in my worldview, though. All of that pain I felt, all of that anguish,

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was easy for me to cover up because I had convinced myself so thoroughly that the path I was on was the right one.

Someone I trusted had abused me, both physically and emotionally, and even that was insufficient to wake me up to the dead end where I was walking. Rather than cultivating faith, and looking in the right places, I was looking for other people to complete me. I would put so much responsibility on everyone I met – when more often than not, they were only looking to use me for their own immediate needs.

The root cause was my insecurity. Deep down inside myself, I was hollow. I lacked the confidence to say what I wanted, to get what I wanted, and to stand up to the things that seemed wrong. Every morning, I would wake up and whisper the same lies into my own ear. I would tell myself that if I felt pain, it would all go away soon enough, once I found the right person. I attached my future to an idea of the “right person,” of finding the one. A beautiful butterfly of a person, all bright colors and happiness. Little did I know, He was already waiting for me.

BELIEVING THAT $2+2=3$

Beyond my insecurities, there were certain misconceptions that had taken root inside me. I was missing fundamental truths about the world. For instance, there is good and there is evil. That is a fundamental truth. Back then, though, everything was relative to me. If a person seemed bad, then I must be seeing them in a bad light. No one could do anything objectively wrong, not from that perspective. Attempting to live with this worldview is to misunderstand a beloved Christian concept. ‘Judge not lest you be judged.’ (Matthew 7:1). But you can see how this verse is not only

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misapplied, but misapplied in an incredibly destructive way. To fail to judge between right and wrong, good and evil, is not to obey the command of Jesus. Look at how Paul puts it in Romans 2. After he has profoundly explained why the refusal to acknowledge God leads to idolatry, which leads to all manner of sinful behaviors, he says,

“1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. 2. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. 3. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?” (Romans 2:1-3)

The point is not that you would judge right and wrong, but that you would judge something as wrong but still be doing it yourself. That would be bad. Deal with the evil in your own heart and actions. Then you can have an opinion about your brother’s wrongdoings. Simply put, don’t be a hypocrite.

My lack of judgment of what evil had led to many of my insecurities. If you are holding contradictory beliefs, such as calling evil good, and good evil, then you will be insecure because deep down you know you cannot be trusted. You know something is evil, but you have decided to call it good and to participate. This could have a profound effect on the way you feel about yourself. Learning that God accepts you and gives you his identity is a great start toward becoming secure, but it won’t help you feel secure if you continue to live in a world where you pretend that $2+2=3$. Things are what they are, and when you come into the light you must acknowledge that. Truth is everything.

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Here is another fundamental truth: The devil does exist. That one would have seemed ridiculous to me when I could hardly spend an hour without gawking at myself in the mirror or daydreaming about the life that I would one day lead in New York. Because my mother's missionary work had never clicked for me, and because religion had never made a whole lot of sense to me when I was younger, something like "the devil does exist" would have sounded like a punchline to me.

SLEEPING SOUND(LESS)LY

My whole life took a sharp turn, strangely enough, while I was sleeping.

I had always prayed to God to prove to me that there was darkness in the world. If there was evil in the world and the devil existed, then I wanted hard evidence. When I was thirteen, I got the hard evidence that I craved, in a series of dreams that left their imprints on me.

I know that there is surely evidence of evil in the world. There is child trafficking, slavery (still), racism, hatred, child abuse. There are many kinds of evil. But I was looking for evidence of evil on a supernatural level. Those things are evidence of that, but they are also explained away by psychology and nature/nurture theories. There are some people who claim that not even a rapist is evil, because he can't help himself. He had been abused, so he became an abuser. The world is very confused, and so was I. I was searching to understand it all, so I prayed for evidence, and I got it.

In one dream, a man dressed in black, his hair flowing far past his shoulders, chased after me. I ran and ran, but however much I ran, it was not enough to get away from him. Three

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times, that man chased after me, and each of those times, I suffered from tremendous depression and anxiety.

In another dream, I would be resting in my own bed when an arm would appear from underneath. The arm would reach up and grab me. I would swat it away, but it was no use. The arm would take hold of me, pulling me downward. I kicked and flailed, but the arm was too strong for me. Its grip was tight.

Those dreams were some of the worst -- while depression and anxiety were wearing me down, insomnia became one more problem in my life. After the arm would pull me down, I would wake up and remain awake the rest of the night, many nights getting almost no sleep at all. It is hard to smell the roses and marvel at the butterflies on two hours of sleep combined with crippling depression and anxiety.

In another dream of mine, a group of dark figures surrounded me while I was in my bed. Rather than grab at me, they would harass and torment me. Their words were like slings and arrows, piercing my heart. Every time they spoke to me, I braced myself for the impact. It was torture to meet this group, so much so that I almost wished the arm would show up and take me away. It is interesting that I thought this way. How many of us flee from one demon to another? In the same way, humanity flees from one sin to another. We may see that we are caught up in a sin like gluttony and can only get away from it by the sin of vanity. Both are a trap.

There was another dream that was even worse, though. It only came to me while I was asleep at a friend's house. Figures -- obviously demons -- would appear before me, asking the most probing and uncomfortable questions. They would murmur into my ear, and then their murmurs would turn to shouts. It was mortifying.

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But it didn't stop there. The dreams turned, in time, to real-world daytime visions. Sitting at my desk, I saw shadows lurking by me. My kitchen seemed to transform into a dungeon. Then, the dungeon seemed to melt into a fiery abyss, which I thought must be Hell. Demons latched onto each other, one taking the other into its mouth, chomping down and then swallowing. It was a terrifying thing to witness.

Then, something broke the mayhem. One of the demons looked like a regular man. Looking me in the eyes, the demon spoke a warning to me.

"The chief is coming to pay you a visit," the demon said.

White-hot fear pierced my stomach as I looked over the demon's shoulder. There was a long shadow: a horned figure in a long gown. Each step was an earthquake, a rumbling that may as easily bring the whole world crashing down on me, as send me flying upward into the sky and out into space to drift forever into oblivion.

What could I do? I felt powerless in the presence of such horrible, oppressive evil. It was evil, through and through. Most distressingly, I understood that the evil was my own. The lust that I was living, using others for my own benefit, hoping that they could save me from myself, had invited these creatures into my kitchen, into my life, and into my mind.

Ephesians 4:25-27 says, "25. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and 27. give no opportunity to the devil."

Paul is saying that how we live can make room for the evil one. Other translations say, 'Don't give the devil a foothold.'

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I think this is a very apt, and poetic, way to think of it. I had given the devil several footholds and handles. He was able to have his way with me, because I had seen to it that I utterly belonged to him. I belonged to evil by the way I'd chosen to live.

TO LOVE AND TO HATE

The modern world had molded me as it saw fit into a minion of all its emptiness and despair. Loving too quickly and then forgiving too quickly, I was trusting the wrong people and suffering the consequences. The Bible says there are two kingdoms—the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. I was fully entrenched in the dark.

Was it any wonder that my identity seemed like such an amorphous cloud to me? Was it any wonder that when I looked in the mirror, I saw both a face that I adored and a person I did not recognize? How did I love my face, but hate myself? Because I loved an outward persona of my own making, but despised the real me. It was a dichotomy. I loved who I projected to the world, but hated who I truly was.

The bad feelings got worse with every dream. The demons invaded every inch of my space. It seemed, when I was at my lowest point, that there was no surviving, let alone coming back from the havoc that I had wrought for myself. In some ways, we know that no one is beyond redemption. Paul, murderer of Christians and 'chief of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15) was not beyond redemption. Peter denied Jesus three times and Jesus restored him (John 21:15-17). But then there was Judas. It seemed there was one who was so filled with the presence and influence of Satan that he was unable to be redeemed. I doubt that he was beyond the reach of God's capacity to forgive, but in the end, Judas ran

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from the grace of God so that even when he was regretful, he did not repent. My problem was that I too was filled with the presence and influence of Satan. God was mercifully showing me this in my dreams. I had asked for proof -- terrifyingly (and mercifully), I was receiving it.

THE SIGNS WERE THERE

I chose not to see the dreams, at the time, as a sign from God that I was on the wrong path. Instead, I wondered why this was happening to me. Everyone around me seemed happy, yet I was struggling. I could only see the superficial beauty in myself, the outside appearance. I had not yet learned that my inside could be just as beautiful as my outside. Think once more of butterflies. Their outward beauty shines through. It's the first thing we notice. But their delicate nature, the fact that they only do good in the world, shows that their inside matches the outside. They take nectar from the plants and spread this amongst others, pollinating and bringing forth new life and new fruits and flowers. Looking back at my life now, I see that this is the way to live. They do no harm, hurt no one, and just live the life they were meant to live. I got there in the end, but it wasn't an easy journey by any means. I spent a long time in the chrysalis waiting to be who I truly was meant to be.

STUDY GUIDE

How do you deal with the strongholds in life? Are they for real? Many people live their lives without even being aware of this reality. A stronghold, according to the dictionary, is "a place that has been fortified so as to protect it against an attack, or a place where a particular cause or belief is strongly defended or upheld." Biblically, a stronghold is a defensive

The Fall

structure. It is prevalent in your life and in your family, usually a clan stronghold. You've undoubtedly heard stories of your family's strongholds. Sexual immorality, sadness, rage, and a slew of other things are examples of strongholds.

Living life without the full awareness of the existence of strongholds will lead us to a cycle of defeat. It's like fighting a war without knowing the enemy.

