LIFE UNFAIR?
GET ON GOD’S PATH

Life can seem terribly unfair, even downright cruel. You may be in a rough place due to your own actions or because of circumstances beyond your control. Either way, God still holds your life in His hands and has a plan for you. Michael Swiger found this to be true during his long years of incarceration and beyond. His compelling story demonstrates how God led every step of the way on Michael’s journey, and how He can lead you too.

Michael Swiger is a best-selling author, speaker, pastor, and teacher whose life is an incredible story of God’s redemption. He currently serves as the Executive Director of True Freedom Ministries and has a heart for those living on the fringe of society.

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CHAPTER 1

I stared out the window as the commercial jetliner banked into its final approach into Cleveland. A flash of lightning followed by stomach-twisting turbulence forced involuntary screams from a few passengers. I hoped the plane would crash. Even the continuous flow of alcohol no longer numbed the crushing guilt of the terrible secret I carried.

Forty minutes after touching down, I turned my car onto Priday Avenue. A light drizzle and the haze from the booze caused me to squint at the car parked on the corner across from the stop sign. A police car. I came to a complete stop then counted to three before continuing through the intersection. The police car followed me. When I pulled into my driveway, flashing lights erupted in my rearview mirror.
“I can’t believe it,” I said, pounding the steering wheel. “He’s gonna get me for a DUI, and I didn’t do anything wrong.”

I stepped out of the car and walked toward the cruiser, hoping to talk my way out of the ticket. When I got within a few feet of the vehicle, the door swung open. The barrel of a shotgun swung out of the dark and pressed against my forehead. The officer pumped the gun and shouted, “Freeze.”

I threw my hands up and staggered back.

Uniformed officers swarmed on me from behind parked cars and trees; they poured out of the front door of my house. What seemed like dozens of hands rumpled through my pockets and up and down my legs. Handcuffs cinched my wrists.

“You’re under arrest,” a voice shouted in my ear.

“For what?”

“Aggravated murder.”

Minutes later a scrum of police officers hustled me down a hallway, then into a small, sterile room reeking of stale cigarettes. A crisply uniformed detective partially stood from behind a simple table, and motioned toward the empty chair with his hand. As I sat down I noticed the closed-circuit camera above his head, suspended in the corner from the ceiling.

“I’m going to give you thirty seconds to make the most important decision of your life,” he said, his eyes locked on mine. “You can be a witness for us or a defendant with your brother.”
Silence.
“You might as well save yourself,” he said, patting a closed manila folder on the table. “Your brother already confessed.”
“I’m not saying anything.”
In less than an hour I stepped into a cell for the first time in my life; my blue pin-striped suit replaced by a blaze-orange jumpsuit. When the cell door slammed behind me, the clanging shuttered my soul. I lay down on the plastic-covered mattress, pocked with cigarette burns, and prayed for the first time in years:
“God, if you even exist, let me die in my sleep tonight.”
God did not answer my prayer.
A few days after arriving at the county jail, my indictment arrived: aggravated murder with death specifications. The jarring reality suffocated me: The State of Ohio planned to electrocute me.

At noon on Friday, June 17, 1988, my older brother had gotten into a fight with his college roommate and beat him to death. I helped him arrange the meeting, assisted him in fleeing the scene, helped cover up the crime, then repeatedly lied to the
police throughout the investigation. As I lay on my bunk reliving that day, the chaplain walked onto our range and announced they were passing out free candy bars to anyone who came to the chapel service. Raised Catholic, I had never attended a Protestant service in my life. I did not want to begin now, but I did want a candy bar. So I decided to go to the chapel, get my candy bar, and then act like I was sick so I wouldn’t have to listen to some Bible-thumpin’ Jesus freak. I got in line with the rest of the men. We walked single file down the narrow hallway, then into the multipurpose room turned chapel. To my astonishment, the guard locked the door behind the last man. I couldn’t get out. To make matters worse, the only seats available were in the front row.

A box of Butterfingers sat on a small table behind a heavyset man with long, unkempt hair and a bushy beard. The buttons on his suit strained to stay fastened over his protruding belly.

“Don’t worry about them candy bars, boys,” he said in a heavy hillbilly accent. “We pass ’em out at the end.” I got tricked to go to church.

He read a passage about Jesus and some woman at a well, and the next thing I knew he was pacing up and down right in front of me, pounding his Bible and telling us we were all a bunch of sinners who were going to hell. The more he preached, the madder I got. After all, I didn’t think I was a sinner, and I really didn’t think I was going to hell. I wanted to stand
up and make a fool out of this guy, but I had never read the Bible, and I was afraid he might make a fool out of me. So I sat there stewing. When the service ended, I snatched my candy bar from his hand, then returned to my cellblock and found a Bible. I was determined to find the passage he preached on, study it, and then go back the following week to make a fool out of him. Not knowing how to find the story about the woman at the well, I decided to read straight through every book in the New Testament until I found it. By the time I reached the gospel of John (the fourth book of the New Testament, where the story I was looking for is told), I knew my life was a mess, and I needed forgiveness, God’s forgiveness. But I didn’t know how to find it or ask for it.

