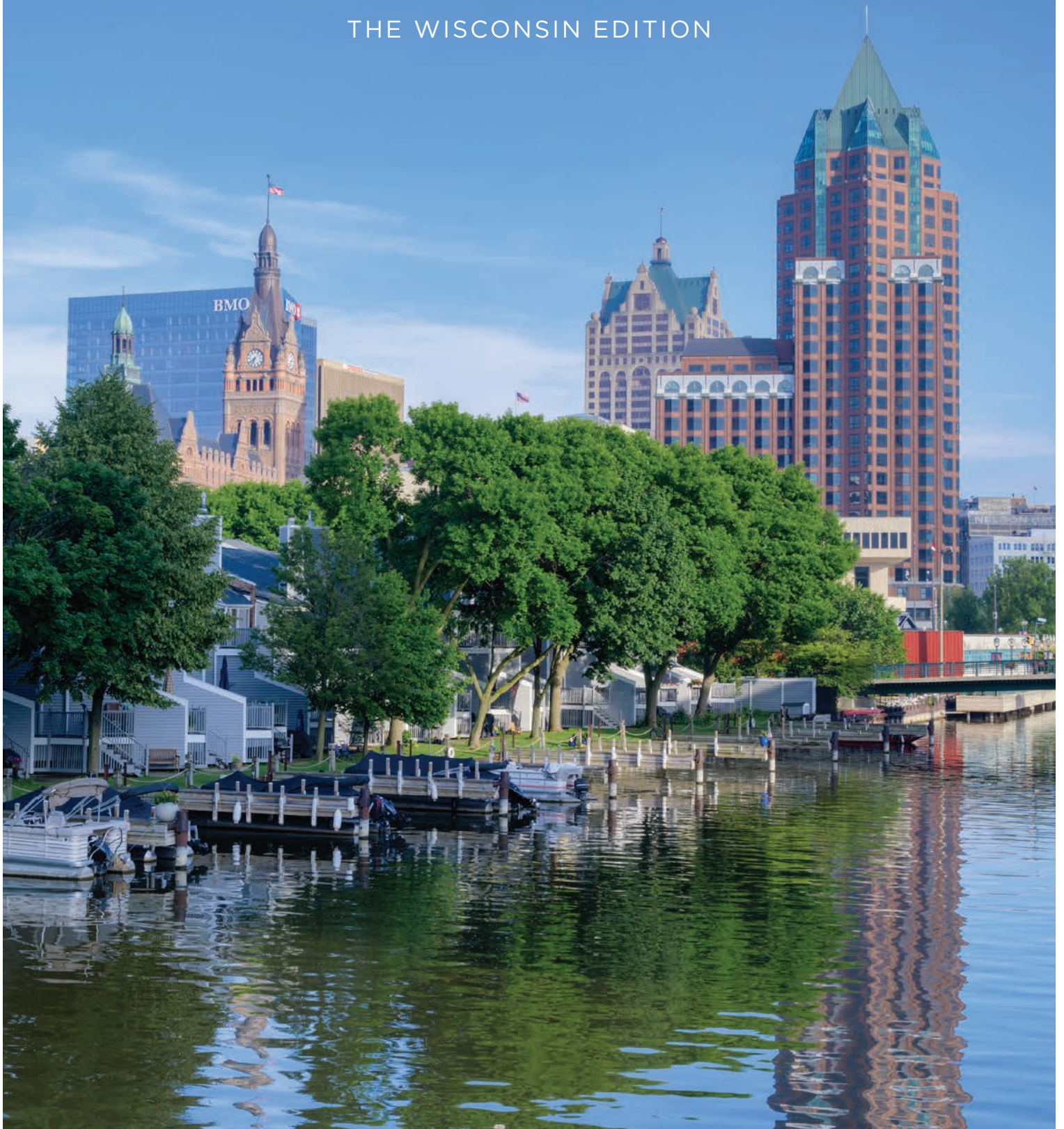


RING & ROBE

THE WISCONSIN EDITION



PAUL'S STORY

I never thought that prison would be part of my story or that I would be sentenced to death row. I grew up in a big city and my parents made sure I had a good education.¹ My family had a business where we made and sold handcrafted tents—our biggest contract often being the military. I grew up learning the business and eventually started my own contracting business with tent making and leather goods.² I grew up with strict, religious parents and I knew the Old Testament and had memorized most of it.³ I believed that God would someday send a Savior who would overcome the power of evil in the world, but I did not believe Jesus was this Savior. I was convinced that what Christians were saying about Jesus wasn't true, that it was interfering with God's plan, and that I should do everything possible to prevent their movement and message from growing.⁴

I became a violent man in my pursuit to oppose Christianity. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in other cities.⁵ I watched in approval, guarding the coats of my friends, as they murdered a Christian.⁶ I went from house to house, breathing out murderous threats and dragging men and women who claimed Christianity out of their homes and throwing them in prison.⁷

But one day I was traveling to another city to arrest more Christians, when a blinding light flashed all around me, knocking me and those traveling with me to the ground. As I was laying on the ground, I heard a voice say, "Why are you persecuting me?"⁸

I didn't know who was talking to me. All I could do was call out, "Who are you?" And that same voice answered back, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up because I have a job for you. I'm sending you to open the eyes of people and turn them from the darkness to the light and from the power of Satan to God, so that through their faith in me they will have their sins forgiven and receive their place among God's chosen people."⁹

The men who were traveling with me were shocked. They could hear the sound but couldn't see anyone. As I got up from the ground, I realized that I was unable

to see anything. I was completely blind! We made it to our destination city, but I was still blind for three days. I knew my assignment had to change. I waited for help, for confirmation of what to do next. Finally, a man came to see me. He told me that the same voice that came to me also came to him with instructions to come to the very house where I was staying and pray for me. He told me I would be a witness to all people of what I had seen and heard, which confirmed everything that the voice of Jesus said to me. As soon as this man prayed for me, something like scales fell from my eyes and I could see again.¹⁰

