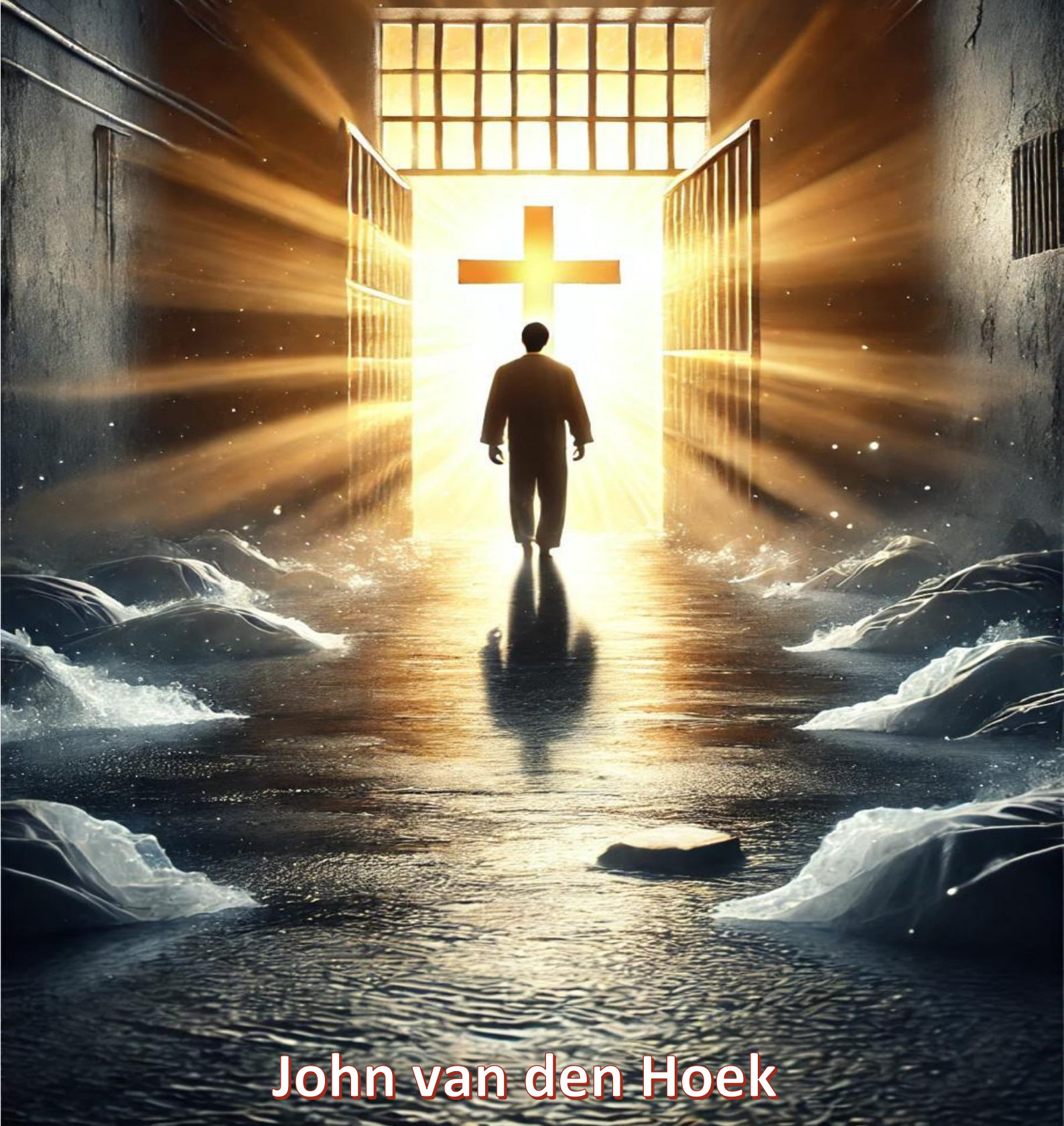


FROM PRISON TO GRACE

A true story of salvation, transformation, and God's grace



John van den Hoek

FOREWORD

This book was born out of my own journey from brokenness to healing. It is my testimony of God's grace and power to transform lives. My prayer is that it will inspire and encourage you, and show you that there is always hope—no matter how deep the darkness seems. May this story touch you and draw you closer to the truth that truly sets free.

All Bible verses in this book are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise noted.

John van den Hoek

From prison to grace
info@life-church-aruba.org
www.life-church-aruba.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 — The Beginning	1
Reflection — God’s Word in Your Life	4
Chapter 2 — Breaking Free from Deep Patterns	6
Reflection — Breaking Old Chains	9
Chapter 3 — The Call of Jesus	11
Reflection — The Prison of the World	14
Chapter 4 — Loneliness, Grief, and Rejection	17
Reflection — Letting Go of Pain and Grief.....	20
Chapter 5 — The Decision to Follow Jesus.....	22
Reflection — A New Beginning: Hope in Christ	25
Chapter 6 — The Calling and Trusting in Jesus	27
Reflection — Light in the Darkness	31
Chapter 7 — From Aruba to the World	34
Reflection — Small Steps, Big Promises	37
Chapter 8 — The Greatest Miracle.....	39
Reflection — God Wants to Use You.....	43
Afterword — The End Is Only the Beginning.....	45
Help Spread This Story Even Further	46

CHAPTER 1 — THE BEGINNING

The first thing I remember is the blood on the wall. I was young—too young to understand everything, but old enough to know this wasn't normal. The scent of fear hung in the air. My mother was crying, her voice trembling with pain and desperation. I pressed myself against the cold floor, my heart pounding in my chest. I didn't know what to do, except wait for it to end.

In that moment, as a little boy, I decided I would never be weak; never again powerless. If no one was going to protect me, then I would protect myself. That moment became the first stone in the wall that I would build around my heart, a wall that would imprison me for years. It was a moment of resolve, but also one of helplessness—I couldn't yet understand the consequences of that choice.