Long before my arrest, I had adopted a blame-shifting mentality in order to deal with my guilty feelings for what I had helped my brother do. The more I read the Bible, the more that strategy fell apart. The Bible says all wrongdoing is sin. And I could no longer deny that sin polluted my entire life. Worse still the Bible also says, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). I knew I deserved to die.

My life was a mess, and I needed forgiveness, God’s forgiveness. But I didn’t know how to find it or ask for it.
because of my sins, and it appeared the State of Ohio intended to make that happen. I was lost, but I didn’t know what to do about it. So I went back to the chapel service the following week, and for the first time in my life I actually heard the gospel.

**What is the gospel?** The word gospel comes from the Greek language and simply means “good news.” The good news the Bible declares is that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and He rose from the dead to purchase a place in heaven for us, which He now offers to everyone as a free gift.

That night I knelt down on the cement floor beside my bunk in cell 42 and asked Jesus Christ to save me from my sins. I surrendered my whole life to him. It felt like a ten-thousand-pound weight rolled off my shoulders and an invisible, constricting chain snapped from around my heart.

**During my tumultuous early days in jail,** I read through the book of Psalms. I came across a verse that made a deep and lasting impact on my life: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:71). I had never considered suffering to be a good thing. I lived my life seeking to avoid or minimize pain. However, the writer of this psalm looked past the temporary discomfort his body endured and expressed gratitude because of the
incredible spiritual benefit he received from it. Was God doing the same thing for me now? Was God using my self-inflicted suffering to lead me to a relationship with Him? Was He using the horrendous consequences of my sin to get me to study and learn and live for Him?

Psalm is the longest book in the Bible and is located roughly in the middle of the book. It is a collection of songs and poems that express the emotions of people who experience a variety of situations in life.

Prior to my arrest I considered the Bible a book of fables, never opening it a single time in my life. I didn’t care about my eternal destiny—if there even was such a thing. But now in the middle of the most cataclysmic upheaval I had ever experienced, or perhaps because of it, God had my attention. The more I read the Bible, the more I wanted to discover who God was and what He wanted from me. With every page I turned, I learned more about God. I learned that what He wanted most was for me to love Him and to live by the principles and commandments in the Bible. If I had known this, loving God would have prevented me from shipwrecking my life.

Jesus said that all the principles and commandments in Scripture can be boiled down to two main things: loving God and loving our neighbors (see Matthew 22:36–40).
A jail employee, John Wiseman, noticed me reading the Bible one day and began stopping by my cell after his shift ended. He started to teach me the first steps of following Jesus. He taught me things like how to use a concordance and a Bible dictionary. But more importantly, he answered my questions and prayed with me. This discipleship continued almost daily for the next eight months while I awaited trial.

What is discipleship? A disciple is a follower, one who learns, accepts, and assists in spreading the doctrines of another. The term discipleship comes from the root word disciple. In the biblical context, discipleship is the process by which one individual learns from another how to follow Jesus Christ.

A few weeks later my brother went to trial. The jury found him guilty of aggravated murder and the judge sentenced him to forty-three years in prison before his first eligibility for parole. While my heart broke for him and my parents, I thanked God for sparing him the death penalty. And now I wondered: What’s going to happen to me?
My attorney talked me into waiving my right to a jury trial, in order to be tried by a panel of three judges. I took and passed a polygraph test conducted by the prosecutor’s office, and by the time I went to trial I felt confident that things would work out. When I walked into the courtroom for trial, instead of finding three judges as the law stated, only one judge sat behind the bench—the same judge who had just sentenced my brother to forty-three years in prison.

“Your honor, if there aren’t going to be any additional judges, I would like to withdraw my waiver and have a jury trial.”

“Request denied.”

My attorney stipulated to the prosecution’s entire
case. This means he agreed with the evidence as it was presented at my brother’s trial and that the State did not have to present any witnesses or evidence against me. It also meant that my entire defense would be my testimony alone. By the time I stepped off the stand, my entire capital murder trial with death specifications lasted less than two hours.

Two days later I stood beside my lawyer in front of the judge to hear the verdict.

“To the charge of aggravated murder with death specifications,” she said, reading from a yellow legal pad, “I find the defendant not guilty.”

I expelled a sigh of relief.

“To the lesser included offense of murder, I find the defendant not guilty.”

*I’m going home.*

“To the lesser included offense of involuntary manslaughter, by complicity, I find the defendant guilty,” she said, “and I sentence you to ten to twenty-five years.”

My knees nearly buckled.

“To the charge of kidnapping, I find the defendant guilty, and I hereby sentence you to eight to twenty-five years . . . consecutive.”

I glanced at my lawyer. He stared stone-faced, straight ahead.

“To the firearm specification, I find the defendant guilty, and I sentence you to an additional three years . . . consecutive.”

As an engineering student at Case Western
Reserve University, mathematics always came easy, but these numbers seemed impossible. I couldn’t add them up in my head.

*Ten … eight … three … what is that? Twenty-one to fifty years!*

The deputy cuffed my hands behind my back and escorted me back to the jail. As I sat in the holding cell in stunned silence, John Wiseman appeared at my cell door.