I got baptized and became a Christian. Everything in my life changed. I had come to know the truth about Jesus and I traveled from city to city preaching this truth.¹¹ But there were still many people who hated Christians, and people attempted to kill me. The tables had turned, and instead of me dragging people to prison, I was thrown in prison myself. More than once I was severely beaten. One time stones were thrown at me until I was unconscious and left for dead.¹²

My fellow prisoners, I know what it's like to be hated. I know what it's like to go hungry, to suffer physically, to have my feet in cuffs and chains, to be locked away to die in prison. I have been crushed and overwhelmed beyond what I felt I could endure.¹³ I have been a miserable person...wanting to do what is right but inevitably doing wrong. There has been a power within me that has been at war with my mind. Making me a slave to sin. But the power of God's Spirit lives within me and I have been freed from the power of sin.¹⁴ And this freedom is available to you too. Whatever your prison—shame, guilt, fear, anger, bitterness—true freedom is available to you.¹⁵

My friends, I am absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing alive or dead, angelic or demonic, fears of today or worries about tomorrow, not even the powers of hell—can get between us and God's love.¹⁶ So, be encouraged. Forget the past and look forward to what lies ahead.¹⁷ Remember that even if you are knocked down and pressed on every side by trouble, you are never abandoned by God.¹⁸ ■



Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. MATTHEW 11:28

This story is adapted from the Bible about the life of the Apostle Paul. Paul lived 2,000 years ago and is the author of nearly half of the New Testament of the Bible.

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8. Acts 26:12-14
9. Acts 26:18
10. Acts 9:7-18
11. Acts 13:1-28:31
12. 2 Corinthians 11:25
13. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9
14. Romans 7:21-25
15. Romans 8:1-2
16. Romans 8:38-39
17. Philippians 3:13
18. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Dear Readers,

You don't know us and we don't know you personally, but we pray that God would speak to you in personal and powerful ways through these stories. We pray that God would draw you to Him and show you His true nature, His love, grace and transformative power. We pray that you would be encouraged and given hope. We want you to know that you are not forgotten. With each magazine, we strive to provide something of great meaning to you. We strive to honor you by creating something of beauty for you, beauty in the design and beauty in the stories. Perhaps someday we may meet you and write your story—a story to glorify God. Know this truth: you are deeply loved and sought after by your Father in heaven. May God bless you, protect you, and give you a peace that passes understanding.

Yours truly,
The Ring & Robe Team



PROVERBS 3:5-6

I was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the middle child of five boys. I grew up in a single-family home with my mom as my primary parent. I vividly remember the day my dad left us. I was about five years old. My mom was cooking Hamburger Helper. This was our favorite meal and it smelled so good. My mom and dad got into a heated argument. My dad got so angry that he took the cast iron skillet and slammed it against the wall. As I watched the food dripping down the wall, I wondered what could have made my father so angry.

We had an estranged relationship over the years. My brothers and I had a deep love for my father, but our mother reminded us that he had abandoned us. Sometimes my dad would say he was coming to see us, then he wouldn't come. Sometimes I resented him. We never had a relationship where he knew me as a person. My brother became the man of the house. He ran the streets and got into gangs. In the 1980s, my brothers and I followed and got into gangs. In the '90s, gangs got involved in drugs

and firearms. In the gangs, especially in the inner city, there is a culture of pride. Whoever is big and bad is the one the others look up to.

When I was a freshman, I was in a bad argument with an individual who was in another gang that was more prevalent in my school than my gang. This turned into a four-year war between the two gangs that ultimately led to my mom's house getting shot up. My older brother had already moved out, but he came back to our house and loaded up our family in his car. He took us to my grandmother's house and we lived with her. My brother and I went back to our house the same day. We saw one of the guys who had shot up our house walking past to check out the damage. I locked eyes with him. He had two guns and started shooting toward us. A bullet came inches away from where I was sitting.

I got deeper into gangs over the years. I went from gangs to doing drugs to becoming a drug dealer. I got into a gang that had several drug houses. The gangs warred

because of boundaries and the money being made on the drugs. Bullets flew back and forth in our neighborhood. Everyone had a gun on them at all times because the warfare could happen at any moment. I had one foot in the gang and one foot out.

Before I met the woman I married, I had two children with a woman I did not marry. These two sons lived with their mother until my oldest son was 11 years old. He walked miles to my house after being physically abused by his mother. She had spanked him with something that had cut his legs and they were bleeding badly. He was so traumatized; he wouldn't talk about it. I reported this to the authorities, and she ended up going to prison for abusing him. The court placed my two oldest sons with me. At that time, I was living with my girlfriend, whom I later married, and our two children.

I moved my two oldest boys into a dope house with me. My girlfriend and our two children went to live with

inside, but instead drove away and went on the run for eight months. They placed my sons with my mom.

I was at my all-time low, drinking and doing cocaine. I started going with a friend to sell drugs in Oshkosh. We went to a hip hop club one weekend. We got pretty drunk, and my friend got pulled over while he was driving us home. When the police came to the car, I gave them my brother's ID and they didn't notice that I wasn't my brother. We went back to the club and the guy from the rival gang, who was a confidential informant in the drug scheme, was in the club. When he saw me, he got nervous and called the police. I called the gang and told them that the guy that got us involved in the drug scheme was at the club. The gang members showed up and we were going to get this guy who told on us. I was drinking and had cocaine on me when I got tackled by six cops. They found the cocaine and took me to the county jail. I was still using my brother's ID so I was at the jail under

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. PROVERBS 3:5-6

her mother. I was still entangled with a gang and we were at war with another gang. I got a call from my gang members about a drug scheme from a rival gang. Another gang member went with me to our drug house to check the drugs. As we were leaving, we saw undercover cops in front of the house. We crept back into the house and tried to escape out the back. An unmarked car pulled up and the guy I was with started running, which tipped them off. I was arrested and because I had a felony at 17 for stealing cars, I went to jail looking at five years. The judge gave me two years of probation and one year stayed sentence, which was basically a delayed sentence. If I did anything to violate my parole, then I would have to serve one year before my hearing for violating parole.