I grew up in an environment that was far from “normal.” I was raised in a climate thick with fear, where my father's anger was a constant presence. The sound of slamming doors, shouting matches and broken promises was was my reality. I learned at an early age that silence often meant something bad was coming, and I would hide. Sometimes it felt like the world was too big for me to make sense of. But I could always hear the rage, see the sorrow in my mother's eyes, and feel the weight of it all.

At the same time, I began turning into someone I didn't recognize. I wasn't just afraid, I was angry. Angry at the world, angry at my father, angry at my own weakness. And that anger, instead of being released in a healthy way, turned inward. It built up, little by little, and I held onto it. It fed me. It gave me a purpose—a reason to protect myself, to never

let anyone see how weak I truly felt. And in my mind, the only way to do that was to fight. Fighting became my identity; my way of proving I was strong, even if it meant hurting others or myself.

I remember sitting in church for the first time when I was six years old. The adults around me lifted their hands in worship, their faces filled with peace, and I didn't understand it. I didn't know what they were doing, but I felt something different in the air. There was something in their eyes, something missing in mine. At that moment, a quiet thought came into my mind, one I couldn't explain: "*When I grow up, I want to follow Jesus.*" It felt like a distant dream, a fleeting thought I quickly pushed aside.

The years went by, and I became a fighter. Not just a fighter, but someone who believed physical strength was all that mattered. If I was strong enough, if I fought hard enough, no one could hurt me. No one could make me feel small. I would never let anyone steal my pride. My fists were my only protection.

By the time I was twelve, fighting was no longer something I did out of necessity—it had become a lifestyle. I didn't just defend myself; I looked for confrontation. It gave me a sense of control, the illusion that I wasn't a victim of my circumstances. The more I fought, the more invincible I felt. But the truth was, with every fight, every so-called victory, the emptiness inside me only grew deeper.

At thirteen, I found a new escape: drugs. It started with something small, something a friend offered me. A joint. Nothing serious, just something to calm the nerves. But once I tried it, there was no turning back. Drugs became my escape from the pain. It wasn't just

about getting high; it was about running; running from the chaos at home, from the rage inside me, from the overwhelming sense that I wasn't good enough, that I didn't belong. Drugs helped me forget; even if only for a moment that I was a broken person.

By sixteen, I was using cocaine. The high was stronger, the escape deeper. But every time I used, the emptiness came back. I was trapped in a cycle of self-destruction, always thinking the next high would make me feel better. But, it never did. No amount of drugs could fill the void in me. And as the years passed, I drifted further and further from the boy who once dreamed of following Jesus.

REFLECTION — GOD’S WORD IN YOUR LIFE

It doesn’t matter where you come from or what you’ve been through, you may have had experiences like mine, marked by fear and pain in the early stages of your life. Yet, God reminds us that fear does not come from Him. He has not given us a spirit of fear, but something far greater: power, love, and self-control. God wants you to live from a place of strength and trust—not from fear. Whatever comes your way, you don’t have to carry it alone, because He has empowered you with His Spirit:

**“For God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”**

(2 Timothy 1:7)

Life has many seasons, and maybe right now you feel broken or recognize certain struggles in yourself. It’s in those very moments—when you feel broken—that God wants to be close. He is not absent in your pain, but comes with comfort and healing:

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

(Psalm 147:3)

Also, think of others around you who may be going through difficult times. Consider who you could pray for, and how you might be a source of support. We are not called to carry life’s burdens alone. God encourages us to lift one another up and to lovingly share each other’s struggles or challenges:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

(Galatians 6:2)

Remember, it is never too late to begin again, or to realign your life. Even if you feel like you’ve fallen short or fallen back again, God’s faithfulness is still new. Every morning is another opportunity to receive His grace:

“Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed,

Because His compassions fail not.

They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.”

(Lamentations 3:22–23)

You don’t need to understand everything or have it all under control. When you learn to trust in God, He will guide your steps, even in the difficult seasons:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,

And lean not on your own understanding;

In all your ways acknowledge Him,

And He shall direct your paths.”

(Proverbs 3:5–6)

Let these words encourage you to be bold—for yourself and for others—and to trust in God’s ability to restore and renew.

CHAPTER 2 — BREAKING FREE FROM DEEP PATTERNS

Violence became my language. It was the only way I knew how to survive. In a world where no one protected me, I had to do it myself. At school, on the streets, everywhere, I sought confrontation; it gave me a sense of purpose, a way to survive, a method to suppress the fear of everything happening around me.

By the age of twelve, fighting wasn't just something I did when necessary—it had become a way of life. I didn't just defend myself; I sought out conflict. If someone looked like a threat to me, it was automatic: I had to react, to make sure no one ever thought I was afraid. I had learned that the only way to survive was by being the strongest, by never showing weakness. Adrenaline was my friend—the only thing that kept the fear at bay, the fear that was always there.

The first time I really fought was out on the street. I had no idea that moment would be a defining one in my life. It started with an argument, but when things escalated, I felt the urge to fight. It was all or nothing. The boys who once saw me as weak would now know I was a force to be reckoned with. And when I saw that boy lying on the ground, I felt nothing; no shame, no remorse, only pride. It felt good. It felt like victory, like a strength I had never known before. It felt like the ultimate confirmation of my identity: I wasn't weak—I was someone to be feared.

That was the first step on a path of violence. Fighting was no longer just about surviving—it became the way I lived. Every confrontation gave me the validation I craved. It made me feel stronger, or so I thought. In reality, it made me more and more dependent on

violence. It became the only way I understood myself, the only way I felt any sense of control. But just like any addiction, there was always a void that violence couldn't fill.