“I have no idea why God allowed what happened to you today,” he said, compassion radiating from his eyes. “But God has a plan for your life.”

I nodded my head.

“That plan involves you going to the penitentiary, and maybe for a long time. When you get down there, find out what God would have you do, and do it. And He will give you peace.”

That was not what I wanted to hear; but it was exactly what I needed to hear. At five in the morning the following day, I awoke to the sound of a nightstick on my cell door.

“Swiger, pack your stuff,” the deputy said, tossing a brown paper bag through the bars. “You’re riding out.”

The cell door buzzed open. I hurriedly stuffed my personal items into the bag and then stepped out.

“Kneel on the floor,” he commanded, “facing the wall.”

I complied.

He cinched a set of shackles on my ankles; the
steel bit into my legs when I tried to stand. He fished a belly-chain around my waist, and then connected the shackles to my new steel belt with yet another chain. Finally, he looped a set of handcuffs through the belly-chain and then clamped them on my wrists.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he said, with a sarcastic smile.

I watched him repeat the same procedure with another inmate. However, before placing the handcuffs on him, he instructed the guy to shuffle over next to me. He linked us arm-in-arm before slapping the cuffs on him. Thus we were joined together for the next three hours awaiting our trip to prison. After a few minutes, I noticed my new friend sniffing back tears.

*Give me a break, dude,* I thought, *I’m having a bad enough day on my own.*

Before long tears were streaming down his cheeks. “I can’t do all this time Judge Spicer gave me,” he said.

Judge Spicer was my judge. And we both had the same prosecutor. I was officially curious.

“Okay, what happened?” I asked.

“Me and my partner went on a little crime spree. We robbed a bunch of jewelry stores in Akron. Then we went to a motel to split up the loot, and I accidentally shot him in the head with a shotgun we stole from the last store.”

“Did he die?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. You had my judge and my prosecutor. I
guess we are going to be friends for a long time. How much time did Judge Spicer give you for that?”
“One to five.”
“What?”
“Yeah, one to five.”
“Let me get this straight. You robbed a bunch of jewelry stores, stole a gun, and killed a guy, and she gave you one year.”
“One to five.”
“She gave me twenty-one to fifty years for not telling on my brother. If I were you I’d stop crying.”

▶ Is God unfair? When seemingly unexplainable injustices occur in our lives, it is natural to question God’s fairness. After all, the Bible says that God has absolute power and control over all of His creation. So, the reasoning goes, if God allows bad things to happen, He must be unfair.

This reasoning is faulty and foreign to the Bible.

As the Creator of the universe, God has the absolute right to do as He pleases with His creation; the Bible refers to this as the sovereignty of God.

God is all-knowing; we are not. The Bible says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the L ORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (ISAIAH 55:8–9). God is infinitely more intelligent than we are, and His purposes exceed our ability to understand. This does not mean God is unfair; it simply means we lack the capacity to understand what He is accomplishing through the event.
During my first couple of months at Lorain Correctional, God brought a Prison Fellowship volunteer, Bill Wilder, into my life. I didn’t know it at the time, but this humble, faithful engineer would profoundly impact my life. Bill taught a weekly Bible study to a group of about six inmates. But more than teach the Bible, Bill modeled mature, godly manhood—a way of living that puts love for God and other people ahead of our own needs. Bill demonstrated what the Bible means when it says to treat others as more important than yourself (see Philippians 2:3). He showed me what it means to be someone who is self-sacrificing and self-controlled and who follows the example of Christ. He took a liking to me and over the next several years helped me grow in every area of my spiritual life.

While studying the book of Ephesians in Bill’s class, I encountered a verse that shaped the way I did my time: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15–16).

No one needed to tell me I ought to be careful in prison; violence and mayhem were everywhere. Almost daily I witnessed serious fights that led to bloodshed. The days were evil. However, it hadn’t occurred to me
that God expected me to make good use of the one commodity I had in abundance—time. I had the same twenty-four hours as people living on the other side of the fence, and I determined to use every hour to educate myself as much as possible in order to be a productive member of the kingdom of God. But how?

I decided I wouldn’t own a television. I saw men sit mesmerized for hours squandering their time. Instead, I spent all my spare time reading the Bible and listening to Christian radio. Through the interlibrary loan program at the prison library, I gained access to a world of classical literature and theology. The content of these timeless masterpieces did not change depending on where they were read, whether on Harvard Yard or in a prison cell.

I also took advantage of every educational opportunity offered. I enrolled in courses being offered through a local community college, and for the first time took academics seriously. In the first days of classes, I came across another verse that would alter the course of my life: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for
“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

The word “whatever” jumped off the page at me; it was all-inclusive. It meant everything. God not only cared about the day-to-day activities of my life, but He expected me to accomplish them to the absolute best of my ability, whether cleaning toilets in the warden’s office or playing the piano at chapel services. While thinking about this verse, I could almost hear God saying to me: “Michael, work as hard as humanly possible on this philosophy class. And remember you are doing it for Me, not for the grade.”