There is what we call Spiritual Warfare. Spiritual Warfare is the Christian belief in fighting supernatural evil forces. It is based on the biblical truth of demons, who are said to influence human events in so many ways. The fact is that there has always been a war between God and Satan. We don't know exactly the motive of his rebellion, but we can see the results of his attack. The assault becomes particularly severe if you are now a follower of Jesus. Ephesians 6:12 says "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

The reality is that when we became followers of Jesus Christ, we declared war against the devil. We may not say it aloud. The devil is the enemy of God, so he is ours too. The good news is that God did not leave us to figure out how to win this war on our own. Ephesians 6:10-11 says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can make your stand against the devil's scheme." What are those armors? In verses 14-17 of the same chapter we can read this: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness arrayed and with your feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can

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extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

The Belt of Truth is our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the truth. The Breastplate of Righteousness is the gift of salvation we received in accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The readiness of the gospel is a perfect fit as we share it with others. The shield of faith is our undivided devotion to God. The helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit are the word of God.



Point of Discussion

1. What could be the worst sin man can do that God can not forgive?
2. How do we respond to the grace of God when we receive His gift of salvation and forgiveness?
3. Was there a time in your life that you felt hopeless? How did you overcome it?





THE BREAKTHROUGH

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Revelation 3:20

The Return

Who cried for the man?
Who cried for the little boy screaming inside the man?
He sleepwalked for forty years
He didn't fit in anywhere he went
There were no rules
He was so young
He ran around, trying everything new
Being wasteful
Being extravagant
This wasn't where he intended to be
Still he wasn't alone
But still, he was lost in the wilderness
Trying to weave ribbons of memories
Navigating through smoke and mirrors
He needed someone to hold him when his dreams were done
Who cried for the man?

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Who cried for the little boy screaming inside the man?
Never knowing he was well-made
He concealed everything in his heart

His tribulation ended with a simple surrender to his
heavenly Father
He took all the idols and smashed them

With morning glow filling the air
He made his way home
He was out of danger
Battlefield abandoned and destroyed
He couldn't stay all his life down the abyss
Eating with the swine and sinning against heaven
Far away you could hear him singing to the dawn
Running to the father, he surrendered all
His father saw him and had compassion
It was the castle to all who saw
Of everything being prepared
Banquet chairs adorned the surroundings
The fraudulent smiles they all had
Coordinated with the deceptive costumes
He was frightened by the green-eyed monster of jealousy
Knives were out, as they sliced the cake of envy
They sang the songs of allurements
Distressed by their own reflections
Troubled, they heightened their need of perfection
Too many broken ever afters
Nothing impressed him at all
Nothing more to say to them
The son didn't learn the lines they wanted to hear

God blessed the little boy inside him
They prayed for him even though he was already blessed
They all forget he was sent out there

The Breakthrough

He rested because finally, he had it all
Because he surrendered
He saw the eternal God
He gave the world new ways to dream
Everyone *needs* new ways to dream
God's waited long enough
He's home at last

O Retorno

Quem chorou pelo homem?
Quem chorou pelo garotinho gritando dentro do homem?
Ele foi sonâmbulo por quarenta anos
Ele não se encaixava em nenhum lugar que ele ia
Não havia regras
Ele era tão jovem
Ele corria por aí, tentando tudo novo
Sendo um desperdício
Ser extravagante
Não era onde ele pretendia estar
Ainda ele não estava sozinho
Mas mesmo assim, ele estava perdido no deserto
Tentando tecer fitas de memórias
Navegando através de fumaças e espelhos
Ele precisava de alguém para segurá-lo quando seus
sonhos terminassem
Quem chorou pelo homem?
Quem chorou pelo garotinho gritando dentro do homem?
Sem saber que era bem feito
Ele escondeu tudo em seu coração

Sua tribulação terminou com uma simples rendição
ao seu Pai celestial
Ele pegou todos os ídolos e os esmagou

The Boy From Brazil

Com o brilho da manhã
Ele voltou
Ele estava fora de perigo
O campo de batalha estava abandonado e destruído
Ele não podia ficar a vida toda no abismo
Comendo com os porcos e pecando contra o céu
Ao longe se podia ouvi-lo cantando até a alvorada
Correndo para o pai, ele entregou tudo
Seu pai o viu e teve compaixão

Foi o castelo que todos viram
Onde tudo foi preparado
Cadeiras de banquetes enfeitavam os arredores
Os sorrisos fraudulentos que todos tinham
Coordenados com as fantasias enganosas
Ele se assustou com o monstro de olhos verdes do ciúme
As facas estavam para fora, enquanto cortavam
o bolo da inveja
Cantavam as canções de sedução
Afligidas por seus próprios reflexos
Incomodados, eles aumentaram sua necessidade de perfeição
Muitos para sempre quebrados
Nada o impressionou
Nada mais a dizer a eles
O filho não aprendeu as falas que eles queriam ouvir

Deus abençoou o menino dentro dele
Eles oraram por ele, já sendo abençoado
Todos esqueceram que ele foi mandado para lá

Ele descansou porque finalmente teve tudo
Porque ele se rendeu
Ele viu o Deus eterno
Ele deu ao mundo novas maneiras de sonhar
Todos precisam de novas maneiras de sonhar

The Breakthrough

Deus esperou o suficiente
Ele está em casa finalmente

It was December 26th, the day after Christmas, when I woke up in a haze. Quickly, the haze washed away. Although there was darkness all around me, I sensed that it didn't matter. I looked out into the pitch-black shrouding my bedroom and paid close attention. There was no sound to hear, no vision to see. But, through the blackness, something seemed to be reaching out to me.

It was a hand. It was not any hand, though. This was the hand of God, stretching out and touching my heart. I knew it surely and clearly. God had entered my room, that December 26th, and brought to me a message, too pure to put into words -- a silent message that I could only feel deep inside. There was a great sense of knowing. I simply knew what God wanted me to know. As a butterfly knows where to find nectar, I knew that God had spoken to me.

There was no one around, there in my bedroom, but I never felt alone for a moment. Before long, once the magnitude of what had just happened had sunk in, I broke down. For two hours, I sobbed. My body writhed, and the tears fell down my cheeks, off my chin, and into my lap. The tears were my own, but God was behind them. He had come to me. It was the most overwhelming emotion of my life. I reeled with it there, tossed by the torrent that crashed over me. God was saving me and delivering me, but I did not yet know it.

What was it? I looked for an answer, but it was nowhere to be found. It was incomprehensible at the time. Even though I recognized that I was going through something meaningful, the meaning itself escaped me. It was such a tremendous feeling that it seemed to me impossible to pin

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down into a single statement. On top of that, I was not sure what had caused this emotion – other than His touch.

SO MANY QUESTIONS

Questions swirled around inside me, flitting like butterflies in my stomach. Full of energy and too quick to catch. I remembered all of my friends and family, the ones who said they would pray for me. It could have been that. They had offered up their prayers to God, and in response to those prayers, God had acted upon me. That seemed to make sense. At the same time, I was unsure if I could apply any sort of human logic to this miracle that had awoken me. In John chapter three, Nicodemus, a Pharisee comes clandestinely to Jesus to talk with him and ask him questions. It says,

“2. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’ 3. Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ 4. Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ 5. Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

This is such a profound mystery. But that night, the Spirit of God was ‘blowing where it wish[ed]’ in answer to the prayers of my friends and family. I was being reborn, even if

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I was not yet quite aware. The Kingdom of God was coming into my room and upon me. I was being changed.

Pacing from my kitchen to my front door, I repeated the only words that I could muster: "God is great." I said those words, again and again, in the hope that they would get me somewhere. More lucidly than ever before, I knew those words were true. I owed it to Him, to say them loudly, to show my courage in acknowledging His power as I was living through it. Augustine, a theologian from the 4th century said this in his Confessions, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." We were made for God. We were made for worship, to glorify God in all that we do and all that we are. I hardly understood anything in that moment, but I understood that 'God is great' and that I should worship him!

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

My fall, up to this point, had been painful. In the aftermath of all that pain, I did not know what to expect. There was no reason for me to think, back then, that the pain would somehow come to an end. Doubt had filled my mind to such an extent that I struggled to see any end to the suffering. I was just like that woman with the 'issue of blood.' in Luke 8:43-48. This story resonates with me.

*"43. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone.
44. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased.
45. And Jesus said, 'Who was it that touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you*

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and are pressing in on you.’ 46. But Jesus said, ‘Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.’ 47. And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. 48. And he said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.’”

Think about that. This woman had a condition for twelve years, and for twelve years she had tried to get rid of it, spending everything she had to find the cure. She was unsuccessful until Jesus came along. Her problem was one that also caused her to be continually impure. The Levitical law categorized her as unclean as long as she had this problem. It was a physical, spiritual, and emotional nightmare for her, and her whole being seemed to be dedicated to getting ‘clean’. I can imagine that she was nearly hopeless that there was any solution for her. She would always be sick. She would always be impure, and she would always be a rejected outcast. But then Jesus was revealed to her.

