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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

And, finally, my Kairos teammates and my brothers in white are always full of encouragement and affirmation.

P R E F A C E

“You need to write a book.”

I’m sure many would-be authors receive that encouragement. I doubt many of them receive that encouragement in prison. It was my second experience volunteering with Kairos Prison Ministry, and I had just finished giving a twenty-minute talk on “Obstacles to Accepting God’s Grace.” The main theme of the talk was that no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace. It was a theme that was well received inside prison, both among the Kairos team and the men in white, as we call the inmates. A man in white, whose velvet voice left no doubt about his previous occupation in the radio business, was adamant. “You need to write a book. I’ve never heard a story like that from the child’s perspective. You’ve got to write it.” Clearly, he made an impression. I had thought about writing my dad’s story, the part of my talk that really captivated this audience, several times over the years. I had never thought about writing this story

PREFACE

from my own perspective. Writing it from my perspective seemed much less daunting. As weeks went by, I simply could not take my mind off it. With time and much prayer, I decided the Holy Spirit was really leading me to write this book. It would be just like my Savior to use a prison inmate as the spark for this endeavor.

My dad's name was Gary Brown. What made his story so captivating for a room full of prison inmates is that he too was a man in white almost the entire time I knew him. It was not his first time in prison, but a judge and a jury sentenced him to Alabama's death row when I was six years old. He was executed when I was a senior in college, age twenty-two. Not long after the crime that landed him on death row, he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Jesus loves to use the least among us, and my dad became a force for the kingdom of God. He went to his earthly death confident in where he would end up for eternity, and his relentless witness meant many people will join him there.

If you ask me to sum up the entire Bible with one word, that word would be *redemption*. Jesus Christ was the ultimate redeemer, engaged in the ultimate act of redemption to save all God's children. Followers of Jesus are merely children of grace. The

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simplest definition of grace is the free and unmerited favor of God. In Christ's death on the cross, He showed that His grace and love for us know no limits. Nothing anyone can do is so bad or so extreme that God's grace can't reach and redeem them.

That's what this book is really about. It is partly my story and partly my dad's story, but it is all part of the grand story of God's grace. I hope Jesus, Gary, and my friends in white are all pleased with it.

CHAPTER 1

It Had to Start Somewhere

For you created my inmost
being; you knit me together
in my mother's womb.

—Psalm 139:13 (NIV)

I wasn't born in jail, but I came pretty close. Dad was in jail in a small city outside of Birmingham, Alabama. Despite being in early labor, my mom was too stubborn to leave him in jail, wanting to bail him out before giving birth. In the afternoon hours of November 11, 1980, a hapless young deputy was on duty at the jail, and he didn't have the authority to release someone on bail. Only the sheriff could do that, and he wouldn't be in for a while. My mom, eighteen years old at the time, escorted there by her dad, Billy, to bail out her twenty-two-year-old husband, wouldn't budge. The deputy pleaded with Billy

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to talk some sense into her, but Billy just laughed at the thought that she would listen to him or anybody else.

I have to feel a bit sorry for the young deputy; his adherence to the rules nearly led him to be part of delivering a teenage girl's baby. Knowing my mom, delivering the baby would have been easier than arguing with her. Fortunately for everyone involved, the sheriff did show up, and my mom posted bail. The whole crazy family vacated the jail and made it to St. Vincent's Hospital in Birmingham in time for me to have an ordinary hospital birth the following day.

By the time I was old enough to hear that story, nobody remembered exactly what my dad had been arrested for. It would be safe to assume it involved alcohol, drugs, fast cars, or, most likely, all of the above. Getting police attention for some combination of those things was a common occurrence from the time he was old enough to drive until his final arrest. The impending arrival of a child had no deterrent effect on that behavior; in fact, the presence of his only child did not deter any of his actions over the next several years. Before I turned one, my parents had separated, my mom citing the fact that he kept partying just as hard after having a son as the main reason for the split. They would remain friends

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and were even roommates at one point after they divorced. My mom was also not a model citizen by any measure, and by my third birthday, my paternal grandparents had custody of me.

One of my earliest memories is standing in their living room with my blue suitcase. It is not so much a coherent memory as it is a single image coupled with feelings of fear and confusion. I didn't understand what was happening; I just knew there was a major change in my life. In an almost literal sense, I was rescued by my grandparents, but I would be much older before I truly understood that. They answered God's call to take me in.



Visiting a maximum security prison like Holman Correctional Facility, where Alabama's death row is located, is quite an experience. I grew up visiting this facility, so I never thought much about it. However, when I saw the reaction others had on their first visit, I realized the whole thing could be traumatic. The approach from the highway was through a gate that was always open during visiting hours and then down a half mile of rough road that went past the prison's farm fields. That program was later cancelled, but