From that point on I sought to put my complete heart, soul, and strength into whatever I was doing. It was a way of loving God. I earned two associates degrees and moved from being a clerk in the County Office to working directly for the warden. Obeying what I felt God telling me about working hard gave me the opportunity to share my faith with the
warden who stopped me one day while I scrubbed the floor.

“Why are you always working so hard?” he asked. “We don’t pay you anything.”

“The Bible says to do everything as for the Lord,” I said with a smile. “And today it happens to be buffing the floors.”

In August of 1993—three-and-a-half years into my incarceration—my first opportunity for release arose. As a first-time offender convicted as an accomplice, my sentencing judge had the authority to suspend the remainder of my sentence. Before my attorney filed the motion, I made a deal with God.

“Lord, if you let me out of here, I will dedicate my life to prison ministry,” I prayed from my knees alongside my bunk. “I will be like Billy Graham for jail.”

I thought this was a pretty good deal for God.

My attorney filed the motion, and to my family’s utter amazement, the judge granted the request and issued an order for my release effective September 1. I praised God for His amazing answer to my prayer, fully determined to uphold my end of the bargain. I quietly mailed my property home, not even telling my closest friends—in prison good news for you does not mean good news for others. Some inmates, jealous that someone else is about to released, make it a point to cause that individual harm.

On August 31 I sat on my bunk, about to pick up my Bible and a daily devotional book, when I heard a
knock on my cell door. The inmate in the cell next to me stuck his head into my cell.

“Hey, Mike, do you have something pending in court?”

“Yeah, how do you know?”

“I heard on the radio; your judge denied it.”

“That’s impossible,” I said, opening my locker box.

“I have the court order right here.”

With my heartbeat thundering in my ears, I hurried down the steps to the bank of phones lining the wall by the guard’s desk and dialed my lawyer’s number.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he said. “But the judge overturned her own decision, and the prosecutor did not even oppose our motion.”

My heart sank.

“In the thirty years I’ve been practicing law,” he said. “I have never seen anything like this.”

The room seemed to spin as I shuffled back toward my cell. I couldn’t believe it. I thought God and I had a deal. I tried to focus on what I should do next, and then it hit me. I had to call my mom and say: “Don’t come get me tomorrow. It will be another decade.”

After speaking with my mom I staggered back into my cell and saw my Bible and devotional book, *Our Daily Bread*, lying on my bed. I was mad at God and felt sorry for myself. The last thing I wanted to do was read the Bible. I plopped down on my bed
and picked up the devotional. The reading for the day began:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one (James 1:12–13).

That wasn’t even fair. Right then I didn’t want a crown of life, I just wanted to go home. As I wallowed in self-pity and struggled to make sense of this crushing disappointment, the words from this passage kept looping through my mind. God was not tempting me to fail or walk away from my faith; the Bible clearly said God tempts no one. God did not need this trial to learn how I would react; He already knew. This test was meant to show me about me. Would I blow up, express immature anger, or accuse God of being fickle or unfair? Would I use this as an excuse to fail and forget about living for God? I realized in that moment that in life we do not get to pick the
In life we do not get to pick the tragedies we face, just how we react to them.

I could choose to get angry and walk away from God because of my perceived injustice in this situation, or I could continue trusting God, even though I did not understand why He allowed this to happen. The more I mulled these things over, a profound truth took hold of me: I had surrendered my life to Jesus Christ not to get out of prison but to change my life and my eternal destiny. This disappointment did not change the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins, and as my Lord He had the absolute right to my trust and obedience. When I reread the verse again, I zeroed in on the positives—a promised blessing now and a crown later in heaven. Through this trial God presented me with both the opportunity to do the right thing now and to receive a reward as well.

As I continued to think about this passage further, I could almost hear the Holy Spirit speak to my soul—not audibly, but spiritually: “You say that you trust me,” the Holy Spirit impressed upon my heart, “then trust me. If you want to get involved in prison ministry, why not be a prison missionary? You are already on your mission field.”
The Holy Spirit is a person—not an impersonal force—who together with God the Father and God the Son make up the Godhead, sometimes referred to as the Trinity. The three persons in the Godhead are one in nature and essence, yet have differing roles. The Holy Spirit is fully God; He is eternal, knows all things, and possesses all power.

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit participated in creation, inspired the prophets to write sacred Scripture, and empowered some to work miracles. In the New Testament the primary role of the Holy Spirit is to convince and convict people of the truth of the gospel. The Holy Spirit lives inside those who believe in Jesus in order to produce God’s character in the life of the believer—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That day I quit my job in the warden’s office and took a position as janitor in the chapel. I just wanted to be where God’s work was happening, in whatever capacity I could.
CHAPTER 3

Shortly after my job in the chapel began, Chaplain Lawrence Nevels thought that God had gifted me for teaching others, so he allowed me to lead classes while he supervised. I developed and led the praise band and began building a lending library. I also applied to the College of Business at Ohio University and was the first correspondence student ever accepted.

One day when walking to work with a big smile on my face and my Bible tucked under my arm, another inmate yelled: “I bet I can knock that smile off your face.”