As I said before, I started using soft drugs at thirteen. It seemed harmless, but it felt like the escape I had been searching for. It was a way to get away from everything that haunted me. I was the son of a violent father, always on edge, always bracing for the next fight, the next victory.

That night changed everything. I felt relaxed, for the first time in years, I felt free. Alcohol and drugs gave me what I thought I needed. They let me forget about my past, about the pain of my childhood, or a moment, they made me feel whole. That freedom, however, was an illusion. Every time I used, the emptiness returned. And it grew deeper each time, like a bottomless pit I tried to fill with the high, but it was never enough. Cocaine, that was the addiction that eventually took hold of me. It wasn't just an escape from pain; it became a way to suppress it, to hide the anger and frustration. But every time I sobered up, I felt even more empty. It was a vicious cycle—a battle I could not win.

The temptation to escape reality was too strong. It gave me the illusion that I wasn't completely dependent on the world around me, that I at least had control over something. But in truth, I was more lost than ever. The addiction had its grip on me, and each day I drifted further away from the boy who once sat in church thinking he wanted to follow Jesus.

The inner battle was intense. One day, I felt like I had control; the next day, I didn't. I knew I had no future in this world, but I felt trapped like there was no way back to the boy who once had hope. I had become the man who only knew loss. Violence was my only

companion. Drugs were my only distraction, but none of it brought the fulfilment I longed for. In fact, it only made everything worse. Every time I lost myself in that world, the emptiness grew and grew until I was completely stuck.

REFLECTION — BREAKING OLD CHAINS

Patterns can be deeply rooted in our lives. They are shaped by our childhood, poured into us through experience—sometimes through pain, sometimes through rejection. They weave themselves into our thinking, into our reactions, into the way we see ourselves and the world. And often, we're stuck in them without even realizing it.

I don't know what you're going through. I don't know who you are in this moment as you're reading this. I don't know what masks you've had to wear, what burdens you carry, or what wounds you live with. But, what I do know is this: it is not God's will for you to remain in bondage. Maybe you feel broken right now, carrying wounds that run deep. God doesn't leave you in that brokenness—He promises healing and restoration:

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

(Psalm 147:3)

God's plan for your life is not bondage, not pain, not the repetition of the past. God's plan is freedom.

The Bible shows us that Jesus came to this earth with a purpose: to set us free, not just from sin, but also from the patterns that hold us captive. Jesus didn't come only to forgive sin; He came to break the chains that bind you. His freedom is real and complete.

**"Therefore if the Son makes you free,
you shall be free indeed."**

(John 8:36)

Maybe you've believed for years that things can't change. Maybe there's a voice in your mind that says, "*This is just who I am.*" But that's a lie. God did not create you to live in chains. He created you to be free.

Freedom is possible. You can break free from the patterns that hold you back. You don't have to stay trapped in the pain of your past. You don't have to remain bound by addiction, fear, or rejection. Jesus paid the price for your freedom.

I hope this helps you to see that there is a way out. God has a plan for your life. The question is: Do you want that too?

CHAPTER 3 — THE CALL OF JESUS

Prison was a world of its own. A world of constant struggle—not just to maintain physical safety, but also to keep control over my mind and soul. Every day I had to fight for my place, but I felt that this fight was slowly destroying me. Whenever I closed my eyes, I felt the anger and hatred building up. The prison walls weren't just physical—they were mental too. There was no escape. Only the choice to survive.

Yet, it wasn't just about the fights and the violence. There were the hours of silence—the moments when I was grateful for the stillness, but also the moments when I felt incredibly alone, despite being surrounded by hundreds of other inmates. The silence of those nights was often louder than the noise of the fights. It was in that silence that the memories of my past and my mistakes came flooding back. The moments I fought with my stepfather, the times I saw my mother cry, the times I cried in despair—it all came back. In that silence, there was no escape, no place to hide. That sense of not knowing who I really was never left.

The knife I had made while in prison gave me the illusion of control, but it brought no inner peace. It was the only thing I had to protect myself—but what was it really protecting me from? Was it fear of others, or fear of myself? Every night when I held the knife, I felt stronger, but every day, every decision I made to keep my power, made me weaker inside. I was trapped in the illusion of strength.

One day, I ran into an old friend, a man I knew from outside prison. He was locked up too. When I saw him, I thought maybe we could come up with a plan together to survive more easily. But he had changed, not physically, but in his heart. He was calm, composed. We

talked for a while, but his words didn't reach me. I was too far removed from what he had. He spoke about change, about how he had given his life to God. I couldn't understand it. How could I believe in something like that, when I was still trapped in the prison of my own mind?

But what struck me most was his peace. He had something I didn't—peace.

That day, I began to question everything I had built in prison; the control, the violence, the knife all felt meaningless. I started to realize that I had spent my entire life just trying to survive, but I had never truly lived. It felt like I had locked myself up—not just in prison, but in my own choices. I had hurt so many people, slammed so many doors shut, but what had I actually gained? In the silence of my cell, I realized that it wasn't strength that would save me, but something entirely different.

I finally understood that the pain I felt wasn't just from prison; it came from everything I had been through and never let go of. The hatred, the anger, the addictions had held me captive for years. But now, even in that suffocating cell, something began to shift. The thought that there was more, that there was forgiveness, that I wasn't doomed to fight forever—began to break through. Maybe it was time to let go of it all, to no longer be imprisoned in the cycle of violence.

During that same period, as I began to understand more, I was approached by another inmate. This man wasn't big or physically intimidating, but there was something in his eyes that intrigued me. He asked if I was interested in the "business" of smuggling. Drugs had

always been a way to make money, but this was something different. He told me about a method to get larger quantities inside the prison walls.

Incredibly, for the first time, I felt no desire to say yes. Instead, I felt fear—not of the prison, but of my own desire for control. What was I about to do? Would I keep following the same cycle? Or would I find the courage to stop?

