

RESCUE STORY

FAITH, FREEDOM, AND FINDING MY WAY HOME

ZACH WILLIAMS

WITH ROBERT NOLAND

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BOOKS

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Rescue Story

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*To my wife and children for always standing
by my side. To my mom and dad for their
constant prayers. And to my family and
friends for all the love and support.*



*There I was empty handed
Crying out from the pit of my despair
There You were in the shadows
Holding out Your hand, You met me there . . .
You are my rescue story¹*



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INTRODUCTION

Plan for Me

*When I was darkness, You were light
When I was dead You breathed new life
God, You changed my destiny
And now the only thing I see

Your relentless love . . . Ever chasing me²*

The first night of my 2023 A Hundred Highways Tour was on a drizzly, cool March evening in Columbus, Georgia, at RiverCenter for the Performing Arts. As I sat in my dressing room, I prayed for the strength to follow through on the decision I had made to break the silence on a very personal story, one I had never shared from stage. Up to this point, I had only talked about it with a close circle of family and friends.

In the middle of our set, just before performing the song “Plan for Me,” through quite a few tears I had to constantly wipe away with my bandana, along with a broken, repentant heart, as King David wrote in Psalm 51, I shared these words with the sold-out crowd:

“If you have been to one of my concerts before, you’ve probably heard me talk about how I was raised in church and then, like a lot of kids do, I wandered away from how my parents raised me. I walked away from how I was brought up. Today, I know that my parents are responsible for everything I have in my life. Had it not been for the seeds that they started planting in me from an early age, I wouldn’t even be here tonight.

“I worked construction for my dad as he watched me go through my struggle with drugs and alcohol for many years. To be honest with you, I took advantage of Dad’s grace. He would

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do things like pay me, even when, at times, I didn't show up for work. He was always there to share a word of encouragement. With all that was going wrong in my life, I can remember to this day how Dad would say, 'Son, I don't have an answer for you other than Jesus. He's the reason why you're here. He's the reason why your mother and I are still together.'

"I remember when Dad finally told me his own story of life before Jesus. One thing I have come to realize these past few years is the devil comes to attack us with the same things that our parents and our grandparents and their parents struggled with. It's a generational thing.

"Dad told me, 'I'm just like you. I used to struggle with a lot of the same things you did. A while after your mother and I got married, we were on the verge of divorce, much like your own marriage has been. But all that was before we gave our lives to Christ.'

"For me, growing up as a kid, I don't have any memory other than being in church. Because of the relationship my parents had with Jesus, that was the way they brought me up. But I know there were a number of times over the years that they just wanted to throw in the towel and give up on me. They would pray, 'God, what have we done wrong? We've done everything that You've asked us to do, and our son is still living this way.'

"I can remember how my parents used to come to where I was playing and sit sometimes for three hours in a smoky, noisy bar listening to me while I was getting drunk and doing drugs. They would pray for me and try to make sure I got home

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all right. They also came over to our house to pray for me and my wife.”

I could see I was connecting with the audience in Columbus, so I knew the moment had come to go deeper into the specific story Dad had told me. I continued . . .

“What I’m about to tell you, I haven’t shared this story publicly, but I figured it was time. When I gave my life to the Lord at thirty-three years old, my dad and I had been working together for about fifteen years. It was a steamy, hot, and humid day in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Inside the dried-in house where we were putting up sheetrock, the air was dead and stagnant. The distinct smell of gypsum and drywall mud hung thick in the air. We had one of those huge squirrel-cage fans that squeaked way too loud with each revolution, but at least offered some movement of air. When Dad decided to break for lunch, we made the call to take our chances outside to try to, hopefully, just maybe, catch some kind of occasional breeze in the shade. Some days we would leave and go eat fast food, with the main reason being to sit in the AC for a half hour and cool off.

“But on this particular day, Dad decided that he and I would stay on the job site. I had no idea he had something he had been waiting so long to share with me and was praying for the right moment. Typically, there would be other subcontractors working on the same house we were, but that day, I don’t recall anyone else being there. The only sound was the familiar songs on the radio from the local Christian station that Dad always had playing.