I thought everything was good and that I would stop being around the gang. One day while I was at the store, some narcotics agents ran into my home. When I got home my neighbor said that about 10 agents had run into my house and that it looked like a drug raid. I didn't go

his name. The guys in the club bailed me out of jail and I went to live with my girlfriend at her mom's house. I hid out in her basement, but the cops eventually found me. I went to the county jail first and then they took me to a maximum-security state prison in downtown Milwaukee.

As soon as I got in, God started pricking my heart. My grandmother was the pillar of faith in our family, and I remember her whispering to me, "All that work you're doing for Satan. When are you going to let the Lord use you?"

I came to the realization that God put me in this place. I thought, "I need a Bible." I wrote the chaplain about getting a Bible but didn't hear back. I prayed, "Lord, I need to hear from You. You put me here for a reason." Then they moved me into another pod. There was an older gentlemen they put me with. He had several Bibles just laying around. I picked up one and started reading it. They had a little desk in the cell where I sat and read the Bible. After three months of studying the Bible, the older

continued on next page

man said, “You have been over there for three months. God is doing something in you. You know what you’ve got to do? You’ve got to fast.”

I went one day without eating, while praying and reading the Scriptures. While I was fasting, the Bible stories started coming alive to me. I could picture what was happening in the stories. The presence of God was so thick. God was revealing Himself to me. It went from one day of fasting to two days and then three.

They moved me to another prison, and I found favor with the correctional officer. He got me the job as a swamper, so I didn’t have to be in the cell all day. I did janitorial work, dropped off letters and checked on guys. I tried to witness to the guys. There was a guy that was a Wiccan who tried to witness to me and I witnessed to him. They moved me to the county jail because of crowding in the prison. While I was there, they came and got me to stand before the judge. They took me outside to get into the transport van. I hadn’t seen sunlight in six months. The colors and sunlight were just popping. As I got into this van and my eyes were adjusting, I could see that the man sitting across from me was my father. I ended up in the same pod in the county jail with my father. I was still doing my spiritual discipline and my father had his Bible and did his spiritual discipline. It was there in the county jail that we reconciled. I saw myself in my father. He talked a lot about the drama with my mother. He said if he could do it all over again, he would never have left my mom. He said, “When you get out of here, you marry that girl and raise those kids.” That was the best advice I ever received from my father.

Then they moved me to Fox Lake Correctional Institution. There was a beautiful building for the chapel with a service every week, and Bible study throughout the week. I went to church in the chapel and they were having baptisms. The guy who was the Wiccan, who I had witnessed to, was getting baptized! He said, “Hey! He is real!” The following weekend I was baptized. The Lord started connecting me to guys who were Christians mentoring other men, and I got in with them.

The year of my stay was coming to an end. They came and got me before anyone got up. I was putting on my clothes, and then they said, “Do you remember the night

you got arrested under your brother’s name?” They took me back to another prison. The Lord was speaking to me so clearly, not audibly but in my thoughts: “You are going to forget about me when you get out.” Then I remembered that when I was 16 I read a book titled *A Divine Revelation of Hell* by Mary K. Baxter. It scared me so bad that I made a vow to the Lord while I was in jail that I would change when I got out. But the night I got out, I came home to booze, drugs and a shoot-out. Fast forward 15 years and God was reminding me that I had forgotten Him before. I made a vow again not to forget God.

My big case was still pending. When we went court, something unheard of happened. I was not a candidate for a personal recognizance (PR) bond, but the judge gave me a PR bond. This meant they released me without a requirement to post any bond. But then when I got out, they put me in the Milwaukee County Jail for the case that started my eight-month run. My mom and girlfriend paid the bail and I was released. For the next couple of months, I kept reading the Bible, and my girlfriend and I got married. I had no money but God, in His sovereignty, brought a friend to me who got me an interview for a job at the silk-screening warehouse where he worked. The boss hired me on the spot. I didn’t even fill out an application. Rob, my friend who got me the interview, was a believer. He showed me how to walk out my faith at work. After 11 months, I got hired with benefits at my uncle’s company. I noticed that there was not one believer who worked there, not even my uncle. I started doing what I saw Rob do at the silk-screening warehouse. I brought my Bible, shared my faith, and fasted.

After about a year and half, there was a shift and they got ready to lay off my uncle. I took his layoff and let him stay. About that time, I went to court for the big case. They were going to make a decision about whether to bond me over for trial. I had been reading the book of Joshua in the Bible. The whole time I was in court, I was praying fervently, “God, I have seen you deliver men and change hearts. Do it for me God. Would you do it for me Lord?” The judge started scratching his head. The issue on the floor was that they didn’t have a warrant when they ran into the house. Their story was that they were chasing a guy who ran into the house and they ran into

the house to find him and then assumed it was me. The judge said he could go either way, with the state or the defendant with a criminal history. He came down off the bench and walked in front of the prosecutor’s and defendant’s tables. Then he went up and sat down. All this time I was praying. The judge picked up the gavel, banged it down and said, “Dismissed!” When he said that — everything was over. My lawyer grabbed my hand, rushed me out of the courtroom and said, “Get out of here!” I fell to my knees and cried out to the Lord. I know God did it.

When I finished my probation in 2008, I was working with a ministry called The Captive Project (www.thecaptiveproject.com). We went into high crime areas in Milwaukee and set up a stage and sound system. We provided free lunch, rapped the gospel, and played praise and worship music while people gathered to get food. We shared the Gospel through open air preaching as people gathered. Two years in, we began going into prisons quarterly to do ministry live events as the Captive Project. I got a community outreach position for Genesis in Milwaukee, Inc., a mentorship program serving returning citizens from prison. Then we lost our federal funding after 3yrs. During that I began to go into prisons and partner with the Prison Fellowship program and led weekend workshop services.