This decision—this moment of choice—brought me into deep conflict. The power I thought I had was beginning to fade. Was I willing to live my life differently? Did I really have the strength to leave my old self behind? This was the battle I had to face—not with someone else, but with myself.

REFLECTION — THE PRISON OF THE WORLD

Prison. Maybe that word stirs up a lot of questions for you. But if we're honest, reality is a kind of prison, a prison of power, money, status, and the drive to be better than others. It leads to corruption, and the pursuit of worldly desires. We are all chained to these things—trapped by a false truth we're meant to release. We get caught up in what the world calls important, but this is not the truth God has for us. Maybe you've tried to find your way in a world full of pressure, performance, or the longing for recognition. But, God's wisdom points us to a different way, a path of truth, protection, and understanding:

**"For the Lord gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
He is a shield to those who walk uprightly."**

(Proverbs 2:6–7)

God has a bigger plan for our lives. He wants to shine His light in this dark world—through you and me. Instead of being trapped in the world's prison, God calls us out to share His truth and light with others.

Imagine this: what if you are the one—the spark, the single flame—that can help someone out of darkness? What if you're the only person in your family, workplace, or friend group who can shine that light? You might be the one who makes the difference. You are called to be a visible light in this world—a beacon of hope and truth for those walking in darkness. God did not place you where you are by accident.

He wants your life to visibly reflect His love:

"You are the light of the world.

A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden."

(Matthew 5:14)

You carry the light of Jesus within you. This light is stronger than the darkness around you. You can make a difference. Even if the world is filled with darkness, your life can be that one point of light someone looks to in order to find their way to Jesus. If God's light lives in you, it should also shine through you. It's a light that doesn't just drive out darkness. It reveals who God truly is:

**"This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you,
that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."**

(1 John 1:5)

You can be the light that helps others find the way to God's truth. You don't have to be perfect; you can be a reflection of the love and grace you yourself have received from God.

God doesn't just call us to receive His light—He calls us to pass it on. What if you're the only one in your family who can bring that light? What if you're the one who shows others what it means to live in God's freedom and truth? It's not a small task, but it's the

calling God has placed on your life. If His light is visible in you, it can serve as an invitation for others to seek Him too.

Through your life, people can discover something of God's love, truth, and goodness:

**"Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works
and glorify your Father in heaven."**

(Matthew 5:16)

The world needs your light. The people around you need it. Are you willing to let your light shine? Are you ready to make a difference, even if you're the only one carrying that light? Your light may be the very thing that sets someone else free.

CHAPTER 4 — LONELINESS, GRIEF, AND REJECTION

Prison was a world of its own. It wasn't just the physical space that held me captive; it was also the space within my mind. The walls of my cell were nothing compared to the walls I had built in my heart. The loneliness I had always tried to suppress was now rising to the surface.

It was the pain of not being seen, not being understood, the pain of always standing in the shadows. I didn't feel lonely because there were no people around me, but because I never truly felt like I belonged anywhere. The rejection I experienced in my youth was a constant companion that never left my side.

My stepfather was always a distant figure. His presence was physical, but emotionally he was often unreachable. I learned early on not to rely on love or support from him; that I had to be strong on my own, because no one else would be there for me. And even though I always saw him as my father, I increasingly felt like a stranger in his home.

The rejection I felt from him was reinforced by his silence and indifference. And, that feeling—that pain—stayed with me throughout my life. It was a sorrow I could never fully understand, but always felt.

Prison felt like a reflection of my own inner world. There were so many people around me, yet I still felt invisible. When I looked at the other inmates, I saw men fighting their own battles. But, I always felt like the only one truly struggling to find something worth living for.

The thought that I couldn't go on just by fighting slowly started to sink in. What had I really accomplished? Had I only fed my fears and anger?

I remember the days passing by before my eyes in my cell. The walls I once saw as protection were now suffocating me. I was trapped in a world of thoughts that were beginning to unravel. I had always tried to build myself up through violence and intimidation, but now I could feel how those very things were breaking me down.

The strength I thought I had was actually the chain that held me captive. Every day, I fought the same battle—but it was the wrong one. I had been fighting to suppress others instead of freeing myself.

And as I sat there, locked in my thoughts, I came to the realization that there had to be another way. That maybe the answer to my battle wasn't outside of me—but inside. Maybe, just maybe, I needed to learn to forgive myself for all I had done.

The pain, the rejection, the struggle, maybe all of it was trying to teach me that true strength comes from accepting myself. It wasn't an easy thought, but it felt like the first step toward something new. And as I sat there in that cell, not knowing how any of this would turn out, I felt a glimpse of hope.

It was a feeling I couldn't explain, but I could feel it.

That glimpse of hope was so small, but it was the beginning of something greater. It was the possibility of change, of letting go of the chains of my past. This was the moment of choice: would I keep holding on to my pain, to my rejection, or would I take the first step toward healing?

That night in my cell was different. It wasn't a miracle that changed everything, but there was a shift within me. Maybe the time had come to stop defending my wounds, to stop clinging to the grief. Maybe it was time to finally let in the love I had always avoided. But, it was a choice I had to make. Was I willing to make it?