“You didn’t give me the smile,” I said, “so you can’t take it from me either.”
Walking on I realized what that smile was. I was doing what God wanted me to do, and He had given me the peace that John Wiseman told me about six years earlier.

In 1997 I graduated from Ohio University through correspondence. Chaplain Nevels, Bill Wilder, Gary Koly, and a few other godly men encouraged me to continue my education and pursue Bible training. After a thorough search of accredited graduate schools, I applied to Reformed Theological Seminary, at that time home to renowned Systematic Theology Professor R.C. Sproul. I felt foolish completing the lengthy application process; the cost of a master’s degree at that time exceeded $30,000. I was making $17 per month! Then, for the first time in four years, my lawyer came to see me.

“Mike, great news,” he said, uncharacteristically cheerful. “The Ohio Supreme Court overturned a case identical to yours. You can have a new trial if you want one.”

“Of course, I want a new trial.”

“I just need your permission to file for it.”

“Absolutely.”

I walked across the prison yard with a new spring in my step, and then it occurred to me that I had not prayed about the decision. If released from prison, I wouldn’t be able to go to seminary. Due to parole restrictions I would not be allowed to leave the state to attend the seminary in North Carolina.
I returned to my cell and knelt down beside my bed and prayed:

“Lord, show me what You want me to do. If it is Your will that I prepare for ministry, You have to do two things: One, You will have to deny the appeal, because if I am released I will not have the time or ability to take classes; and two, You will have to somehow pay for my education.”

What is prayer? Prayer is simple communication with God, either verbally or silently. When we read the Bible, God speaks to us; when we pray, we speak to Him. In prayer we share our love and honor for God, confess our sins to Him and ask forgiveness, thank Him for the various ways He provides for our needs, and bring our requests and petitions to Him. The Bible teaches that all prayer should be directed to God the Father in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ. When we pray, we have the privilege of interacting with the all-powerful Creator of the universe and participating in His unfolding plan for our lives.

While waiting on a response from both the seminary and the Ohio Supreme Court, I decided to write the great American novel. Armed with an electric typewriter and a vivid imagination, I wrote a Christian, pro-life, murder mystery, banging out the first draft in about six months. I sent it off to an agent and received a letter back. 

Dear Michael, while your plot is compelling, your
prose is terrible. It is as if you have no formal training whatsoever. You need to write in the active voice.

I didn’t even know what that meant. I found a book on writing in the prison library, then retyped the 320-page manuscript and sent it off to a publisher. While I was waiting on a response, I received a letter from my attorney stating that the Ohio Supreme Court chose not to review my case. As a discretionary appeal, they were not required to accept it, and they didn’t. I felt disappointed, but I knew God’s sovereignty extended even over the courts. This decision did not catch Him by surprise. And after all, didn’t I pray about this? Was this God’s answer? Even though I didn’t understand, I trusted Him.

The very next day I received an acceptance letter from the admissions office at Reformed Theological Seminary. The day after that I received a letter from their financial aid office stating that I had been granted a full scholarship, including books. God’s answer indeed!

Over the next several years, I diligently pursued my studies and continued to work on my book. Then in 1999 a Christian publishing company offered me a two-book deal, which I eagerly signed. I published under the pen name Michael Andrew, thinking that the world might not be ready to accept a writer taking the moral high ground from a prison cell.
The following year I wrote a short story entitled *Jesus Barabbas*. Inspired by a sermon preached at the prison chapel by a volunteer named John Schmid, the two-thousand-word tale told the story of Jesus’s crucifixion through the eyes of Barabbas. I wrote the story in a single sitting and sent it off to *War Cry*, the Salvation Army’s national magazine. A couple of months later I received an acceptance letter along with a check for $300. Every month for the next six years when the new issue of the *War Cry* arrived at the chapel, I tore through the pages searching for my story but never found it.

Barabbas was a prisoner who was released instead of Jesus. Jesus was then sentenced to death.

A few months later I read in *Writer’s Digest* about the Malice Domestic mystery-writing contest held annually by St. Martin’s Press. The first prize was a two-book deal with a $10,000 advance. The article said that thousands of writers entered each year. I read the contest rules and decided to give it a shot. Over the next few months I banged out a classic who-dun-it mystery, much in the style of Agatha Christie. I mailed off the manuscript and waited for a reply.

I went about my normal routine, and then out of the blue I received a letter from St. Martin’s Press. I ripped open the envelope:
This year’s decision was agonizingly close between your manuscript and the one we ultimately declared the winner. Both works displayed imaginative creativity and a mastery of the craft that we do not typically see. . . . Instead of awarding you a second-place mention, we respectfully request that you allow us to hold on to the manuscript for a year and re-enter it in next year’s contest. The panel of judges feels strongly that if we follow this course, you will be next year’s winner.

Since I had nothing else to do for the next year I agreed. The following May when the top finishers were announced in the *New York Times*, my name appeared in second place. Very disappointing. But a week later I began to receive letters from literary agents offering me their services. After much prayer I signed with the Helen Rees Literary Agency in Boston.