I was introduced to the program supervisor at Racine Correctional Institution. She allowed me to lead the Malachi Dad’s class and to introduce and lead the Genesis mentorship class. I did those two programs for five years side by side. The Malachi class had a waiting list of 150 guys. I was still working full-time in caregiving and part-time with Genesis. In 2014, my daughter was in a car accident. She had to have surgery and passed away from multiple cardiac arrest. She was only 19. This caused me to reevaluate my life. I became full-time with Genesis and in 2016 was given the reins to lead the ministry as the Executive Director. Having full power to revamp the program, I added a residential housing component. I wanted to create and mimic the same template that allowed me to have a successful re-entry.

During this time, I was invited on a tour of the historical North Point Milwaukee Lighthouse of the 1800s neatly nestled in beautifully landscaped Lake Park.

I am most thankful for the opportunity to get a second chance at life. I’m thankful for being able to marry a lady who has been with me in the good, bad and ugly.

Quickly, God gave me a vision for a housing component for our ministry with the same theme. Our first house is totally opposite in respect to its setting being an area heavily populated with homeless individuals in a dilapidated neighborhood but the vision is the same. We want to be a light to those who are coming out of jail and prison. We collaborate with other Ministries to provide food and clothing for homeless men and women, and right across from our property there is a minimum-security prison. My son lives with the guys, manages the home and disciples the guys. They have Biblical training, financial literacy/management and entrepreneurship training.

I am most thankful for the opportunity to get a second chance at life. I’m thankful for being able to marry a lady who has been with me in the good, bad and ugly and to raise our children under the admonition of the Lord that they might grasp His teachings and do the same for their children.

God is an infinite God, without ending, and discipleship is a process that never ends. EVEN TEACHERS LEARN! In order to continue learning about LORD GOD, one must always be in submission to Him. God is so good and knows all things. We think we have to have a checklist to earn God’s favor, but if you do none of the things on your checklist, He still loves you. It’s when we haven’t earned God’s favor that God shows us the beauty of the relationship with Him. Even on our worst day, God’s still for us, and He still loves us. That is the beauty of studying the Psalms. You see that the people were good, bad and ugly but, through it all, God was still their God and they were still His people. ■



PROVERBS 4:23

As I stood on the tarmac, the cold January temperatures and brisk wind made my entire body shiver. I looked down at the red welts that had already formed on both of my wrists. The handcuffs were painfully tight, as were the chains that were wrapped securely around my waist. The heavy restraints prevented me from raising my hands more than a couple of inches.

“Scheller, stand here!” barked the US marshal as he held his clipboard, taking inventory of the nearly one hundred federal inmates who just made the seventy-five mile one-way trip to the Tampa International Airport. Given I was surrounded by a dozen federal agents wearing bullet proof vests and carrying high-powered sharp shooting rifles, I started moving in the direction he was pointing. The metal cuffs around my ankles and short chain between my feet made walking difficult, but I eventually made it to my assigned spot.

I was one of two female inmates from the Federal

Correctional Complex in Coleman being airlifted to the Federal Transit Center in Oklahoma City. While I stood in my designated area, dressed in my khaki-colored elastic-waist pants, a brown T-shirt and blue slip-on tennis shoes, the same US marshal was diligently studying his paperwork as the damp air chilled me to the bone.

Just when I did not think it could get any worse, it did. I silently began to pray that somehow the light mist would wash away the black Sharpie marker that had just been placed on my hand. The dreaded X meant I was heading to the Grady County Jail in Chickasha, Oklahoma. Chickasha is thirty-five minutes southwest of Oklahoma City, but it might as well have been a million miles away. “Shady Grady” was the last place on earth I wanted to spend my one-year anniversary in prison.

“God, I don’t deserve this,” I prayed quietly. “The punishment just doesn’t fit the crime.” Unfortunately, the chains and shackles, armed guards and prison-traveling clothes told a different story.

Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.

PROVERBS 4:23

My name is Katie Scheller and I was born and raised in Racine, Wisconsin. What you have just read is an excerpt from the introduction of my first book: *Call Me Vivian*. This was where I found myself on Jan. 4, 2013.

So, what was a nice girl like me doing in a place like this? How did something that felt so good and seemed so right 20 years earlier turn into my worst nightmare? How did a mother and grandmother on the fast track in corporate America end up in a federal prison?

Sad but true, there was only one answer to all three questions—it was a matter of my heart. And like so many women who fall in love, convinced they are going to live happily ever after, I let my heart determine the course of my life.

My fall from the corporate ladder began almost 10 years earlier, in October 2004, when I was involved in a workplace romance that turned criminal. I was having an affair with my boss and although committing adultery is not a crime, I became entangled in a legal battle that played out for well over a decade.

After a lengthy criminal investigation, I was charged with two crimes: misprision of a felony (knowing a felony has been committed but failing to inform the authorities about it) and making a false statement. At that time I was facing eight years in prison and, through a plea deal, I received a three-year sentence that included one year of probation.

My guess is that no one ever plans on spending time behind bars. And though people commit different crimes, what if I told you that all crimes are a matter of the heart?

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I the Lord search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

My heart was broken and it was God who was going to fix it. I learned firsthand that God is not worried about how fast we grow; he is more worried about our strength and character as we grow.

“We can make our plans but the Lord determines our steps, and we can make many plans but the Lord’s purpose will prevail” (Proverbs 16:9, 19:21).

Since 2004, everything that has happened to me was directed by God when he dispatched his angels to guide me. When I needed work, God sent me to a Christian company. When God wanted me back in church, he brought new friends into my life to walk beside me. When a volunteer opportunity presented itself at an assisted living facility (which was a pivotal point in helping my heart heal), he gave me the confidence I needed to walk through that door. God placed me where he needed me, directed my steps and orchestrated every event to prepare my heart for ministry.