Here is the most beautiful thing about God, though: in our darkest moments, wherever we are in the world and whatever strife we are going through, there is a signal within us. That signal is like a radar system, keeping us on the path to Him, pulling us in His direction. In our hearts, all of time exists. God understands that from time to time, we will stray from Him and His ultimate righteousness. In that sense, He keeps faith in us, finding ways to remind us that only His love can fill us up. An apt metaphor would be a GPS in your car. You have set the right direction, and there is a constant, ‘recalculating, recalculating, recalculating,’ until you turn and ‘proceed to the route.’ Consider Jonah for a biblical example. Did God not have a plan for him? Did Jonah not try to go in the opposite direction? Did God not turn him

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miraculously and have a fish spit him up on the shore of His will for him? Jonah found himself unable to run from God, so he made a decision to do His will.

All that it took, to get from my lowest point to the next point in my life, was a decision. I decided that I wanted to stop living the fast life. Whatever set this event into motion, others' prayers or my own -- I knew that my life would never be the same. As I paced around my home, saying the only words that added up in my mind, I looked back on all that I had encountered to get there. I was experiencing a moment of pure grace—mercy, the unmerited favor and love of a relentless God.

As a child, I had connected with no church. None of it resonated with me. When I thought about faith, it felt inconsequential. On that fateful day, December 26th, I remembered how I felt when I was sitting in churches in Brazil. As the sobbing gave way to self-reflection, visions came to me. These visions were rich, more real than any dream I had ever had. I could even remember what my Bible smelled like decades earlier.

At seven years old, I was questioning who I was. I had gone through this type of faith encounter before, even though I had blocked it in the years that followed. Because God's presence was all around me, encompassing me, God holding me in His warm embrace, I could transport to any time in my life. I could relive any moment. More than that, I could live out moments that I never had.

In one vision, I was ascending upward. I walked into Heaven, as the strains of 'I Surrender All' softly played in the background. That song ushered me forward, from this life to the next one, and I felt grand. I wasn't waiting for eternal life, it begins upon salvation. I felt that whatever other

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happiness I found in my life, it would never compare to this one. No pleasure, however attractive, would ever compare to the peace and fulfillment that were waiting for me in God's Kingdom. Romans 5:8 says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." I had never experienced true peace in my entire life, and this peace was supernatural.

A BROKEN COMPASS

Before then, I had tried to make myself the moral compass of my universe. I had tried to seize a role that belonged to God and God alone. That was a mistake. It was no wonder I suffered because of it. For years, I had been trying to make my own decisions about good and evil, instead of letting go of all that and permitting God to show me the one true way. Though it is mysterious, this must explain the prohibition to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Whatever else it means, it must mean that only God and His ways are the standard of what is good. What is evil is what is opposed to His ways and to Him.

Rather than trusting that God had made a purpose for my life, I had used my sexuality as an idol. My own momentary satisfaction had been much more important to me than God's love. Paul tells the Philippian church,

"18. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

My god was my sexual appetite and my hunger to be wanted by others. Since it felt good, I decided that it was good. An image-bearer of God comes with a moral compass: right

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and wrong are what God has defined as right and wrong. But I had chosen to ignore the compass, broken as it was by sin.

But the thing is, that type of thinking was never going to work out for me. It was not my place to decide what good and evil were – or to choose my own purpose. Those things were always up to God. Focusing on Him, entrusting myself to His will completely, I would begin to find true love. It would take effort, of course. Over time, I would get a firmer picture of the immensity of that effort. After all, I had spent years defining myself according to sex. That obsession had landed me in negative, unhealthy relationships with people who were only looking to get things from me. The best kind of people are those who are looking to give before they get. Those kinds of people only exist in Christ.

I was suffering, though I did not see it back then. One unexpected night, filled with tears and realizations, had opened my eyes and my heart. God knew that I did not have to suffer. If I loved Him, I could be free of all that, the same way that God freed us all of that when He became human and died on the Cross for us. He made the ultimate sacrifice for me, pointing me away from literal darkness toward the metaphorical light.

CHANGING MY BEHAVIOR

Soon after that night, I deleted all of the ‘swiping’ apps from my phone. With every app that I deleted, I felt a little lighter. It was a small action, but it was an important action. By deleting those apps, I was signaling my willingness to trust in Jesus Christ and to give up my idolatry of lust. We are shaped by choices. Every choice to move away from God

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by sinful actions was a choice to become a person far from God. Now I was making the choice to let Him draw me close. I was making the choice to become the person who is in Christ and like Christ.

Shortly after that, I made the first of two momentous trips. Heading south, I went to Key West. Many people, myself included, always thought of Key West as a place to go and party. You see the photos that come out of there, especially during spring break, and it seems that there is no end to the debauchery. Coming out of such a spiritual and transformative experience, I knew that my trip to Key West would not resemble the trip that many others took.

It was, however, one of the most spectacular times of my life.

In Key West, I felt like I had conquered something. As I walked along the beach, my feet barely seemed to touch the sand. Instead, I was floating. I was as weightless as a butterfly down there, finally glimpsing what I had done wrong and what I could do differently. In the afterglow from all of that deep satisfaction, so much deeper than anything I had ever found on my own, God remained with me. God's love carried me aloft so that when I looked out on the ocean, the blue was like crystal, shards that would never cut my skin, each wave a piece of art and a pillow onto which I could lay my head. I was a new creation and I felt like it. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I imagined Will Smith in the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness." He had gone through so much, such deep and overwhelming pain, and I understood the tears of joy that he cried in the end. My struggle had lasted for many years.

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Finally, out on the other side of it, I knew that I could never turn back.

It was the second trip, though, that was even more momentous. Traveling to Miami, I was to meet up with some friends, all of whom were intent on nonstop clubbing. That was the purpose of Miami, at least in their minds. It was not the purpose for me anymore though. I made it clear to my friends that while I would go to the club, I was not going there to meet anyone. I was adamant that I could enjoy their company without giving in to the unnecessary pressures of nights out.

Inside the club, the lights and the smoke looked like a battlefield. It was the opposite of the peaceful feeling I had become accustomed to since God 'spoke' to me that night. After putting up with it as long as I could, I moved up a flight of stairs and onto a balcony filled with people. As I walked onto the balcony, the people cleared out of the way for me. It was as if some force was urging them to make room for me. There, overlooking the club, I said a prayer to myself. I let the music and the smoke surround me – and created a shield for myself, by thinking about my relationship with God. "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him." (Psalm 28:7).

At the end of the prayer, my body seemed to slip from my control. From my head to my toes, there was a strong sensation. Then, my tongue started to move on its own. It was forming words, but words that I had never spoken before. That was when I knew: God was speaking through me. "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." (Isaiah 50:4)

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“Look at my people,” He said. “Look at how everybody missed the whole meaning of life and identity.” It is amazing to me still how a Christian can see so clearly when others are blind. But I too was blind before.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

When I regained control of myself, those words, “Look how everybody missed the whole meaning of life and identity” were still in my ears – and on my tongue. I promised God that from that moment forward, I would always follow His will. Wherever he wanted me to go, I would go there. Any time God commanded me to do something, I would do it. I would live my own life, but according to His values. Lust would not rule over me any longer.

Thinking that way, I felt I was seeing myself more clearly than I had in the past. I was seeing myself from every perspective, the inside and the outside. As I left Miami, I felt zero doubt. God would stay with me, guiding me and helping me.

Did that mean it would all happen on its own?

Absolutely not! I realized that in order to live this way, and hold on to God’s guidance, I had to act a certain way. Transformed as I was, having emerged from my cocoon of sinfulness, I had to leave behind all of the relationships that no longer served me. I had to walk away from everything that tied me back to the lust that had confined me in a cell of my own making. “With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.” (1 Peter 4:4)

CHANGE ISN'T EASY

There would be times when the change hurt. When I spoke to people who I knew I could not keep around, it pained me to remember the smiles and laughs that we had shared together. They were still people, even if they were not right for me anymore. On top of that, it would hurt to face up to all of the emotional harm that I had done to myself over the years.

It was the beginning of another huge lesson for me: I had to make peace with my old life. As much grief as I felt over the time that I had spent separated from God and away from His love, I had to make my way forward. Dwelling in the past wouldn't serve my future. I knew that, but it wasn't easy to let go of who I was and the things I had done.

In short, I needed forgiveness. From God and myself. I think often on what Paul said to the Philippians...

"13. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

There was much for me to process before I got to that point, though. I had misunderstood, or failed to understand, so many things throughout my life. When I thought about 'beauty', I was apt to go looking for a mirror or a well-polished window. As vain as it feels to me now, that's the person I used to be. Of course, we need to love the skin we're in. Our bodies are amazing. Think of all the things we can do! But they are simply vessels for something much more meaningful. My lust had blinded me to all of the most wonderful things in this life – and to the forever that would come after it.

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It was ignorance. As a butterfly is ignorant to their own beauty, I was ignorant of the poor choices I was making. That was the root of all my bad decisions. From ignorance, I had wandered into idolatry. I had navigated freedom irresponsibly. “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Galatians 5:13)

Once I understood that, I had to stop beating myself up over it. Giving up on all of the excuses, and accepting that I had been the source of all my troubles, I was able to find change. The last change would be no less difficult than all of the others, though: I had to change into someone who had outgrown the sins and learned to love the sinner that I had once been.

Luke 15:11-32 is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In it, a young man recognizes what he has been doing wrong in his life. He sees, for the first time, how he has gone astray. It is not enough for him to see that, though. He also has to learn how not to speak to himself in such a way that he is only going to end up right back in the same place. The same was true for me after my trip to Miami. I needed forgiveness, to stop getting down on myself so that I did not repeat the same dangerous cycle. You’ve heard the saying, “love the sinner but hate the sin.” That’s what I had to work on. Even though I’d done things that didn’t align with God’s teachings, I knew that going forward, the life I live would be different from the one I had lived. This allowed me to truly come to terms with my life.