REFLECTION — LETTING GO OF PAIN AND GRIEF

Letting go of pain and grief is almost always a process. Sometimes God does something supernatural—something you simply can't explain. I've experienced it myself. I've seen it in others. I've lived it—both in my own life and within my family. Sometimes God delivers us in a miraculous way. But, what's always visible is this; healing is a process, a process of surrender, of forgiveness. And, that process leads to healing. Forgiveness is not just a choice we make—it is also a promise from God. He reminds us that He forgives our sins, and He forgets them:

**"For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness,
and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."**

(Hebrews 8:12)

Forgiveness for the people from our past. Forgiveness for the one who hurt you. Forgiving is so important. It's the key to being set free from the lies, the intimidation, the pain we carry with us. And God can help you with that. He can soften your heart, heal it, and bring together the broken pieces of your soul. God is close, even when your heart is broken. Especially in those moments, He wants to comfort and restore you:

**"He heals the broken hearted
and binds up their wounds."**

(Psalm 147:3)

When God heals your heart, He transforms your thinking. He doesn't just change the way you see yourself—He changes the way you see others. No more pain, no more bitterness—just release. Forgiving and letting go is a process, but it always leads to healing. God's forgiveness is not only something you receive—it's something you're called to give. He calls us to forgive one another as He has forgiven us:

**"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."**

(Ephesians 4:32)

It will always happen through a process, but the first step is to acknowledge that you were never meant to carry these burdens of pain and bitterness. Look in the mirror, and look at how God sees you. He does not see someone who has to remain in pain—but someone who is invited to live in His love and freedom. God invites you not to carry your burdens alone any longer. If you're tired of fighting, of the pain and the grief—listen to His words:

**"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest."**

(Matthew 11:28)

God never intended for you to carry these things on your own. You were not made to remain stuck in pain, but to be free.

CHAPTER 5 — THE DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS

After that night in the taxi, I couldn't look at my life the same way. I had stood on the edge so many times before, but this time felt different. There was something I couldn't explain—something that shook me awake. It was as if the veil that had covered my eyes for years was finally lifted. Deep down, I knew that if I kept living the way I was, I might not get another chance next time.

But how do you walk away from a life that is all you've ever known? My friends, my environment—everything revolved around violence, drugs, and power. This was my world—the only world I knew. If I left it behind, I would lose everything. No more money. No more status. No more protection. What would be left of me if I was no longer the one people feared?

I wrestled with that thought. The fear of losing everything was almost paralyzing. Because if I was honest, I didn't know who I was without the violence, without the adrenaline of a fight, without the control I thought I had over others. I had been shaped by my past, by the streets, by the harsh lessons of life. How could I choose a different path without paying the price? Was there even a way back?

I started to remember my childhood. That time when I sat in church as a six-year-old and thought, "*When I grow up, I want to follow Jesus.*" Those words, so innocent and pure, now sounded like an echo of a forgotten dream. I had buried that little boy under layers of pain, anger, and sin. But why did that thought keep coming back? Why now? Was it a coincidence—or was God trying to show me something?

One night, I couldn't escape the unrest in my heart. I was alone, in a room filled with smoke, the scent of burned-out cigarettes, and the remnants of my old life. A table covered in empty bottles, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, a gun within reach—like it was a part of me. I looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes were hollow, empty. My face marked by years of struggle, by sleepless nights, by the drugs that had hollowed me out. I no longer saw the man I thought I was—strong, untouchable. I saw a broken human being. A lost son.

For the first time, I couldn't lie to myself anymore. I wasn't in control of my life. I wasn't in charge. I was a prisoner of my own choices, my own sins, my own fears. I dropped to my knees; not because I knew how to pray, not because I suddenly had all the answers. But because I had nowhere else to go.

"God," I whispered, "if You're really there... if You can really save me—then do it. I can't do this anymore."

I waited. The room stayed silent. There was no voice from heaven, no angels coming down. No dramatic miracle. But, something inside me changed, a peace, a presence I couldn't explain. It was as if an invisible hand wrapped around me, as if something—or someone—was saying, *"I am here. I've seen you. I never left."*

And in that moment, I knew. God had never left me. I was the one who had walked away. But, He had always been waiting.

That moment didn't change everything at once. The battle wasn't suddenly over. The next day, I woke up to the same problems, and the same temptations. My friends didn't suddenly disappear, and the world around me didn't magically change.

But I had changed.

I got up and knew I couldn't go on like I had. I had to break free. I had to find another way. And this time, I knew I didn't have to do it alone. The road to freedom wouldn't be easy. But for the first time, I had hope. I had made a choice—a choice for Jesus.

And that would change everything.

REFLECTION — A NEW BEGINNING: HOPE IN CHRIST

Maybe you've felt trapped. Maybe you are not in a physical prison, but in a situation you can't seem to escape. Maybe you're struggling with addiction—whether it's drugs, alcohol, or something else that's taken control of your life. Maybe you're consumed by worry, fear, or grief over someone you love. Or perhaps you're stuck in patterns from the past, habits that keep pulling you back into a life you don't actually want.

Sometimes you stand in front of the mirror and ask yourself: Who am I? Who am I allowed to be? Maybe you wonder how God sees you. Am I still loved? Is there still hope for me? You wrestle with the question: What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here?

You're not the only one asking these questions. In the Bible, we see many people who found themselves in situations where there seemed to be no way out. But time and time again, God shows that there is hope, even for those who feel completely lost:

**"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you,
says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil,
to give you a future and a hope."**

(Jeremiah 29:11)

Maybe your life feels like a maze with no exit right now, but God sees beyond it. He has a plan for you, a future full of hope. You weren't born by accident. You are not a mistake. Maybe you're tired of searching, tired of carrying your burdens alone. Jesus invites you:

**"Come to Me,
all you who labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest."**

(Matthew 11:28)

Jesus is calling you today. He says, "Come as you are." You don't have to change yourself first. I will change you. I will heal you. I will set you free.

Will you take that first step today? Call out to Him, like I once did. He is closer than you think. And if you seek Him with all your heart, you will find Him.

**"And you will seek Me and find Me,
when you search for Me with all your heart."**

(Jeremiah 29:13)

You are loved. There is hope. There is a future. And it begins today.