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“My father was fifty-nine years old with salt-and-pepper hair and a bit of scruff on his face. Especially in the Arkansas summers, his face and arms became a deep dark brown. He grabbed a sleeve of saltine crackers and a bottle of lemonade, while I got my bag of Funyuns and a Mountain Dew. I remember our main course was splitting a can of Vienna sausages.

“Just after we sat down outside on a stack of sheetrock, Dad put his food down, looked at me, and said, ‘Son, I need to tell you something.’ He paused as if he was mustering up some strength, then continued. ‘Years ago, when you first started playing music, I knew something was different about your decision. You don’t just pick up a guitar when you’re nineteen and start playing, singing, and writing songs. Then you began playing in bars and started to go down a different path. But your Mom and I just kept trusting and believing that God had a plan for your life.’

“I’ve never told you this, but when you were a baby, we had you dedicated to the Lord at church. As we walked down the aisle toward the front, you started screaming and making a lot of noise. The pastor smiled and joked to the congregation, “Man, Zach’s got a strong set of lungs on him. Probably going to be a singer someday.” After everyone laughed, the pastor’s face grew serious, as if he was listening to a voice that no one else could hear.’

“Zach, he looked at your Mom and I and stated, “This child will be a voice for his generation.”

“Hearing the pastor’s words from Dad, after a moment of

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feeling speechless, I asked, ‘How is it that at thirty-three years old, you’ve *never* told me this story?’

“He answered, ‘Well, I didn’t want to put any pressure on you. I didn’t want to give you something you had to live up to. But when you started playing music, I knew God’s plan was somehow about to start. And now, I believe He has allowed you to walk through all of this to give you a platform to share your story with the world to help so many others.’

“As I reflect back on the pastor’s prophecy, I’ll be honest with you . . . there are days when I feel undeserving and unworthy of those words. But then I am reminded how God has been using broken people, messed up people, for a long time to do His work . . . so don’t let anybody ever tell you that you’re not qualified or not worthy to do what God is calling you to do. If He has a plan for *my* life, then He has a plan for *your* life.

“The reason I’m sharing this story is not to point out *anything* about me. I am certainly no ‘chosen one.’ The word from the pastor has never made me feel special at all. But I want everyone who comes out to hear my songs to know the truth of Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” That is true for *anyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord—just like I finally discovered at thirty-three years old, after years of trying to outrun my guilt and shame, after straying far from the life I knew I was always supposed to be living.”

Taking a deep breath, grateful to get through my first time

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of telling this personal story, the band and I went into playing “Plan for Me.”

After experiencing the gracious response from the folks gathered that evening in Georgia, I knew I had to keep sharing about that moment with my dad every night I stand on a stage, for as long as the Lord leads me. I know I have a responsibility that comes with that prophecy—to share the truth of Jesus with those who will listen.

Yet on that day when I heard my father speak those words for the first time, spoken about me when I was just a baby, I had no idea of the amazing plan God was about to unfold for me and my family. Looking into Dad’s weary, steel-blue eyes, somehow I could see all his prayers for me throughout my entire life, especially those born out of the pain of the past fifteen years.

But I could also see something else, something much bigger, much stronger—the face of a father who never wavered in the belief that his God can still bring thirty-three-year-old prodigal sons back home.

CHAPTER 1

*BIG DREAMS
IN A SMALL
TOWN*

*Help me believe it
When I can't see it
Help me to know it
When I can't hold it³*

In the summer of 2022, my parents, Steve and Jenia Williams, celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Quite an amazing accomplishment in any era of history, but especially in these past five ever-changing decades since they shared their vows before God in 1972.

Throughout our lives, they have provided me and my sister, Amy, with a firm foundation in Christ. In all my wayward years, while I was building my house on the sand, they had shown me how to live life on the Rock and, as Psalm 40 states, to “set my feet on solid ground.” As Proverbs 22:6 encourages all parents to do, mine certainly trained up a child in the way he should go. So my story can’t be told without talking about their stable and prayerful presence in my life. Without them, I would have had no idea that there was Someone to run to when I finally came to the end of my road.

My parents grew up in Bono, Arkansas (pronounced Boh-no, not Bah-no like the U2 singer). They became a couple when Dad was in ninth grade and Mom in eighth. Since they’ve been together, they’ve never been with anyone else. Even when Dad gave in to his own rebellion a few years later, he stayed faithful to Mom.