FORGIVENESS AND THE CHURCH

When I found forgiveness, it opened the gates to another point I had not considered: church. This was something that

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I had written off many times before. It seemed nonsensical to me when I was a child. Why would I go to church? What was there in it for me? I never understood why, to worship God, you had to go to a church. As a kid, I often thought, why can't you do it at home? Of course, now I know that you can worship God from anywhere in the world, and that the church is more than just a place of worship.

As it turned out, there was plenty in it for me. While God had not found me in a church, and had instead found me when I was at my lowest point, I started to see that in church, I could connect with God on my own. I could refresh and rejuvenate my relationship with Him. Remembering how freely He had shown me love, I could think of church as my own private getaway, there for me to sustain myself and keep living in a place of joy.

After forty years of lies and self-torment, everything changed for me. It was that light-bulb moment where all of a sudden everything is clear. I saw that by living in holiness, I could thrive in the world. My own church, one where I could be myself and live as God wanted me to live, would mean everything to me.

The more that I grew in my faith, both at church and outside of it, the more I was able to pay attention to people. When others spoke, I felt like I was hearing their innermost feelings. I understood them to a degree that I previously had not. Peace and calm were my default states, replacing the anxiety and the questioning that had defined me all the years that I worshiped lust instead of Him.

Equipped with that peace, blessed with self-forgiveness, and feeling closer to God than I had once thought possible, I saw that many things in my life did not fit anymore. At

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my job, for example, I was experiencing much abuse. None of it was beneficial for my mental health. Worst of all, I associated that abuse with a disrespect for God: because He was looking out for me, I had to look out for myself as well. I think that is a good way to look at things. When you are being treated badly, you are not loving yourself as God would. It is a disservice to both yourself and to Him. Like all people, I was precious to God. I was made in His image which comes with inherent dignity. It would make no logical sense for me to love and respect others, but disrespect myself. Allowing myself to be abused was exactly that.

Praying to God, I asked for something new. It did not take long for the offers to come in. Moving into a new job, I felt like I was planning a better, brighter life. The changes were wide-reaching: I lost almost all of my friends, and my day-to-day routine looked nothing like it had. My new life in Christ was total -- almost nothing was the same. If you'd told me a few years before that this would be my life now, I'd have laughed and thought it wasn't possible. I probably wouldn't have even wanted this life back then, for I would not have appreciated what I have. The journey I have been on led me back to God, and I'm in a place where I see the value and happiness in the life I am leading. It might not have been exciting for me in my twenties, or even most of my thirties, but it certainly is now.

I started asking better questions of myself. Instead of thinking about how I wanted to feel, I thought about what role a person would play in my relationship with God. I asked myself, any time I made contact with someone, whether or not they would be good for that relationship. My relationship with God comes first. As a butterfly might pick the most beautiful flower to suckle from, I choose Him.

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

The difficult truth about this journey is this: not everyone is going to understand it. Many people will look at you like you are out of your mind if you talk about faith in even the most general terms. When you open up about your personal relationship with God, even more people are not going to get it. Sadly, that's just the way it is now. As much as I would love for everybody to have the same relationship with God and faith that I do, I know that, realistically, that will never be the case.

God is bigger than their doubts, though. When He has decided that it is the right time for something in your life, that is all that matters. He will put you through strife and trials, tests to see if you are ready, and challenges to help you grow. To bring you closer to Himself, he will pull away all of the damaging influences. It will hurt, but to get you through the pain, He will speak to you. In His own way, he will let you know – as he has always let me know – that one who knows His love is never alone. “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10) As butterflies take their strength from the nectar they drink, I take my strength from God. It took a long time for me to reach this understanding, but I'm thankful above all else that I got there in the end.

STUDY GUIDE

What was, or is, the most significant breakthrough you've ever had from God? Why do you think God answered your prayer request? After all, He doesn't always respond to our requests right away. Our requests may take a long

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time or not be answered at all. People frequently assume that God will respond to our requests if we follow a certain procedure. As though, when we go through the steps in order, the solution appears.

Prayer by definition means a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God. Most of the time, when we pray, we are referring to making a request to God. Making a request is just one aspect of it, though.

Christianity is more than just a religion. It is first and foremost a relationship with God that must be nurtured. Communication is at the heart of any healthy connection. The better the communication, the stronger your relationship will be. God communicates with us in a variety of ways, but His Word, the Bible, is His greatest means of communication to us. We communicate with God through prayer. When we read the word of God, we learn to hear His voice in our lives. He hears us when we pray. We act on his words and take action as a result.

The effectiveness of our prayers depends on our relationship with God. The more we know Him the more we will have bold prayers before God. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." How we approach God will vary according to how we know Him personally. Like a son to his earthly father, when asking for something, there is no hesitation at all because the son has a relationship with his father and knows him personally. 1 John 5:14-15 says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." Praying according to His will is knowing who God is.

The Breakthrough

This is also the reason why we will not be disappointed if our prayers are not answered. Since we fully trust God, His plan for us is always way better. When we have a developing, growing, and healthy relationship with God, that is a true breakthrough.

Jesus Christ is the greatest example of prayer in our lives. We may learn how to have a personal time of connection with God by observing his prayer life. Mark 1:35 says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” He knew that when the day came, he would be preoccupied with his work in the ministry, but spending time with God was always his top priority.



Point of Discussion

1. What was the greatest breakthrough or answered prayer you received from God?
2. Are there prayer requests that God is still not answering for you?
3. How do you respond if God will not give the answer to your prayers?



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HOLY IDENTITY

"It is in the quiet crucible of your personal private sufferings that your noblest dreams are born and God's greatest gifts are given in compensation for what you have been through."

- Wintley Phipps

"At the intersection where your gifts, talents, and abilities meet a human need; therein you discover your purpose."

- Aristotle

At some point in our lives, we get so soaked up in the noise and chaos of the world that we forget about who we are. Naturally, our bodies and souls are tempted to forget our identity. 2 Peter 1:9 says, "For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins." If we forget we were cleansed of our sin, we will fall into that same sin repeatedly, in a never-ending cycle.

We are so attracted to the world that, sometimes, we think we can do without God, who leads us with His mercies. However, one can notice that our souls will always cry for

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God, no matter how we try to move away from Him. No matter how we occupy ourselves with sin, we will always need to go back to the root of our existence. Sometimes, I think that God lets us dissolve in the body's desires for us to get a better picture of how important it is for us to live under His refuge. He wants us to understand the falsehood that living according to the world's desires is better than living under Him. Just as the butterfly will always find nectar, we can find our way back to God. It's a pull that's simply a part of our human nature. It's who we are and how He made us.

LOSING IDENTITY TO DESIRES AND AWAKENING

Something I've noticed is that the moment we walk away from our fellowship with God, we begin to experience an identity crisis. We get lost in the wilderness of sin and suffer with nowhere to go and hide, just like a lost sheep that does not have any shelter to hide from darkness when the sun goes down. As spiritual beings, losing our identity brings us to a state of disorientation where we feel confused and dissatisfied with the kind of life we live. It forces us to begin to think about who we are. At this point, one will get the urge to activate that desire to gain back their identity. This is when the soul awakens and realizes how far it has gone off the course of its identity and begins to search for its source again. Sometimes, individuals lost in an identity crisis may spend their entire life without embarking on the journey of retracing their identity.

CONCEPTUALIZING AWAKENING -- THE PRODIGAL SON

As I said in the previous chapter, one of my most favorite passages in the Bible is that of the Prodigal Son. Whenever

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I think and read about this passage, I realize how much God's mercy extends to our lives, even after we have fully dissolved into sin. Sometimes, we may feel God is angry with us after we've spent all our lives in sin. However, looking at the context in which Jesus taught this story is essential in understanding the nature of God. Knowing that, we can always go back to our true identity. God is waiting to welcome our hearts to His house at any time.

After the Pharisees accused Jesus of entertaining sinners -- "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them..." (Luke 15:2) -- he related this parable, describing a man who had two sons. The youngest one asked to be given his inheritance and led a sinful life. However, after squandering all of his inheritance, he had nowhere to go, and all his 'friends' abandoned him. He then found a job feeding the swine. At this point, he came back to his senses or awakened. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!' (Luke 15:17, NIV). Even though he had already decided to forget about his father and family, he reached the end of the crisis, and his soul cried to be near his father. This was because he remembered his true identity and acknowledged who he really was. The most interesting part of the story is his reception. Although he was expecting the worst, his father ordered a feast. He also ordered a robe, shoes, and a ring for him. The older son, loyal to his father, became jealous of his younger brother. He even confronted their father for favoring the son who had wished the worst for him. Here, Jesus is trying to liken the older son to the Pharisees who used accusatory remarks to justify their feelings that their maker had neglected them. Although the Pharisees and the older son in the prodigal son story were closer to their 'father', they do not seem to seek the Father's merciful love.

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On the other hand, the prodigal son was submissive, reflecting on his life, and seeking mercy. In this context, Jesus meant that what matters is not our faith but our longing to connect with the father and understand what it means to be loved by Him. Faith without seeking identity may not take us too far. We must constantly remind ourselves of who we are in him.