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**My first eligibility for parole** occurred in 2002. Over the course of my thirteen years of incarceration I had earned two associate degrees, a bachelor’s degree, and several graduate credits. I had two novels published, amassed 23,000 community service hours, completed every program the prison system offered, and had not been cited for a single rule infraction. Hundreds of letters of support streamed in, including a compelling letter from the detective who led the prosecutor’s investigation for my case:
I can state emphatically and passionately that Michael Swiger has been sentenced and punished unfairly and disproportionately when the facts and circumstances are reviewed objectively. I write this letter in utter disbelief that Michael Swiger remains incarcerated. . . . I cannot reiterate strongly enough that Michael has been mistreated by the justice system which I have always strived to uphold.

Detective Bruce Van Horn later said this was the only letter he ever wrote on behalf of an inmate.

On the morning of my parole hearing, I sat nervously in the hallway outside the conference room, reviewing my file and praying. I watched the inmate scheduled before me enter the room. I knew him well as we had served all of our time together. He had not completed any community service or any educational programs and had been thrown into solitary confinement for extended periods for fighting and failing drug tests. Forty-five minutes later he bounded out of the room, thrusting his hands over his head.

“They paroled me, Swigs,” he shouted before hugging me. “I’m going home.”

If they just released him, I felt really good about my chances. I entered the room and sat down across the table from a middle-aged man in a dark brown suit. He placed a pair of reading glasses on the bridge of his nose, opened a manila file on the desk, and read a statement of my case.
“Is this your case?” he asked.
“It is.”
“Could you step out for a moment? I need to call Central Office.”
I obeyed.
Less than three minutes later the door opened.
“You may step back in and we will continue.”
I sat down and opened my folder, prepared to discuss my institutional record.
“Mr. Swiger, the parole board has decided to extend your sentence for an additional sixty months.”
“Five years?”
“That’s correct.”
“Did you even look in my file? If you give me the opportunity—”
“I can give you more time, if you’d like.”
“No, sir.”
“Good. We’re done here.”
I walked out of the room in stunned silence. I knew God was sovereign, and I knew I could trust Him; I just didn’t understand why. Early on my journey of faith I discovered a verse that time and again brought me great comfort: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9).
The distance between heaven and earth is infinite. If my brain were the size of a thimble, and God’s
thoughts the size of the ocean, I simply lacked the intellectual capacity to dump His ocean of thoughts into my thimble-sized brain. This truth drove home a simple yet profound reality: an infinite God cannot be fully understood by finite human beings. I only had the ability to understand what He chose to make clear to me. This meant that many things in life—things that did not make sense to me—simply fell outside of my ability to understand the will and workings of God. During confusing and troubling times I found great comfort knowing that God, being wiser than I, had His hand on the wheel of life, knew about me and my circumstances, and I could trust Him. More and more I began to understand that, ultimately, shaping my soul was more important than my temporary, physical inconveniences.

Recognizing that being like Jesus was more important to God than my physical comforts, when life’s disappointments knocked me down I focused on being more like Jesus and doing what God had

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asked—doing everything as service to Him. I continued my daily routine of reading the Bible and Our Daily Bread. During these times I often encountered a passage or anecdote that spoke to my situation and encouraged my heart. I also found comfort in reaching out and helping other inmates—whether volunteering as a literacy tutor or teaching a new-believers Bible study. When I focused on others instead of myself, God lifted my spirits and restored to me a deep sense of peace. I was learning that not only were loving God and loving others the two greatest commands, obeying them was giving me peace when everything else was frustrating and confusing.

Two years later my attorney showed up unannounced for a visit. As I walked into the visiting room, he stood with a broad, beaming smile, and handed me a bundle of papers.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“The Ohio Supreme Court overturned your case.”

“That’s impossible,” I said. “I don’t even have an appeal pending.”

“It’s all right there,” he said, pointing to the papers.
“There was a capital murder case in Cleveland, and relying on your case, he was tried before a single judge. Only he was found guilty and given the death penalty. Therefore, he had a constitutional right to a direct appeal to the Ohio Supreme Court. In deciding his case the Ohio Supreme Court struck down the lower court’s decision in your case.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means you have been illegally detained here for the past fifteen years. All we have to do is file a habeas corpus motion and you will be released.”

We filed the motion in September, and the judge granted it, ordering my release. The State of Ohio appealed. Two weeks later a hearing officer from the parole board showed up at my prison unannounced and called me in for an unscheduled hearing.

“Mr. Swiger, in reviewing your file, it was determined that you were not given a full and fair hearing two years ago. I am here to rectify that.”

He carefully reviewed the contents of my file, recounted all of my accomplishments, and commented on my spotless institutional record.

“Mr. Swiger, we believe you are entitled to relief,” he said, with an odd smile. “However, we understand you have a habeas corpus motion pending. If you are willing to withdraw the motion, we would be willing to grant you a parole.”

“Can I talk to my lawyer before I make a decision?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Feel free to use my phone.”
I called my lawyer and explained the exceptionally unusual turn of events and asked his advice.

“As things stand right now, the State’s appeal will probably take six months before the Ohio Supreme Court rules on it. Then Summit County has ninety days to get you to trial. So you are looking at another nine months. Then you will have to pay me to defend you. Or you can accept the parole and be done with it.”