CHAPTER 6 — THE CALLING AND TRUSTING IN JESUS

The night I prayed for the first time in years felt like a turning point. Not just because I said the words, but because I meant them: *“Get me out of this. I’ve tried a thousand times. You can take my life—I can’t do this alone.”*

I knelt down, head bowed, fists pressed against the cold floor. I was exhausted. Tired of fighting. Tired of failing. Tired of myself. My whole life I had believed I needed to be strong, that I didn’t need anyone. But there I was, broken, empty, and without hope.

The silence after my prayer was deafening. No voice from heaven. No lightning bolt. No visible change. But deep inside... something shifted.

I knew I couldn’t keep going the old way. But, knowing you need to change, and actually changing are two completely different things. My past clung to me like chains around my neck. I felt like a prisoner, locked inside my own history. The voices in my head screamed, *“You’re not good enough.” “You’ve gone too far.” “There’s no way back.”*

But in the midst of that darkness, another voice whispered. Soft, but unmistakable: *“I haven’t given up on you.”*

It was barely audible—almost drowned out by the noise of guilt and shame. But it was there. And the more I listened, the louder it became.

When I turned 26, I began to feel a deeper calling. It wasn't a loud, booming voice from heaven like I might have expected. No angel stood before me with a clear message. It was a steady pull in my heart, a growing awareness that God wanted to do something big with my life. But first, I had to be prepared.

I knew I couldn't change everything at once. Years of habits, buried pain and addictions had kept me going; it was like trying to turn a ship that had been sailing in the same direction for years. But one thing I knew for sure: I couldn't go back.

Step by step, God began to remove things from my life. Some things I let go of easily, others clung to me like chains that refused to break. In a miraculous way, most of the addictions—the drugs, the alcohol, the nights I lost myself—disappeared almost overnight, as if God took them out of my hands in a single moment. But smoking, that was a different story. That one didn't go so easily. It was like that chain was anchored deeper, like it needed more time to come loose.

Compared to everything else I had been set free from, it seemed so small. But the fight was intense. Every time I tried to quit, the addiction pulled me back in. I had broken with everything that was destroying me, and yet that cigarette still had a grip on me. Why? Maybe because it was the last piece of control I wasn't ready to surrender.

Every failed attempt felt like a defeat. But every time I fell, I heard that same quiet voice: *"Don't give up. I will set you free."*

It took longer than I wanted. But one day—it happened. No dramatic moment. No sudden revelation. Just a day when the craving was gone. It was just gone. Not by my strength, but by His.

I realized: He hadn't just set me free from my addictions—He had set me free from the fear of letting them go.

Half a year later, I met her. From the very first moment, I knew: this wasn't a coincidence. She was different. She didn't look at me the way others did—as if my past defined who I was. She saw something else. Something I wasn't even sure I could believe myself: a man being restored by grace.

Our love wasn't just a relationship—it was a journey. Together, we began to grow—not just in love, but in faith. We learned to trust Jesus, to walk by faith, even when we had no idea where the road would lead.

We didn't have a perfect plan for the future. There were moments of doubt—moments we didn't know what to do next. But every time we looked back, we saw God's fingerprints on our lives.

God had rescued me when I was deep in darkness. He had protected me when I didn't deserve it. But now, I began to understand: He hadn't saved me just to survive. He called me to live.

The calling grew stronger. At first, it was just a whisper, a quiet feeling in my heart. But over time, it became an unmistakable assignment: God had something prepared for me. What exactly? I didn't know yet. But one thing was clear: I couldn't stay where I was. This was just the beginning.

REFLECTION — LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Sometimes it feels like you're stuck. You pray, but the answers don't come. You know God is there, but you don't feel Him. You seem surrounded by darkness, as if you're stuck in the mud with no way out. But even there, in the deepest darkness, God sees and hears you. It's in those very moments that He invites you to call on Him, because He promises to answer:

**"Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."**

(Psalm 50:15)

God's silence doesn't mean He is absent. Think of Job, who wrestled with suffering, and yet knew who God was. Job couldn't see or feel God, but he knew God saw him and knew his path, even when he himself no longer understood it:

**"Look, I go forward, but He is not there,
and backward, but I cannot perceive Him;
when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him;
when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him.
But He knows the way that I take;
when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."**

(Job 23:8–10)

Job understood that God saw him, even in his trials, whether he felt it or not. Whatever surrounds you: darkness, fear, or chaos, it doesn't change who God is. His light remains stronger than any shadow:

**"This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you:
that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."**

(1 John 1:5)

Even when you are surrounded by: fear, depression, or patterns that seem to rule your life, He is still there. David knew that God's presence didn't mean the absence of darkness, but comfort in the midst of it:

**"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."**

(Psalm 23:4)

Walking with God means learning to trust the process. Sometimes that process is hard, full of moments of surrender and letting go. But know this: His eyes are on you.

**"The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and His ears are open to their cry."**

(Psalm 34:16)

Jesus has His eyes on you. He is the Good Shepherd who will not leave you, no matter how deep your valley may be. Trust Him. Hold on to His promise, and know that He will carry you through the process.

**"...And lo, I am with you always,
even to the end of the age. Amen."**

(Matthew 28:20)

CHAPTER 7 — FROM ARUBA TO THE WORLD

I looked out the airplane window and watched the endless ocean below fade from view, replaced by an island surrounded by turquoise-blue water. Aruba, our new home. It felt unreal. Everything we had built, everything familiar, we had left behind. No solid ground beneath our feet, no certainty, only God's voice that had called us.

As we walked into the Arrivals Hall, I felt a mixture of excitement and tension. We didn't know exactly what lay ahead, only that we were supposed to be here. No network. No steady income. No plan, except to trust God's guidance. It felt like a leap into the deep without a safety net, but with the certainty that He would carry us.

Those first days were a battle. We walked the streets, explored the area, trying to imagine what our life here would look like. Where do you even start? How do you plant a church in a place where you don't know anyone? At night I often lay awake. The heat of the island was different than what we were used to, but the unrest in my heart was even greater. Had I made the right choice? Was this really God's plan—or had I been led by my own convictions?