My mother’s family owned a Phillips 66 gas station back in the “full service” days, meaning you pulled up and an attendant came out to pump your gas, wipe your windshield,

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even check your oil and tires. If anything was low, they took care of it. You never even had to get out of your car. (If you're under thirty-five, no, I am not kidding. This was a real thing back in the day.)

Their station was the preferred hangout for local farmers to stop in, grab a cup of coffee, and catch up on gossip when they came to town for supplies. But they all knew to stay clear of the mechanic's area, where a sign read, "Labor \$15 an hour. \$45 an hour if you watch." For many of the men in our community, the station was their gathering place.

Built on the interstate, the Phillips 66 was in a prime location about twenty miles from the nearest towns in either direction. It was a one-stop shop that sold car parts and offered basic maintenance like oil changes and flat fixes, as well as other minor repairs. On the side of the store were two attached bays to work on cars. The building was classic Americana, with Coke and cigarette machines out front. You could grab a Coke and a smoke while someone put gas in your car. I guess that's why they call them "the good ol' days," back before anyone knew that sugar and tobacco could kill you. And before they decided we were all perfectly capable of pumping our own gas.

Because Mom's family owned and ran the station, they had a very nice, large house, while Dad grew up in a small two-bedroom, one-bath home, sharing a room with his two brothers. He told me that he ate his very first steak when Mom invited him over to dinner with her family. Mom's family wasn't rich, but compared to the way he grew up, Dad thought

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they were. But even with that difference in raising, they were drawn to each other.

My parents got married when Dad was nineteen and Mom was eighteen. Once they were out on their own and away from their families, they experienced independence and some personal freedom for the first time. As happens with many young couples from solid, churchgoing families, they were lured into trying out the wild side.

Dad's family tree had two extremes, from alcoholics to preachers. But he had grown up in a strict home, so once he was out of high school, I guess some pent-up rebellion saw an opportunity to come out. Several of the guys Dad ran around with back then, even after he and Mom got married, eventually ended up in prison or died from drug abuse. Just in the past few years, he's told me some stories about those days when he started drinking, experimenting with drugs, and needing to come to grips with what he called an "addictive personality." He faced some tough crossroads of his own, and I think that's why he always found grace for me when, years later, he started seeing his old self in his only son.

Of course, substance abuse has been a temptation in every generation since humans first figured out how to create or consume anything that temporarily alters the mind. But the risk any of us take in using alcohol or drugs for the first time is that we have no idea how our bodies and brains will respond. For far too many people, it becomes easy to lose control. What starts out as fun, relaxation, or escape soon turns to abuse and addiction.

Because Mom had been raised in a well-respected blue-collar

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family, when Dad went from social drinking out with friends to consuming heavily at home, that became a problem for her. She didn't mind him having a cocktail or two while hanging out with other couples, but getting drunk at home was not something she had signed up for. Those issues quickly took a toll on their marriage, and for about six weeks, they separated.

But, fortunately for me and my sister, it didn't take long for Dad to come to his senses. He realized he had to get away from the temptations to focus on putting his marriage back together. When my dad decides to start or stop something, he has always been able to do it. That unique resolve was a trait I later realized I had inherited from him.

Dad knew some major changes had to be made, and while seeking answers together, both he and Mom gave their lives to Christ. Even though they had each grown up in church, Dad decided he needed to give his heart to Jesus because Dad clearly saw that sin was destroying him. Realizing there is more to faith than just church attendance, they both chose to start a relationship with God. Their mutual decision would forever change the dynamic of our family for the better. To offer proof that Mom and Dad's transformation was real and lasting, I have never known my parents as anything other than strong Christ followers.

BUILDING A LIFE

Mom and Dad's new commitment soon led them to see the need for a fresh start, to begin a new chapter in life together.

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So in 1977 they pulled up their Arkansas roots and drove away from the past to transplant in Pensacola, Florida. Dad got a job on a construction crew run by an older man there, doing framing and general carpentry. He had become skilled enough at his craft that finding work was never a problem for him. After they became established in their new city, Dad also started going to Bible college. He felt like some kind of ministry could be in his future and wanted to be better prepared for whatever God might call him to do.