“But what if I withdraw the motion, then they renege and take away my parole?”

“We can always refile the habeas corpus. But we won’t have to as long as the Parole Board lives up to its promise to release you.”

I hung up the phone, turned to the hearing officer and said, “I will withdraw the motion.”

“Very good,” he said, stretching out his hand. “You have been granted a parole.”*

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My first step into freedom seemed to pass through a time portal; the world changed dramatically during the nearly two decades I had been removed from society. The cell phone had been invented, along with the Internet. I moved in with my parents at the age of thirty-eight, eager to begin my job search. I

* Additional criminal activity and co-defendants were involved in the case prior to my arrest. However, because some individuals were given immunity and others have paid their debt to society, I honor their privacy and never publicly discuss the elements of the case involving them. Instead I focus on taking responsibility for the egregious crimes I committed in order to show how great God is.
applied for an assembly line job at a circuit-board factory, and a construction inspector. I interviewed at my former company, where I had worked as a process engineer. And a friend encouraged me to apply for an IT position at the Salvation Army’s regional office in Cleveland.

I showed up in my suit and tie the week after Easter. I dutifully filled out the job application, and then froze when I reached the dreaded question: *Have you ever been convicted of a felony? Please check yes or no. If yes, please explain.* And the line provided measured about two inches long. I checked *yes*, then printed on the line: *I will explain during the interview.*

I handed my application to the security guard, then returned to my seat. As he thumbed through the form, I watched his eyebrows raise, and his expression sour. He looked up at me.

*He found that felony box, didn’t he?*

He glanced back down, and then stared at me again. His gaze seemed to singe a hole in my forehead. In order to avoid a staring contest, I picked up the magazine sitting on the end table beside me, the Easter 2006 edition of the *War Cry*. I mindlessly flipped the pages until I reached the featured story. The title seemed familiar. My eyes widened. My mouth dropped open. The featured story was mine. My name appeared in the byline. I penned the tale six years before, and it was finally published six days before my interview. I slid the magazine into my
folder. God got there before I did.

The human resources manager called me back and immediately grilled me about my resume and application.

“How did you get three college degrees in prison?” she asked. “Do you have copies of your transcripts?”

I reached into my folder to get them.

“How did you get Microsoft certified in prison?” I handed her the certificate.

For the next twenty minutes I fielded a stream of questions that took a predictable form: How did you . . . in prison? Finally, she looked up at me with an incredulous look on her face.

“Your resume says you’re a published author.”

“I am.”

“Yeah, right.” She shook her head. “Do you have any samples of anything you have written?”

“As a matter of fact I do.” I reached in my folder and laid the War Cry on her desk. “I’m the feature story in your national magazine this month.”

They gave me the job.

In my reading through the Bible each year, I repeatedly encountered stories of God’s divine intervention in the lives of people. The story of Joseph’s life seemed to best show how God sometimes worked. Joseph’s jealous brothers initially sought to kill him, then settled for selling him into slavery. He worked hard and his owner liked him. Then his master’s wife falsely accused him,
so his master threw him into prison, where Joseph was well-liked by the guards. During his incarceration, Joseph met a high-ranking government official. When the nation faced a crisis, this official mentioned Joseph to the king. Because of Joseph’s God-given counsel, the king later elevated Joseph to the second-highest-ranking position in the land. Joseph went on to save the lives of thousands of people.

God used all of the “unfair” events in Joseph’s life to prepare him for enormous responsibility followed by miraculous blessings. At the end of the story when addressing his brother who initially did him wrong, Joseph said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

Now instead of reading about a supernatural event, I experienced one for myself. My belief in God’s divine intervention in the lives of men moved from the theoretical to the experiential. My faith grew.
On the night of my arrest, my fiancée, Susan, sat inside the home we recently had purchased, addressing the invitations to our wedding scheduled for December 30, 1989—and despite my arrest, she waited for me. She faithfully visited, wrote hundreds of letters, and spent countless hours on the phone. We married on July 8, 2006. She wore her original wedding dress. Thirty months later God blessed us with a son, James.

From 2007 to 2010 God blessed me with success in my writing career. I wrote and released three mystery novels. But about the time the third novel rolled off the presses in April of 2010, my wife, who was eight months pregnant at the time, continued to express
concern about an enlarging lump in her right breast. She initially found a small spot in the same area about eighteen months earlier. However, a specialist at a renowned Cleveland hospital chose not to biopsy the lump, and instead offered us her opinion: “It’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “If you get pregnant it may change shapes, but it is nothing to worry about.”

Susan conceived, and change shapes it did—it grew to a mass over 7 centimeters long and 4 centimeters wide. Now at the end of April my wife, less than two weeks away from her due date, climbed onto the exam table in a hospital gown, as the doctor hurried into the room.

“I don’t even know why you are here,” she said in a condescending tone, lifting the gown, “I told you . . . oh . . . oh, I see.”

“What is it?” my wife asked.

“I’m going to biopsy that right now, myself.”

The following evening as I put my son down for a nap, we got the call.