IMMIGRATION

Coming to America was not a walk in the park for me. I experienced my fair share of challenges. When my family moved to Newark, New Jersey in 1989, I was 9-year-old Brazilian boy trying to find a purpose in life.

As soon as I began to settle in America, I began losing myself. I had to learn a new lifestyle that did not, in any way, resemble my life back in Brazil. I often felt isolated because I did not understand the American language. I did not feel the new land upheld any sense of dignity for immigrants like me during that time. If I had known what I now know that all Christians are immigrants, sojourners in a land not our own, citizens of a heavenly kingdom, that would have helped. But at the time, I just felt homeless and lost.

Due to this isolation, I was left with voices in my head. I had to listen to myself to understand who I wanted to be and, often, I felt I was not good enough to reach my full potential. This is where I began losing my way. I began to listen to these voices in my head because of the challenges this foreign land presented to me. In an attempt to prove that I was better than what I thought of myself, I ran after things that did not matter. I dealt with my feelings of isolation by searching for intimate lovers who would be my company. Since all these attempts were a way of masking my inner feelings other than

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solving them, I hopped from one relationship to another because I never stopped searching for that relief. The search for a companion in a country whose lifestyle made me feel inferior made me run after material possessions, as well. Since I wanted to satisfy my ego to feel I was part of this lifestyle, I relished material things to attract lovers. Just as the colorful flower attracts the butterfly to feed on it, I used my physical appearance to attract lovers. The more I surrounded myself with beautiful things, the more attention I received. I would go the extra mile to do anything I could to maintain this status, and in the end, I completely submerged myself into sin. I had lost my cultural identity to a foreign land and my spiritual identity to a strange life that did not match the life in the Kingdom of God.

When I remember my experiences during my initial days in America, I begin to understand the events that unfolded after the prodigal son left home for a new land. Most of us would believe that when he asked for his share of the inheritance, he had already planned to squander it with strangers and prostitutes. We tend to vilify him for his careless actions while away from home. Based on my experience, however, I look at this young man differently. I do not believe his initial plan was to squander all that his father had given to him, but that the face of a new place confused him. Just like me, he may have struggled to maintain his identity before the new country forced him to give in to a new identity. In the same way, I was not rooted in who I was when I confronted this new place. I faced challenges of both fitting in and maintaining any kind of self-esteem.

LIVING IN SIN

I lived in sin for more than thirty years and was lost in the world because I didn't find any refuge, nor did I recognize any

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in the world. I did not understand what faith and a personal relationship with God meant. I was an empty vessel living a life of spiritual inadequacy. What I considered the best life was actually a sinful life guided by lust. At this point, I was guided by my body and knowledge, and never at any point in my life did I acknowledge the scripture's advice in Proverbs 5-6 that our bodies or our understanding should not guide us. My happiness was found in hopping from one person to another. I didn't think that hopping from one relationship to another was a significant impediment and health hazard for my spiritual development because, of course, I was spiritually lacking.

In Romans 1, Paul points out that every human has the capacity to discern that there is a God by observing creation. But he points out that since men decide to fashion their own gods instead of seeking the one true God, they are given over to their sin, and lusts. He says,

"20. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23. and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

24. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25. because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

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26. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27. and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

28. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30. slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31. foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” (Romans 1:20-31)

The connection is clear. Deny God, find a new idol, and fall into lust and depravity. For whatever reason, the prodigal son was not able to find God in the new land. The idolatry and licentiousness of the new place overcame him. This is precisely what happened to me. While I was supposed to find happiness in the wings of our loving God, as Psalms 91 tells us, my soul, instead, found happiness in material things that did not matter. I was occupied by running after vanity and got lost in believing that I could do anything and be successful on my own. At this point, I did not believe in the importance of keeping my relationship with my maker firm because all that mattered to me was living life the way I thought was right, without giving any regard for any knowledge above me. I was worshiping God at the altar of my preference and had become my own moral compass.

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However, like the prodigal son, I came to myself at a certain point in life. I had traveled a long distance in sin and the wire connecting the creator and me was already getting tighter and about to snap. But God did not allow that. He did not, "Give me over, which would have been His wrath," (Romans 1:26). God did not allow the connection to snap but instead let me come to myself and learn something about my life. Luckily for me, my soul told me it was time to turn around and look how far I had traveled. It was telling me that it was time to gather all my strength and be willing to walk back through the same path I had traveled to find a home.

A REALIZATION

It eventually dawned on me -- I realized that all I was following in the world was vanity. I knew I was not getting any happiness from my pursuit of worldly desires. I remembered that all my 'brothers' finding refuge in the arms of my Father were living happier than me and for the first time in over thirty years, I yearned to experience God, because my soul felt He was the perfect source of its peace. It was time for me to go and be received by the house of my Father, even though I had sinned and felt I was not worthy of being called His son.

At this point, I was asking if all I had done could be forgiven and if I could get mercy in God's presence. I did not understand Him and how great His mercy was until I realized nothing was too big for Him to forgive. A few days after I had begun my spiritual journey, I would learn about how He forgave Dismas, a thief who had spent the whole of his life making people's lives miserable until he was crucified alongside Jesus Christ. I realized I deserved a better life, one that mattered to God, not how long I had lived in sin. Like Dismas, I realized that I needed God to remember me. Like

the prodigal son, my soul had realized that it was better off in the arms of God.

THE PHENOMENON OF THE PRODIGAL SON: THE NEW IDENTITY

This was the phenomenon of the prodigal son. According to the Bible, when he came to himself, he said, “It’s not what people are saying about you that messes you up, it’s what you are saying about yourself; what you are saying about your life; what you are putting in the atmosphere.” When I look into this phenomenon, I picture myself and understand its truth, for I would not be writing this memoir if I did not come to myself and say something positive about my life while trying to cleanse my environment. It’s not about how the story begins, but how it ends that truly matters. Consider the parable of another two sons.

“28. What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29. And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. 30. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. 31. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. 32. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21).

This is a powerful example of the grace of God. No matter how we begin, if we end in our Father’s vineyard, we will live.

HOLY SEXUALITY

The first path I took towards gaining my original identity was to eliminate the sins that had taken away that identity. Ephesians 4:17-18 says,

“17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.”

As a young and curious man, I had spent most of my life exploring unholy sexuality. Like the prodigal son, I devoured all my spiritual wealth with harlots and all sorts of unholy sexuality until that day. Like him, I realized it was time to let go of that and go back to where I belonged. It was time to stop ‘feeding the pigs’ and regain my identity as God’s beloved son. This is when I began my journey on the right path.

As a son of the most loving Father, I understand that it is essential to maintain honesty if I want to live holy. I began my path to a holy life and made the journey easy by laying down all the sins that would have weighed me down. “Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1).

As soon as I pulled away from this kind of life, my soul saw some light, and I felt peace in my life. Like the prodigal son, God had received me, ‘ordered a new robe’ in place of the ‘old one’ I was wearing while I was in sin, and was happy to have me back. At this point, my heart was marked forever. Conforming to worldly pleasures became painful since the fire of the Holy Spirit became my beacon. When I remember my exit from unholy sexuality as one of the many ways I

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walked from the life of sin, I also remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 and how God marked Lot's family and saved it from perishing. I believe God marked me and did not want me to perish in this kind of life. Therefore, I do not want to look back or admire that kind of life and perish because I would rather be comfortable in the house of God than suffer in the 'foreign land' of sin.

TRANSFORMED INTO GOD'S IMAGE

As the Bible tells us, we are created in the image of God. Therefore, we cannot claim our identity without mentioning God. In the same way, we cannot claim to possess the identity of God if we cannot live in a way that reflects Him. To be transformed into His image, I had to leave behind my sinful life to become part of His kingdom. Like the prodigal son, I searched for my true identity and left the fake one to reunite with the family and the kingdom of God. My transformation from a sinner to a God-fearing individual helps me imagine the magnificence of God and how merciful He is. It makes me realize that He does not leave His people to perish under His watch, no matter how far they have gone in sin. We see in this His nature. God loves His people, and His name is Faithfulness and Patience. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

How many times did He forgive the Israelites? He disciplined them as a good Father, but He made every possible attempt to bring them to Himself in peace—all the way to the cross.

Reflecting on who we used to be helps us to appreciate who we have become. While reflecting on this sudden turn of events in my life, I understand and appreciate the

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story of Saul even more. Although he had spent almost all his life persecuting Christians, he could not resist what he believed was his calling -- to leave behind the old and tainted identity of a Christian persecutor and wear a new one of an apostle who would later mobilize the church to stay strong in faith. In the same way, I am determined to use the new identity given to me to bring back the lost souls to God because I believe God saved my life to be a testimony to people going through challenges that may place them away from Him. This is what I emerged from my cocoon to become, a person sharing his experiences and the message of God with others, in the hope that they don't need to make the same mistakes as me, to secure their relationship with God.

STUDY GUIDE

Identity has become a controversial topic, and many individuals are avoiding the subject. More and more people are vocal about their thoughts on what they believe they are, as the LGBTQ+ community grows in number. It's good to know that everyone is entitled to the same rights as you, regardless of their preferences in life.

Is it true that we have a choice in terms of our identity, or do we have an assigned identity that we should not change? If that's the case, what is the basis for true identification? Identity is who you are by birth, that is your standard. No matter what you say growing up or what others may say, that identity is your standard. Without a standard, the world will be chaotic since everyone has their own opinions. We know that a circle is not straight because we have a standard of straight, a ruler. The color red is red even though others may say it's blue.