As a part of their new beginnings, Mom and Dad decided they were ready to start a family. On June 27, 1978, I was born Zachary Stephen Williams. When I was just over a year old, Mom became pregnant with my sister. Knowing they were about to be parents to two small kids, with their marriage now strong and feeling like enough time had passed, they decided the best move would be to return to the support system of their families and community back in Arkansas.

So we left Pensacola and moved back to Bono, just outside Jonesboro. We lived with my grandmother, my mom's mother, while my parents built a house of their own. Our new home was at the end of a dead-end street, right behind my grandparents' house, just across from the city fire department where my uncle was the chief. I remember going over to the station all the time and marveling at the fire truck. Especially to a young boy, a fire engine, with all the red and gold, ladders and hoses, massive tires and doors, bells and sirens, looks like some sort of larger-than-life ship on which only heroes in huge, heavy coats and helmets get to climb aboard. Many

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nights I would be sound asleep in bed only to be suddenly awakened by the deafening siren. Looking up, I could see the flashing lights cut through the blinds on the window as the firefighters raced away to deal with danger.

As if that weren't quite enough noise, on the other side of my grandparents' house were train tracks. The 3:00 a.m. train sounded like it was racing and rumbling right through my bedroom. As many kids did back in the day, my buddies and I would take any pennies or quarters we could find and lay them carefully on the tracks. We couldn't wait for the next train to come through so we could go back and find our perfectly squashed and smoothed-out pieces of silver or copper.

The final detail of my Mayberry-like neighborhood was that we lived right beside the town's water tower, which had huge block letters of BONO sprayed in black for the world to see. Giving someone directions to our house was easy. We just said, "Below the water tower, across the street from the fire station, near the train tracks. Can't miss it."

My buddies and I played baseball all the time on the huge concrete driveway of the fire station. We always hit toward our house, but too many times someone would throw a wild pitch or a ball would tip backward off the bat and we would bust a pane of glass in the large rolling doors of the station.

My friends and I looked for ways to make our own fun anywhere we could find it. After a good rain we would wade into the large drainage ditch that ran right between the street and our front yard to catch crawdads that had been carried down with the runoff.

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For a while, Dad worked for Mom's family at the Phillips 66. As a little kid, I spent quite a bit of time there. I remember the distinct smell inside that station—a mixture of oily rags, gasoline, and hot asphalt. I can still hear the loud ding of the bell when someone drove in for gas. Eventually, a builder in town helped Dad start his own drywall business. After being in construction for a while, he had decided to put all his energy into that specific area of construction. From there, he worked hard to get his company off the ground and quickly gained a solid reputation in the community.

Years down the road, Mom's family sold the gas station, but one of my cousins stayed on to run the business until 2023. It's amazing that this Arkansas landmark managed to stay connected to our family for decades.

In 1980, twenty-two months after I was born, my sister entered the world, making me the only Floridian in our family. Now raising two children, my parents began going to a new church plant that was meeting in a home. The pastor and his wife soon became Mom and Dad's best friends. My earliest memories are of our family in church together, going to the services at different members' homes. Everyone there became our friends, as we were together every Sunday morning and Wednesday night and often in between. The church became a major part of our family life. Before long, Dad started playing guitar and leading, with Mom singing in the worship band.

Because we had no church building in the early days, everyone gathered at the lake for baptisms. Those were always followed up by a big potluck picnic and cookout. I recall

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running around with my church friends, navigating through all the people, with the smell of grilling hot dogs and the sound of sizzling burgers giving us a huge appetite. Because we were right beside the lake, once we finally filled our plates, we'd have to fight off the flies and bugs from our food as we ate.

Music was an important feature of every church event. Because we were "charismatic," we didn't sing a lot of traditional hymns. Occasionally, we would sing the ones that had to do with God's power, like "Washed in the Blood" and "Power in the Blood." Most of our worship songs came from the most recent Maranatha! Music songbooks. Some of my favorites were "As the Deer" and "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy." If you aren't familiar with those, "As the Deer" is a ballad-style song taken from Psalm 42, while "Joy" is an upbeat, fun camp song.

The congregation soon became too big to meet in anyone's home. The church was eventually able to work out an arrangement to meet in the ballroom of a vacant motel. Now, with plenty of room to grow, stacks of chairs ready to set out for visitors, space for nursery and kids, and even women's *and* men's restrooms, the church was establishing roots in the community.