Whatever you are experiencing at this moment is not a surprise to God. He is all-knowing and has a book about each of us in heaven. ***You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed (Psalm 139:16).***

If you had to write a book about yourself, what would the title be? Would you be happy with the content up to this point? Although you might not be able to change the beginning of your story, you can start right now and allow God to be an integral part of the remaining chapters.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them (Romans 8:28).

In October 2011, God told me “Write the book.” The result of that directive was *Call Me Vivian*, launched on Feb. 1, 2016, exactly seven years to the day that I became born again!

continued on next page

While I was incarcerated, God also told me to start The Vivian Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping inmates and children of incarcerated parents. Although I had no idea what God was going to do, it was only a matter of time before a partnership formed between The Vivian Foundation and my publisher, BroadStreet Publishing.

God knew all along that he was going to give me a book ministry, and everything was lined up well in advance! What is the chance that BroadStreet Publishing, whose corporate offices are located in Savage, Minnesota, would choose to have their book warehouse in Racine, Wisconsin, just 15 minutes from my home?

To date, we have gifted well over 100,000 Christian books to a variety of ministries around the country. These coloring books, devotionals, and other Christian titles are filled with scripture, which means that every book we donate comes with a guarantee!

It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it (Isaiah 55:11).

Additionally, 25,000 *Just One Word Bible Reading Plans*, 10,000 *Call Me Vivian* books, and 10,000 coloring books from The Vivian Foundation have found their way into 3,000 jails and prisons nationwide, thanks to the Prison Book Project and CLI Prison Alliance.

On numerous occasions, I have been invited to share my testimony with individuals who are currently incarcerated, and I have also had the opportunity to minister to women on Death Row.

Romans 2:11 and Acts 10:34 remind us that God has no favorites. If he can transform my life, he can do the same for you!

My second book, *Vivian's Call*, will be available in December 2021. It continues to chronicle my story about the transforming power of God's love. My hope is that my journey will inspire others to answer God's call.

God has a great plan for your life and even more importantly, He has set you apart for just such a time as this. The question is ... will you trust Him?

"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" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The moral of my story can be found in the Old Testament book written by the prophet Ezekiel.

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

My journey has proven that all things are possible with God if you simply have the faith to believe (Mark 9:23). I never wavered in believing God's promises and completing each assignment, regardless of its difficulty. As a result of my faith and God's unfailing love, my heart has been transformed. I have been strengthened in faith.

What is faith?

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1).

It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

How do you become born again? I'm glad you asked because it is a gift well worth receiving!

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. As the scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced" (Romans 10:9-11).

Ask Jesus into your heart and trust God's perfect plan for your life. He wants to make your story a best seller!

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine" (Isaiah 55:8). ■



North Point Light Station, Milwaukee



ISAIAH 54:17

I was born and raised in Waukegan, Illinois, near Chicago. My mom divorced my father and became involved in another relationship with the father of my younger siblings. My stepfather was a very violent man. He drank a lot and there was a lot of drug use. My mom didn't drink or do drugs. She suffered a lot of physical, mental, and financial abuse from him. He abused me as well. I didn't look at education as important and I didn't think I was as smart as the other kids. I was disruptive and disrespectful. I was taught not to trust people and that hindered me from letting anyone get to know the real me. I was afraid that if I told what was going on at home that social services would come in and take us away from my mother. Between eight and nine years old, I experimented with marijuana for the first time. I had watched my stepfather use it over and over, and curiosity got the best of me. I didn't know that going down that path was going to create a whole different chapter in my life. In my community there was gang activity and a lot

of crime. A lot of the kids I hung with were drug dealers and users. I became criminal-minded at a very early age. I was trying to survive by doing whatever it took to get money and food.

My grandmother was a positive person who spoke hope into my life. She was the backbone of my family. She took us to church periodically. My grandmother was someone I loved very deeply. She had a good home where I got a chance to see healthy relationships. I had other people in my life who were positive influences. I made a friend named Louie at around second or third grade. His life was much more normal than mine. He witnessed what my stepfather would do to me and tried to protect me. He taught me to play baseball and I taught him how to steal.

A woman named Holly, who was a mentor, picked up a group of us a couple times a week. She took us to a church and we would play basketball, study Bible scriptures, and eat food. She said the school gave her my

No weapon formed against me shall prosper.

(BASED ON THE SCRIPTURE FROM ISAIAH 54:17)

winformation because they were concerned about me. She gained my trust so fast. Looking back now, I know she was God-sent. Eventually she took us to her home, where we would cook meals and talk about God and pray. When she came and got us, there were no more worries in my life. But when she dropped us off, we were back to darkness. One night she cooked a special dinner and told us she was getting married and moving away. That was one of the worst days of my childhood. I was about 14 at the time. When she moved, my life became much darker.

In high school I decided I wanted to join the military, so I enrolled in the ROTC program. For the first time in my life I was able to be a part of something positive other than a sports team. Unfortunately, that was short-lived because while at school one day my grandmother called and requested that I come home immediately. When I got home there was a moving truck sitting in our front yard. My stepfather was gone doing an odd job and my grandmother said, "Get your things. We are moving you out." We went to a shelter and then moved to the state of Wisconsin, which was not too far from Illinois. The school that I attended did not have the ROTC program, so I got involved in criminal activity even more (drugs, gangs). My drug addiction was getting significantly worse. By the time I was 17, I had dropped out of high school. On my 18th birthday I became a teenage father to a daughter. A year later my son was born. Two years later, the mother of my children and I broke up, but she was pregnant with our third child. At the time I didn't have a job, I was doing drugs, I was a full-fledged gang member, in and out of jail, creating an unsafe environment for my family. I didn't know anything about being a parent. I had forgotten about God and I wasn't attending church regularly like I used to. The only time I called on God was when I was drunk and high and wanted to sober up, or when I was about to get caught by law enforcement for doing something wrong. But I always remembered what my grandmother and my mentor, Holly, had taught

me...pray and God would answer my prayers. I knew scriptures from the Bible and I knew who God was, but I thought God didn't hear me because I was a criminal, a drug dealer, a deadbeat father, etc. I thought God only listened to people who were perfect. I didn't think I was good enough for God to do something in my life.