“It’s cancer. Stage two. HER2 positive—an aggressively growing form of cancer. I have scheduled you to report to the hospital in two hours so we can induce the baby and begin treatment immediately.”

Click.

Tears welled up in my wife’s eyes and then traced down the sides of her face. The room receded from focus. The next several hours blurred together as we arranged to have my in-laws stay with our two-
year-old son. Ironically, the subplot in one of my novels features the main character’s wife being misdiagnosed at the same hospital for the same condition. I originally wrote the manuscript seven years before we lived out the storyline.

My wife lay in the birthing bed wired to a heart monitor, an epidural taped to her back, and a harness of probes around her protruding belly. Monitors beeped, IVs dripped, and instead of the joyful anticipation of the long-awaited arrival of new life, we frantically searched the Internet for information on breast cancer. Phone calls to and from doctor friends punctuated the waiting, all busy researching and relaying the latest information. Some made recommendations. Others made referrals. Some just prayed and cried along with us.

The Bible says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Sometimes “good” isn’t exactly what we expect or want, and while we had no idea how things would turn out, our experience of navigating crushing
disappointments and crises during my incarceration taught us that we could trust that God could even use cancer for His glory and our good.

At 8:03 p.m. on April 30, Audrey Ann Swiger took her first breath—a beautiful, fragile little girl weighing only 5 lbs., 13 oz. Immediately, the birthing staff suspected something wrong and called in the “Special Care” team to evaluate.

“She’s a little under-responsive,” the doctor said, “but still within the normal range. I think she will be fine.”

Two hours later Susan placed a bottle into Audrey’s mouth. After just a few sucks, her face turned blue.

She stopped breathing.

The observing nurse whisked her down the hall for further evaluation, and she stopped breathing again, this time without the bottle. The next time we saw our precious Audrey in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, a tangle of wires and tubes filled the incubator. A myriad of tests over the following weeks revealed an exceptionally rare genetic disorder, leaving her with two ping-pong ball-sized cysts in her brain. The muscles in her esophagus were paralyzed, this coupled with severe reflux forced the doctors to place a feeding tube in her abdomen. For the next three years she received nourishment through a carefully calibrated pump. Simultaneously, Susan’s first round of chemotherapy completely wiped out her white blood cells, leaving her neutropenic—
her white blood cell count was low, leaving her very susceptible to infections. For one week in late May, my wife and daughter resided in two separate Intensive Care Units in the same hospital.

Yet through procedures and surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation, exhaustion and fear, the Lord graciously walked us through the crisis. We continued praying daily for God’s wisdom in making medical decisions. God brought Christian doctors and health care professionals into our lives who helped us negotiate the maze of medical procedures. Step-by-step He gave us peace, knowing we were exactly where He wanted us to be. Five years later my wife is cancer free, my daughter’s health concerns have resolved, and we are blessed. We have a deeper faith in God and we know that our growing faith was part of the good that God was accomplishing during this time.

**When faced with my first major crisis**, I lacked a moral compass and shipwrecked my life. During my wife’s and daughter’s health crises, I had a solid biblical foundation to stand on, a fellowship of believers to help guide and direct me, and the battle-tested faith that comes from trusting God through heartaches and disappointments. Over the years I learned that when life doesn’t seem fair, God has a plan and is at work. God has a plan for my
life and He has one for you as well. God once told the Israelites, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). God’s promised plan for Israel is not the same as what happens to you and me, but He is still the same God. He is the God who intervened in Joseph’s life so that what was meant for evil turned out for good. He is the God who can be trusted. However, you cannot experience Him or the richness and blessings of His plan until you find Him. The path that leads to Him starts with Jesus, who He is, and what He did.

In order to experience God’s forgiveness and receive the free gift of eternal life, you have to understand that heaven is a gift you cannot earn. You need to confess that you are a sinner and that your sin has separated you from God. But Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin, and you can receive the free gift of eternal life by placing your faith in Him. The Bible says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Romans 10:9–10).

Confession, repentance, and placing your faith in Jesus Christ is the start of a relationship with God, one that continues to grow as you learn more about Him and His love for you. Not all stories turn out the
same. Not everyone in the Bible who had something bad happen to them had the same experience as Joseph. Not everyone will have the same experience as me. But the God who worked in Joseph’s life is the God who worked in my life and the same God who can work in yours too. 🙏
Questions for Personal Reflection:

1. In Psalm 119:71 the writer states: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statues.” Describe an experience when God used an unpleasant experience to get your attention. What did you learn about God through the event?

2. In Ephesians 5:15–16 the apostle Paul says, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” Take a few moments to consider how you spend your day hour-by-hour. What changes can you make to your daily routine that will allow you to make the best use of your time?

3. In Colossians 3:23–24 the apostle Paul writes: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” Knowing that God expects excellence in every activity you are engaged in, what changes can you make to insure that you are giving God your best?
4. In James 1:12 the Bible says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” Have you ever gone through a difficult experience and really made a mess out of it? Would you have responded differently if you had known the trial was actually a test from God meant to bless you with a reward?

5. In Isaiah 55:8–9 the Bible says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” How does knowing that God is infinitely more intelligent than you are help you trust Him more during uncertain situations?
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