FORMING THE FOUNDATION

It's fascinating how small, seemingly insignificant moments forever lock into our minds as vivid memories. One of mine is the first time I saw an electric guitar. I can close my eyes today and still see it. I was with my parents at worship practice

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when a guy pulled a red Gibson Les Paul out of its case. Dad always had an acoustic guitar sitting on a stand at our house, but I never really paid much attention to it. It was just another fixture to me, like a coffee table or lamp. But *this* guitar immediately caught my eye.

I was mesmerized by the bold, rich finish, the trim outlining the edges, the curves on the body, the pearl pickups under the strings, and then the amazing sound that came out when he started playing. Up until that moment, all I had ever heard was acoustic guitars, so when he plugged the cord into the strange black box with all the knobs and switches, I was stunned to hear the powerful, bright, rich textures coming from something that still had only six strings. Even at my young age, the experience of seeing and hearing that guitar for the first time made a lasting impression.

At the worship practices for church, everyone's kids were there. As with many young congregations, childcare for any event was a luxury not yet possible. But there was something really cool about the community created when all of us were together. Listening to Mom and Dad and their friends make music to honor the Lord became familiar and comforting to me. As I played on the floor with the other children, I was literally surrounded by live music. A major part of my childhood was built around church and music, music and church. The two were intertwined and inseparable for me.

Another fond memory I have was my introduction to country music by my grandpa. I remember riding around in his van listening to his favorite eight-track tapes of legends like

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Jerry Reed, Johnny Cash, and Willie Nelson. I always thought it was cool how he had his tape player mounted on the middle of the headliner above the dashboard where he could reach up and pop in a tape. In the back, behind the two front captains' chairs, he had built a bed frame with a mattress. Often my sister and I would lie back and listen to music while my grandparents were just cruising around. Those times were pure fun, creating such great memories.

My grandparents being music lovers, they often took me to gospel and bluegrass festivals in Mountain View, Arkansas. The town would have "Music on the Square," where people played all kinds of acoustic instruments. Those events were the first time I had ever seen and heard the banjo. The dulcimer. The mouth harp. The single-string tub bass. Whether people called it "mountain music" or "hillbilly music," whether the songs were bluegrass or gospel, to me, it was magical. Many of my childhood memories are of experiencing organic, live music played by musicians who obviously loved what they were getting to experience together.

When we went to the music festivals held at those small-town Arkansas downtown squares, there was usually a candy store where my grandparents would buy me some kind of sweetness-on-a-stick, and a bunch of ladies would be making quilts and crafts. Even though the town was in the middle of nowhere, no one cared because all those sights and sounds and smells were like being at the county fair. I think I loved the vibe so much because everybody was just so stinkin' happy! To me and my grandparents, those weekend days were awesome!

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Listening to music was a part of my family's everyday life, from the records played at home to the car stereo always being on to the portable radio playing on Dad's job sites. In our living room, my parents had built their own entertainment center. They set two-by-eight boards across cinder blocks they had painted black to create a custom shelf configuration. The center held our TV, a vinyl player with speakers, and Dad's record collection. One trendy staple of the 1970s we had on one of those shelves was the lava lamp—a tubular glass piece with colored blobs inside, all sitting on top of a gold brass base. When you plugged it in, the light would come on, and the blobs would begin to move around and change colors. More than once, I accidentally touched the base and burned my hand.

The best part about our entertainment center was that my parents could change up or add whatever they wanted, just by moving the blocks and boards around. Another blessing of Dad being in construction was that our furniture could come from the local lumberyard, not an expensive showroom. Anything he made was not only custom but fit the budget too.

SOUTHERN SOUNDTRACK

Growing up, I spent countless hours sitting with my dad, listening to vinyls together. His collection consisted of just one genre of music—the still-new contemporary Christian music, or CCM. There were no phones, no screens, and no distractions back then, so we were totally focused on the singers' and musicians' talent coming from the needle in the grooves.

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Because I have always loved to draw and sketch, I remember listening to Petra's albums and trying to re-create the cool graphic art emblazoned on their covers.