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The basis of our standard in life is the Bible. The Bible is the word of God, and God's word is the truth. In finding our identity look to what the Bible is saying. Genesis 5:2 says, "He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them 'mankind' when they were created." The Bible is straightforward on this issue: He created humans male or female.

When someone's identity is taken away, he or she will be dealing with an identity crisis. In psychiatry, an identity crisis is defined as a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. A person's life is impacted by the people around him or her. While we may hear many viewpoints, but the issue is that an individual is merely exploring his or her own identity.

Isaiah 45:9 says, "What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, 'Stop, you're doing it wrong!' Does the pot exclaim, 'How clumsy can you be?'" We are created by God, and He alone has the sole authority to declare our true identity.

The same is true as followers of Christ, our identity is no longer defined by how the world molded or influenced us. We might be the worst sinner growing up. We may have committed numerous wrongdoings in our lives and thought that it would be so until we die. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" We became children of God when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are now members of God's family. We are loved. That is your identity.

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Point of Discussion

1. What was the turning point of your life before receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?
2. How can you explain to someone the grace of God who isn't yet a believer?
3. Have you ever experienced condemnation because of wrongdoing you've done? How did you overcome it?





FULL CIRCLE

*"For I know the plans I have for you." declares the LORD,
"Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give
you hope and a future."*

Jeremiah 29:11

*"When you are at the top, be careful of the monster called
PRIDE*

*Pride will make you look down on the people who haven't
attained your level of success.*

*When you are at the bottom, be careful of the monster
called BITTERNESS*

*Bitterness will make you jealous and think that other
people are the reason you haven't made it.*

*When you are on the way to the top, be careful of the
monster called GREED*

*Greed will make you impatient and make you steal or
seek shortcuts.*

*When you are on your way down, be careful of the
monster called DESPAIR*

*Despair will make you think it's all over yet there
is still hope."*

-Nelson Mandela

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The Girl With the Wide-Brim Lavender Hat

With her lustrous wide-brim lavender hat
She becomes lost in her sense of serenity
The glory of the omnipresent God
Bursts through her garden
Alone with the heavens and nature
She hears God's whispers
She delights in the beauty of the butterflies
Each one unique
Each one special
Each one beautiful
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze
Hovering to kiss the petals of flowers
Whispering secrets of God's precious gifts
Leading us to the sunny side of life
Reminding us of the gift it is to be alive

A Garota Com O Chapéu Lavanda

Com seu lustroso chapéu lavanda
Ela se perde em seu senso de serenidade
A glória do Deus onipresente
Enche o jardim
Sozinha com os céus e a natureza
Ela ouve os sussurros de Deus
Ela se deleita com a beleza das borboletas
Cada uma única
Cada uma especial
Cada uma bela
Tremulando e dançando na brisa
Pairando para beijar as pétalas das flores
Sussurrando segredos dos preciosos dons de Deus
Levando-nos para o lado ensolarado da vida
Lembrando-nos do presente que é estar vivo

Full Circle

In my mind, I'm comparing this chapter with one of my favorite classics, *The Wizard of Oz*. You'll see what I'm getting at in a short while. But for now, it all started with the little boy from Brazil who knew the smells of mangoes, and fresh, cold sugar cane juice, almost as well as he knew himself. The endless Sundays with trips to the lake, and my favorite afternoons with my best friend Jacqueline. Together, she and I navigated through the neighborhoods of Belo Horizonte discovering life with full force. Unlike the little girl from Kansas who dreamed of a place far away over the rainbow, I was already on the other side of the glorious arc of colors, living my best life in my own little corner, in my own little place.

What I didn't know was that a storm was coming, and just like Dorothy's tornado, would sweep me up and take me to a place far away, dropping me in a place far from my comfort zone -- Newark, New Jersey. Living there was a complete change for me -- a new language, people, and weather. It forced a complete adjustment, like a butterfly spreading its wings for the first time after breaking free of the cocoon. From the minute I landed in New Jersey in 1989, I wanted to go home, and the only way I knew how was through the yellow brick road of the American way of life.

Instead of red slippers, I was given the book of truth. I carried it with me wherever I went. I was faced with green giants along the way that tried to take me out. I was the Christian soldier fighting through my own Land of Oz: the world, the flesh, and Satan. I experienced identity confusion, an unfair boss, addiction, peer pressure, and lust, to name a few. I'm not saying I would have handled these things differently back home in Brazil, but I would have, at least, been in a place that felt comfortable. America was completely alien

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to me and I was trying to make sense of that, as well as all of these other things that thrust themselves at me.

I was left in the wilderness, an empty place. God kept me there for a long time. I complained and cried. I often looked back at past mistakes, missed opportunities, unhealthy relationships. I kept looking back at the path I had taken. God never intended for me to be there. I was in a place that would never bring me satisfaction or peace. It was a place of make-believe, full of wizards and witches. This was a place where I was not focused on Jesus; a place that didn't last. Just as a butterfly has to find nectar to live, I had to find my Faith. I had to continue along my yellow brick road to find where I was truly meant to be.

RECOGNIZING THE ENEMY

I later recognized my enemy and fought back with full force because I wanted to go home. Ephesians 6:11 KJV states, "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." This was a spiritual battle that I was confronting, and I was getting protection from the heavenly father all along. The devil tried to destroy me many times but 'the devil is a liar' – God had been guiding me and I somehow knew it.

I met many friends along the way. Some have made me feel wonderfully blessed and safe. I have always supported my friends and thrived on them doing well. But there was a small part of me that was jealous. I knew what I needed wasn't tangible. I always felt this longing to go home and to be closer to my heavenly father. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 it states, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot

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find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” There is something that is in every human. Even while we are out in the world, there is something calling us to Him. God placed eternity in the hearts of man.

A TEACHING MOMENT

I heard a testimony from a gentleman a while ago. He told how he was at a grocery store one night and there was an extremely long line. In that line, there was a mom and her two boys. One was an older boy, and the other was a toddler. The toddler was crying because he saw that his brother had glowsticks and he wanted one. His mom decided to open that bag of glowsticks and give her younger son one of them. He was immediately happy, smiling and running around. A few moments later, his older brother took that glowstick from him and the toddler instantly started crying again. Before his mom could say anything, the older brother took the glowstick, and bent it, making it glow. As his little brother stopped crying and smiled, the older brother said, “I had to break it to get its full effect.”

It was like the voice of God saying, “I had to break you, to show you why you were created. You had to go through your yellow brick road of discovery and mistakes to find your purpose.” We all have a purpose in this life. Things are hard and they are tough. Sometimes we feel like giving up, but we can’t. You have a reason to be here, and you are needed, and you are loved. You have to go through the dark times, hidden away inside the cocoon, growing and changing, to explode forth from it and live the life you desire.

The greatest tragedy in life is not falling, it’s staying down. Proverbs 24:15 reads, “For though a righteous man falls

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seven times; he rises again..." If you have fallen, get up because God has your back. Start living and achieving again. Listen to the voice of your heavenly father; your storm is over. Just know that you had the power all along, right from the very beginning. Stop allowing your past to control your future. Don't be pushed by the evils of this world but be led by your dreams. God is your father; nothing is unreachable to you. When you believe that, you will never be the same again.

In Philippians, it says for us to be anxious about nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition and, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. It continues by stating that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ. When you align yourself with Him, there is a peace that is beyond understanding.

MY YELLOW BRICK ROAD

It has been thirty-one years since I left the city of Belo Horizonte, a place I once called home. These fond memories still give me hope and the expectation of one day being able to return. I felt that it was time to go back; an opportunity to relive moments and memories that were once dormant in my dreams and in my imagination.

I couldn't do this journey back to Brazil without my childhood best friend Jaqueline and her family. Sometimes God sends people into our lives to save us. I remember it was a simple phone call in February of that year that turned into many five-hour conversations full of laughter and tears. I was the injured soldier who she nursed back to health. It was her, the girl in the lavender hat who danced through the garden as the kaleidoscope of butterflies danced around her, that brought me home.

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I arrived back in Brazil in an old threadbare shirt and worn-out Adidas. With my new transformation and new life, I was ready to buy everything new; and I did. The boy from Brazil was back, but now a mature man, sure, and with a conviction of who he was in the grand image of God.

The moment was impressive, the blank canvas descended in front of me, and with each brushstroke, I continued to complete my masterpiece. My eyes were fixed on the bright magical colors that lit up my soul. It was a dream come true, and my final way home.

Butterflies represent change, transformation, and rebirth. You might wonder why butterflies feature so prominently in this book, in my story. Well, the answer is very simple. I feel that my life has been a series of rebirths. Returning home to Brazil, and reuniting with Jaqueline and her family, was the rebirth. The one that changed everything. I emerged from my chrysalis a changed man.

STUDY GUIDE

What comes to your mind when you think about a church? Maybe while you were growing up you thought of it as a building that would be filled with people on Sundays. By definition, church is a building for public Christian worship. But the church is more than a building. In Greek, the word for church is 'ekklesia,' which is an assembly or congregation. The meaning of church, therefore, is the people who are called by God. Matthew 16:15-18 says, "'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'" Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by

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my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Jesus was addressing Peter and his disciples, his followers.