But, every time doubt crept in, I remembered the voice that had called me. The same voice that had rescued me from a life of violence and addiction. The same voice that had shown me there was a future beyond the darkness I had once lived in. And I knew: if He could rescue me from that pit, He could lead us here too.

We started small, very small, in a space that hardly resembled a church. We gathered with a few people who were searching. Some were broken, others trapped in their past, just like I had been. They longed for something they couldn't yet name, but I knew what it was. They were searching for Jesus, even if they didn't realize it yet.

The first services were simple; no grand sermons, no impressive worship teams, just us, a few chairs, and God's presence. But the moment we began to pray and lift up His name, something happened. I saw hearts being touched, people crying without knowing why. God was moving. It wasn't always easy. There were moments when we sat at our table wondering how we were going to pay the rent for the space. Moments when we were tired and unsure if we could keep going.

One day, when everything felt too heavy, I went outside and looked up at the stars. "God," I said, "*we need You. I know You sent us here, but we can't do this on our own.*" And as always, He answered. Not with an audible voice, but by opening doors we could never have opened ourselves. In the days that followed, new people began showing up to the meetings, people who didn't know why they came, but later told us they had heard a voice in their heart saying, "*Go.*"

But, the greatest breakthroughs came in the lives of the people we met. I remember a woman who entered our service for the first time, her face marked by sorrow. She had been in pain for years, and nothing had helped. When we prayed for her, she felt a warmth pass through her body. The pain vanished instantly. She looked at us with wide eyes, her hands trembling. "What is this?" she asked. "That's Jesus," I said.

I saw people healed from addictions. I saw relationships restored. There was a man bound by bitterness, resentment, and anger. The first time he came to our church, he sat with his arms crossed, skeptical and closed off. But that night, God touched him. He began to cry and shake. The walls around his heart came crashing down. Later he told us he had never felt so much peace.

What began as a tiny seed in Aruba grew into something far greater than we could have imagined. People started inviting us to share our story in other countries. We traveled to places where people were battling the same darkness I had been rescued from. We saw that God's power is universal. The same Jesus who saved me was saving others.

Sometimes we stood on large stages, speaking to thousands. Other times we sat in small rooms with just a few people, and saw God move just as powerfully as in a packed auditorium.

I had done nothing to earn what He gave me. It was grace. Pure, undeserved grace.

And I knew: as long as I had breath, I would keep telling the story. Because if He could save me, He could save anyone.

REFLECTION — SMALL STEPS, BIG PROMISES

Sometimes we look around and find it hard to make decisions. We ask ourselves, “*Are we doing the right thing?*” feeling stuck in uncertainty for so long. We want to move forward, but the future seems blurry and unclear.

Yet often, it’s the small steps that mark the beginning of something big, things we can’t yet see, but that God has already prepared. These steps lead us toward God’s ways, toward His plans, and toward the rivers of blessing He has for us.

God has a plan for you and me. He wants to lead us to rivers that overflow with life and abundance.

**"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you," says the Lord,
"thoughts of peace and not of evil,
to give you a future and a hope.**

(Jeremiah 29:11)

This promise reminds us that God doesn’t want us stuck in fear or uncertainty. He calls us to step out in faith, even when we don’t yet see the full path ahead.

The Bible says that streams of living water will flow from within us. This means that when we trust God, His life and power will flow through us. Jesus Himself said:

**"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said,
out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. "**

(John 7:38)

That's a powerful promise! When we take small steps of faith, God can fill us with His Spirit and lead us down paths we could never have imagined.

It's up to us to take the first steps; to seek God, to ask for His will, and then to walk in trust. Even if we can't see the whole picture yet, we can trust that He sees us and directs our path.

**"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path."**

(Psalm 119:105)

This means we don't have to understand everything ourselves. We don't need to fear the future, because God knows the way. Our part is to take small steps of obedience and trust Him in all things.

Maybe today you're standing at a crossroads, unsure of which way to go. Then remember this: God has promises for you. He wants to lead you to paths of life and abundance. All He asks is that you take small steps of faith; that you seek Him, trust Him, and keep walking in His direction. And as you walk, He will lead your way.

CHAPTER 8 — THE GREATEST MIRACLE

The greatest change in my life wasn't that I got out of prison. It wasn't even that I was set free from my addictions. It was something far greater. The true miracle was that God completely changed my heart.

I was a man who had fallen so deep into darkness that I didn't know if there was any way back. Evil had spread through my soul like poison, and every day felt like one step further from redemption. My hands had fought, my words had wounded, my choices had destroyed. But despite everything, God did the impossible: He brought light into my darkness and gave my life a new purpose.

There were nights I lay awake asking why I, of all people, had been saved. Why hadn't God given up on me? I had disappointed Him time and time again. I had promised to change, but always fell back. And yet... every time I felt myself sinking into my old life, there was that soft but unmistakable voice: *"I'm not finished with you."*

Slowly, I began to understand why God hadn't given up on me. Not just to save me, but to use me. To make me an instrument in His hands, so I could show others that there is hope, even for those who think they've gone too far.

I used to think I was the only one struggling; the only one crying in loneliness at night, the only one trapped in a cycle of anger, addiction, and pain. But when I started sharing what God had done in my life I saw it everywhere I went. I met broken people; people with

the same fear in their eyes, the same wounds in their hearts, the same emptiness that had once lived in me.

I saw it in the man who had been struggling with drugs for twenty years. He came to me trembling, his eyes bloodshot from sleepless nights. “Brother,” he whispered, “I don’t want this anymore. But I don’t know how to stop.” I recognized his battle, because it had once been mine. And I knew: *this is why God saved me.*

I saw it in the woman who had been abused, her trust in the world completely shattered. She shared her story through tears, and all I could do was listen. But when she asked me, “*Do you think God could still love me?*” I could look her straight in the eye and say, “*Yes. With everything He is.*”

I saw it in the man who was about to walk away from his family. His anger controlled him, just like mine once controlled me. “*I’m not made for love,*” he said. “*I’m too broken.*” But I knew better. Because if God could change me, He could change anyone.