Another constant in our living room was Dad's guitar and music stand, where he always had Maranatha! Music songbooks with the guitar chords. He would go to the Lighthouse Bookstore in Jonesboro and buy the latest release of praise songs with the chord charts. I remember Dad practicing every week for Sunday morning, playing and singing through the songs, following along with the book open in front of him, perfecting anything new that would come out of Calvary Chapel's "Jesus music."

My first interaction with creating music was in the sixth grade in a gifted and talented class. The teacher told us about a national contest in which the school could win money if an original song by students was chosen for an antipollution campaign. Always up for a competition, I was all in. Because of my growing obsession with basketball, the title I came up with was "Shoot, Shoot, Don't Pollute." The lyrics were about picking up trash and shooting it into a trash can. Not knowing a thing about songwriting yet, I wrote it as a rap, which made it easier for everyone in the class to perform. We also came up with some simple choreography to go with the lyrics. When we felt like everyone had the song and dance down well enough, the teacher shot a video of us performing the rap. She then sent in our tape to the contest. Our class ended up receiving one of the awards, and we also got a check for the school. (That was the one and only rap song in my career . . . *so far*.)

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When I was in seventh grade, Mom evidently decided that my sister and I needed a little culture. She made us both take piano lessons. I hated it. I did not want *anything* to do with it. But, with Mom ignoring my complaints, we took lessons for a whole year. The entire time, all I wanted to do was go outside to ride my bike, play ball, and hang out with my neighborhood buddies. I remember thinking, “Why in the world am I stuck in here taking piano?” Of course, now I’m grateful for what I did learn during that time and wish I would have stuck with the lessons. Today, I’m just dangerous enough on the keys to sit down and pick out an idea for a song.

By the time I was a teenager, one of the families from our church had a satellite dish installed at their house. That was a big deal at the time in small-town Arkansas. They would invite us over to watch the Hillsong Church service broadcast from Australia. I was blown away watching and listening to their worship team. That was back in the day when Darlene Zschech’s classic song “Shout to the Lord” took the more progressive American churches by storm. We would also watch contemporary Christian concerts when they were shown on one of the faith channels.

Dad always listened to and searched for the latest worship music to teach to our church, so he was continually introducing me to the latest artists in contemporary Christian and gospel music. He played me some who are now legends and heroes of mine, but Dad often discovered them back when their first albums came out.

The biggest game changer for me was when we got a VHS

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tape of Mylon LeFevre and Broken Heart's "Sheep in Wolves' Clothing" live concert. Watching incredibly talented rockers sing unashamedly about Jesus *rocked* my world. Mylon has always had such a killer, classic, Southern rock sound. I also had the cassette and was constantly listening to him and his band. "Trains up in the Sky" is still one of my favorite songs of all time.

Another artist that heavily influenced me at a young age was Russ Taff. My dad first listened to Russ when he was with the Imperials. During Russ's incredible solo career, I wore out his *Walls of Glass* record. Some of my other favorites were Petra, as I mentioned before, and also DeGarmo and Key. I was eight years old the first time Dad took me to see Eddie and Dana perform in Memphis. The idea of merging rock music with the gospel was sinking down deep into my heart. And I don't think anyone had more influence on what would eventually become my vocal style than Mylon and Russ. Obviously, I had no idea that, from a kid into my teen years, all those artists were shaping what would become my own sound, years down the road. Just more proof that God can end up using anything and everything.

Yet, even with all these artists' positive influence and strong impressions on me, I had no desire to play music. Playing music was my parents' thing. In grade school, basketball became my passion. Especially in a small Southern town, my generation was particularly biased toward guys becoming jocks and not "band nerds," as they were called back then. Ironically, far more young people from my generation

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went on to make a living playing music than those who became pro athletes.

While our family certainly wasn't rich by any means, my sister and I never wanted for anything. My parents were amazing providers. We were the classic example of 1980s and '90s middle-class America. Dad's construction job, along with Mom's work as a beautician, then her eventual switch to being a dental hygienist, always offered a secure living. Later, my mom decided to start college and get her nursing degree. During our childhood, rather than bearing the expense of sending me and my sister to day care or hiring a sitter, Dad would often just take us to his job sites. Going with him to work was just as normal to us as being at home. Amy and I would play together while he worked.