Peter then acknowledged the truth of Jesus’ true identity, which had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. This truth would serve as the foundational stone for His church, according to Jesus. He also described the kind of church he would establish, a victorious church that would overcome darkness’ kingdom. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul used the word church in referring to God’s people.

We are all called to be a part of the church as followers of Jesus Christ because He knew that we could not do Christianity alone. Have you ever had difficulties as a believer? We all have, and no one is exempted as long as we are in this world. There are times when we are not sure if we can continue our walk with God. Sometimes we feel condemned because of a sin we have committed. It is not okay, but do we have people we can go to for help? James 5:16 says, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” Even the most devout pastor or minister, however pious, needs help and guidance in their spiritual development. We call it accountability. You must have an “accountability partner.” That means you are allowing someone to monitor you, check on you, and ask you about your life. The keyword is allowing. How many people have you ever let play that role in your life? If you’ve had no one, pray and look for someone who can do that for you because we all need it.

The best place to look for someone who can help us, to look for true friends, is in the church. We all need true friends,

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but only a few of us can find them since we're searching in the wrong places. True friends are those who have our best interests at heart. They remain with us through thick and thin, no matter what. True friends never lead us away from God. Instead, they push us to be more godly.



Point of Discussion

1. Do you have people in your life with whom you are comfortable sharing what you are going through?
2. Are you part of a community wherein you can grow spiritually and share your life?
3. Do you know someone who is in need of God today? What is the first step to help that person to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?



CLOSING REFLECTIONS

LIVING VICTORIOUSLY

“Life is a journey with problems to solve and lessons to learn, but most of all, experiences to enjoy.”

Unknown Author

YOUR STORY IS UNIQUE

Some of you may be able to relate to my experience. Some may not, because you have had different issues, challenges, and struggles growing up until today. Nonetheless, each story of every life's journey is beautiful and unique. We have different stories to share. According to the National Forensic Science Technology Center, no two people have ever been discovered to have the same fingerprints, including identical twins. Our fingerprints are unique to each of our fingers, which means we have a different print on each one of us.

Psalm 139:13-14 says, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well.”

The author of this passage was saying that God has created us carefully. Ephesians 2:10 also states that we are God’s masterpiece. Regardless of where you were born or how you grew up, you are a work of art in the eyes of God. You are unique in the eyes of God because you are His handiwork.

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This is the reason why we should never compete with others. First of all, it's not healthy for us; if we discover others who we see as superior to us, in any way, it will just cause anxiety or insecurity. Secondly, envy may arise on our side as a result of this. It might lead to fury, animosity, feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, or disgust. In other words, it would not be beneficial for us.

We can't even compare our seasons in life to others. We may see people who have been blessed and live better lives than ours. Don't worry about your breakthrough; it will come in God's time. Have you ever dined at a buffet restaurant? You won't be in a hurry since you know there's enough for everyone. God is no different; He will never run out of blessings for every one of us since He has more than enough (in fact, He has an overabundance). Here is the encouraging truth: God won't be intimidated no matter how big your prayer is. Just keep doing the will of God. Galatians 6:9 reminded us with this encouragement, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Don't quit, don't give up, and stay strong in your walk with God.

LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE

Problems, trials, and struggles are all real for as long as we are living in this world. Challenges are part of life. They will come as a result of our mistakes or the blunders of others. Even the Bible warns us, "In this world, you will have troubles of many kinds." We will continue to have problems until we leave this world, therefore be equipped and prepared.

We frequently pray to God to remove monumental problems from our lives, but if the issue is something we need to face and overcome, pray that He will give us a monumental faith.

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Have you ever wished for a life free of problems? You may have prayed that countless times, but have you thought about it? Have you seen a young child who has trouble completing his addition assignment? Imagine if, at the college level, students would be required to still solve addition problems. That would be an insult to the student. A life with problems like a grade-schooler is quite boring. How much more, though, would be a life with no problems at all.

Problems have both advantages and disadvantages. Often, when problems arise, we don't know how to deal with them. We feel as if they might destroy us. On the other hand, being able to overcome problems, one at a time, will make us stronger. Realizing that we are not in control of what goes on in our lives can humble us, as well. We will be led to God because He is an all-powerful God; He is in control. It's a lot easier said than done, though.

A daughter is telling her mother how everything is going wrong, she's failing algebra -- her boyfriend broke up with her and her best friend is moving away. As she listens, her mother is baking a cake and asks her daughter if she would like a snack. The daughter says, "Absolutely, Mom, I love your cake."

"Here, have some cooking oil," her mother offers. "Yuck," says her daughter.

"How about a couple of raw eggs?"

"Gross, Mom!"

"Would you like some flour then? Or maybe baking soda?"

"Mom, those are all yucky!"

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To which the mother replies, “Yes, all those things seem bad all by themselves. But when they are put together in the right way, they make a wonderfully delicious cake!”

“God works the same way! Many times we wonder why he would let us go through such bad and difficult times. But God knows that when He puts these things all in His order, they always work for good! We just have to trust Him and, eventually, they will all make something wonderful, like my cake!”¹

The Bible is also encouraging us in this verse, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28.

Life is a journey, everything has a purpose. Every time you feel down and want to give up, say this: “I may not be where I want to be, but I’m not where I used to be.” Learn to be grateful for every little accomplishment and breakthrough. Instead of magnifying the difficulties, magnify God. God is so good, and He answers our prayers. A grateful heart has a cheerful life.

“Give thanks in every circumstance, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

Looking at the big picture of life can provide us relief and assurance. We are often overwhelmed by our challenges because we choose to be consumed by them. Now and then, we need to learn to “zoom out” our lives so that we can see the bigger picture. We will realize that those problems are only temporary because we will see how many challenges we have already gone through in the past. We are a victor, for if God has already done it for you, He will do it again.

PROBLEMS AND TEMPTATIONS

Have you ever heard the saying ‘Don’t tell God you have a big problem, tell your problem you have a big God?’ This is not necessarily true because we can tell God all our big problems, even the small ones, but I do agree that we can tell our problems that we have a big God. Matthew 11:28 says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” God is the one who invites us to come to Him and pour out our problems. The truth is even before we go to God, He already knew our problems because He is an All-Knowing God. Why is He still asking us to go to Him and tell all of our problems? It’s about relationships. God desires for us to establish a healthy and growing relationship with him. The more we get to know Him well, the more we will trust Him in our lives. Continue to seek God in your life.

There is a teaching that, “God will not give us problems beyond our ability to bear,” and 1 Corinthians 10:13 is usually used to support this statement.

“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”

This is referring to temptation. Temptation is one of the most serious problems we face, and temptation is all around us. We don’t face temptation, but we run as Joseph did in Genesis 39:6-12, as the Bible says,

“Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while, his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he refused. “With me in charge,” he told

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her, "My master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house."

Joseph ran away because he knew that if he remained a little longer, he would give in. Potiphar was one of Egypt's most powerful officials and his wife was no ordinary woman. Her beauty was so compelling that it was difficult to resist. If she wasn't so beautiful, it wouldn't be a temptation.

We run from temptation because, more often or not, we can't resist. That is why it is called temptation. Here is the thing though -- a temptation for us might not be a temptation for others. For example, when there is food, some people can't help but eat. For others, however, food isn't a temptation. For some people, pornography is their temptation; for others, it is not. Therefore, we don't face or stay where temptation is, we run as fast and far as we can. We must avoid being alone if being alone is when and where pornography becomes a strong force. "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind..." You know when and where you're most likely to give in to temptation.

On the other hand, we must not run away from problems. We must face head-on. King Saul and the Israelite's army were confronted with a daunting challenge by the Philistine

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warrior Goliath who ridiculed them to their faces. While the soldiers of Israel were avoiding and running away from Goliath, David did not. 1 Samuel 17:45-47 says, “David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

The fact is, God will allow us to have problems or challenges beyond what we can bear for us to fully trust God in our lives, for the battle is the Lord’s. Another example is from the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

Paul acknowledged that the trials and problems they experienced were beyond their ability to endure so they would rely on God fully in their lives. He continued in 1 Corinthians 12:6-9 when he said this...

“Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given

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a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Paul was considered a super apostle because of what he accomplished in preaching and spreading the gospel. He built planted and established so many churches and wrote almost one-third of the New Testament because he learned to fully trust God in his life.

WORLDVIEWS

There are so many worldviews, philosophies, and beliefs out there. We're often susceptible to being influenced and persuaded a lot of times. So, what's our weapon? It's the Bible. The Bible might not have all of the answers to all of our questions, but it has everything we need to live a victorious life. The Apostle John warned the believers about the false prophets and teachings. 1 John 4:4 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Federal agents don't learn to spot counterfeit money by studying the counterfeits. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they see the bogus money, they recognize it. Similarly, we don't need to be aware of every world view. We just need to read, study, and understand the Bible so that we can quickly identify whether a belief, worldview, or philosophy is false. It is also the Bible that told us about the origin of our problems with sin.

FALLEN NATURE OF MAN

To Adam, he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it, you were taken; for dust you are and to dust, you will return.” Genesis 3:17-19.

Beginning after the fall of Adam and Eve, when they disobeyed God by eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, humans have always been subjected to problems. The first sin was Adam and Eve’s disobedience, which began all of humanity’s problems. Sin is the source of all problems.

Sin is so powerful that humans always fail because of our sinful nature. Romans 7:17 says, “As it is, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.” The Apostle Paul recognized the destructive power of sin. He didn’t want to sin but he failed. Because we have a natural inclination to sin. We would choose to sin if left on our own and apart from the grace of God. Here is the reality about sin according to Kay Arthurs, who is a well-known international Bible teacher.