Every time I saw someone repent, a broken heart healed, an addict set free, it felt like confirmation of everything I had been through. My salvation wasn’t just for me. It was meant to show others that Jesus gives true life.

It started with small encounters, and brief conversations. But then it happened. I began to witness miracles that went beyond my understanding.

I was standing in a small hall in a poor neighborhood. People came in, some hungry, others with deep pain in their eyes. One man sat in a wheelchair, his face grey from a life that had worn him down. We prayed for him, not a quick prayer, not an empty religious ritual, but a sincere cry to God. And then... he moved. First a small twitch, then more. Before we knew it, he stood up, tears running down his face. He looked at us, as if even he couldn't believe it. *"I can feel my legs,"* he whispered.

There was a young woman bound by occult forces. She had been involved in witchcraft and carried a darkness around her that was almost tangible. When we started praying, she trembled—struggling against a power that didn't want to let her go. But the name of Jesus is stronger. We saw her delivered, her eyes cleared, her breathing calmed, and with a voice no longer distorted by darkness, she said, *"I'm free."*

These weren't just stories. These were moments where heaven touched earth. It didn't always happen how I expected, but it was always powerful. And every time I thought I had seen the greatest miracle, God showed me something even greater.

But of all the miracles—the healings, the deliverances, the transformations—there was one that remained the greatest: when someone believed in Jesus and gave their life to Him.

The world thinks miracles must be spectacular. But I've learned that the real miracle happens in the heart. When I looked someone in the eyes and saw the same emptiness I once had, I knew: *this is why Jesus died. This is why I'm alive.*

People would sometimes ask me, *"Why would God love me?"* And every time I answered, *"Because He already proved it on the cross."*

There were days I didn't know how to go on. When the challenges felt bigger than I could handle. When the future looked uncertain. When doubts whispered that I wasn't enough. But then I remembered... the One who brought me out of darkness would not let me fall. He gave me the strength to keep going, to keep speaking, to keep believing.

And now I see how God, through my brokenness, heals others.

That is the miracle of my life.

Not that I was freed from prison.

Not that I was delivered from addiction.

But that God would use a lost man like me to carry His light.

Because if He could do it with me—He can do it with anyone.

REFLECTION — GOD WANTS TO USE YOU

I can now speak of thousands of healings, thousands of miracles, people who have been healed. God does extraordinary things. And the most extraordinary part is this: God wants to use you.

He wants to work through you. He wants to break through in your life. What seems impossible in your eyes is not too great for Him. Because...

"Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh.

Is there anything too hard for Me?"

(Jeremiah 32:27)

What He has done for others, He can do for you. And He doesn't only want to do something for you, but also through you.

There are more books I will write, but this is not just about books. God wants to tell a story through your life. He wants to show the world what He can do through you. It may not be in written words, but in the way you live, speak, and act. He wants to make His power, His love, and His miracles visible through you. You were created with purpose. God's plan for your life goes beyond receiving; it is also a calling to walk it out:

**"For we are His workmanship,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand**

that we should walk in them.”

(Ephesians 2:10)

Your life is not an accident. God has a purpose for you. He has a plan, a destiny, and He's only waiting for your “yes.”

Are you willing to give your life fully to God? To trust Him, even when you don't understand everything? That goes deeper than just going to church.

Do you dare to trust God with the next step in your life?

Do you dare to dream big?

Or maybe, to do the small, hidden things He asks of you?

How do you make that choice, when the way ahead is still unclear?

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

I will guide you with My eye."

(Psalm 32:8)

God doesn't ask for perfection. He asks for trust. He asks for a heart that says:

"Lord, here I am. Use me." What is your answer today?

AFTERWORD — THE END IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

This book is only the beginning of a much greater journey. The story you've read here is just a small part of the full process of transformation, healing, and growth that I've gone through. The experiences I've shared are deeply personal, but there is so much more to tell: moments of struggle, of breakthrough, and of an ever-deepening relationship with God.

In the full version of this book, which is currently in development, I will share more details and testimonies. We'll go deeper into the challenges, the victories, and the moments when God's grace became visible in the most unexpected ways. This book is not just my testimony, it is an invitation to anyone who is searching for redemption, freedom, and hope.

I believe this bigger story, with all its depth and insight, will encourage many. My prayer is that my journey will give others the courage to walk their own path with God, to break free from everything that holds them back and to experience the love and grace of God.

The journey is far from over. This book is only one chapter in a much greater work that is still being written, both on paper and in life itself. And, I'm certain that there are still many more miracles to come.

HELP SPREAD THIS STORY EVEN FURTHER

We want as many people as possible to receive this story **for free**. That's why we give away every copy—without cost—so that anyone, no matter their situation, can read this message of hope and redemption.

Would you consider investing in this ministry and in the many journeys currently underway? And beyond that—are you willing to sow into God's kingdom? Feel completely free to give as you feel led.

Your support helps us spread the gospel, reach people, and change lives.

ACCOUNT DETAILS

Life Church Aruba Foundation

- Bank Account Number: 7700000100387889
- Bank: RBC Royal Bank (Aruba) N.V.
- Swift Code: RBTTAWAW
- Name: Life Church Aruba Foundation

Awake and Revival

This platform also provides opportunities to donate from different countries, which helps support our global mission:

www.awake-revival.org/donations

Thank you for your support, your prayers, and your encouragement.

I'm grateful to have been able to share this first part of the story with you, and I look forward to sharing the full journey in time.

May God's grace surround you and show you that no past is too great for His redemption.