If you already know some of my story, you might be surprised when I say that my childhood was about as close to perfect as any family could offer. I don't have bad memories of any hurtful events in our home.

END OF THE INNOCENCE

Starting around the fourth grade, with each passing year, as I grew bigger, I became better at basketball. That created expectations of me being not just good but great. While those expectations were likely formed mostly in my own mind and heart, I felt like the bar was set really high, that I needed to stand out. The more I excelled, the more pressure I put on myself. I started feeling like I had to live up to a standard

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I didn't know if I would be able to reach. My identity was starting to be formed by a performance mindset—based not on who I was but on what I could do.

My life's dream of playing basketball in college and then going on to the NBA became stronger as I got older. That goal became everything I wanted out of life. My father and my uncles had been standout athletes in school. Dad had made the all-star team in high school and played in junior college. Because I wanted to follow in their footsteps, I would eat, sleep, and breathe basketball. If I had any free time, no matter the weather, I was out shooting hoops.

While basketball was the dominant and positive force in my life, I began to rebel and get into trouble. In such a small town, the biggest problem for me and my friends was sheer boredom. The age-old argument of, "Everybody else is doing it," dominated our thinking and decisions. If I wanted to hang with my buddies, I had to do whatever they did.

This dynamic with my friends started an ongoing conflict with my parents around junior high. I realized my friends were getting to do some things I wasn't allowed to do. I noticed that my buddies had more freedom than I had. Like most kids, I didn't have the maturity to realize that my parents loved me and were trying to protect me. I couldn't see that some of the guys' parents should have cared more instead of just saying, "Sure, go do your thing. Whatever."

I struggled with resentment toward Dad and Mom for not letting me hang out as long as I wanted or do some of the things I wanted. For example, if I asked to go somewhere with

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a buddy, I might be told, “Well, we don’t know his mom and dad, so we’re not letting you go.” I would often come back with, “But so-and-so gets to go!” And they would answer with, “Well, so-and-so isn’t our kid.”

I always had a curfew, which was usually earlier than everyone else’s. Being the first one to have to stop the fun, to leave and go home, was hard. The more that happened, the more rebellious my heart became. While I was never out of control or a bad kid, sometimes it felt that way because I couldn’t do what others could or stay out as late as they did. Was I somehow going to get into more trouble than them, so I had to be contained more? But along with the rebellion came a sense of guilt and shame for anything I did that I knew my parents wouldn’t approve of—all the feelings that the enemy loves to use against us. It’s the classic “frog in the kettle” story. The heat turns up so slowly that eventually you don’t really notice what’s happening in your heart.

When you grow up in a small town, often there’s not really a reason *why* you do anything you do. But because you say yes to just wanting to have some fun, you can also unintentionally introduce problems into your life that you won’t know how to stop down the road. Because we lived at least an hour away from the nearest major city, peer pressure, or whatever you want to call it, caused me and my friends to get into trouble, like stealing cigarettes or, later, a six pack of beer. We always saw the older kids doing those things and figured that’s just what you do in this town. Everyone wanted to fit in, so we all just settled for status quo and followed the pattern

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that had been set for years, all with what I thought was just innocent fun.

While my parents were strict on one hand, in other ways they would show me way too much grace—mostly by believing what I told them. The bigger problem was that I became a convincing and creative liar. One particular night, I was supposed to be home by a certain time. I had no excuse for being late because my parents had given me a watch. Running way past my curfew, I put my watch down into some water until the face got soaked enough to fog it up. I walked into the house with the excuse of being late because I couldn't see what time it was. Anything to stay out of trouble. Funny how as lies get easier, life gets harder, because lying ends up taking way more work than the truth.

Back then, smoking was still considered “cool,” so my buddies and I would come up with a plan to steal a pack of cigarettes from the neighborhood convenience store. We would meet up and walk down the train tracks that led straight to Kelly's IGA grocery store (IGA—Independent Grocers Alliance). Walking in, one of us would buy some candy and ask that it be put in a small brown paper bag. While the clerk was busy with the candy transaction, one of us would sneak a pack of cigarettes. The rest of us just wandered around the store to create a distraction. Then we would conceal the cigarettes in the paper bag. We could then smuggle the cigarettes unnoticed as we all walked out together. This was obviously before products like cigarettes were kept behind the counter. (Kids like us are probably why those laws exist.) Next, we had to figure

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out a safe place to hide the pack and also plan a group smoking session. All while thinking we were such clever thieves.