In 1994, there was a sweep of my neighborhood, arresting people for dealing drugs and gang activity. Law enforcement were looking for me as well. So, I went on the run, but eventually I was arrested and charged. I had three counts of delivery of crack cocaine on three different occasions. The charges carried a maximum sentence of 36 years. When I went to jail, I felt so alone but still remembered what my grandmother and Holly had taught me about prayer. I believe God had been trying to get my attention because I had been running from a relationship with Him for so many years. After the court negotiations, two charges were dropped, which exposed me to one charge and a possible 10 years. Of that the judge sentenced me to four years in the state prison. I got classified for a medium minimum, which made it possible for me to go to boot camp. This program showed me so many things that I didn't know about myself. It was ugly and I believe God set that up for me to take a look at myself. I ended up doing about 13-14 months total. When I got out, I got a job and started spending time with my kids. I was clean and sober. But my mistake was to go back and visit the old crowd. I started using and selling again, and I ended up going back to prison for two and half years for violation of parole. I wasn't really locked in with God's plan yet. I didn't see it. I was going through the motions being in prison, so I wasn't focused on change. I walked out of prison for the second time. The day I got out was the same day I relapsed. What a nightmare. I had a \$300 or \$400 drug habit a day. The drugs had such a stronghold on me. I couldn't escape the urges until I fed it. It was much worse than before.

By that time my children had moved to Missouri
continued on next page

with their mother. I ended up going back to prison, this time for three years. I was mad and blaming others for my situation and not taking a deep look at myself until December 31, 1999. While sitting in prison I was scared because they said the world was going to end. So, I started taking a much deeper look at who I really was as a person, deadbeat dad, convict, drug addict, gang member, drug dealer, etc. I thought, “Wow, this is how I am going to die, a nobody. I have not accomplished anything but a life of crime.” That is when I decided it was time to reevaluate my life (again). People around me were dying from drug overdoses, getting life prison sentences, yet God still allowed me to live through it all.

I got on my knees and prayed to God wholeheartedly, “I don’t know if You hear me, but I am ready to be a new

God is real. God loves us and doesn’t want to hurt us. God has ways of getting our attention... If you are going through life and trying to do it on your own, give God a try.

person. I just want You to take charge. I keep messing everything up. My way isn’t the way. I just need Your help.” I was ready to surrender. I knew I wasn’t ready to face the outside world when I got out of prison. God gave me the idea to develop a program called Operation Make A Change (OMAC) while I was in prison. This program helped me get ready for my release from prison. God gave me a vision that someday I would use OMAC to help many other people. I walked out of prison almost 18 years ago. I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t know what or how. I just knew my mind was made up and I wanted to do better. Instead of running from people who wanted to help me, I sat down, listened and learned. I started picking up different ways and habits. I was terrified of change because I didn’t know what to expect. I had made so many mistakes and didn’t know if I could really change. I had asked God to forgive me but many people didn’t forgive me. I had to realize it’s not about people. It’s about what God wants me to do. I surrounded myself with ministers, law enforcement officers, educators, and community activists, and I started to become like them.

After being out of prison for about three years not

knowing where my life was headed, a miracle happened. I was on my way back to prison because I was about \$40,000 in arrears in child support. I had \$30 to put toward the child support. They laughed at me in court. I realized I had nothing and couldn’t take care of my responsibilities. I was embarrassed. Just as they were about to put the cuffs on me, the judge said, “Wait a minute. Sit down. I don’t know why I’m doing this.” She gave me 30 days to get a job and start making payments. I had been praying before I met with the judge, asking God to be my lawyer, to help me. I had only 30 days and I knew how to get the money from drugs, but I also knew that came with another challenge. If I got caught, I would go back to prison, and if I start using, I would probably die. I got a call from some people I knew from a church in Racine,

Wisconsin. They told me they had been praying for me. They got me a job interview at a school. I was saying to myself these people have to have the wrong person (I’m a convicted felon). I was sitting across from a woman at the interview, and I was just about to tell her I had been to prison. She said, “We know who you used to be. But my question is: What are you going to do if we give you a chance?” They hired me as a lunch monitor and to take the kids out to recess. Within two months, I became the gym teacher of the school. Every kid knew my name and I knew every kid’s name in that school. I was actually making a name for myself in a positive way.

I started playing semi-pro football for the Racine Raiders. I became a personal trainer and got involved with the YMCA Young Leaders Academy. I became a case manager for Safe Haven and Safe Passage runaway shelter. For years I was building up my integrity and credibility. But I still felt like I had a dark cloud over me in Wisconsin, so I moved to Kentucky in 2010. In the beginning, I wasn’t able to find a job working with kids, so I got a job at a gas station. After six months, a police officer walked into the gas station. I said, “Sir, I am look-

ing to work with young people.” I told him my story and he wrote everything down. He said he would get back with me in a week. I didn’t believe him because I was used to being let down. But he actually called me. He asked me to come to a meeting at the police department. I thought they were trying to set me up or I had an old warrant. But I went and he introduced me to a retired police captain who was working with the county attorney as a gang specialist. He said, “I’m getting ready to retire, but I believe I’m not supposed to retire because of you.” It was like God was joining us together at the hip. You have an ex-con, ex-gang member joining with a 40-year veteran of the police force. The captain took me under his wing for a long time. I still worked at the gas station all night; then went to work with the captain as a volunteer during the day. He treated me like a son. He introduced me to his boss, the county attorney, and tried to convince him to hire me but he said no. I didn’t get mad or discouraged. I just kept doing what I was doing, going with the police captain into schools, doing outreach work to prevent violence.