“Sin will take you farther than you ever expected to go; it will keep you longer than you ever intended to stay, and it will cost you more than you ever expected to pay.”

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Sin can control us. How many sins have you done despite knowing they were wrong and having no desire to do it? Sin is a powerful force that we entertain for a long time. Paul said in Romans 7:24, "Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will rescue me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"

As a general definition, a sin is an act that goes against religious or moral law, which is considered to be extremely bad. A frequent shortcoming is seen as fault. The term "sin" is used in the Bible to signify unethical behavior that is considered a violation of godly law. Christianity's fundamental message, according to its basic idea, is about redemption through Christ. Sin is an offense or transgression committed directly against the lawgiver who is God.

When we sin against someone, we sin against God first and foremost. King David realized this when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and her husband, one of his dedicated generals, murdered by sending him to the frontline on the battlefield. Psalm 51:4 says,

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." According to Mosaic Law, David committed sins punishable by the death penalty. When David repented for his sins before God, he was forgiven. We can learn from David's life, which is that we are not defined by our sins, and the same can be said for the sins we've made. God can restore us to our intended purpose and calling in life if we sincerely seek forgiveness from God. Here is King David at the end of his life. "Now when David had served God's purpose in his generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed." Acts 13:36.

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Despite what he has done, David is still known as a man after God's own heart up until today.

It's never too late for you and me. Our story is not over yet; we have all the time and opportunity to serve God by fulfilling our purpose and calling. Be with God and stay with God.

Another aspect of sin is missing the mark of God's standards set for humanity. Missing the mark initially sounds like it could be a little mistake or an accident. The term "miss the mark" refers to falling short of God's glory through deliberately choosing to sin. Adam and Eve "missed the mark" by disobeying God. Their "mark," or target, should have been to fully obey God.

At the 2004 Olympic Games, Matt Emmons, an American air rifle shooter, competed in the three-position event. In this sporting event, competitors shoot from their stomachs, knees, and feet at a target fifty meters away. Emmons was in first place going into his final shot and just needed a considerable score for gold. He shot the wrong target, one lane over, and earned no score at all. He finished eighth.

This clearly illustrates that every time we sin, we miss the mark or target to honor and glorify God in our lives.

THE GOSPEL

Sin is costly according to Romans 6:23a; "For the wages of sin is death." The wages of one sin is death. Have you ever sinned in your life? Then, according to Romans, you deserve death. The death mentioned here means two things. First, it is physical death. In Genesis 3:19, after Adam and Eve sinned against God, we read, "for dust you are and to dust,

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you will return.” If Adam and Eve had not sinned against God, they would have been able to live forever and never die; they could have stayed in the paradise of Eden forever. Second is the Spiritual death. Sin causes death spiritually and we experience its effects. The guilty feeling, emptiness, dissatisfaction, confusion, or disconnection from God and as we naturally act unrighteously. Sin separates us from God. Isaiah 59:2 says, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear.” Here is the bad news; spiritually dead people’s destination is Hell.

Someone once said, “The good news is not that good because the bad news is not that bad.” That is why many people do not take the punishment of sin seriously or may be unaware of the consequence of sin. Mark 9:47-48 says, “And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. You should enter the kingdom of God with one eye than have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

Revelation 20:15 says, “And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

The question we must answer now is how can our name be recorded in the book of life so that we will not suffer torment in hell? The Apostle Paul said this in Philippians 4:3, “Yes, I ask you also, true companion, to help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Is there a way for our names to be written in the book of life? Having our name written in the book of life means to be in the presence of God in heaven, with Jesus Himself. Thank God that Romans 6:23 did not just end in that statement, “For the wages of

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sin is death,” but continues, saying this, “but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The separation between us and God was caused by sin, but Jesus Christ brings us to God. Instead of all of us being subjected to the punishment for our sins, which is hell, the godly solution was for Jesus, God’s only Son, to take on human nature and suffer as a sacrifice for our sins. Hebrews 9:26-28 says, “But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to get away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Acts 4:11-12 says, “This Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation exists in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

We are saved by Jesus Christ because we cannot do it on our own. When we stop believing in ourselves and put our trust in what Jesus Christ has done for us, we can receive that salvation. He died for our sins. Now, how can we receive the gift of salvation? Romans 10:9-19 says, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and justified, and it is with your mouth that one confesses and is saved.”

If you haven’t received Jesus Christ in your life as your Lord and Savior, now is the time to do it. Follow these simple words of prayer.

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God, I acknowledge that my sins have separated me from you. I confess that I had sinned and fallen far short of your glory. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for all my sins. I believe that He died on the cross for my sins, and I believe that you have raised Him from the dead. I am sorry for all of my sins. I want to repent from all my sins and ask your forgiveness. Cleanse me from all unrighteousness. I want to turn away from everything the Bible calls sin. Help me to love, serve, and obey you for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You can now be certain that your name has been written in the book of life if you have sincerely confessed that prayer. Congratulations!

Your next step is to find a church or someone who is a genuine follower of Christ to help you grow in your relationship with God.

THE TIME TO EMERGE FROM YOUR COCOON IS NOW!

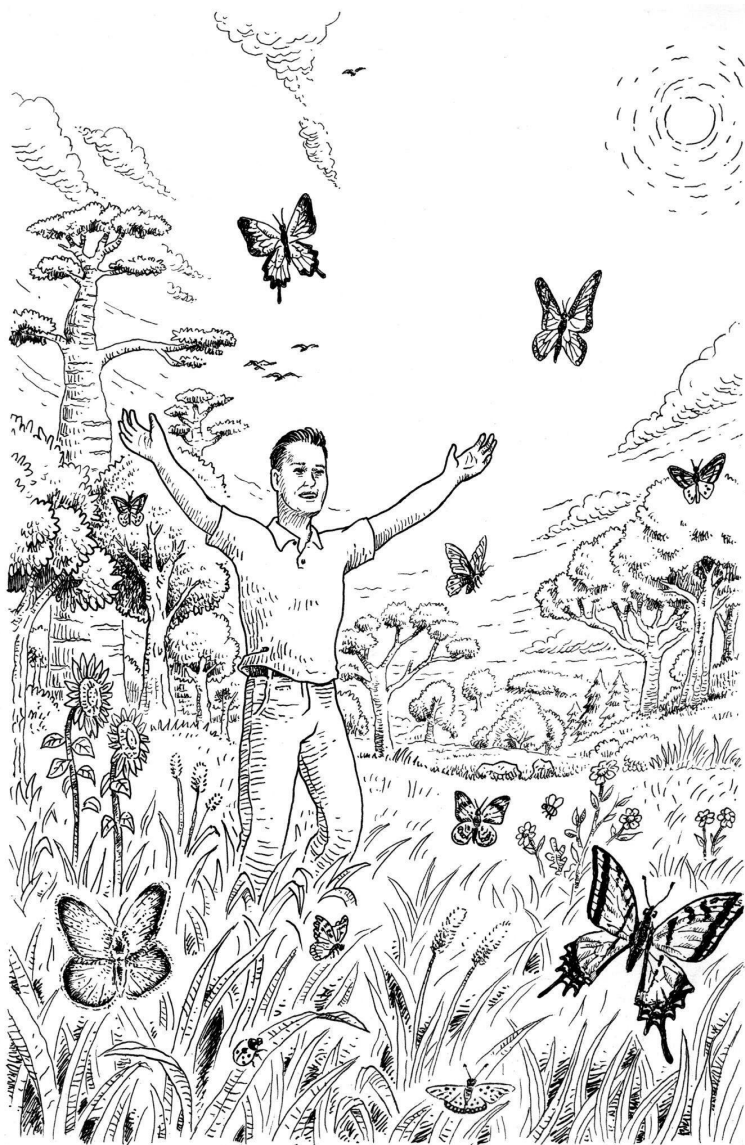
Throughout your life, you may have been living in the darkness of your cocoon. Finding God, and pursuing a positive relationship with Him, is the push you need to break free from your chrysalis and live a life worthy of Him. We are created in His image and it is our role to live a godly life. It is the butterfly's basic instinct to suckle from the beautiful flowers, just as we feed upon the wisdom and righteousness of God. As you emerge from your cocoon, I want you to feel the freedom we are afforded when we live by His design. There's something comforting about knowing that He will be with you always, no matter what you've done in the past.

Closing Reflections

All that matters to Him is who you are now and how you go forward from this point.

I want to thank you for taking the time to read my story, my thoughts and feelings. If, through reading this book, one of you reaches out and finds the Lord, then this will have been worthwhile.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marcelo Sousa was born in Brazil and lived most of his life in the United States. He is a writer, an educator, singer, and coach. He received his bachelor's degree in History and Elementary Education from Kean University. He received his graduate degree in TESOL / Bilingual Education and his sixth-year degree in Educational Leadership from Southern Connecticut State University. He received his certification as a Certified Christian Coach from The Center for Christian Coaching (CCC). When he is not writing, he can be found teaching and participating in public speaking engagements throughout the world.



More info at
Video * Events * FAQs
Email
Marcelo@theboyfrombrazil.org
Instagram
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TikTok
www.tiktok.com/@theboyfrombrazil.org

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/72542/trials-and-difficulties-by-rev-dr-randall-m-deal-sr>