One time Dad found one of the cigarette packs hidden in our doghouse. When he asked me what I knew about it, I told him the cigarettes belonged to one of my buddies and that he smoked them, not me. I swore they weren't mine and that my friend had hidden them in there. Dad appeared to buy my story. Fast-forward to a few weeks later, when my buddies and I were hiding behind our shed in the backyard, smoking. One of the guys started picking up plums that had fallen off a nearby tree and throwing them against the shed. Dad was inside the house taking a nap. The sharp pop of those plums hitting the wall woke him up. When he came out to see what was going on, there we were. Of course, the moment Dad came around the corner, he zeroed in on me. He glared at the other guys and, with a stern voice, said, "Y'all need to put those out and leave . . . now." My buddies were more than happy to do what he asked, throwing their cigarettes down and running home.

After they had left, Dad looked at me and asked, "What's that in your hand?" Ashamed, I looked down and put out the cigarette on the ground. But he insisted, "No, go ahead and have another one." I responded, "No, Dad, that was enough." But he had decided he was going to teach me a lesson. "Yeah, Zach, you *are* going to have another one." Dad stood there watching as I nervously lit up a cigarette. As soon as I put one out, he would tell me to light up another. Finally, when I reached the point of getting sick, he said, "Okay, that's enough."

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Since tomorrow is your twelfth birthday, I'm not going to tell your mom that I caught you doing this, because it would break her heart."

Man, did I ever get sick! What Dad didn't know was that when I "smoked" with my friends, I never actually inhaled. I faked it. But with his punishment, I now understood the feeling of having your lungs full of smoke and the horrible burn as if your throat is on fire.

Let me rewind a bit and go back to the doghouse story. The reason Dad had found the cigarettes in there was because he was cleaning it out after my dog had died. This wasn't long after Halloween, and some of my sister's guy friends had toilet-papered our house, then grabbed my dog and spray-painted him blue. *Yeah, blue.* He was never quite the same after that and passed soon after. One of those boys eventually became my brother-in-law, and so I have often used that prank to my advantage by telling him, "You know, when I was a kid, you killed my dog."

BATTLE ON THE BROAD ROAD

My parents probably knew a lot more of what I was doing than they let on, but I also understood how much they loved me and wanted to believe I was always telling the truth. They didn't want to face the fact that their son was making bad choices and lying to them. But, like many kids, I learned I could get away with certain stuff with Mom and other stuff with Dad. I had figured out how to play that game.

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By late elementary into middle school, while the battle for my heart was constant, the God of my parents was always present. I began to not want to go to church because most of my friends didn't. Anytime I would ask to stay home, or sleep over at someone's house on a Saturday night, or ask why my parents were making me go, the answer was always, "As long as you're living in this house, you're going to get up and go to church on Sunday." That would usually trigger me to say, "Well, I can't wait to get out of this house, to move out, so I can do what I want to do!"

But on the other side of that coin, I can remember in certain church services how I would sense or feel something strange spiritually. I'm not sure if it was the Holy Spirit or just my emotions, but I would find myself fighting back tears, wondering, "Is this the way I'm supposed to feel? Does everybody here feel this?" I'd slip away to the restroom and then hang out in the hallway until the service ended. Those feelings were confusing and a little scary. What I felt in church was clearly conflicting with what my buddies and I were doing, and then the lying just made everything worse. In those vulnerable moments, I would fight the urge to go down front at the invitation. Whenever I did give in to the urge, I waited until other people went down first. I have always been an introvert and never liked drawing attention to myself (an interesting paradox about many artists who perform live that most people don't realize).

With my choices slowly eroding my innocence and my desire for independence growing, the stage was now set for my

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flesh to start putting up a good fight to beat out my spirit. I had to deal with the constant reminder that I knew better than to act how I was acting. A consistent voice inside told me, “This is not how you were raised. This is not what God has for you.” But some bad seeds were being planted. Roots of rebellion against authority were sprouting. I had no idea at the time just how tough and bitter the coming harvest would be.