In 2014, I won a Golden Apple award and the county attorney showed up. We met in his office again but he still wasn’t convinced about hiring me. The captain said he would put his name and career on the line for me because he believed in me. We had prayed a lot together and were spiritually connected. He wholeheartedly wanted to help me with no strings attached. The county attorney told the police captain that he was responsible for me and gave me 99 hours of work per month. God kept His promise to make me new if I would just trust in Him. Months later the county attorney hired me full-time and gave me an office with benefits. That was the first time in my life I had ever had benefits. They were the first ones to adopt the OMAC program I had developed in prison. The purpose of the program is to invest in the lives of troubled youth to promote change. OMAC is implemented in the county jail and the public schools and more. A few months later, a part-time position opened up as a substance abuse violence intervention specialist, and the captain encouraged me to apply. I doubted myself and the captain told me to have faith. God had taken me so far. How could I not apply? There were people with high

credentials applying for this position as well. But God says He will put the last first, and I got the job. Four years ago, I got a call from the chief of the police department. He said they had someone retiring in the community service part of the police department and they would like me to fill that position. I hesitated because, where I come from, the police have a stigma attached. I said, “If I take the job the kids won’t trust me anymore.” But if I didn’t take the job, I felt I would be going against God. I decided to take the job and of course I did get push back but it didn’t matter. I just wanted to carry out the mission and the vision that God has given me.

My faith in God is very powerful. I am an example of what God can do. There is no way I should even be telling this story right now. I should either be dead or locked up for the rest of my life. There had to be a Higher Power to get me out of my situation. My platform to help kids has just gotten bigger. God placed all these things around me for a reason. I used to think I was supposed to die violently in the street, now I just want to live and be a light for others, to witness to others. God motivates me every day to want to keep going. OMAC went from a small piece of paper in a prison cell to helping so many people stay away from crime, drugs, and gangs. This is God’s program not mine.

God is real. God loves us and doesn’t want to hurt us. God has ways of getting our attention. I believe the times I spent in prison, drug houses and gang activity — all of that allowed me to have firsthand experience so that now I can minister to other people about it. If you are going through life and trying to do it on your own, give God a try. What do you have to lose? I knew there were things that were better than what I was doing but I didn’t want to learn. You have to open up your mind and heart. God can help you with that. God will elevate whatever you are doing if you stay obedient. God protected me and covered me. He gave me the vision and He has opened every door along the way to make that vision come to life, even more than I ever imagined. I have learned that God can take pain and turn it into something good. I have learned to never give up, to never doubt that God is good — amazingly good. ■



PSALM 1:1-3

My family originates from Alabama. My father's family had their own land, where they farmed for subsistence and food. As a child, he worked in the cornfields and peanut groves as soon as he was able to walk and talk. He said it would get so hot you could fry an egg on the red clay soil. Growing up in the south in those days was tough for any family, but especially for black people who farmed the land. You had the constant fear of white men taking whatever they wanted from your land. During this time, the religion of choice was the Baptist faith. Most of my family believed in God and prayer. Going to church was the order of the day for most black families. My dad had a strong faith in God and always expressed a need for prayer. My father was 6' 2" tall and strong as a bull. He once caught a mule by its hind legs, as he tried to kick him. My mother was beautiful. Her intelligence always impressed me.

My father is supposed to have fathered 26 children, but this may vary by three children. My dad had eight

or nine children before he met my mom, and my mom had two before she met my dad. I was the first of the five children my mother and father had together. I was born in Waukegan, Illinois. My parents had moved there in 1958 to have a better life. I have had the pleasure to live with most of my stepbrothers and stepsisters at one time in my life. We shared the same bed and wore each other's hand-me-downs. We shared food, like butter sandwiches and paper dog sandwiches (newspaper and a piece of meat), just to survive. My mother taught all of us to love each other in spite of our lack of necessities, which helped us become a tight-knit family. We were also taught the value of prayer and going to church as a family. My father and mother were really focused on the spiritual side and, since I can remember, God was always present in our family. My mother handled the discipline and she did a good job of putting the fear of God in us. She also stressed the value of education to us. In Waukegan, my father worked as a waiter, serving food to truckers. My

mother worked cleaning for the well-to-do white folks in the suburbs. They would come home so discouraged every evening. When I was five years old, they decided to move with some of their friends to Kenosha because the jobs were supposed to be better there.

I found out early that sports were my way to escape not being heard in my family. I excelled at basketball and other sports. When I played, I could escape the world for some time, and life didn't seem so hard. At this time, I lived for one thing only. I wanted my father to show me that he loved me. My father loved coon hunting. I learned as much as I could about coon dogs, so my father would tell me I was the best young dog man in the racoon business. He didn't seem to notice me at all though. And I have since found out that it is a condition that most men from the south had, in that men didn't show love in the fashion that their children wanted.

Because of wanting attention from the other kids, and to have the things they had, I started shoplifting at a young age. I stole and hid items from my parents. It started with shoplifting and went downhill from there. My earliest recollection of getting caught stealing was nine years old. I made some really bad choices at a young age, which I had to pay a great deal for. I spent a lot of time in jail cells, suffering for the consequences of my foolishness and lack of personal responsibility. I have been through it all, from jail, to prison, to near death. I was enslaved to my own self. I experienced how it felt to lose my soul. In 1995, after 18 years of going in and out of jails, prisons, and treatment facilities, I came to the realization that I was tired of wasting my life. The pain of prison is different only when you realize you are at the end of your rope. Then, and only then, will you fight to change your circumstances.

At the age of 35, beaten and broken, I was sitting in a prison cell facing more time than I ever faced at in my life – 40 years. While I was waiting on my new criminal charges to be completed, I remembered the things my parents had instilled in me. I remembered the importance of getting an education and getting a job. I remembered to get on my knees and pray to God for help and guidance to deal with my soul. I started praying and asking God for forgiveness.

One day, my daughter, and my sister came to visit me

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers.

PSALM 1:1-3

in the Racine County Correctional Institute. My 12-year-old daughter asked me a profound question, "Daddy how come you cannot take care of me?" I hadn't seen her in four years. For the life of me, I had no answer to give her. I could only muster up a pitiful answer of "I'm sorry." When the visit was over, I went back to my jail cell and I prayed to God to give me the answer to the problem that my daughter had just asked me about. God answered my request.

About three weeks later, I was walking around the prison yard praying to God, "What I am I going to do with this child of mine?" This voice came to me internally and said until I learned to take care of myself, I would never be able to take care of anyone else, especially my child. That prayer made me finally surrender my life and my will to God. I knew if I didn't change, I was going to spend the rest of my life in jail or die without reaching my full potential as a man. After that, I never used alcohol or committed any crimes. That was my spiritual awakening. At a crossroads of my life, I decided to let God's will become the driving force behind whatever life I had left. After I had the internal conversation with God in prison, I had people help me that weren't supposed to help me in prison, such as officers, guards, and church members.

While I was waiting for the criminal charges and facing 40 years, I started going Narcotics Anonymous

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and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. I started going to church. I was seeking a change. I got brought back in to court and went before the judge. He was familiar with me. By law, I should have gotten all the 40 years because I had been in trouble all my life. He looked at me and said, “I see something different in you.” I said, “I do plead guilty. I know that I have to do some time but I’m done. This will be the last time you see me.” I don’t know why, but he believed me. He always told me every time he saw me thereafter that he saw something different in me. God had opened his eyes to the change in me. He gave me four years and ran it concurrent with what I was doing. I got sent back to the receiving part of the prison because it was a new sentence. They sent me to a camp and I stayed there for a year. I had to do the three years of probation and had no incidents. I was going to church and finding my way spiritually. I came home, got baptized and continued to journey through church and the things I needed to do to find myself. I had been studying the Bible in jail and was familiar with the Word of God. I went to a Pentecostal church where they preach in Jesus’ name. This is where I got married and became a trustee of the church. My pastor mentored me to develop me and help me use my skills to further the kingdom. He has allowed me to teach classes and speak from the pulpit.

When I was in prison, I was assessed by the Department of Corrections’ social workers with all the assessments and evaluation tools that the Wisconsin prison system can use to measure readiness to change and career development of prison offenders. Over time, these tests helped me to see what I was capable of accomplishing. I had taken enough tests to know that I would be a good counselor if I put my mind to the task of changing my life.

When I got out of prison, I worked at a community center. In 2000, I worked at a treatment facility doing counseling. In 2005, I opened my own facility. In 2012–13 I attended college to get my bachelor’s degree. From 2013–15, I attended school to get a master’s degree in management, organization and leadership; then kept

going for the next 16 months to get a master’s degree in mental health and counseling. I have opened an agency called Moore and Associates, a private outpatient clinic focused on helping substance-abuse clients from the Department of Corrections. The other organization I have started is a nonprofit agency that is a full-service facility to address the issues that affect the Kenosha community, such as parenting, maleness and manhood, and domestic violence. I also have been blessed to start a professional basketball club where the mission is for players and staff to get a chance, or a second chance, to build or rebuild their opportunities to be a part of a professional basketball organization. My hope is that I will be able to help young men and women stay positive. I have cried many nights because of the pain I have caused and because I influenced young men to believe in things that appeared to be exciting in this life. What these young men were taught by me, and others like me, was pain and a way to self-oppress, such as jails, drugs, women, and being immature.

I now want to be a voice to motivate and inspire young people to believe in the possibility of hope and to reach for a brighter tomorrow. I want to help them reach their full potential so that they will be able to teach their children a new way of living. I pray the seed of my dreams will help to end the pain of a generation.

I am now married and have two stepchildren whom I raised. My wife has played a major part of my journey. She had been in church all her life. I am thankful for her spiritual mentorship with my daughter. I have a good relationship with my daughter, who has four of her own children now. My going to college, encouraged her to go to college, and she actually challenged me grade-wise. It pushed her to excel.

I have discovered this about God’s nature: In a word it is LOVE. Even the trials are love because they provide education that helps you to be a greater witness. It is possible to live a life of hope and change if you find the seed of God in yourself and allow it to grow. ■



Rural Wisconsin



Milwaukee Pierhead Lighthouse, Lake Michigan

ABOUT OUR NAME

Jesus spent time with all kinds of people, including notorious sinners. The religious leaders criticized him for hanging out with the wrong crowd. In response to them, Jesus told three stories. The last story was about a young man who told his father he wanted his inheritance money early. The father gave the young man his inheritance and he left home and spent all the money on wild living. He ended up taking a job feeding pigs and was so hungry even the pig's food looked good to him. He decided to go home to his father and ask for a job as one of his servants. Luke 15:20–24 tells the rest...

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."

But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill a calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and now has returned to life. He was lost but now he is found." So the party began.

The ring and robe the father gave to his son were symbols of his love for his son and the son's worth, identity, and rightful place in his father's family. Likewise, God our Father loves us unconditionally. He doesn't force us to come home to Him but waits patiently, and when we do come home to Him, He is overjoyed and filled with compassion and love for us. Our identity as children of God and our place in His family are secure, just as the ring and the robe symbolize in this story. When you see the name "Ring and Robe" we hope you are reminded of God's love for you, your worth to God, and your place in His family. ■

If you would like additional copies of *Ring & Robe* or would like to tell us how *Ring & Robe* has been helpful to you or others, please drop us a line at: **Ring & Robe, PO Box 368, Lexington, KY 40588-0368**